



Guiding Students on a Pathway to Success

How Pinellas County's College and Career Centers use community resources to transform the model of college and career preparation, and provide more intentional life readiness support for underserved and low-income students

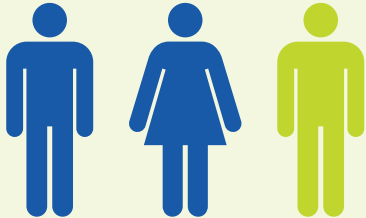
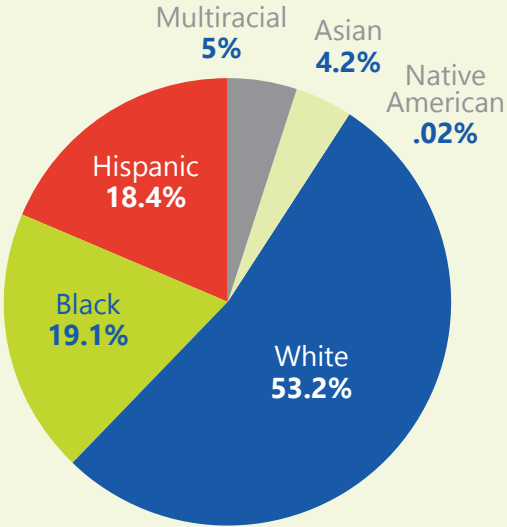
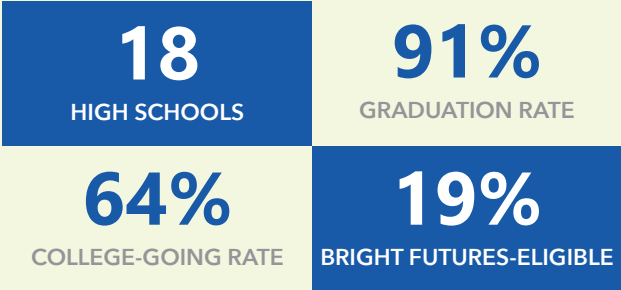
September 2021

All Floridians need education beyond high school to meet the demands of a 21st-century economy, and people with at least some education past high school are more likely to keep their jobs during hard times.ⁱ Additionally, education is an engine for improving social mobility and is an investment with a high return.ⁱⁱ On average, Floridians with bachelor’s degrees earn more than double compared to those with only a high school diploma each year.ⁱⁱⁱ

While there are multiple pathways to success, many students need help understanding what options are ahead. In Florida, just 20% of voters believe that high schoolers are provided adequate resources to make informed decisions about options for education after high school.^{iv} Like the rest of the nation, Florida has a school counselor shortage. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students to 1 counselor, yet Florida averages a 442:1 ratio.^v School counselors provide academic, social-emotional, and career guidance and have many other non-counseling duties, including clerical tasks, administrative obligations, and coordinating school-wide tests. Balancing all these demands often leaves students with limited access to college and career guidance.

Students with supportive adults in their lives may have help filling out the FAFSA, navigating which career pathway to follow, or considering which kind of college to attend. Yet many students come from families who lack information about college or career pathways—such as first-generation students or those from low-income families—and need targeted guidance. For these students, their high school counselor is often one of the most influential people to them during their postsecondary planning and plays an essential role in helping students and families understand college

SNAPSHOT: Pinellas County Schools



2 IN 3 ARE ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED

preparation, paying for and choosing a college, and career exploration.^{vi}

To meet the recommended student to counselor ratio, schools would need to hire hundreds of school counselors – an expensive and unattainable fix. Instead, to provide equitable access and support for all current and future students, Pinellas County Schools came up with an innovative alternative. In 2017, district leadership recognized their resources to help guide students on the pathway to college were not robust enough. For example, the district noticed that there were 9th graders demonstrating college readiness on their PSAT, yet by their senior year, they were not receiving Bright Futures scholarships or attending selective schools such as schools in the state university system. In response, the district imagined a model that could offer targeted support for all students, particularly student groups traditionally left behind or on the bubble of success. The goal: change the culture of the schools themselves.

IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMATION

Once Pinellas County Schools (PCS) determined a strategic direction focused on college and career



442:1
STUDENTS:COUNSELOR

**NEARLY DOUBLE THE RECOMMENDED RATIO BY
THE AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS ASSOCIATION**

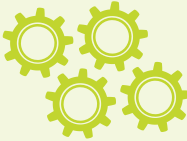
readiness, one of its first actions was to hold a college readiness summer seminar in 2018. Across multiple days, the summer seminar provided intensive intervention around college preparation. Yet multi-day sessions during traditional work hours meant many students and families could not participate. The district decided that to best reach low-income and underrepresented students, support needed to be built into the school day.

To expand college readiness across the district, PCS district leadership put together Elevating Excellence (EE), an initiative that engages high-performing, underserved students and families with individualized supports for their path to college

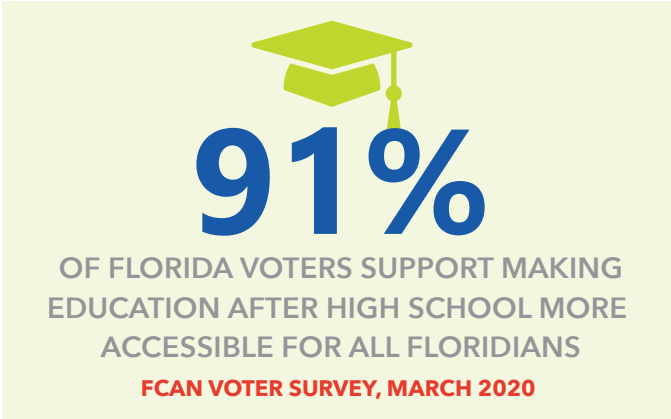
The spark of an idea:

In 2012, Dr. Anne Eason, a practicing psychologist, began volunteering at her daughter's school, Robinson High in Hillsborough County, to support the College and Career Counselor. Through her volunteering, Anne realized students were eager for one-on-one conversations about their future. Anne and other parents began regularly volunteering their time to meet with students in school and discuss their postsecondary plans. The school soon converted a storage room to a meeting space, and a local business donated desks, tables, and chairs. Calling the new space "The Cube," Anne and other volunteers met with over 250 students in their first year. Volunteers help students identify interests and skills, identify financial aid opportunities, and narrow down their postsecondary choices. The Cube has grown since, and Anne has been honored across the state for her volunteer efforts, including as a Tampa Bay Lightning Community Hero.

success. The year-long EE model was designed through research, surveys, community discussion and building upon existing resources. Other successful programs across the country, such as the College Advising Corps and AmeriCorps programs, were consulted to develop the six pillars that the program is based upon—academic counseling and targeted support, pathway course progression, parent and student engagement, college entrance test preparation, college and scholarship planning, and peer collaboration experiences. While EE specifically targets high-performing, underserved students, the initiative connects all students with the resources and supports needed to develop a personalized path to college success. The district is fortunate to have support from the Pinellas Education Foundation, which seeks to ensure every student is prepared for life after high school. In partnership with the Foundation, the district secured funds and developed a plan for what this expanded EE programming could look like in practice.



THE CENTERS ARE ONE PIECE OF THE LARGER **ELEVATING EXCELLENCE (EE)**, AN INITIATIVE WHICH WORKS TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO MAY BE FIRST-GENERATION, UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES, OR FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS WHO SHOW POTENTIAL FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS BASED ON PSAT SCORE AND GPA ON THEIR PATHWAY TOWARDS POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS.



While the district was in discussion about ways to enhance the EE initiative, they learned about Dr. Anne Eason’s success at The Cube and the potential to scale it across the area at a meeting of LEAP Tampa Bay, the community’s Local College Access Network. As Anne described it, the Cube did not necessarily take a lot of money but rather,

commitment. In 2018, LEAP Tampa Bay, which supports postsecondary education efforts in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties, secured a small grant to expand the model established at Robinson to two other high schools in Tampa Bay. In spring 2019, the first two College and Career Centers opened – one in Pinellas County and one in Hillsborough County.

With support from the Foundation, Pinellas’ district leadership designed a systematic implementation of the College and Career Center pilot program into more schools, using the Cube as inspiration. Seeking to move beyond providing support from volunteers in high schools when room was available, the district put their full efforts into expanding the Centers as a critical strategy within the EE initiative. The Centers serve as the centralized hub for degree and career exploration, preparation, resources, and information at each school. The Foundation decided to incorporate the expansion of the Centers within multiple grants, garnering additional support from the Helios Education Foundation and the Richard O. Jacobson Foundation.

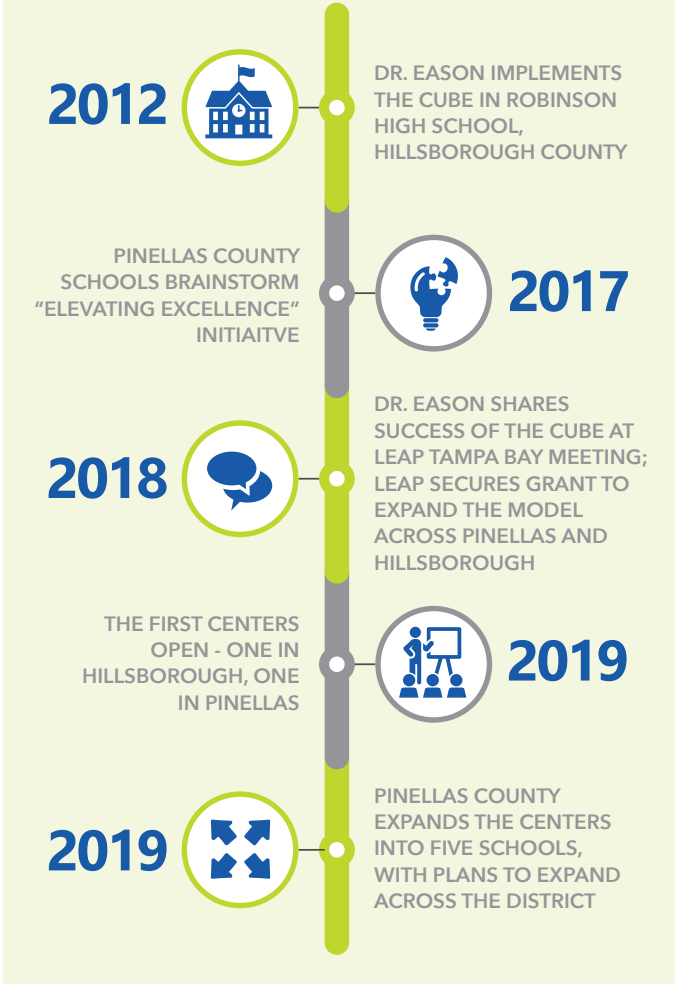
HOW IT WORKS

The PCS College and Career Centers are coordinated between school administration and school counselors. By providing a dedicated place for students to ask questions about college admissions or how to fill out the FAFSA, the Centers support the work of school counselors. Ultimately, the resources at the Centers allow students to use their time with their school counselors for more substantive conversations, like specific questions about academic advising and coursework progression to meet their postsecondary goals.



When the Centers are first established, they are staffed with a full-time Center manager who oversees daily organization and operation of the Center as well as recruitment and coordination of volunteers. That manager is eventually replaced with a part-time paid volunteer coordinator, who continues to provide structure for the Center under the direction of the school counseling and

Expanding the Centers Across a District



administrative teams. Through district oversight and regular meetings with the Center manager, the Centers seek to maintain the same quality of service regardless of school. The goal is for the schools and district to commit to the Centers and support them towards long-term sustainability, and that the Centers are fully integrated within the school's culture and its administrative system.

The Center manager recruits volunteers who jumpstart essential conversations with students to take back to their families. By opening the dialogue

about career paths, financial aid options, and scholarship opportunities earlier on in their high school experience, the district is working to make postsecondary education a reality for every student.

On a typical day, the Center volunteers reach out to targeted EE students. The students, who are called to the Center during their elective hours, talk to the volunteers about broad college and career readiness topics depending on the student’s year. For example, sophomores may explore their career options and interests after high school, while juniors may discuss college application essays, and seniors may learn about scholarship options. Beyond the targeted list of EE students, any student can also choose to walk into the Center to get help.

In fall 2019, PCS implemented Centers in five different schools throughout the county, and each had the freedom to evolve based upon their population and school culture. In 2021, the district expanded the College and Career Centers to 4 more high schools, with plans to have one in every high school by 2024.

AFTER THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION, PINELLAS COUNTY DISTRICT SAW A

+ 4% INCREASE IN FAFSA COMPLETION RATE

FOUR OF FIVE SCHOOLS WITH CENTERS HAD FAFSA RATES THAT MET OR EXCEEDED DISTRICT RATES. TWO SCHOOLS SAW DOUBLE-DIGIT INCREASES OF OVER 11 PERCENTAGE POINTS.

PRIMARY COMPONENTS

DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION SUPPORT CENTER SUSTAINABILITY

With the high ratio of school counselors to students in most public schools, the solution is not necessarily to hire more counselors. In times of economic uncertainty, adding new hires is an expensive option for districts already tight on funds. Instead, given the barriers of the school counselor shortage, PCS and the local community worked together to fill the gap.

The Robinson model was based upon community volunteers who were generously able to give their time. However, the PCS district looked to take that model and make it permanent in every school, with formal plans to provide equal support for students at all PCS schools regardless of volunteer makeup. Such large-scale systems change takes time, effort, and money. One of the reasons the Centers have had early success is because the district and community have made those resources available.

“Communities can better support the work if there is clarity and consistency about what students need and what outcomes we should collaborate to produce.”

Chuck Tiernan, Senior Director of LEAP Tampa Bay College Access Network

In the beginning, the Pinellas Education Foundation helped formalize the expansion plan for the Centers, raised money to support the launch of the

first Centers, and provided funds to hire the first Center managers. LEAP Tampa Bay also worked to share the plans with corporate partners in efforts to garner community commitment for the Centers. Although the pandemic halted some efforts, LEAP and the Foundation continue to meet with corporate and civic partners to establish support and recruit potential Center volunteers. LEAP and the Foundation quickly found the work of the Centers aligned with the interest of local businesses and organizations, who are interested in supplying students with information and opportunities to help them on their postsecondary journeys.

“The College and Career Centers are addressing the issues students and families face navigating the postsecondary planning process. The opportunity to leverage the talents and time of volunteers to help with all the important college preparedness steps will set students up for greater success upon graduation.”
Dr. Stacy Baier, CEO of the Pinellas Education Foundation

Pinellas County is fortunate to have a highly active education foundation whose goals align with EE and were willing to support the expansion of the Centers. When PCS started their college access summer seminars with zero private funds, this demonstrated to funders that they were all in on innovating and leveraging existing resources to support low-income and underserved students. PCS’s creativity and willingness to reconsider past efforts show that other districts may not need to secure large grants before trying something similar.



FLORIDA VOTERS IDENTIFY **AFFORDABILITY** AND **ADEQUATE GUIDANCE** AS THE TOP TWO BARRIERS TO FLORIDIANS PURSUING AN EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL



FCAN VOTER SURVEY, AUGUST 2019

Instead, they may be able to reallocate district resources towards critical student populations and their needs.

One way school districts can mitigate barriers to college and career supports, especially for student groups traditionally left behind, is to cultivate and strengthen community collaboration. In turn, it benefits the community to increase the number of low-income students who fill out the FAFSA, choose selective colleges, and qualify for Bright Futures scholarships. To facilitate this type of change, schools need multi-level leaders on board and willing to commit.

HIGHLY TRAINED VOLUNTEER CORPS SUPPORTS SCHOOL COUNSELORS

With a volunteer-run model, recruitment and intensive training are critical for success. In Pinellas County, the Center managers recruit volunteers who go through multiple background checks, are trained on specific college and career planning topics, and shadow an established volunteer or Center manager. Based on the model Dr. Anne Eason created at the Cube, training components include

culturally sensitive practices, finding resources, financial aid 101, and the college application process. In meetings, volunteers listen to where students are in their postsecondary planning and offer ideas towards a plan that can help students meet their goals. Practicing active listening and basic counseling techniques, volunteers help students identify their interests and skills. Often, students need to see that they have more options and pathways than they realized.

Center volunteers educate students on the multiple pathways for life after high school, including four-year degrees, two-year degrees, the military, and credentials in high-demand fields that also earn college credit and “stack” toward a degree. Volunteers come from diverse backgrounds themselves, although they are generally parents of students who attend the Center’s school. However, the Centers have also seen their volunteer base expand to include enthusiastic community members, retired professionals, military spouses, and college students.

Volunteer-run models can come with challenges, including the necessity of training and lengthy background checks, people who may bring implicit biases to their interactions with students, and a lack of volunteers. Largo High School had a fairly seamless volunteer recruitment process and started in February 2019 with eleven volunteers. In the spring of 2019, the Center operated 1.5 days a week and saw around 135 students. Volunteers also saw students outside of Center hours by staffing Largo’s FAFSA completion workshop, as well as a resume-writing workshop. However, other schools had a more difficult time securing volunteers and saw fewer students throughout the day. At schools

with a parent base that may not have extra time in their days, it may benefit them to partner with community members to ensure the Centers have enough volunteer staff.



THE CENTERS CONTRIBUTE TO A SCHOOL CULTURE OF POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

One of the Center’s greatest early successes was to help schools focus on the critical transition that happens after high school. Because school counselors often do not have the capacity to individually guide students through a detailed postsecondary plan, this is one area where the Centers excel. The Centers’ existence and their ability to integrate postsecondary readiness into the fabric of the school helps to create a culture of support.

To advertise the Centers and describe their purpose, messaging is essential. It is important to communicate with all stakeholders early and often to ensure teachers and staff understand the Centers’ work. Without clear messaging, school counselors may have some resistance to the

Centers. To combat this, PCS has proactively worked to inform stakeholders that the Centers' purpose is to help school staff and empower students to have better, more useful interactions with their school counselors. Ideally, the Centers will help make school counselors' jobs easier and allow them to do more of what they enjoy—having meaningful conversations with students to guide their future.

Although the Centers primarily target outreach to specific groups of students, they are open to all, and the helpfulness of the Centers quickly spread throughout the schools by word of mouth. Notably, there are many repeat customers to the Centers, which signifies that students find them useful. When the Centers become the hub of learning about scholarships, FAFSA, or college exploration, school staff gets on board.



At certain schools, teachers invited volunteers to present on college and career-readiness topics. For example, at Largo, volunteers presented



AFTER THE FIRST PILOT ROUND WITH FOUR HIGH SCHOOLS, PINELLAS COUNTY OPENED UP APPLICATIONS FOR INTERESTED HIGH SCHOOLS TO ESTABLISH CENTERS IN THE 2ND COHORT. AS EVIDENCE OF THEIR SUCCESS, EVERY SINGLE HIGH SCHOOL IN THE DISTRICT APPLIED.

in automotive and culinary classrooms and successfully engaged students who may have otherwise not sought out the Centers. Teachers also refer students to the Centers, whether it is a student who has asked a specific question or a student who the teacher has identified as someone potentially at risk of being left behind. Tellingly, counselors also direct students to the Center. When a student comes to a counselor with a request in the Centers' purview, like questions about a college application or test preparation, the Centers are a great resource.

GOING VIRTUAL: ADJUSTING TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The district could not have predicted the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity to shift their resources completely virtual. Yet, with in-person meetings, FAFSA nights, information sessions, and college tours delayed, college and career support were more critical than ever. In response to curveballs that came with the pandemic, the Centers and their expansion changed dramatically. Due to security issues and COVID restrictions, for most of the 2020-21 school year, only the Center manager met with students - both virtually through appointments and by socially distanced walk-ins. The Centers also

launched an expanded virtual volunteer format in spring 2021 that expanded access to 1-on-1 meetings.

Without the ability to leverage volunteers, the Centers assisted fewer students than in the prior pre-COVID semesters. However, there were promising practices to keep when the Centers and volunteers moved back in-person in Fall 2021. Most helpful is the new ability to offer virtual appointments. These appointments provide greater flexibility for students to schedule a meeting at their convenience within their school day. Additionally, the Centers used the pandemic as an opportunity to build deeper relationships with teachers. Taking advantage of the online format, some Center managers presented specific college and career readiness topics to entire classrooms, successfully expanding the Centers' reach.



After providing more access to information than ever before, the Centers do not plan to return to an entirely in-person model. With targeted email communication about making appointments and advertising virtual events like college planning fairs

and FAFSA completion workshops, Center managers find they are seeing new student populations for the first time. In addition, more robust electronic communication has shown the district how it can reach new groups of students and parents who may have been previously difficult to reach due to conflicting work hours or a lack of transportation. And with the appropriate safeguards, virtual volunteering will continue to provide convenience for both students and volunteers. Now, the school district has experience and expertise with virtual platforms and has more avenues to meet families where they are in the future.

NEXT STEPS

Pinellas' vision for creating a strategic direction of Career and College Readiness is a continuous commitment from all levels. Beyond traditional one-on-one advising, the middle school and high school curriculum guides have dedicated one class period per quarter for counselors to deliver seminars and allow students to access and complete postsecondary preparation tasks and activities.

In 2020-21, PCS implemented Naviance, a college, career, and life readiness program, districtwide in grades 6-12. Naviance provides secondary students access to resources to help them plan for postsecondary endeavors. Students can also get assistance with and complete Naviance assessments and tasks in the College and Career Center. The district believes that Naviance, along with counselor seminars and the College and Career Center supports, will make students better informed and have a more individualized, purposeful meeting with their counselor.

PCS's partners, the Pinellas Education Foundation and LEAP Tampa Bay, continue to be essential in the development and trajectory of the district's

college and career preparation. For instance, the Foundation and PCS are actively collaborating to align the college readiness and success coaching element of the Take Stock in Children program with the district's other college and career initiatives to create more efficiency and better alignment.

Pinellas County Schools College and Career Centers saw early immense growth in just a few years, only to be followed with pandemic-related setbacks and opportunities to improve services. Yet, their early successes are promising for districts across the state interested in addressing their own counselor shortage through community-based efforts. Within the traditional model of advising students, the

numbers do not add up, and sometimes students who need extra help are inadvertently left behind. Districts may not need to necessarily secure large grants before trying something similar to the work in Pinellas. Rather, they may be able to reallocate district and community resources towards critical student populations and their needs, as Pinellas did with its initial Elevating Excellence program. Through small amounts of funds, district and community commitments, and highly trained volunteers, College and Career Centers can offer a new model to better support the postsecondary journey for today's students, leading to success in education after high school and meaningful careers.

ⁱ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *America's Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots*, 2016. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/americas-divided-recovery/>

ⁱⁱ Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, Danny Yagan, *Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility*. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/coll_mrc_paper.pdf; Michael Greenstone, Adam Looney, Jeremy Patashnik, and Muxin Yu, *Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education*. The Hamilton Project, 2013. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/THP_13EconFacts_FINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Florida College Access Network, *Talent Strong Florida*, 2020. <https://floridacollegeaccess.org/talent-strong-florida/>

^{iv} (FCAN Survey, March 20).

^v The Education Trust, *School Counselors Matter Factsheet*, 2019. <https://edtrust.org/resource/school-counselors-matter/>

^{vi} Blaire Cholewa, Christina K. Burkhardt, and Michael F. Hull. "Are School Counselors Impacting Underrepresented Students' Thinking about Postsecondary Education? A Nationally Representative Study." *Professional School Counseling* (2015). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.144>.

Florida College Access Network (FCAN) is Florida's first collaborative network committed to ensuring all Floridians have the opportunity to achieve an education beyond high school and a rewarding career. We envision a Florida working together where education is the pathway to economic mobility for all.


As a nonpartisan organization, FCAN strives to expand knowledge of research, data, policies and practices that impact postsecondary access and attainment in Florida. This report is intended as an educational resource.

FCAN is a statewide organization hosted by the University of South Florida System (USF). The statements and findings presented are those of FCAN and are not made on behalf of the USF Board of Trustees or intended to be in any way be representative to USF.

For more research and data from FCAN, visit www.floridacollegeaccess.org/research-and-data/.

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