



# COLLEGE NOW GREATER CLEVELAND STRATEGIC PLAN



**College Now**  
*Greater Cleveland*

216-241-5587 | [collegenowgc.org](http://collegenowgc.org) | 1500 West 3rd Street, Suite 125, Cleveland

November 2023


# MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD CHAIR AND CEO

## Dear Friends of College Now,

In late 2022, College Now partnered with Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) to facilitate a year-long planning process that would result in a strategic plan for use up to five years. The process included extensive stakeholder research, including interviews, focus groups and surveys. College Now received feedback from more than 1,300 individuals about both the organization and the work we do. At the highest level, we heard that College Now should continue to:

- **Champion the value of postsecondary education for all.** This means ensuring individuals and families understand what postsecondary education can do for them, based on their own personal goals and circumstances.
- **Increase postsecondary educational attainment.** This remains our “north star” and requires ongoing innovation to respond to the changing needs of individuals and families in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and a shifting workforce landscape.
- **Expand and enhance the impact of College Now’s role as a thought leader.** Being at the table when decisions are made about how our region will tackle complex social problems helps us make the most difference for the people we serve.
- **Advance College Now’s organizational effectiveness.** Strong and successful nonprofits like College Now remain that way through strong and effective leadership and wise fiscal stewardship. This “behind the scenes” work is critical to our ability to support beneficiaries and their families.

As you will see, these four concepts became the pillars of our new strategic plan – consistent with our mission and vision, while leaving room for the flexibility and adaptability we know this work requires. Ultimately, this plan will help us sustain the momentum of the last decade and launch College Now into a bright future.



Michael Cogan  
Board Chair



Lee Friedman  
CEO

# BACKGROUND

## PLANNING PROCESS

College Now's success hinges on delivering effective, high-quality services to beneficiaries and serving as a collaborator and partner with likeminded organizations, so it was imperative the strategic plan reflect the needs and preferences of College Now's many stakeholders. To that end, ACS conducted 12 focus groups, 15 in-depth interviews and three surveys with a wide variety of individuals. Across the three methodologies, ACS received input from 1,339 individuals representing the following constituencies:

- Individuals who have received College Now scholarships
- High school students attending schools served by College Now
- Adult Learner Program participants
- Parents/Caregivers of College Now beneficiaries
- K-12 educators in schools/districts served by College Now
- Administrators within institutions of higher education
- Experts in college access at the local, state and national levels
- Leaders within small philanthropic organizations
- Nonprofit and business leaders in Northeast Ohio
- College Now staff
- College Now mentors
- Staff and leaders from youth-serving and postsecondary education nonprofits that provide direct services to individuals in Northeast Ohio

## GLOSSARY

### **Beneficiaries:**

Individuals who receive services from College Now, including but not limited to college and career advising, mentoring and scholarships.

### **Stakeholders:**

People or entities that can affect and/or be affected by an organization - they have a stake in the organization's work. Stakeholders (such as volunteers, donors and vendors) influence the organization's ability to fulfill its mission; they are also the people (such as beneficiaries, partner organizations and the community) who experience the consequences of the organization's choices and actions.

### **Postsecondary education:**

Any formal education (e.g., two- or four-year college, career training programs) after completing a high school diploma or GED.

### **Historically underserved communities:**

Populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in postsecondary education, including:

- People of color, particularly Black and Hispanic youth and adults
- Multilingual learners
- People with disabilities
- People who live in rural areas
- People from low-income backgrounds
- People who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness

### **First generation college student:**

An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

# FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The interviews, focus groups and surveys generated rich qualitative and quantitative data about stakeholders' views of postsecondary education, including common barriers, facilitators to postsecondary education attendance and completion, as well as perceptions of College Now within the educational and workforce ecosystem of Northeast Ohio. Key themes from the stakeholder engagement process are as follows.

KEY FINDING	IMPLICATION
People who are familiar with the phrase believe that “postsecondary education” means any education after high school. Some audiences, like high school students and parents/caregivers, are not familiar with the term.	College Now should continue using a broad definition of “postsecondary education” and continue defining the term for all audiences.
People see cost as the top barrier to postsecondary educational attainment, followed by the challenge of identifying career/life goals and options as well as navigating complex processes associated with postsecondary educational attainment (like paperwork). Effective ways to overcome these barriers include college and career advising, scholarships and financial aid counseling, mentoring and retention services that help people complete postsecondary education once they enroll.	College Now’s current programs and strategies align with what stakeholders believe to be the most effective ways to support postsecondary attainment, and this work should continue. College Now’s growing emphasis on college as part of a career pathway will help more individuals understand where and how postsecondary education can fit into their long-term career goals.
Multiple audiences – staff, funders, partners, beneficiaries, educators – are not fully aware of all the services College Now offers. Many are familiar with only one or two programs or services and miss the “big picture” of how College Now drives change at the individual and systems levels.	College Now should elevate its brand, illustrate how its programs fit together and use data to demonstrate how it makes a difference in the lives of individuals and communities.
High school students are not fully aware – and families and educators struggle to articulate to them – how to plan for life after high school and where and how various kinds of postsecondary education can fit into long-term career planning.	College Now should continue working with other youth-serving nonprofits and school districts to educate and empower middle and high school students, families and educators about postsecondary planning. Specifically, College Now is best positioned to lift up postsecondary education opportunities that fit within “college” – that is, two- and four-year degree programs. This remains the organization's “sweet spot” and a gap no one else can fill.

# FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

KEY FINDING	IMPLICATION
<p>College Now has been an effective voice in advocating for public policies that support postsecondary education. College Now's voice on behalf of its beneficiaries – particularly those from historically underserved communities – remains critical.</p>	<p>College Now should continue to engage in policy advocacy at the local, state and federal level, and publicize its efforts to motivate other youth-serving nonprofits to contribute their voices.</p>
<p>College Now has a strong reputation in Northeast Ohio as an effective nonprofit organization with excellent leadership, a mission-driven staff and robust recent growth. It is viewed as well-respected among thought leaders and decision makers. As with all nonprofit service organizations, community members have individual ideas for improving service delivery and outcomes and retaining staff, but overall, College Now is viewed as a positive and much-needed part of the educational ecosystem in the region.</p>	<p>College Now should continue to operate the organization with the same level of intentionality that has led to its explosive growth over the past decade. It will be important to continue to partner with multiple area organizations to amplify its impact.</p>
<p>At the state level, policy trends of relevance to College Now include investment in re-enrollment efforts for individuals who started but did not complete college.</p>	<p>College Now should continue its outreach and engagement with “some college, no degree” adults, and keep abreast of state grant opportunities to support this work.</p>
<p>At the federal level, a favorable policy climate has facilitated policy changes that will help address common barriers to postsecondary enrollment, including increases to Pell grant amounts and reforms to the FAFSA process that will allow for data pre-population and ease the burden on families. College Now's historic willingness to add its voice to federal advocacy efforts has been appreciated and effective.</p>	<p>College Now should continue serving as an advocate at the federal level.</p>

# THE PLAN

## FOUR PILLARS TO DRIVE SUCCESS

Following thoughtful reflection on the stakeholders' inputs and College Now's historical and current work, ACS and the College Now leadership team identified four strategic pillars that embody how the organization's work over the next five years will drive progress toward its vision. All of College Now's work is underpinned by its values, including an unwavering commitment to respect and value diversity and promote equity for staff, beneficiaries and the community. Within the pillars there are 11 goals and 28 strategies.

### VISION

**All members of our community have the support they need to successfully complete their postsecondary education, allowing them to lead more satisfying and productive lives and contribute to Northeast Ohio's economic vitality.**



**Champion the Value of Postsecondary Education for All**



**Increase Postsecondary Educational Attainment**



**Expand and Enhance the Impact of College Now's Role as a Thought Leader**



**Advance College Now's Organizational Effectiveness**

## PILLAR #1

### Champion the Value of Postsecondary Education for All

The significant and rising cost of postsecondary education paired with public sentiment that increasingly questions its return on investment makes it more important than ever for College Now to be a strong and consistent voice about the value of postsecondary education. For some, it can be hard to envision the long-term benefits of making a multi-year investment in education when there are many highly visible examples of peers gaining success online and through immediate employment following high school. The reality is, however, that most available jobs in Ohio require a two- or four-year college degree, leaving a gap in understanding regarding the value of developing a post-secondary education strategy.

As a result, College Now is uniquely positioned to articulate the multiple postsecondary options available to individuals of all ages — opportunities that align with their individual career interests, skills and timelines — and to help make those opportunities broadly accessible and affordable.

***What does success look like?** A shift in the public narrative about postsecondary education to better align with its value for individuals and for the regional economy.*

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## PILLAR #2

### Increase Postsecondary Educational Attainment

To achieve College Now's vision, it is imperative to remain focused on postsecondary educational attainment and delivering services that help beneficiaries before, during and after enrollment in postsecondary educational programs. College Now's core programs and services – advising, mentoring and scholarships – work together to drive successful completion of postsecondary education for beneficiaries.

***What does success look like?** More individuals completing postsecondary educational programs.*

## PILLAR #3

### Expand and Enhance the Impact of College Now's Role as a Thought Leader

As a thought leader, College Now lends its hard-earned social and political capital to change the systems that stand in the way of its vision. This often means leading and participating in transformational regional initiatives like Say Yes Cleveland, the Higher Education Compact and the Greater Cleveland Career Consortium. It also means advocating for public policies — within both government and organizations — that shift the ways people learn about, access and experience postsecondary education. Greater Cleveland continues to experience significant leadership transitions, including a new county executive, Cleveland mayor and Cleveland Metropolitan School District superintendent, as well as new leaders at multiple local institutions of higher education. At the same time, the Ohio Legislature continues to introduce (and often pass) legislation that undercuts funding for public K-12 education where College Now delivers services, strangles critical dialogue on college campuses with which College Now partners and disregards the very real impact of systemic racism on educational and economic outcomes for Ohioans. For all these reasons, it is imperative that College Now continue to take a stand on issues that impact its beneficiaries at all levels of policymaking.

***What does success look like?** Leading advocacy efforts for policies that support career planning and postsecondary attainment.*

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## PILLAR #4

### Advance College Now's Organizational Effectiveness

Maintaining College Now's reputation as a strong and stable nonprofit will require the organization's board and leadership to continue to govern in a manner that balances fiscal responsibility with risk-taking and innovation. Sustainability also requires continuing and strengthening College Now's commitment to hiring and retaining high-quality staff who understand and share the lived experiences of the organization's beneficiaries. Importantly, this strategic plan will see the organization through the first chief executive officer change in more than a decade, a process throughout which College Now's passionate, engaged and diverse board will play a fundamental role.

***What does success look like?** College Now is recognized as a best-in-class nonprofit for financial, programmatic and governance management practices.*





**GOAL 1: Elevate the critical role that postsecondary education and career planning plays in improving outcomes for individuals and the region's economic health.**

Stakeholder research reinforced the need to increase the public's understanding of the importance and value of postsecondary education for long-term individual and collective economic security. As the national narrative around higher education continues to cast doubt on the value of postsecondary education, College Now has a key role to play in ensuring individuals and families have accurate information about the return on investment of postsecondary education so they can make decisions that best align with their goals and financial reality.

**STRATEGY 1:**

Create and implement a comprehensive strategic communications plan. This plan should include messages and outreach tactics for various audiences including current and prospective beneficiaries, families, educators, policymakers, business owners, nonprofit leaders and more.

**GOAL 2: Increase awareness about College Now's mission, core programs and impact among thought leaders and decision makers.**

College Now's rapid growth over the past decade means many key thought leaders and decision makers are unaware of the varied services the organization delivers and its broad reach in Northeast Ohio. While the brand still rates high among these audiences, it will help College Now's short- and long-term work to fully convey how its robust programs work together in support of its mission and the impact College Now has on beneficiaries of all ages and backgrounds.

**STRATEGY 1:** Evaluate College Now's current brand.

**STRATEGY 2:** Based on brand evaluation, create and implement a brand strategy plan.

**GOAL 3: Increase the number of individuals served by College Now with an emphasis on those from historically underserved communities.**

College Now remains committed to connecting all individuals and families with high-quality services, but as an equity-focused organization, it is important to prioritize individuals who face complex barriers to postsecondary education, often due to systemic racism and economic inequality. To that end, it is important for College Now to continue and grow its collaboration with organizations in order to reach and serve individuals and families who may not otherwise know about or feel comfortable connecting with the organization, as it continues existing outreach and marketing efforts across Northeast Ohio.

**STRATEGY 1:**

Grow grassroots partnerships to meet prospective beneficiaries where they live, work and play. Cultivating trusted messengers will be increasingly important for reaching individuals and families who historically have been left out of conversations about college-going and postsecondary education.

**STRATEGY 2:**

Enhance collaboration with partners to ensure widespread promotion of available College Now programs and services.



# Increase Postsecondary Educational Attainment

## **GOAL 4: Improve postsecondary access and enrollment with an emphasis on historically underserved communities.**

College Now's more than 50 years of experience informs its multifaceted approach to postsecondary enrollment – from awareness-raising to affordability – and increasingly reflects a commitment to helping learners of all ages make decisions about postsecondary education based on their personal career goals, skills and interests. Effectively driving postsecondary enrollment includes framing college as a key part of one's career journey rather than the destination, an approach reflected in College Now's advising strategy.

### **STRATEGY 1:**

Help beneficiaries develop postsecondary plans that provide meaningful guidance for postsecondary education/careers including awareness of the financial aid system and the various affordability programs that exist to support postsecondary education.

### **STRATEGY 2:**

Continue to improve postsecondary affordability for all (for example, by providing scholarships and financial aid advising).

### **STRATEGY 3:**

Collect, analyze and use data to inform and promote real-time programmatic improvements to college and career advising services for middle and high school students and adults.

### **STRATEGY 4:**

Continue to build a career advising system to help individuals plan and achieve goals and secure opportunities to learn about careers and educational pathways. This robust system includes professional development for all adults who work with current and prospective students of all ages.

## **GOAL 5: Improve postsecondary education completion for beneficiaries using data and best practices research.**

Getting individuals into postsecondary education and training programs is only half the battle. College Now also provides services and support to ensure people achieve their goals and complete their postsecondary education programs. The COVID-19 pandemic meant years of lost classroom time and added stress for a generation of people, increasing the financial, mental health and academic barriers facing many postsecondary students. Effectively supporting postsecondary completion in upcoming years will require a community effort to ensure individuals and families can access the variety of resources they need to overcome barriers and finish postsecondary education and training.

### **STRATEGY 1:**

Strengthen the mentoring program to provide various supports, greater social capital and awareness of career opportunities for College Now scholarship recipients.

### **STRATEGY 2:**

Provide college students with advising services to help connect them to resources and to help them secure funding to complete postsecondary education.

### **STRATEGY 3:**

Deepen partnerships with colleges and universities and community-based organizations that connect students with wraparound supports.



## Expand and Enhance the Impact of College Now's Role as a Thought Leader

### GOAL 6: **Advocate for policies that support our mission and vision.**

College Now historically has advocated at the local, state and national levels for public funding and policies that support postsecondary students before, during and after graduation. This work is arguably more important than ever as public sentiment turns away from prioritizing postsecondary education. College Now will continue to make its voice heard when it comes to policies that affect its mission and the lives of its beneficiaries.

**STRATEGY 1:** Convene and sustain an advocacy committee within the College Now board of directors.

**STRATEGY 2:** Develop and implement a policy advocacy plan.

### GOAL 7: **Deepen College Now's presence as a leader and key partner in college and career advising and scholarship and retention services.**

College Now has established itself as a key player in driving regional innovation around what it takes to support the career and educational goals of our beneficiaries. From its role in Say Yes Cleveland to the Higher Education Compact to the Greater Cleveland Career Consortium, College Now will continue shaping these critical conversations in upcoming years. College Now staff and board members are invited often to speak about best practices and lessons learned in the work, all important opportunities for the organization to shine and to contribute to shared knowledge in the postsecondary education space.

**STRATEGY 1:**

Ensure College Now staff plays leadership roles in major community education and career advising initiatives.

**STRATEGY 2:**

Serve as a trusted speaker and expert resource on advising, scholarship and retention for local, state and national audiences.



## GOAL 8: **Maintain a diverse and effective board and workforce.**

College Now's power comes from its talented, passionate staff, making it imperative that the organization continue its longstanding commitment to hiring, developing and retaining high-quality professionals at all levels of the organization. Being a great place to work means providing a safe, inclusive space for individuals from all backgrounds and lived experiences and being intentional in identifying and implementing policies and practices (including maintaining a diverse board of directors) that promote equity for staff as well as beneficiaries.

**STRATEGY 1:** Ensure everyone has access to professional development.

**STRATEGY 2:** Develop and implement plans to support and retain staff and volunteers.

**STRATEGY 3:** Develop and implement internal diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) plan.

**STRATEGY 4:** Further diversify the board of directors, staff and our volunteers.

## GOAL 9: **Build succession planning as an institutional practice across departments and with board of directors.**

In preparation for leadership changes, College Now is well positioned to hone its approach to succession planning and leverage lessons learned during a transitional time organization wide.

**STRATEGY 1:** Establish consistent succession plan template and process for all levels of the organization.

**STRATEGY 2:** Build leadership capacity to conduct effective succession planning.

## GOAL 10: **Standardize, capture and internally communicate about organizational policies, processes and norms.**

As the organization prepares for leadership transitions, it will be more important than ever to achieve clarity on day-to-day operations and have open and transparent conversations about what the future holds and the implications of any changes for staff.

**STRATEGY 1:** Ensure organizational policies, procedures and practices are best-in-class.

**STRATEGY 2:** Develop and implement a streamlined and sustainable internal communication plan.

## GOAL 11: **Ensure long-term organizational health.**

College Now would not be where it is without ongoing collaboration from school districts, nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, businesses, philanthropic organizations and government agencies. These programmatic partnerships support College Now in reaching its beneficiaries and delivering services when and where they are needed and will remain a core piece of the organization's work moving forward. With steadfast support from its board of directors, College Now has refined its business model over the past decade, contributing to robust growth and financial stability that can and should continue moving forward.

**STRATEGY 1:** Maintain and grow partnerships with stakeholders.

**STRATEGY 2:** Ensure the College Now board of directors effectively supports the organization's mission by providing strategic leadership and financial stewardship.

**STRATEGY 3:** Operate to continue building long-term financial strength.

# NEXT STEPS

College Now's new five-year strategic plan will be operationalized by the leadership team and staff, who take ownership for creating and maintaining day-to-day action plans with tactics, timelines and metrics. The College Now leadership team and board of directors will develop and then monitor progress on key indicators of success for the goals and pillars in the plan and will secure and allocate needed resources to implement tactics and strategies.

## Thanks to the College Now Board Strategic Committee Members:

**Stephanie Antunez**, *California Closets*  
**Suzanne Aral-Boutros**, *Community Leader*  
**Joshua Bagshaw**, *Sherwin-Williams*  
**Kristen Baird Adams**, *PNC*  
**Brian Barren**, *Cleveland Guardians*  
**Mike Cogan**, *Northern Trust*  
**Marisa Darden**, *Benesch*  
**Tom Dewey**, *Medical Mutual of Ohio*  
**Ward Dumm**, *Community Leader*  
**Rich Garcia**, *Bluepoint Capital Partners*  
**Ashley George**, *Fortune Brands Global Plumbing Group*  
**Jessica Jung**, *Oswald Companies*  
**Kevin Kelley**, *Cuyahoga County Court*  
**Peggy Kennedy**, *Community Leader*  
**Veena Khanna**, *KeyBank*  
**Alan Kopit**, *MediLogix LLC*  
**Megan Mehalko**, *Benesch*  
**Elizabeth Newman**, *CBIZ, Inc.*  
**Lauren Rich Fine**, *Gries Financial Corporation*  
**Darnella Robertson**, *First Energy*  
**Mark Ross**, *Community Leader*  
**Sue Tyler**, *Community Leader*  
**Deborah Vesny**, *Community Leader*  
**Felicia Williams**, *Perficient, Inc.*  
**Adam Zelwin**, *PwC*



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