

Community Foundation Leadership in Action Stories

Expanding Access and Success in Education (EASE): Three Indiana Community Foundations Take On A Critical and Persistent Challenge

“The community foundation is a catalyzing force that creates a better future for all by addressing the community’s most critical or persistent challenges, inclusively uniting people, institutions and resources, and producing significant, widely shared and lasting results.”

Definition of community leadership by the [National Task Force on Community Leadership](#)

Three Indiana community foundations and their local partners took on the challenge of increasing the number of at-risk youth in their communities attending and succeeding in college or other post-secondary education. This opportunity arose when [Lumina Foundation for Education](#) identified counties in Indiana in which there was need and opportunity. Then in partnership with [CFLeads](#), the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation provided funding and technical assistance to the community foundations serving these counties to support convening, data collection and the implementation of programs and advocacy activities. The effort, which ran from 2005 to 2009, was called Indiana EASE – Expanding Access and Success in Education.

While supporting academic achievement goals in each community, the EASE program also provided an opportunity for each of the participating community foundations to advance their practice of community leadership – developing local solutions to a critical and persistent problem in an intentional and proactive way. Through their efforts, each foundation demonstrated key building blocks of community leadership, as set forth in the Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation.

Lumina Foundation for Education is a national funder whose big goal is to increase the percentage of American adults with high-quality college degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025. In a recent report,

To learn more
about the Framework for
Community Leadership by
a Community Foundation
and the building blocks
illustrated in this story,
visit www.cfleads.org or
www.cof.org/cfltools.

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[A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education](#), Lumina makes a compelling case that we must educate many more people beyond high school if we are to meet the huge social and economic challenges facing every state within our nation. College attainment rates are rising in almost every industrialized or post-industrial country in the world except for the U.S. where about 39 percent of adults hold a two-or four-year degree. This rate has held steady for four decades. A deeper look at the data presented shows dangerous stagnation in the rates of college attainment among underserved students – first-generation, low-income and students of color. Their college attainment rates are significantly lower than those of other students and the gap is widening.

As well as suggesting strategies to increase college access and success, the report provides data on degree-attainment rates for every state and for each county within a state. In Indiana, only 28 percent of the state's 3.1 million working-age adults (25 – 64 years old) and 31 percent of younger adults (25 – 34 years old) hold at least a two-year degree. The three counties in the EASE project have similar outcomes. Lake County has 27.8 percent of young adults with a two- or four-year degree. Vigo County has 32.5 percent and Sullivan County has 21.4 percent. These counties and others in Indiana face great challenges in meeting the goal of 60% by 2025.

Responding to the challenge by Lumina to increase college access and success were [Legacy Foundation](#) (serving Lake County including Gary, IN), [Wabash Valley Community Foundation](#) (serving Vigo County including Terre Haute) and its affiliate, [Sullivan County Community Foundation](#) (serving a sparsely populated rural county). At the start of the program, the participating community foundations' staff sizes ranged from one part-time to six and all had assets of less than \$31 million. Building on existing relationships and forging new connections, the community foundations formed local partnerships to collect and analyze data, raise awareness about the issue, and consider local solutions. Their partners included two- and four-year colleges, nonprofits that work with marginalized youth, public agencies, churches, and schools. Impact Strategies, Inc., a planning and evaluation group based in Indiana, provided technical assistance helping each partnership develop its theory of change and measurable outcomes.

“Having immediate responsibility to facilitate the work of the (EASE) advisory group was an introductory crash course in each of the building blocks of community leadership,” according to Cara Spicer, Legacy Foundation's Grants and Communications Officer.

Not only were the local partnerships critical to the success of the EASE efforts, but also they sowed the seeds of new alliances that will have lasting impact in their communities. One member of the Sullivan

County partnership commented that the community had never before convened such a diverse group – for any purpose.

Mentoring of middle school youth was the priority for action identified by each partnership. Completing high school and succeeding in post-secondary education are dependent on critical decisions and actions taken in the middle school years. For example, taking college preparatory classes such as algebra as well as developing good study habits can “make or break” a student’s chance of attending and succeeding in college.

While each identified mentoring as a priority, the programs and supports they developed reflect the unique needs and opportunities in their communities. The Sullivan County partnership, recognizing limited nonprofit infrastructure in their county, created a new nonprofit that will provide mentoring and other supports to youth such as connecting them to Indiana’s [Twenty-first Century Scholars Program](#). This state initiative guarantees income-eligible 6th, 7th and 8th graders, who enroll in the program and fulfill a pledge of good citizenship to the state, the cost of four years of undergraduate college tuition at any participating public college or university in Indiana. Lake County’s partnership developed a mentor training curriculum and Center for Mentors to connect and support nonprofits that are providing or wish to provide mentors. And, the Vigo County partnership brought College Mentors for Kids’ newly developed, national model for mentoring middle school youth to its community.

These community foundations “lived” the definition of community leadership. Each was a catalyst, creating a better future for all by addressing the critical problem of college access and success for at-risk youth in their community. Each community foundation brought together people, institutions and resources to produce significant, widely shared and lasting results. Those results include:

- lasting resources for youth - a new nonprofit in Sullivan; a mentor training curriculum and Center for Mentors in Lake; and, in Vigo a newly developed, national model for mentoring middle school youth;
- attention to youth facing significant barriers and to the importance to them and their communities of increasing their access to and success in college;
- new networks and alliances that include public and nonprofit leaders who provide funds and make policies that have impact on youth;
- new partnerships with two- and four-year colleges in their communities to develop programs and strategies to increase college access and success;
- new advocates for college access and success, including youth who have been mentored in Sullivan County’s Stair Steps to Success program and are now mentoring younger youth;

- leverage of financial and people resources;
- good connections with and use of existing local, state and national resources.

Through “learning by doing,” these community foundations gained valuable community leadership experience and honed skills that will help their communities address persistent and critical issues now and in the future.

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