



2024-2025 IMPACT REPORT

PEERS. POWER. PURPOSE.



A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO

In a time of increasing uncertainty, our remarkable Peer Leaders are generating hope and lighting a path to help their peers prepare for and pursue careers.

This generation of students has navigated numerous unexpected barriers on the path to college and career - from pandemic interruption to new court rulings and policies affecting access. PeerForward Peer Leaders learn how to overcome barriers and how to help their friends do the same. Here, in these pages, you will see a reflection of this powerful work and what we have achieved in 2024-25 school year.

Looking ahead, we face strong headwinds as our school partners confront ongoing financial pressures, alongside shifting student perspectives and market attitudes about the role of conventional college pathways. Please consider how you can help this life-changing, community-building work continue.



With gratitude and conviction,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gary Linnen'.

Gary Z. Linnen,
CEO, PeerForward



At the heart of our work is a simple, bold idea:

STUDENTS CAN LEAD THE WAY.

Our **PEER LEADERS** are powerful influencers, with an outsized reach and impact.

PeerForward's unique model harnesses the power of peer-to-peer connections to transform individuals, schools, and communities.

With the right tools, coaching, and support, these student leaders can become powerful catalysts — not just for their own futures, but for their entire peer networks.

Throughout the 2024-25 academic year, they created and executed hundreds of campaigns and mentoring sessions to guide high school seniors toward a postsecondary path and first-year college students to the resources and support that helped them persist.

Peer Leaders are at the center of the PeerForward ecosystem, which is fueled by transformative peer power at all levels — from staff, to alumni and volunteers, to our leadership team. Our ethos is to lift each other to new heights.

THE CHALLENGE



A MILLION DOLLAR DISPARITY

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

BUT THERE'S A PROBLEM

Only 15%

of low-income students earn a four-year degree by age 24 compared to 59% of high-income students.

A DAUNTING PATH TO A DEGREE

The very thought of pursuing a postsecondary degree after high school can be daunting, especially for those who will be the first in their family to achieve higher education.

The admissions process and FAFSA application remain complex and overwhelming for many students. Rising education costs are pushing potential debt levels beyond what many families consider manageable, while available state and federal grant funding continues to decline.

NEW PATHWAYS EMERGE

On the upside, there are emerging career pathways that provide alternatives to enrolling in a traditional, four-year college immediately after high school – certificates, apprenticeships and work-based learning, High School Career and Technical Education courses, and Dual enrollment programs are helping students get a head start.

Enrollment in certificate programs increased by 10% in 2024 alone and is 20% higher than before the pandemic. There is also a 14% enrollment increase for vocational programs and community colleges.

YET GUIDANCE REMAINS ELUSIVE

The increasing options only heighten the need for strong advising to help students navigate these challenges and opportunities. But that guidance is difficult to come by. Many students, already disadvantaged, are feeling lost and overlooked.

**INSUFFICIENT GUIDANCE LEADS TO
MASSIVE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES**

**376 Students
for every
1 counselor.**

**and in some states, it's 600 students
to every one counselor.**

**Only 38 Minutes
of 1:1 time with an
academic counselor**

**to discuss academic plans, on average.
School counselors are overwhelmed, and
students are left lost and confused.**

**\$4 BILLION +
left on the table**

**The high school class of 2024 missed out on
\$4.4 billion in Pell Grants by not completing the
FAFSA, a \$400 million increase over 2023.**

COLLEGE PERSISTENCE REMAINS CHALLENGING

With a 20% gap in retention of low-income students v. high-income students, colleges are scrambling for more effective means to keep students on track. Common challenges for first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students include:

- **Paying for college:** The mean amount of unmet need is nearly \$6,000 per year before loans.
- **Unexpected events:** FGLI students are nearly 4x as likely to quit after the first year, often due to unexpected events that affect finances and transportation.
- **Campus engagement and belonging:** Many working and FGLI students experience alienation from the campus community and are hesitant to seek out resources.



OUR SOLUTION

INCREASING SCHOOLS' CAPACITY WITH PEER LEADERS

Each year, PeerForward activates a team of student leaders in under-resourced high schools and colleges with large populations of low-income students. These teams instantly boost the schools' capacity in supporting students with postsecondary planning and persistence.

PEERFORWARD IN HIGH SCHOOL

648

PEER LEADERS (81 TEAMS)

17k

SENIORS SERVED

58k

GRADES 9-11 IMPACTED

PEERFORWARD IN COLLEGE

108

PEER LEADERS (6 TEAMS)

1640

STUDENTS SERVED

4

COLLEGE PARTNERS



For nearly **30 YEARS**, we have guided more than **700,000 STUDENTS** along the path to postsecondary success. Our goal in the next five years is to grow that total to **1 MILLION!**

MISSION & VISION

PeerForward maximizes the power of positive peer influence to transform the lives of students in low-income communities by connecting them to higher education and careers.

PeerForward, originally College Summit, has continuously evolved so that students in under-served communities have a shot at higher education and economic agency through meaningful careers.

Our Unique Approach

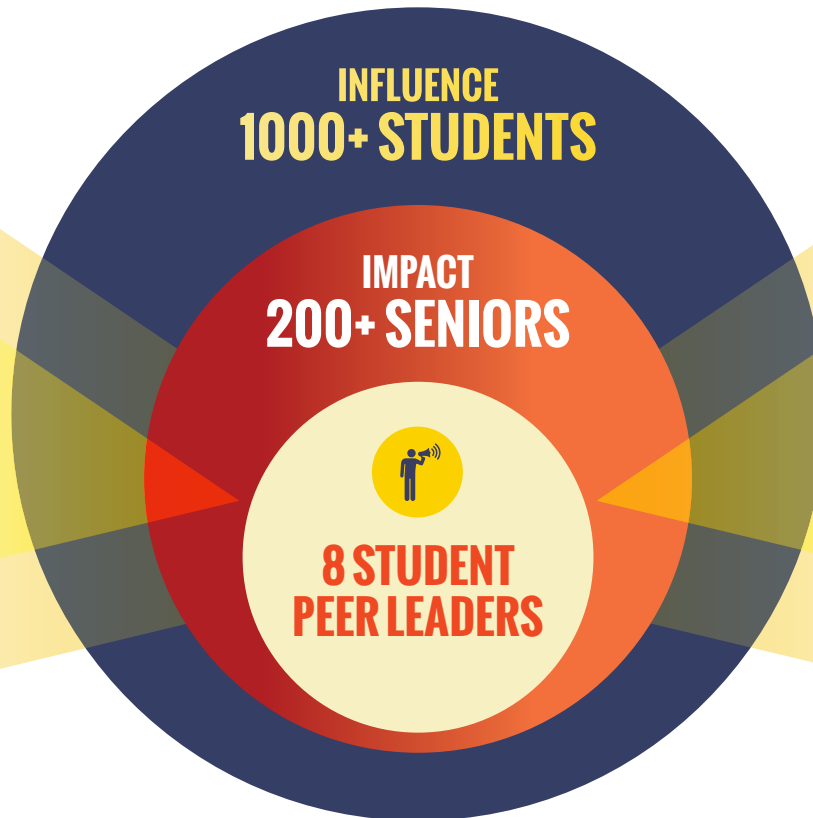
THE PEERFORWARD MULTIPLIER EFFECT!

PeerForward leverages a valuable resource found in every high school - influential students. A team is comprised of four seniors and four juniors who are supported by a school-based Advisor and a dedicated PeerForward Coach.

After undergoing PeerForward's superb youth activation training, these eight students lead transformative movements across their entire school, making postsecondary planning and success the expectation, not the exception.

On average, each team of eight Peer Leaders influences and educates 1,000+ grade 9-12 students and directly serves 200+ seniors, creating a **force multiplier of hope, planning, and persistence.**

Our **unique whole-school model** supports equitable access to postsecondary education and positions student leadership as a tool for systemic change.





CHARGING UP

Peer Leaders attend transformational summer workshops to both discover their “why” and unlock their leadership, advocacy, and motivational skills.

Through expert training led by youth development specialists, they delve deep into their personal motivations for postsecondary education, share their hopes and fears, and solidify their belief that they can achieve it.

They gain knowledge on the mechanics of how to pursue their chosen path, while learning how to inspire their peers to do the same.

LIGHTING THE WAY FOR OTHERS

Who does a 17-year-old listen to? Another 17-year-old.

And as students advance from high school to colleges and postsecondary programs, they lean on each other. PeerForward saw the power of peer influence long before ‘influencer’ became a trendy occupation.

By taking motivated and influential students – not necessarily the smartest or most popular, but influential in their social circle – and training them on how to navigate higher education AND help their friends do the same, PeerForward elevates the capacity of high schools to provide effective support.

We believe, now more than ever, in the power of student-led initiatives to clear the path to economic empowerment for themselves and their communities.





FROM SELF TO SERVICE!

PEER LEADERS PAY IT FORWARD

Peer Leaders undergo a process of self-discovery and develop a strong sense of confidence in their ability to shape their futures. They then share that self-belief with others and boost schools' capacity to help every student pursue a path to careers.

They deliver meaningful, life-changing outcomes that shape lives.

60% – 80% College Enrollment

Our Peer Leaders' college enrollment has ranged from 60%-80%, far surpassing the national average of 52% for students in high-poverty schools, according to the National Student Clearinghouse analysis.

\$136M Unlocked

\$136,000,000 of financial aid unlocked for our students, with PeerForward high schools outpacing the national average of early FAFSA completion for low-income students, according to NCAN.

Nationally, Peer Leaders Orchestrated Nearly 800 Campaign Activities

From creative Tik-Tok reels to nitty-gritty application workshops, PeerForward teams organized their community to help students get started on their postsecondary path.



PERFORMANCE ARTS

The team at Lake Wales (FL) High School organized a college fair – and performed a skit before the student body to promote it.



FSA FRIDAYS

Peer Leaders at Waianae High School (HI) established FSA Fridays, to directly assist students to register for their federal student assistance ID number, the first step to applying for financial aid.



APPLICATION “LOCK IN”

Harlan County (KY) High School held an application “lock-in” taking over senior seminar classes to provide 1:1 assistance in completing postsecondary applications.



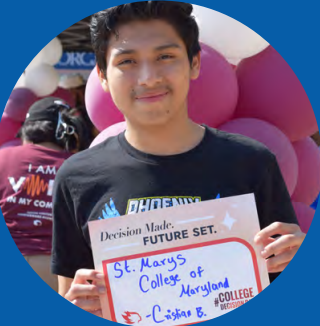
FINANCIAL AID WORKSHOP

Skyline High School (TX) Peer Leaders organized an evening financial aid workshop for parents and their students.

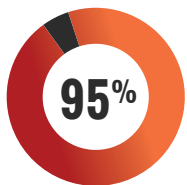


WRITING SEMINAR

The team at Teachers Preparatory High School in Brooklyn (NY) practiced techniques they learned at summer workshop to assist students in writing personal statements for scholarship and admissions application.



PEER LEADER TRANSFORMATION



95% of Peer Leaders indicated they felt confident they can **motivate** and **influence** the behavior of their peers.



99% of Peer Leaders said their **ability to advocate** increased and their **communication skills** improved.

ON THE SUMMER WORKSHOP

“ The Workshop gave me a better understanding of what’s involved in college applications and how to complete the crucial requirements. I was also able to figure out what schools I should go to based on my major and the things I enjoy in a school environment.”

“ Hearing everybody’s stories and seeing the support they received when sharing was the most impactful to me. **We are all working through obstacles, and that is so important in understanding how to properly lead.**”

“ My College Coach helped me find colleges that would fit. **My writing coach helped me find my voice** to write a tremendous personal statement that accurately reflects myself and what I stand for. I also learned a lot of life lessons, like advocating for myself, that will help when applying to college, in my college years, and throughout the rest of my life.

 Read more student stories [on our blog.](#)

ON NEW SKILLS!

“ **Being in a space where others looked to me for support taught me how to respond calmly under pressure** and make decisions on the spot. I learned how to adjust to different personalities in a way that felt supportive and respectful. I realized how important it is to lead with care.”

“ **I have gained more experience in public speaking**, which is what I am proudest of. I was always someone who was nervous to speak out and I was reserved because of that. But after joining PeerForward, something changed. I was able to actually do more and help others. That is the point of being a leader: helping and guiding those who need it.”

“ Resilience. Since being in PeerForward, I feel like **I can push through anything** I need to.”

ON IMPACTING OTHERS

“ I supported students over the Thanksgiving break as they worked on their college application. Many felt overwhelmed by personal statements and deadlines, so I sat with them, gave feedback and encouraged them to keep pushing. I could see how much it meant to them to have someone who believed in them and was willing to give up their own break to help. **That experience made me realize the power of showing up for others.**”

“ I shared resources, encouraged open conversations, and helped others feel less alone in the process. **These moments were meaningful because they allowed me to use my own journey to guide others through theirs.** It felt rewarding to create a space where we could relate to one another and move toward our goals together.”

“ My greatest accomplishment was **seeing quantifiable change in students’ awareness, responsibility, and aspiration.**”

PEER LEADER IMPACT

How did Peer Leaders Help You?

“ My parents weren’t sure about me going to college, and I didn’t think that I was smart enough to even get accepted.

A Peer Leader helped narrow down the options and conclude that college close to home in Hawaii was the best for me.”

“ I felt comfortable asking silly questions. **Every time I thought I should quit my journey to go to college, Peer Leaders instilled a belief that I should continue** to apply to college because I deserve an education!”

“ It is important to have non-teacher/advisor resources because **I have social anxiety speaking with an adult so talking to another student was ideal for me.**”

“ Growing up in a rural area I found it hard to find the motivation to go to college and the possible financial burden of college scared me. **But Peer Leaders provided mental support and encouraged me to never give up and find different ways to pay for college.** Peer Leaders are cool because it’s nice to have someone close to you that you can go to for support no matter when.”

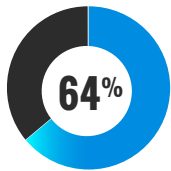


PEERFORWARD IN COLLEGE

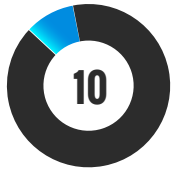
GOING FROM PEER TO COLLEGE LEADERS!

The PeerForward in College program builds on the momentum of the high school program. Yay, they got to college, now let's use that same peer power to help them get all the way through.

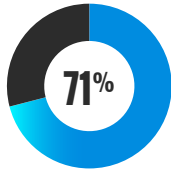
SUCCESS METRICS AT PARTNER COLLEGES



64% Fall 2024 to Spring 2025 **persistence rate**, far exceeding the target rate of 38%.

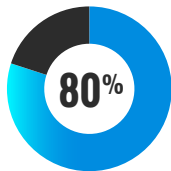


10 percentage points **higher course completion rate**.

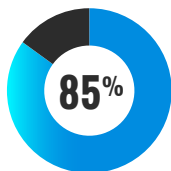


71% **higher rate of degree completion**.

COLLEGE PEER LEADERS' IMPACT



80% of mentees surveyed said their **Peer Leaders helped them succeed** in college.



85% of mentees said they **feel a sense of belonging** (10% points higher than the control group).



WHAT DO MENTEES SAY OF THEIR PEER LEADERS?

“ My Peer Leader benefited me by **connecting me to a lot of resources that the college offers that I didn’t know about** like the college lending a laptop, the Lyft program, groceries, mental health sessions and many more!”

“ My peer mentor **helped me find scholarships**, work-study opportunities, and other helpful student resources.”

“ My peer mentor **helped me choose better classes** based off my pace.”

“ This experience has **boosted my confidence**, making me more comfortable seeking assistance.”

“ Honestly, **they’re the reason I was able to get through** this semester and pass my classes!”

GENERATING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES:

By training and serving with PeerForward, Peer Leaders develop career-ready skills such as project management, public speaking, and data analysis.

Both high school and college Peer Leaders benefit from exposure to opportunities with corporate partners such as Amazon, Amtrak, Bank of America, Deloitte, and Google.

They gain valuable experience setting measurable goals, strategizing, planning and executing campaigns and events, such as career fairs and financial aid workshops, and problem solving to achieve their targets.



amazon

AMTRAK

Bank of America

Deloitte.

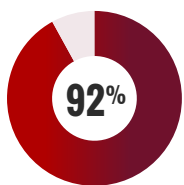
Google

PROGRAM ALUMNI

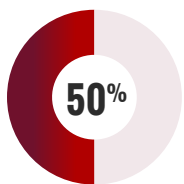
are key to PeerForward's effectiveness

The Peer Leaders who have a profound experience with PeerForward as high schoolers grow into the **Alumni** who serve on our staff and volunteer at our workshops.

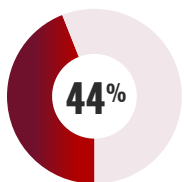
They also comprise the **National Alumni Council**, which advises PeerForward on relevant trends that PeerForward ought to adapt to, and create networking events for fellow alumni to make personal and career connections. It's this "pay-it-forward" ethos that keeps the organization running.



92% of Summer Workshop staff are PeerForward alumni, many in volunteer roles.



50% of PeerForward's program staff are alumni.



44% of PeerForward's total staff are program alumni as well.

“ One person who shaped me personally and professionally is the Co-Founder of PeerForward, Mr. Derek Canty. I met Derek 23 years ago at the age of 17 as I was entering my senior year of high school.

During this time, college was not on my mind, and the possibility of attending seemed out of reach. What Derek did in 4 days was instill HOPE in me. He turned on a light switch that I don't allow people to dim.

When hope is instilled in someone you build courage and confidence. You provide options that they may not consider. The hope Derek provided me changed the trajectory of my life. He is a huge reason why I continue to give back to the organization as an alumni and trainer. **It has been an honor to pay it forward.**”

— **Ashlee Neal**

Alum, PeerForward Coach / Alumni Trainer



ALUMNI RULE THE SCHOOL

**92% of
Summer Workshop Staff
are PeerForward alumni.**

Many volunteers are alumni;
and alums are 44% of the full-time staff.

“ Peer-to-Peer influence did not stop in high school. Being active within the PeerForward Alumni space led me to opportunities I never thought would be an option.

Over the last few years, Cornelius Williams pushed me outside my comfort zone by assigning me different tasks and responsibilities at any given moment. Today I find myself using those exact lessons with ease and confidence.

Who knew those lessons would be the exact roles and responsibilities I needed for my next career opportunity? My PeerForward Alumni family have influenced the person that I am today..... and the person I haven't even discovered yet.”

– **Alivia Graham**

Alum, Workshop Coordinator, College and Career Advisor for Houston Independent School District

“ I've witnessed the magic happen time and again. But I cannot describe the joy I experienced serving as a Writing Coach last summer. One of my students was holding back until his peers encouraged him to share with thoughtful questioning and authentic feedback. It turned into a 'lightbulb moment' and he wrote a beautiful, compelling personal statement.”

– **Perry Green**

Alum, Writing Coach volunteer

“ One word I would use to describe PeerForward is love. It's the love we have for the younger generation that keeps us coming back, and the love we give to fill their cups so they'll do the same when it's their time.”

– **August Taylor**

Alum, Writing Coach volunteer. [Read her story here.](#)



Read more Alumni stories [on our blog.](#)

THE TEAM BEHIND THE TEAMS

COACHES ARE OUR SECRET SAUCE

Talent, tenacity, and true desire to light the path to postsecondary success are the traits each coach, volunteer, and staff shares. We invest in, support and celebrate each other. It's the PeerForward way!

PEERFORWARD COACHES lift students and one another up to greater heights.

“ From my beginnings as a first-generation Peer Leader, I’ve come full circle—now leading and coaching the next generation. I’m proud to be pouring back into this 30-year program!”



– **Dr. Loubert Senatus, EdD, PCC**
Alum, Director, Program
Implementation and Partnerships
[Read his story here.](#)

Today Dr. Senatus coaches high school Peer Leader teams across multiple states and helps college students transform their campuses through peer-led initiatives. He embodies our “self-to-service” mindset by continually challenging himself while growing the next generation of PeerForward coaches.



**240+
HOURS**

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

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

“ The impact of your work at Fremont and across Oakland is clear. Students are stepping into their own leadership because of the incredible guidance and support you and the PeerForward team provide.”

– **Sandra Ernst**
CEO of Oakland Promise



OUR AMAZING VOLUNTEERS

More than **150 volunteers** joined us in coaching and mentoring Peer Leaders during summer workshops, training camps, and career field trips.

Employees from corporate partners such as Amtrak, Deloitte, and T. Rowe Price shared their educational and professional journeys to inspire our Peer Leaders to explore careers they might not have otherwise known about. [Read more here.](#)

The presence of these volunteers is an act of belief in the power of young people, and in the promise of what can happen when students are seen, supported, and equipped to lead.

“Volunteering for this organization is so special. Being around the students and the other volunteers pours into my soul. Education can be a powerful lever for breaking cycles of poverty and expanding access to opportunity, choice, and self-determination.”



– **Dr. Ebony Wright-Campbell**
*Licensed Clinical Social Worker with
the NYC Department of Education
and College Coach Volunteer*

[Read her story here.](#)

 Read more about our dedicated volunteers [on our blog.](#)



PeerForward was the 2024 NCAN Member of The Year

In addition to receiving this honor, the PeerForward team led a powerful session at the NCAN conference titled *Effective Student Coaching: More Important than Ever in a Post-Affirmative Action World*.

This session addressed the challenges and opportunities in assisting students toward postsecondary success amidst changing educational landscapes.

 Learn more about this win [on our blog](#).



Our CEO, Gary Linnen, was named on the ForbesBLK 50 List

“Today, I am brimming with gratitude. Forbes just launched ForbesBLK 50 – its inaugural list which recognizes some of the most forward-thinking and influential Black leaders, and I’m deeply humbled and honored to be included. I’m so thankful to the Forbes team.”

 Discover [the feature](#).

OUR STAFF PAYING IT FORWARD

With a wide range of backgrounds – everything from teaching, to coaching and youth development, to sales and marketing – the one thing our staff all have in common is a **passion for creating the next generation of change makers**. They invest countless hours training, guiding, and mentoring our Peer Leaders. Many were first generation, low-income students themselves, so they understand the struggle and are focused on paying it forward. [Read more about our incredible team!](#)



“Ultimately, it’s about community and doing all we can to lift one another.”

– **Shyla Ingram**
Managing Director of Finance



OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

PART OF POWERFUL PEER NETWORKS

Our leadership team prioritizes peer connections with groups such as the **National College Attainment Network (NCAN)**, a network of 600+ organizations spanning the education, nonprofit, government, and civic sectors, and **Americas Promise Alliance (APA)**, a collective of 150+ college access organizations.

Our CEO Gary Linnen was selected to be part of 2025 cohort of **Pahara Fellows**, an extraordinary group of leaders united by a shared passion for transforming public education so that all children are equipped to lead free and fulfilling lives. These groups share our ethos and are driving education equity at scale.

“Connecting with like-minded peers at events like the APA Convening and NCAN truly fills my cup. These gatherings ground me in community and keep me anchored in the habits and patterns that sustain me, especially when the headwinds feel strongest against student access and success. The courage I see in my peers, as they navigate uncertain times with clarity and resolve, reminds me of the glasses metaphor: when I’m feeling tired, defeated, or overwhelmed, I ask myself—what lens do I need to shift to? Their example helps me see challenges not as roadblocks, but as reminders of why we persist.”

— **Raquel Figueroa**
*Managing Director of
Program and Innovation*





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Tyree Bell

DMV



“ When I first applied to work at PeerForward (then College Summit) in 2002, I was drawn to a powerful truth: the most influential person in a student’s life is often another student. Twenty years later, I was honored to join PeerForward’s Board of Directors. No other model can match PeerForward’s combination of quantitative results and qualitative transformation. The data speaks volumes, but so do the stories—students who never saw college as possible now graduate and return to lift up the next generation. This isn’t just an organization changing lives; it’s a movement proving that when we invest in young people’s potential to lead, the returns extend far beyond what we can measure.”

— Dana Warren

PeerForward Board Member



OUR SUPPORTERS

We are deeply grateful for the generous support of our diverse community of donors, including foundations, organizations, and hundreds of individuals who have invested in PeerForward's mission.

“The Quest Foundation is proud to support PeerForward and its mission to unlock the potential of young leaders in underserved communities. I've seen firsthand over the past fourteen years how their student-led model transforms not just individuals, but entire school cultures. PeerForward's impact is deep, lasting, and urgently needed.”

— **Derek Jernstedt**

Quest Foundation Executive Director



THANK YOU!

[Learn about becoming a supporter.](#)

PARTNERSHIP COLLABORATIONS

Amazon Sponsors PeerForward & Hosts Peer Leaders

Amazon hosted several Peer Leaders at a new distribution center in Michigan, where they toured the facility and learned about the career opportunities and world-class benefits that Amazon offers.

 [Learn more.](#)



Bank of America Provides Personal Finance Education

Bank of America provided students in Oakland with personal finance education through its “Better Money Habits” curriculum.

 [Learn more.](#)



Google Hosted a Career Panel for STEM

Google hosted a cohort of NYC-based female students for a career panel and networking day focused on STEM careers as part of International Women’s Month.

 [Learn more.](#)



NBA Foundation and Dallas Mavericks Created Pathways to Success

Continuing our partnership is a direct investment in students’ economic mobility, preparing them for postsecondary and professional success.

 [Learn more.](#)





**Aloysia “AJ” Jean
exemplifies the “self to service”
ethos of PeerForward.**

She began as a Peer Leader, then served as an Alumni Leader at summer workshops while she was in college. Upon graduation, she began her journey to becoming a PeerForward certified Coach while working on the communications team. She currently serves as PeerForward’s Digital Marketing Manager. For the last ten years she has been investing in uplifting our students, alumni, staff, and volunteers.





“ I learned the power of advocacy as a Peer Leader, how to be a Leader as an alumni, and the impact of relationship building as a Coach. **And now, I am grateful for the opportunity to open doors for others.”**

– **Aloysia Jean**
Digital Marketing Manager



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

PEER  **FORWARD.**

1140 3rd St. NE, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20002
www.peerforward.org