

ROCHESTER COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

ONE YEAR PROGRESS REPORT

*A PROGRAM OF ROCHESTER EDUCATION FOUNDATION
APRIL, 2014*

BACKGROUND

Rochester College Access Network was launched in April 2013 to build upon interest generated with the release of the report “Success for Rochester City Students: Making a College Education Attainable.” The report had been prepared by Rochester Education Foundation for the Rochester Area Community Foundation.

Most of the initial attendees at the first meeting were individuals who had been interviewed, and attended focus groups, for the report.

Key issues were identified in the report that were confirmed when the group started meeting monthly. These include concerns about a lack of sufficient support in and out of school for city youth during the college preparation and application process; frustration over a lack of information about local and other college opportunities provided to city students; and a lack of data about the number of college-going city students and where they go to college.

Concurrently, there was a sense of opportunity to provide information, support and needed resources to Rochester city students through a Rochester College Access Network and efforts provided through such a group.

RCAN DEVELOPMENT

The organization was launched with invitations to individuals who participated in the research project noted above, along with others who expressed interest. Since April 2013, RCAN has met monthly with a consistent attendance of 15 to 20 people.

The group includes broad representation from local colleges and universities, including Monroe Community College, Nazareth College, Rochester Institute of Technology, St. John Fisher College, SUNY Geneseo, The College at Brockport, University of Rochester and Bryant and Stratton College; not-for-profit organizations including National Council for Jewish Women, Hillside Work Scholarship Connection, Ibero, League of Women Voters, Rochester City School District, The Rochester Area Community Foundation, The United Way and others.

The mission of RCAN is to support college access and success through communication, coalition and advocacy for students in Rochester so enable students to reach their full potential.

The group has determined a focus for the group of 6th through 12th graders in the Rochester City School District, though it does not exclude city residents in charter or other schools. The group is focused upon a range of goals including providing easier access to college by:

- Emphasizing the advantages of a college degree, including employment, monetary benefits and personal fulfillment.
- Improving the cooperation and collaboration between programs, opportunities, services and associations that are available
- Providing resources to young people
- Setting community goals for college-going
- Marketing information about college, opportunities and requirements for college entry to parents, students, counselors, schools, community
- Identifying and filling needs (parents, students, RCSD, network members)
- Creating and sharing knowledge and expertise about college access and retention possessed by RCAN members, parents, students and community

The group also agrees that it will communicate requirements for college entry and encourage high school graduation, and the expectation that college is an attainable goal.

The group has created a leadership group, with a chair and three co-chairs, which has been working to develop procedures for the group to make decisions, to define membership, and to have fiscal governance. Patricia Braus of Rochester Education Foundation is the chair. The co-chairs are Kimberley Collins of Monroe Community College, Shawanda Evans of Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection and Chandra McKenzie of RIT.

Additionally, a subcommittee on organization and planning has met monthly, and two other subcommittees have either met (the website subcommittee) or are planning to meet (the financial aid group).

In September 2013, AmeriCorps member Chelsea Wahl started working to support the RCAN through her assignment for the year at Rochester Education Foundation.

In December 2013 the group agreed to become a program of Rochester Education Foundation which is a 501(c)3 organization and thus can provide fiscal management of RCAN. This will enable RCAN to obtain funds to pursue projects.

REF has coordinated the meetings and the chair is Pat Braus, executive director of REF.

As RCAN plans for 2014-2015, REF has submitted several grant requests to support the project and administrative costs of the initiative.

The group also is contributing information to the community's Roc the Future initiative regarding critical measures needed to judge success in our college access efforts. RCAN is considered a Collaborative Action Network of this initiative.

RCAN ACTIVITIES

From the start, we've chosen to focus on short- and long- term goals.

On the short-term side, the group has launched three projects: providing information and support for financial aid, creating a local college-access website, and obtaining and publicizing key data about college access to help motivate and document community efforts to increase college access.

FINANCIAL AID

The group is planning a campaign in 2014-2015 focused on supporting student and family knowledge and access to financial aid as a way to support college access. The group has started offering support in the community already.

In January, the group reached out to local ministers to help us spread the word about how and when families can get free help in filling out financial aid forms and to encourage students to attend "College Goal Sunday," an event providing free financial aid support in early February. Mistrust about sharing financial data is a big problem in low-income communities, and the group focused on ministers as trusted sources of information. Using partners and social media, we reached out to more than 220 local ministers, encouraging them to share information about a local event in late January and about financial-aid support in general. The group also was able to encourage columnist Erica Bryant to write a column about the same information. We were pleased that some of the attendees at College Goal Sunday said they read about the event in church bulletins.

This month, we are a partner in the mayor's March College Madness event at different community centers providing support with financial aid for college. We have provided critical information and will be providing volunteers from our network for the event.

Additionally, to support community awareness, a group of RCAN members combined to present a "Training the Trainers" event for youth workers about supporting college access March 11. The free event, sponsored by RCAN, Nazareth College and Metro Council for Teen Potential, hit our maximum capacity of 37 people within two days. The group included people from Ibero, RIT, Action for a Better Community and elsewhere. Nazareth College's Ian Mortimer provided the training and lunch for all. This is one measure of the opportunity to educate and engage the community in supporting college access.

WEBSITE

A local college-access website is a project that was launched after RCAN surveyed 67 city students participating in partner-group summer activities. Students chose the website out of three potential projects as the one that would provide the most valuable information for them. Currently REF is raising money to build a stand-alone website, but we have already launched two web pages as a start.

The website will include contact information and photos of admissions officers assigned to Rochester city students at every Rochester Area College institution. It will also include a calendar with local events, and a time-line for preparing for college applications, as well as other key links for students, videos featuring Rochester city students who have gone to college, and other key information for students and their families.

DATA

The third project regarding data is already yielding results. RCAN has obtained school-by-school information about the submission of financial-aid forms (FAFSA) and publicized the wide range of differences between city schools on our website. RCAN also has met with Rochester City School District officials to encourage the district to obtain and share key indicators regarding student enrollment and completion of college. We are optimistic that these indicators will be obtained and shared with us given the shared goals of the city school district and RCAN – to increase access to college for city students. We are already starting to publicize the indicators and update them on our website.

LONG-TERM

The group also has a longer-term goal, to work with stakeholders to create a community strategy to support college access. This may be a strategy supporting college-going city students similar to those in Pittsburgh, Syracuse and other cities which have adopted college enrollment as an educational and economic development goal. Students in Pittsburgh benefit from a “Promise” program providing free of charge education to qualified city school graduates. While our city students benefit from excellent individual programs at our local educational institutions, there is no coordinated program, no general information about how many city students get into college, and no coordinated effort to set community goals. Our Network seeks to change this.

PLANS FOR 2014-2015

Our focus is around communication, coalition building and advocacy to support our focus on college access and success for Rochester students.

Communication will be key to our plans to offer a community awareness campaign regarding financial aid support and awareness in 2014-2015. Currently there are opportunities for students to receive free assistance with their financial aid applications through public events, such as College Goal Sunday, and the assistance of college, university, school and organizational support. This includes help for students through local colleges, the Urban League, Hillside (for its participants) and other groups.

However, the rates of completion of financial aid forms as documented by the government suggest that rates could be higher, and raise questions about how many students who want to go to college are missing out due to financial aid information issues.

Our goal will be to spread the word about existing events – and addition of new events as the group determines are needed and can be appropriately staffed. To that end, RCAN has discussed potential support in staffing from members of the CASH program, a local program which supplies tax-form submission assistance. The CASH program leaders have said they would welcome a collaboration.

Additionally, Mayor Warren has said she would like to make March College Madness an annual event, adding six college financial aid support events to the city calendar. RCAN looks forward to collaborating with the city to support students through these and other similar events.

We also hope to continue building coalitions in the community to support college access and success, working with other regional pipeline initiatives and groups, with local college admissions and financial aid offices, and with key partners such as RCSD and the City of Rochester.

The group will also advocate for students – collecting and reporting data on college-going metrics, helping to set goals and develop key indicators for college-going and college-readiness, and reporting on the region's success and needs.

RCAN has been informed that the college access effort will gain additional support in the 2014-2015 school year with the assignment of another AmeriCorps member. This will provide staffing for a second welcome year as RCAN works to achieve its college access and success goals.

RCAN- Communication, Coalition, Advocacy

Communicate	Build Coalition	Advocate
With students in 6th -12 grade about college access resources, opportunities, and advantages	Between the programs and organizations that are working together as RCAN	Uncover and encourage college access resource/ service and information that can be communicated out (e.g. FAFSA training, Financial Literacy, College contacts, etc.)
To parents and guardians about college access resources, opportunities, and advantages	In concert with other regional pipeline initiatives or groups (Pre K-6, Colleges & Universities...)	Collect and report DATA (college going metrics (including FAFSA), as well as assessment of effectiveness of the RCAN coalition
Between the programs and organizations that are working together as RCAN, as well as with key personnel (not RCAN) who can answer questions, improve processes, communicate out, provide services or help foster interagency cooperation	With local college admissions and financial aid offices as well as local services, programs, that can impact college access	Help set goals and develop key indicators for college going and college readiness and report on region's success and needs
To City of Rochester and other pipeline education efforts in the city/region (ROC the Future, Summer Learning, etc)	WITH RCSD and the City of Rochester	Improve processes that impact college access through communication and advocate for change by challenging regional obstacles.
With RCSD (guidance counselors, teachers, administration...)	Benchmarking resource for or with other regions with City wide College Access initiatives	Career-oriented education opportunities such as advanced skills training, Apprenticeship opportunities and services
To local business community, grant -funders, potential donors, news agencies...		

