

2023-2024 | IMPACT REPORT

BLAZING PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY



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838 Peer Leaders impacting
79,000 students and giving
back to their communities

College enrollment has been rapidly declining for more than a decade, with a steep slide during the pandemic. Recovery is faltering, as students question the cost and value of a postsecondary degree. Yet a higher education credential remains the best proven way to unlock economic mobility and improve financial security.

New career paths are emerging with certificates and credentials that don't require four years but some postsecondary education. This trend is creating new opportunities and new complexity, especially for students in under-resourced high schools where they are lucky to get a half hour with a counselor to map out a plan.

Adding to these complexities, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action and the disastrous rollout of a new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has intensified the challenges our students face.

No matter what hurdles arise, PeerForward continues to use a powerful, peer influence model with a multiplier-effect to guide thousands of students on the path to higher education and economic prosperity each year.

**Read on to find out how our work
and your support continues to
impact others across the country
and in Bermuda.**

79k
STUDENTS
IMPACTED



MISSION AND VISION

PeerForward's mission is to unleash the power of positive peer influence to transform the lives of youth living in low-income communities by connecting them to college and careers.

Since 1996, PeerForward has guided more than 600,000 students in under-resourced high schools along the path to higher education and greater opportunity. In the process, PeerForward's powerful youth activation method develops lifelong community leaders.

Today, those who have gone through our program are now educators, nonprofit founders, and corporate leaders working to find solutions to the pressing needs of their communities. They also give back to PeerForward, lifting up the next generation of leaders. With the majority of our full-time staff and seasonal workshop staff being alumni of the program, our Peer Leaders greatly benefit from interacting with these role models who are proof that the process works!

WHY DOES EDUCATION MATTER FOR ECONOMIC PROSPERITY?

\$1M

On average, those with a four-year degree earn \$1M more over a lifetime than those with only a high school diploma and are more likely to be employed and to have healthcare.

BUT THERE IS A PROBLEM.

THE NATION IS STRUGGLING WITH A WIDENING WEALTH GAP BETWEEN ITS RICHEST AND POOREST CITIZENS.

22%

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS EARNED A BACHELORS DEGREE BY AGE 26

Only 22% of low-income students earn four-year degrees by age 26. This pales in comparison to 67% of high-income students.

5.6%

DECREASE IN FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

12% decrease for community colleges since 2019.

\$1.2T

IMPACT ON THE NATION'S ECONOMY

By 2029, a shortage of workers with postsecondary credentials is predicted to have a major impact on the nation's economy.

For individuals, the lack of a postsecondary credential can limit opportunities for jobs, health care, and economic agency. For the country, labor needs go unmet and social needs, such as housing and health care, only continue to grow. We can't narrow the gap without improving education equity.

The path to and through higher education is complex and everyone needs help. But at high schools in low-income communities:

**38
MINUTES**

Students get on average 38 minutes of 1:1 time with an academic counselor to discuss future academic plans.

**385:1
RATIO**

The average student-to-counselor ratio is 385:1, far above the recommended average of 250:1. Many under-resourced high schools have a much higher ratio.

For those same students and their families, cost is a major inhibitor to pursuing higher education.

**30%
COVERED**

Today, the Pell Grant program for low-income students covers roughly 30% of the cost of attendance, compared to 75% or more in 1975-76.¹

**\$4B
UNCLAIMED**

The high school class of 2023 left more than \$4 billion in Pell Grants on the table by not completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).²

¹https://www.nasfaa.org/issue_brief_double_pell

²<https://www.ncan.org/news/662266/NCAN-Report-In-2023-High-School-Seniors-Left-Over-4-Billion-on-the-Table-in-Pell-Grants>

MEET PEERFORWARD ALUM

Victoria Balogun

Meet PeerForward alum Victoria Balogun, a Strategy Extern for Beats by Dre, and a former social media coordinator for Nickelodeon. Victoria developed her social media chops as a Peer Leader at Suitland High School in Maryland and as a volunteer and intern for PeerForward while in college. She earned her BS in Mass Communications/Media Studies from Norfolk State University and a MS in Integrated Marketing at New York University. And she just happens to be one of the [“lead characters” in a video about the Peer Leader journey.](#)



“Being an alumna of PeerForward and having the opportunity to gain my professional experience here is out of this world! Who would have thought that the program that inspired my path is also helping me create my future. All I want to do is pay it forward.” – Victoria



HOW DOES PEERFORWARD **IMPROVE** ECONOMIC MOBILITY?

PeerForward’s end goal is to see more students from underserved communities achieve the economic mobility and agency that comes with a postsecondary degree. That’s why we focus on getting more students in low-income neighborhoods and resource-strained schools to higher education, and give them the skills to successfully navigate their chosen postsecondary path.

PeerForward trains Peer Leaders to become changemakers in their schools and run campaigns to drive actions that lead to success in higher education. These **KEY ACTIONS** are research-backed and proven to boost higher education enrollment and persistence:

HIGH SCHOOL

Apply to
Three or More
Postsecondary
Institutions

File Early for
Financial Aid

Connect
Academics
to Career and
Community

COLLEGE



Connect to
Academic
Opportunities

Secure
Financial Aid

Build Campus
Engagement

WHERE WE WORK

For nearly 30 years, PeerForward has worked with schools across the nation to make pursuing higher education the expectation, not the exception, for students in low-income and under-served areas.

 HIGH SCHOOLS  COLLEGES



EXCEPTIONAL AND INFLUENTIAL LEADERS

What sets our Peer Leaders apart from other peer influencers is the exceptional PeerForward training and support they participate in at **workshops, training camps,** and **frequent huddles** and **check-ins.** High school Peer Leaders begin their PeerForward journey at our transformational summer workshops held on a college campus. Many sessions are high-energy and active; others are quiet 1:1 reflective discussions. College Peer Leaders receive in-depth training on peer-mentoring strategies. All Peer Leaders leverage their leadership and motivational skills to have widespread impact at their schools.

Bermuda

HIGH SCHOOL

2 Schools
195 Seniors
955 Students

California

HIGH SCHOOL

COLLEGE

8 Schools 1 College
1,280 Seniors 1,076 Students
5,499 Students

DC / Maryland

HIGH SCHOOL

30 Schools
8,130 Seniors
40,860 Students

Florida

HIGH SCHOOL

COLLEGE

4 Schools 1 College
1,612 Seniors 1,030 Students
7,253 Students

Hawai'i

HIGH SCHOOL

3 Schools
1,137 Seniors
5,358 Students

Kentucky

HIGH SCHOOL

5 Schools
352 Seniors
1,441 Students

Michigan

HIGH SCHOOL

3 Schools
432 Seniors
2,634 Students

New York

HIGH SCHOOL

15 Schools
1,339 Seniors
5,524 Students

Pennsylvania

HIGH SCHOOL

1 Schools
356 Seniors
1,707 Students

Texas

HIGH SCHOOL

7 Schools
1,349 Seniors
7,023 Students

"Being a Peer Leader has helped me grow as a speaker, mentor, and scholar. Helping others realize and reach their dreams has taught me how to view mine."

— Paulina Anaya, Peer Leader
Lake Wales High School, FL

WHAT IMPACT DID OUR PEER LEADERS MAKE THIS YEAR?

\$82M

OF FINANCIAL AID UNLOCKED
FOR OUR STUDENTS

71%

HIGHER RATE OF DEGREE COMPLETION

70%

SEMESTER OVER SEMESTER
RETENTION RATE OF PEERFORWARD
IN COLLEGE MENTEES

PEERFORWARD IN HIGH SCHOOL

712 Peer Leaders (89 Teams)

16k Seniors Served

61k 9-11 Grade Students Impacted

77 Partner Schools

PEERFORWARD IN COLLEGE

126 Peer Leaders (5 Teams)

2,080 Students Served

2 College Partners

816 GROUP CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES



The PeerForward team at **Northwestern High School**, in Hyattsville, Md., held a non-traditional Career Fair to kick off the school year.



Texas Peer Leaders from **Beethoven Go Center** held application workshops; 100% of seniors applied to 10+ colleges or postsecondary opportunities!



Our Bermuda Peer Leaders from **CedarBridge Academy** held an "Apply Day" where students completed their applications to Bermuda College and created their Bermuda Job Board and Scholarship profiles.



Our **Honoka'a High School** Peer Leaders from Hawai'i opened "Café College," which is a place where students can go to receive help with their college applications.



PeerForward's Eagle Peer Leaders from **Cal State LA** host what is now an annual tradition "Peersgiving!" to bring students together for a check-in and to deepen campus connections.



"PeerForward is a standout organization in the area of postsecondary access. They have been an incredible partner to my school district over the past 20

years in our shared quest to uplift and empower young leaders in the DC, Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area. Thanks in large part to PeerForward's targeted efforts and the support of its tireless and devoted Coaches, we are building a culture where continuing education beyond high school is the expectation rather than the exception."

— **Carletta T. Marrow, Ed.D.**
Associate Superintendent
High Schools and Non-Traditional Programs
Prince George's County Public Schools, MD

HOW DOES PEERFORWARD ACTIVATE PEER LEADERS?

Long before “influencing” became a trend (and a profession), PeerForward tapped into student influence as a driver of change.

Peer Leaders are trained by some of the most skilled and experienced youth facilitators in the nation.

240+ HOURS PeerForward Coaches go through 240+ hours of training, focusing on the following areas:

- ✓ Postsecondary Planning
- ✓ Leadership Development
- ✓ Financial Aid Training
- ✓ Campaign Organization



PEERFORWARD COACHES ARE A SPECIAL GROUP WHO KNOW HOW TO MOTIVATE STUDENTS AND MODEL PERSISTENCE AND GRIT.

This year, one Coach offered a particularly rare view of how to take risks and stay true to yourself. Coach Tim Spicer competed in the 46th Season of Survivor!

As the episodes aired, Tim was busy visiting and inspiring Peer Leader teams. He was interviewed by local newspapers in Kentucky and had a watch party with Peer Leaders in Bermuda. Here’s what Tim said about competing on Survivor:



“On television, Survivor looks exciting! On the island, it’s the isolation from the world that grants you an opportunity to connect with your most vulnerable self. Having inspired prospective college students for the past decade, it was extremely important to be authentic with people in the game... For my first loss to be on national television, I was most proud of being true to who I am. I want my students and every student that I have ever mentored over the last decade to know that they are valuable. They should take a risk on themselves and put their best foot forward.”



WHO MAKES PEERFORWARD WORK?

Volunteers, program alumni, community partners, funders, our Board/advisors, and PeerForward staff all combine to help open the doors to opportunity for our students.

PeerForward is led by the dynamic Gary Z. Linnen. Gary has been with the organization for 17 years and CEO for four. He has elevated PeerForward's unique method of leveraging peer influence to achieve meaningful change. He leads a veteran staff. **Of full-time staff, 50% are program alumni** and of **summer workshop staff, almost 86% are alumni**, ensuring PeerForward stays relevant and connected to those we serve.

As a leader of color from a low-income community, Gary has become a leading student advocate in college access, economic mobility, and education equity. A graduate of Cornell University, he was the first in his family to earn a postsecondary degree.



“The youth we serve are powerful people who deserve all the great benefits life has to offer, regardless of their zip code. Nurturing their college persistence and career aspirations is more than a goal — it’s a movement.”

– Gary Z. Linnen, CEO of PeerForward



PeerForward surveyed its 2023-24 College Peer Leaders and mentees about their experiences. Here are some of their representative comments:

“One of the most incredible experiences I’ve had is when my mentees come back to express their gratitude and newfound self-confidence, knowing that they can achieve anything they set their minds to. It’s heartwarming to have that kind of impact on them.”

– Broward College Peer Leader

“I’ve taken on additional leadership responsibilities, secured an excellent part-time position at my desired school, and formulated a plan with the guidance and resources generously provided by my mentor. This experience has boosted my confidence.”

– Broward College mentee

“I have really enjoyed being able to meet new students especially first year students, because I was once in their shoes, and being able to help guide them means a lot to me.”

– California State University-LA Peer Leader

CULTIVATING CHANGEMAKERS

Peer Leaders gain life-long leadership skills and experiences while serving their community through PeerForward, including:

-  **Self Advocacy**
-  **Public Speaking**
-  **Project Management**
-  **Working with Diverse Communities**
-  **Community Organizing**
-  **Data Analysis**
-  **Social Media Influencing**



“I didn’t know much about college before PeerForward. I always thought I would be in debt and that going to college was a scary process. PeerForward helped me change those perceptions I had and educated me on how things work. I don’t know if I would’ve been as okay going into college without PeerForward. Having the support from the team and being able to get help along the way is one of the main reasons I enjoy PeerForward.”

– Daniel Del Cid
PeerForward Alum
Current student at Tulane University, LA

PEERFORWARD BOARD MEMBERS

Gary Z. Linnen
Chief Executive Officer
PeerForward

Nicholas M. Florio, Chair
Retired Senior Principal
Deloitte Financial Advisory
Services LLP

Aadon Penny
2006 PeerForward Alum
Business Development Specialist
at Latham & Watkins, LLP

Billy Butcher
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Skadden, Arps, Slate,
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Leader in Higher Education

Howard Byck
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Managing Partner and Founder,
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Jason Gerstein
Partner, McDermott
Will & Emery

Krista Baughman
Partner, Dhillon Law
Group Inc.

Omezie Omeokwe
2007 PeerForward Alum
College Counselor,
Thomas A. Edison
High School



PeerForward cultivates alumni of our workshops and training to serve on our staff, at our workshops, and on the National Alumni Council (NAC), which advises PeerForward on keeping the program relevant.

Omezie Omeokwe, who attended his high school workshop in 2007, served the organization in a variety of ways, from workshop coach to chair of the NAC for five years (and resident workshop DJ!).

Omezie recently transitioned the Chair of the NAC to Baja Poawui, a 2008 workshop alum who also has served at workshops and on our staff. We thank “O” for all he has poured into PeerForward and look forward to Baja’s leadership. All of our alumni leaders are critical to our ongoing success!

THE NATIONAL ALUMNI COUNCIL

Baja Poawui, Chair
DC/MD/VA

Aadon Penny
NAC Advisor, New York

Antoine Tate
Communications Committee
Chair, California/DC/MD/VA

Asia Harrison
DC/MD/VA

Flavio Guzman
California

Gabriele Brown
DC/MD/VA

Jeremy Acala
Operation Committee Chair,
Florida/DC/MD/VA

John Underdue
DC/MD/VA

Kemara Hines
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Lydia Sampson
DC/MD/VA

Rex Okonkwo
DC/MD/VA

Shayla Jackson
Delaware/Connecticut

Scophia Fleming
Florida

Tamika Gordon
DC/MD/VA



PEERFORWARD SUPPORTERS

PeerForward is honored and grateful to have the trust and support of these foundations and organizations. We are also thankful for the support that hundreds of individuals have shown through their donations.



CORPORATE PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

What do Amtrak, Rap Snacks, and Deloitte all have in common? They along with others have helped make PeerForward’s school-year trainings for Peer Leaders a success.

Amtrak employees engaged with students in Prince George’s County (Md.) Public Schools through networking, event planning, and team-building activities.

Rap Snacks made sure students were treated with delicious snacks at select school-year trainings to support the message of opportunity.

Deloitte employees shared their perspectives and tips on building a career.

“Where I come from, we didn’t have the opportunity of someone showing us what the next step looks like,” explained Ahmiyah Mosely, a Human Capital Consultant for Deloitte. “It feels good to be able to give some type of advice that I wish I had someone to give to me.”

 **Our Corporate Partners are making a BIG Impact! [Read more!](#)**

If your company is interested in learning more about volunteer opportunities with PeerForward, contact Cornelius Williams, cwilliams@peerforward.org.

PEERFORWARD IN THE NEWS

The past academic year was stoked with confusion in wake of financial aid system failures and the U.S. Supreme Court striking down affirmative action in college admissions. PeerForward continues to be a influential leader in the educational space. Check out some of our features below.



MarketWatch

PeerForward Peer Leaders were featured in a MarketWatch article on the impact FAFSA delays are having on students' college plans.



Education Week

"To Help Students, One Company Has Unlocked \$100 Million a Year in College Aid", Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute interviews CEO Gary Z. Linnen.



BrownStyle Magazine

BrownStyle Magazine spoke to Aloysia Jean and Raquel Figueroa of PeerForward to find the best way to get started on the path of mentorship!



The New York Times Magazine

The New York Times Magazine featured Peer Leaders' questions about the Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action.



New York Times: The Daily

PeerForward students were featured on "The Daily" podcast with their admissions in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down Affirmative Action in higher education.



Today with Hoda & Jenna

Today with Hoda & Jenna featured CEO Gary Z. Linnen, and alum Dariel Vasquez, CEO of Brothers@ as they visit Peer Leaders at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change.

Discover more [on our blog](#).



PEERFORWARD WINS THE LA BUSINESS JOURNAL AWARD FOR "NONPROFIT OF THE YEAR"

"This experience was an eye-opener and a constant reminder of why we do the work that we do and why we come back. As an alum of the program who continues to implement many of the lessons and values I've gained, I understand how beneficial it is for students, not just for educational purposes but for personal growth as well. I stand by that."

– **Antoine Tate**
Communications Committee Chair for the PeerForward National Alumni Council who completed his PeerForward Workshop in 2007

Read the full story [on our blog](#).



On behalf of our
Peer Leaders, thank you
for your support!

PEER  *FORWARD*

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