

PATHWAYS TO PARTNERSHIP

HOW CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION CAN INCREASE IMPACT



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About CPRL

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University develops the next generation of leaders while supporting the education sector in transforming public school systems into learner-centered organizations that provide every student with exceptional learning experiences. Since its founding in 2011, CPRL has developed close to 750 leaders from dozens of law, business, education, policy, and data science graduate programs and provided research, policy, and legal expertise to hundreds of school systems and education organizations across the United States and internationally.

Learn more at <https://cpri.law.columbia.edu>.

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Purpose of This Study

This case study was prepared for Achieve Atlanta (AATL) to document its cross-sector collaboration model and the key conditions, structures, and practices that AATL uses to design and maintain its high-impact partnerships.

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INTRODUCTION

Achieve Atlanta (AATL) envisions an Atlanta where race and income no longer predict postsecondary success and upward mobility.¹ In service of this vision, AATL's mission is to help Atlanta Public Schools (APS) students access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials.² Overcoming the complex obstacles to postsecondary degree completion and upward mobility that APS students encounter requires multifaceted solutions, varying expertise, and cooperatively developed, community-based infrastructures with aligned goals.

Through a mixture of direct and collaboratively designed supports, AATL provides APS students with scholarships, resources, and experiences and facilitates college access advising, college success coaching, and logistical assistance to help students gain entrance to college and succeed once they get there. In addition to its direct services (such as financial aid, resources, and training), AATL functions as a place-based intermediary, which includes deliberately building and sustaining partnerships across diverse sectors, including K–12, higher education, and nonprofit. In this role, AATL works with partners to develop a collective vision, build infrastructure, coordinate operational support, and center data-informed strategy.

AATL's partnership approach has garnered impressive results for thousands of students in less than a decade of work, including an external evaluation demonstrating that AATL Scholars—those students who obtain the AATL Scholarship and receive complementary supports to pursue their postsecondary paths—persist in college at much higher rates than similar peers who did not receive the scholarship and services and graduate from college at the same rate as all students at those institutions, regardless of income status.³

Across its programmatic areas and strategies, AATL partners with local and national organizations to form intentionally designed, metrics-informed collaborations, doing together what no organization could do alone. Current partners include APS, institutes of higher education (e.g., Georgia State University, as well as 10 other colleges and universities), chambers of commerce (e.g., the Metro Atlanta Chamber), nonprofit college access and advising organizations (e.g., Beyond 12, Braven, College Advising Corps, Edu-Tech Enterprises, OneGoal, Scholarship America), and others. Through collaboration, AATL's programs supplement students' high school and postsecondary academic programs, providing much-needed financial and student-centered wraparound support. The approach has worked. In its first decade of work, AATL has impacted more than 20,000 students across the high school-through-college pipeline. Bolstered by these results, AATL hopes to codify its existing partnership approach to prepare for continued growth and contribute insights to the field.

AATL has partnered with the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University (CPRL) to prepare this case study, which documents AATL's cross-sector collaboration model and how it drives outcomes for APS students and AATL Scholars. This case study first explores AATL and how it has implemented its unique partnership model across its programs. It then describes the key conditions, structures, and practices that AATL uses to design and maintain its high-impact collaborations. Finally, it offers lessons for the field, with the intention of supporting organizations and leaders in developing, implementing, and improving their own partnership-driven strategies for impact.



BACKGROUND

About AATL

In 2014, in response to data highlighting low social mobility rates in Atlanta, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta (CFGA) commissioned a report titled “Getting to and Through College — College Access and Completion for Atlanta Students.”⁴ To design and implement the key initiatives outlined in the report, CFGA partnered with the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation and Atlanta Public Schools (APS) to create Achieve Atlanta (AATL), an organization focused on providing (1) quality, focused high school advising, (2) coaching during college, and (3) need-based scholarships for APS students.⁵



\$57M

in scholarship funds



5,953

Scholars



355

institutions

When AATL was founded in 2014, one in seven ninth graders in APS graduated from college within six years of high school graduation.⁶ To address this, over its first nine years of providing assistance, AATL issued \$57 million in scholarship funds to nearly 6,000 Scholars across 355 institutions, and, through cross-sector collaboration with other organizations, provided training, resources, and programming such as high school advising and college coaching.

Since its founding, AATL has grounded its work in cross-sector collaboration, intentionally forming and maintaining partnerships with a range of organizations. Through these collaborations, AATL has fundamentally altered the postsecondary education pipeline and educational empowerment landscape of Atlanta by providing game-changing supports to thousands of students.⁷ AATL serves more than 7,000 students annually and has achieved impressive results, such as more than three quarters of AATL Scholars returning to college for a second year (compared with two thirds of similar peers) and supporting more than 1,500 AATL Scholars to earn their degree or credential by 2024.⁸

Partnership Across Programs

AATL seeks to produce outcomes for Scholars across three strategies: (1) college access, (2) college affordability, and (3) college success (also called persistence through college).

To execute its strategies, AATL provides financial resources and learning opportunities directly to APS students but focuses much of its services on collaborating with its partner organizations, who then provide hands-on support such as high school advising and college success coaching to APS students and AATL Scholars.

College Access

AATL recognized that APS high school students need opportunities for postsecondary planning during the school day and hands-on help to act on milestones, such as taking college entrance exams, researching colleges, and filling out college applications. AATL's college access strategy therefore involves a partnership with APS that includes providing high school juniors and seniors with advising, resources and workshops, and efforts to build a college-going culture through events such as Scholar Nights. A variety of cross-sector collaborations are essential to AATL's college access strategy.

To provide ongoing and targeted college access support to APS high school students, AATL partners with student advising organizations College Advising Corps (CAC) and OneGoal. These two organizations complement each other and work alongside APS counselors and AATL staff to ensure that all APS juniors and seniors receive college-going support.

1. **CAC** is a national nonprofit with a local footprint that places recent college graduates as near-peer advisers in under-resourced high schools.⁹ CAC advisers supplement the work of APS school counselors (who provide multiple types of advising) by providing expert, college-focused guidance to help APS high schoolers meet important college access milestones. AATL funds CAC to embed advisers in each high school within the district.¹⁰

2. **OneGoal** is also a national organization with local and statewide partnerships. OneGoal uses a three-year fellowship model that starts in a student's junior year of high school and continues through the first year of college.¹¹ OneGoal Fellows take a credit-bearing course their junior or senior year of high school focused



on building college knowledge, improving academic performance, and postsecondary planning. Classes are taught by APS teachers who have been trained in the One Goal model.¹² Once Fellows enroll in college, OneGoal coaches provide coaching through the Fellow's first year of college. For academic year 2023-24, AATL and APS funded OneGoal to support APS juniors and seniors across seven high schools and college freshmen at various institutions.

Through these partnerships, AATL facilitates the wraparound support needed to integrate postsecondary planning into the school days of APS juniors and seniors. These supports include 1:1 adviser meetings, assistance with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college applications, and support with AATL's scholarship application.

As part of its partnership with CAC, OneGoal, and APS, AATL developed and implemented College Access Teams (CATs) to coordinate and deliver college access services within the schools. The program model has taken off, and **now every APS high school has a CAT.**¹³ CATs include APS school counselors, CAC advisers, OneGoal program directors (teachers), and a school leader such as an assistant principal.

The intention is to bring all the adults who support postsecondary planning together within the building. As a result, some CATs also include graduation coaches or staff from other community-based organizations. Through CATs, staff collaborate more fluidly and build the systems and processes to ensure juniors and seniors have access to 1:1 advising sessions, support in applying for college and scholarships, college visits, and more.

To support the work and effectiveness of each CAT, AATL created the College Access Working Group (CAWG) in 2016. The CAWG meets monthly and includes representatives from AATL, numerous departments within APS, CAC, and OneGoal.¹⁴ Through the CAWG,



college access partners are able to tackle issues, review data, analyze milestone completion, and learn collaboratively. The CAWG's collective reflection improves their methodology for the following month, ultimately advancing the program model and reaching more students.¹⁵

“Having a collaborative working group like the CAWG is the most critical component, and it is different from any partnership that I work with in this district. That is the one thing that stands out above others—and just the idea that when there are multiple people doing the work, the success is really defined by all of the people contributing. Whatever the representative departments are, anyone that does the work should have a voice at the table.”

—Dwionne Freeman

Career Technical and Agricultural Education, Atlanta Public Schools

AATL's work in college access has several target activities for students, but four activities in particular have proved indicative of whether students will gain access to college. These are 1:1 postsecondary-focused meetings with CAC advisers, FAFSA completion, submission of multiple college applications, and completion of the AATL Scholarship application.¹⁶ Overall, AATL has seen significant growth across these metrics. For example, since AATL's founding, the share of seniors applying to three or more colleges increased from 46% to 79%, and the share completing the FAFSA increased from 51% to 71%.¹⁷ The FAFSA completion rates are especially compelling as they consistently exceed completion rates by the state of Georgia and the nation.¹⁸ Completing the FAFSA is particularly vital for students from low-income backgrounds, since it assesses their eligibility for federal, state, and school financial aid programs including grants, scholarships, work-study funds, and federal loans.¹⁹

College Affordability

AATL's flagship initiative is its scholarship program. The scholarship is need based and is intended to make college more affordable for APS students.²⁰ AATL's scholarship fills an important gap since Georgia is one of only a few states that does not provide comprehensive need-based aid for college students.²¹ AATL's scholarship is particularly helpful to students who do not meet the high bar to qualify for Georgia's merit-based HOPE Scholarship.²²

All APS graduates who have been continuously enrolled since the 11th grade are eligible for the AATL Scholarship if they have at least a 75 average (about a 2.0 on a 4.0 grade point average scale) and meet AATL's financial need requirements, which are based on the Federal Student Aid Index.²³ AATL's scholarship has few other requirements: Students must fill out the scholarship form and enroll full time at an eligible institution for the fall semester after their high school graduation.²⁴ The scholarship provides bachelor's program students with \$5,000 per year for four years and students in associate or technical programs \$1,500 per year for two years.²⁵ One third of APS seniors become AATL Scholars. The majority of Scholars are Pell Grant eligible (96%), and 50% are first-generation college students.²⁶

AATL's scholarship program is accompanied by other forms of financial assistance, including an ongoing partnership with Scholarship America to administer emergency grants, which help Scholars persist in their postsecondary education even if they have experienced financial pitfalls such as unexpected medical expenses or car trouble.²⁷ AATL also offers completion grants, which support students who have exhausted their standard scholarship awards but are close to earning their degree.²⁸

AATL has impacted thousands of students through its financial assistance programs. By 2018, four years after its founding, AATL had provided more than \$11 million in scholarship funding to 2,235 APS graduates to attend 209 colleges and universities.²⁹ Six years later, in 2024, AATL provided \$57 million in need-based scholarships to 6,000 Scholars attending 355 institutions of higher learning across the country and an additional almost \$2.2 million in emergency and completion grants to support their persistence and completion.³⁰

College Success

Persistence for students from low-income backgrounds can be significantly more challenging than for their wealthier peers for various reasons, including less social and cultural capital, lack of belonging, challenges in time management, budgeting constrictions, and needing to work while attending school.³¹

To help Scholars succeed in college, AATL has developed a partnership-based infrastructure that provides holistic services to its students, including financial support, in-person opportunities to build community, social and emotional support, coaching, and advising. Students receive advice and resources for academic planning, navigating systems, maintaining financial aid eligibility, career pathways, and more. Partnerships are so essential to AATL's college success work that AATL has developed a Partnering Effectiveness Evaluation: a framework to facilitate partner agreement on target behaviors that enable effective collaboration to support persistence and completion.³²

To drive its college success work, AATL partners with postsecondary institutions and three advising and coaching organizations to provide a variety of tailored support to AATL Scholars. Depending on where an AATL Scholar enrolls, they will be supported by one or more of the following coaching models:

1. Achieve Atlanta partners with **11 postsecondary institutions** to develop trusting relationships at every level of leadership, from the president to the coaches and advisers who work directly with Scholars. Together they develop and implement data-supported academic, financial, and social-emotional strategies that are delivered to Scholars through intrusive advising methods.
2. AATL partners with **OneGoal** in the college success space to offer OneGoal Fellows individualized coaching during their freshman year of college. Fellows are students who are “typically overlooked by other interventions,” and OneGoal supports them through academic advising, leadership skills, and on-campus connections to help them persist through the first year.³³
3. AATL partners with **Beyond 12**, a technology-based nonprofit with a near-peer coaching model, to provide virtual coaching to AATL Scholars attending many institutions across Georgia. Scholars enrolled in colleges outside of Georgia can also opt into having a Beyond 12 coach.³⁴
4. AATL partners with **Edu-Tech Enterprises**, an organization that offers academic advising, enrollment assistance, and emotional support to provide AATL Scholars with an extra layer of coaching at certain institutions.³⁵



“Being a Scholar was a transformative experience for me, not only convincing me of the impact of the partnership between AATL and Beyond 12 but also showing me that I had a gift in mentorship and inspiring me to help create similar opportunities for others.”

—Amina Sarr

AATL Scholar Alum and Beyond 12 College Coach

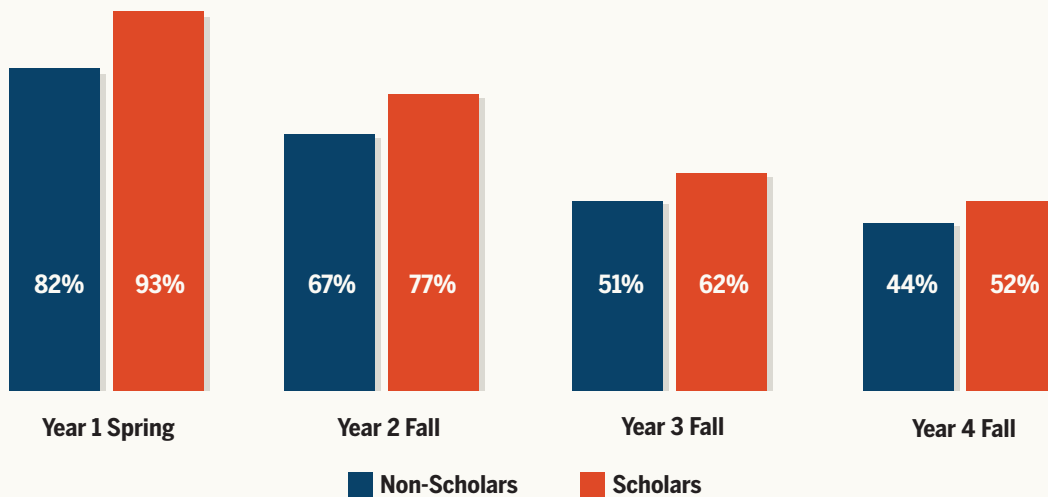


Through these strategies and partnerships, AATL and its Scholars achieve impressive, life-changing results. As of 2023, 77% of AATL Scholars advanced to their sophomore year, 62% to junior year, and 52% to senior year (6–10 percentage points higher than peers).³⁶

Further, data indicate that AATL Scholars graduate from degree programs at rates similar to peers of all income levels.³⁷

Looking to the future, AATL is developing new strategies focused on supporting Scholars' paths to upward mobility because it learned that, even with impressive persistence and completion rates among Scholars, many were struggling to transition to a strong first job. To this end, AATL has convened a pilot called the Peer Work Group (PWG)—building off the successful model of cross-sector collaboration developed through the organization's core functions—to explore this new model. More on the PWG and career pathways can be found in the Case Study on [page 22](#).

College Persistence by Year/Term



College persistence as reported from the National Student Clearinghouse. Retention of Achieve Atlanta Scholarship is not considered, only whether the student remained enrolled or earned a credential.



ACHIEVE ATLANTA'S CROSS-SECTOR APPROACH

Cross-sector collaborations are essential to how AATL carries out its work and achieves life-changing impact for Atlanta students. Since its founding, AATL has recognized that partnerships offer greater capacity to achieve wider impact. To maximize the effectiveness of its collaborations, AATL has developed and implemented a unique partnership model that it tailors to the various partnerships in its portfolio. Although diverse in function, form, and scope, AATL's collaborative partnerships share key conditions, structures, and practices that contribute to its programmatic effectiveness.

AATL identifies key opportunities for partnership and fosters the conditions in which they thrive and evolve.

To establish partnerships that have the highest impact and advance each partner organization's work, AATL identifies opportunities that are best aligned to its values and mission using diligent review of potential partner organizations. AATL trusts partners' expertise and fosters communicative environments in which key practices, such as intentional data sharing, are part of the core partnership model.

Due diligence and mission alignment

First and foremost, AATL partners only with organizations that are aligned with its mission and values. With a grounding in its own mission, local landscape, and centering the students it seeks to serve, AATL assesses its potential partners, using research and data to understand their priorities, reach, and infrastructure.³⁸ This due diligence phase includes an analysis of how the partner connects to the challenge and confirms aligned missions or organizational pillars.³⁹

For example, AATL has sustained a partnership with local coaching nonprofit Edu-Tech Enterprises because of clear mission alignment, even though the organization is smaller than some other coaching organizations that AATL collaborates with. Edu-Tech Enterprises is deeply student centered, meeting students where they are to build their capacity to become self-advocates in their college success. Edu-Tech Enterprises is able to gain access to and build trust with students who have extraordinary barriers to college success, and their relational capability has made them a strong partner in supporting students with complex coaching needs.

Trusting partners' expertise

Through ongoing self-reflection, AATL identifies strategy components best accomplished by partners, rejecting the idea that it should try to fulfill its mission alone.⁴⁰ With the foundational belief that it has vetted and found well-matched organizations to partner with, AATL trusts its partners' expertise, allowing AATL to maximize use of its own resources and human capital.⁴¹

For example, AATL partners with CAC, which has a national infrastructure and expertise in near-peer advising, to provide a CAC college adviser in each APS high school as well as other events and services. Although AATL has many operational and strategic touch points with CAC and APS, AATL trusts CAC's expertise by delegating to it day-to-day operations and supervision of the near-peer advising work.⁴² AATL also collaborates with CAC supervisors on school visits, deferring to CAC supervisors so that visits are functional for learning and reflection, as opposed to appearing evaluative.⁴³

“We emphasize having an understanding of what each partner is bringing to the table and respecting the expertise that they've built, because you're trying to put together the best team to achieve the results.”

—Ninfa Murillo

AATL Senior Director, Scholarship & Affordability

SPOTLIGHT

MATCH & FIT⁴⁴

In 2018, Achieve Atlanta (AATL) conducted research and found that the majority of Atlanta Public Schools (APS) students were enrolling in colleges that were not a strong academic match. Through interviews and focus groups with students and the adults who work with them, AATL learned that part of the reason for this was that students' awareness of college options was limited, and their enrollment decisions were made based on where friends enrolled or what they had heard from family and friends. AATL and College Access Working Group (CAWG) members also noticed that counselors and advisers were not formally trained in how to have thorough conversations about college “match and fit” with students as part of their college access milestones. AATL considered these challenges and came up with two related strategies to meet the need: APS district-wide staff training and a tool to support students in building a balanced college list.



District-wide training on college match and fit

In its research, AATL noticed an assumption throughout the district: that getting students into college was the most important part of college advising. At times, this assumption caused College Access Team (CAT) members to recommend colleges that students were likely to be admitted to, without considering if those schools were compatible with a student's preferences and academic performance, among other factors.

The reality is that just finding a college into which a student will be admitted is not the key to college success. Although students may be discouraged from enrolling in a school perceived as too academically rigorous for them, research shows that students are less likely to persist at a college if they undermatch with a school academically (i.e., if a school is not rigorous enough). Part of AATL and CAWG partners' work was to improve CAT members' understanding of the ways that a strong academic match and a right fit—in terms of geography, affordability, culture, and other preferences—can increase a student's likelihood of persisting and earning a degree. Thus, AATL and partners began to include “match and fit” as part of college-access training, which has increased awareness of this pivotal component of college advising. Knowledge of match and fit allows counselors and advisers to help students find compatible schools where they have the best chance of getting in, persisting, and earning a credential.

“We were trying to make that change in how students are advised in the district, to be more focused on academic match and social, personal, and financial fit: match and fit. In doing this, AATL and the CAWG have been really intentional about communications. We think a lot about how to communicate with different stakeholders and ensure they know how important this is so that we can advance the work of getting more APS students to and through college.”

- Korynn Schooley

AATL Vice President, College Access

Match & Fit List Builder

To address the challenge of students not knowing how to research colleges and identify schools to apply to, as well as to assist CAT members with their match-and-fit advising, AATL worked with APS's data and information team to develop the Match & Fit List Builder. Over 18 months, AATL and APS iterated on various portals, sought extensive feedback and testing from a group of “Match and Fit Ambassadors” including high school counselors, College Advising Corps (CAC) advisers, and OneGoal teachers, and collaborated with students and CAWG members. The result was the **Match & Fit List Builder**, a tool that helps APS students identify colleges that will be a strong academic match and good personal, social, and financial fit. This tool helps students find their best college **matches** based on their grade point average (GPA) and test scores, and then find the best college **fit** for them based on their interests, finances, and preferences (including geographic preference, course of study, and more).

The tool is also a use case for intentional data sharing among partners: with the APS data team's support, AATL tailored the tool specifically for APS students. To generate college recommendations, the Match & Fit List Builder automatically populates APS students' individual data, refreshing GPA and test scores daily. The tool then uses a match algorithm that is unique to Atlanta and based on colleges where APS students with specific grades and scores have historically been admitted.



AATL promoted the tool, developing a **video** and adding a **Match & Fit** page on its website. It also provided **resources** and **steps** for using the tool. More than 1,000 APS students utilized the Match & Fit List Builder in its first four months, and it continues to be used by APS students. Through use of this tool, APS students have an improved awareness of their academic match to schools and a framework to help them consider the factors that might make a college a good option for them.

Thinking ahead

The next step for AATL is to develop deeper training for CAT members around the financial fit piece of the college match-and-fit puzzle. AATL is developing more training to give practitioners the knowledge and tools to support students in the financial components of applying to college and the actual affordability of a particular degree.

Intentional data sharing as a partnership condition

AATL has identified and employs several ways to foster communicative conditions with partners. One of AATL's methods of encouraging open communication is an expectation of data sharing. AATL conveys its expectations for effective partnership during the preliminary stage of a new partnership and sets forth these expectations, along with other anticipated roles and requirements, in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that both parties sign. Because AATL has found that it fosters both strategic intervention and continuous improvement, AATL's MOUs include intentional data sharing as a condition of partnership. As described in more detail below, AATL prioritizes data gathering and analysis across its program models, and centering data in partnership formation is a natural extension.⁴⁵ By setting an up-front expectation of data sharing in the partnership, the MOU requires the agreeing partner to confirm that data sharing is possible within its organization. This has the added benefit of garnering early buy-in from partners' internal data teams and executive officers about the central role data and communication will play in the partnership.⁴⁶

As an instance of practice, data sharing is critically important for communication between AATL and APS. To make the sharing of identifiable student-level data a component of AATL's partnership with APS, AATL outlined a compelling rationale and articulated the benefits that APS and its students would gain from data sharing. Accordingly, APS agreed to set up the necessary security precautions and privacy guardrails in order to approve the agreement. APS also secured investment from its data and information department, making data exchange more efficient and accurate. Through the data-sharing agreement, AATL, APS, and other partners involved in the partnership, including CAC and OneGoal, can collaboratively communicate about and analyze data essential to providing student services and consistently improving the model. Examples include AATL using APS data to create a predictive model that enables college coaches to triage assistance to incoming Scholars who may need the most support, using student grade point average and SAT scores to inform conversations about college match and using data to track student progress (e.g., CATs' tracking of student college access milestones).⁴⁷

AATL establishes structures and processes that generate collective learning and consistent improvement.

AATL intentionally designs and structures each partnership, but it doesn't stop there. Every step of the way, AATL ensures its partnerships are driven by continuous review and improvement. Across programs, AATL employs processes such as collective goal setting and measurement planning, intentional learning cycles, mindful process design, and celebrating successful strategies to ensure that it is driving toward maximum impact.

Mutual development of goals and measurement

AATL does not drive partnership through AATL's individually set and managed goals, but by mutually developed goals and measurement plans, including key performance indicators and target metrics. Mutual goal setting drives alignment and impact, resulting in all organizations setting more ambitious goals than they could set without partnership. Goals are mutually agreed upon at the beginning of each partnership and evaluated and revised as a component of annual and quarterly planning. In addition to AATL and its partners setting goals together, AATL brings in relevant stakeholders (e.g., coaches, district staff, advisers, principals, program managers) to assess and suggest goals.

Mutual goal setting is key to AATL's strategy because it increases buy-in from all partners and ultimately leads to initiatives greater than the sum of their parts. In interviews, partner organizations reflected on the positive impacts of mutual goal setting and the way AATL's synergistic approach recognizes partners' technical and implementation expertise.

“To develop goals, we work with our data team to look at past results and suggest potential areas of opportunity. We also have a school template for the individual schools to create their own goals. Schools want to have a voice in the process, and we also need district leader approval and buy-in. We want to create as many options for our students as possible and not back down from the challenge of ambitious goals.”

—Femi Johnson

AATL Senior Director, College Access

A mutual goal-setting process occurs annually within the College Access Working Group (CAWG). The CAWG, convened and facilitated by AATL, gathers each June for a reflection on the past year and to collectively set objectives for the coming school year. AATL brings recommended indicators of success, and the CAWG collectively determines realistic but ambitious goals and targets for the year and strategies to reach them.⁴⁸ These reflective and visionary meetings allow all CAWG members the chance to think big about how to reach students and how to increase impact. They are also a place where CAWG members can better understand the strategy behind setting certain targets and leave with a collective perspective on how the group plans to serve students and learn from progress.⁴⁹ Throughout the next year, CAWG meetings focus on evaluating progress to these goals and collaboratively identifying strategies to meet them.

Intentional learning cycles

AATL's cross-sector collaboration model centers intentional learning cycles, establishing consistent meeting cadences with clear expectations at each convening, and evolving strategy through frequent progress monitoring. These cycles encourage partners to reflect as they implement, so they know what isn't working before initiatives get offtrack. Each AATL team has a cycle of meetings that closely follow relevant points in the school year.⁵⁰ During all phases, partners can rely on AATL's convenings to include useful information, clear objectives to drive the work, and collaborative data analysis. AATL and its partners regularly review progress, engage in collective problem-solving, and continually reflect, learn, and improve.⁵¹

An example of an AATL learning cycle convening is the annual Partner Learning Forum for college success partners. These forums provide coaches, representatives from institutions of higher education, and nonprofit partners a chance to reflect, improve, and discuss best practices.⁵² In advance of each forum, AATL's data analytics and insights team compiles research findings around partner-submitted topics and also brings data related to certain activities that are correlated to Scholars' college persistence.⁵³ During the forums, partners consider trends they are seeing on campus, discuss salient opportunities for growth, and trade successful practices with peers.⁵⁴ AATL's Director of Postsecondary Partnerships Stacy Boone noted that the forums provide a space where "things that work are able to spread faster across the network because partners are able to be in the room and exchange ideas with one another." She calls this effect "partner-collaboratory ease."⁵⁵

Mindful process design

While staying focused on impact, AATL also pays attention to process. For example, AATL establishes consistent meeting structures and communication processes throughout each partnership. Partners can rely on AATL to communicate the progress of initiatives in clear, thoughtful ways at well-planned convenings with the right staff present. Not only do these structures move the work forward during the typical course of business, they also serve as a buffer to inevitable staff changes and disruptions. Staff movement at large partner institutions is inevitable during multiyear projects. By meticulously establishing learning cycles, communication processes, and consistent meeting structures, AATL becomes a presence at partner institutions, which minimizes the effects of interruption by potential staff turnover at partner organizations.⁵⁶

For example, AATL team members described an instance when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, an entire staff vertical at a higher education partner—from the university president to the student-facing adviser—left the institution. Relying on its strong partnership structures and institutional knowledge, codified through communication tools and processes, AATL was able to continue serving students.⁵⁷ AATL had established such a presence at the institution that staff who did not regularly work with AATL understood the organization's purpose and contributions. The institution ultimately allowed AATL to embed a partner organization in offices on campus for Scholar advising.⁵⁸ AATL's structural soundness gave the partnership continuity, which was essential for Scholars while the institution rebuilt its own advising program.

AATL uses socially intelligent practices for collaboration that cultivate trust and an experimentation mindset.

To create a trusting environment in which partners collectively learn from both successful and unsuccessful strategies and improve accordingly, AATL uses what can be referred to as "socially intelligent practices."⁵⁹ Social intelligence is a set of interpersonal competencies, including empathy, recognition of social environment, and patience.⁶⁰ In the workplace, socially intelligent competencies can be especially useful in inspiring others to be effective.⁶¹ AATL employs socially intelligent practices, such as intentional relationship building; actively managing constructive conflict and mutual accountability; cascading leadership; guiding the internal alignment of partner organizations and encouraging experimentation.

SPOTLIGHT

STUDENT ISSUES TRACKER⁹³

Achieve Atlanta (AATL) and partner Beyond 12 collaboratively resolved an important student affordability and success challenge through communication processes, mutual accountability, and an experimentation mindset.

Despite frequent meetings and strong programmatic structures, the teams realized that Scholars at times needed time-sensitive support that required multiple partners' involvement. For example, when universities had financial aid personnel turnover during scholarship renewal times, students ran the risk of being immediately "purged" from the financial aid system due to lack of awareness of committed AATL funds. Being "purged" meant being barred from enrollment or withdrawn, and students were understandably distressed. AATL considered the current process to solve the issue and realized it was extremely time consuming. For example, a Beyond 12 coach might need to connect with their manager, who would then contact a counterpart at AATL, who would connect with the financial aid office to confirm committed funding. The process was onerous and didn't help the students who typically needed immediate assistance to avoid being purged.

Partners brainstormed on a tool to triage student support quickly. The Student Issues Tracker immediately pings related staff members when a coach updates it, indicating the student's university, issue, necessary next steps, and timeline. AATL responds by appointing a task owner and listing strategic next steps, typically within 24 hours. The system has successfully reduced the number of students getting purged from the financial aid files or withdrawn from school due to miscommunication. Beyond 12's Associate Director of Program Khadijah Powell noted that the tracker worked for scenarios beyond the financial aid issue, and that the collaborative innovation "supports students that are in a moment of crisis" and allows the partners to solve problems "in real time" and confirm they resolve a concern "before it becomes a bigger issue."

"Because of this tool, we've been able to decrease the number of students being withdrawn from school due to complex financial aid processing times at various institutions or other blockers students may be experiencing at the time. This collaborative approach has a very high impact on the lives of our students."

- Donna Arriaga Edmonds

Director of Customer Success, Atlanta – Beyond 12

Investing in relationship building

AATL invests in relationship building by viewing partner institutions and organizations as made up of individual contributors whose relationships should be cultivated for a healthy partnership. To cultivate individual connections, AATL team members empathize, recognizing the precious commodity of partners' time and noticing partners' preferred communication styles. They express appreciation for the commitment of partners and offer meeting cadences that are efficient for partner contacts.⁶²

AATL staff also seek to notice and remove barriers to collaboration and workflow. For example, when scheduling a meeting, they recognize the important actors whose attendance might be the most tenuous "given that this is a small sliver of what's on their plate" and develop ways to make meetings effortless for them.⁶³ AATL teams might do this by holding meetings prior to school hours or attending standing meetings at partner organizations rather than establishing new meeting cycles.

"In addition to the student-centered approach, the Achieve Atlanta team has a people-first approach in collaboration, so it is really about deeply connecting with people who are doing the work and acknowledging the hard work that is being done. And because of that people-first relationship, you are able to build trust, so you can have difficult conversations about what's working and what's not working."

—Alexandra Bernadotte

Founder & CEO, Beyond 12

Direct engagement to resolve conflict

Another component of relationship building is actively managing constructive conflict. AATL team members engage with challenges directly and cultivate honest communication. AATL has codified the implementation of constructive confrontation in its Partnering Effectiveness Evaluation, a framework that AATL developed for the college success program model.⁶⁴ A key behavior that AATL included in the evaluation is that each partner "constructively confronts partners within and external to the organization to hold itself and others accountable, make midcourse corrections, and resolve conflict."⁶⁵ In interviews, AATL's partners reflected on how frank conversations helped move goals forward, even when they surfaced points of debate.

For example, Dr. Yarbrah Peeples, a former chief program officer at CAC, described goal-setting conversations that could occasionally be tense because CAC's proximity to schools centered on the challenges of implementation, while AATL focused on student milestones across the district. Dr. Peeples noted that the team members sometimes "had different opinions about how to make impact" but would ultimately collaborate on a strategy, using the differing perspectives to reach a compromise that would advance the work.⁶⁶ Directly managing the constructive conflict resulted in better outcomes and built trust among those staff members, allowing them to continue to collectively address challenges.

Advancing mutual accountability

AATL also advances mutual accountability: a socially intelligent practice that fosters "the presence of mutual benefit and mutual respect between/among the partners," which AATL recognizes as a "non-negotiable guiding principle" of its cross-sector collaboration model.⁶⁷

When AATL and partners mutually set goals, AATL holds its internal teams accountable for meeting those targets along with partners. For example, if the CATs (consisting of APS, CAC, and OneGoal representatives) have a target of 70% FAFSA completion for the year, AATL also holds itself internally accountable to meeting this target.⁶⁸ While CAC advisers, OneGoal teachers, and APS counselors directly assist students and families to fill out forms, AATL tracks data and presents it back to advising teams monthly and disseminates updates on FAFSA requirements and college financial aid deadlines.⁶⁹ All partners work hard to reach their mutual goal.

"The greatest part of our partnership model is the common vision, but that's anchored by trust in the middle. We have mutual goals that we set every year, and we develop congruent operating procedures and really clear roles in all partner organizations to support mutual accountability."

—Dr. Susanne Diggs-Wilborn

AATL Vice President, College Success

360-degree communication

Communication, in multiple forms and across all topics, is essential to AATL's partnerships and results. Communication drives internal and external alignment, goal setting and measurement, continuous improvement, and near- and long-term impact. One way that AATL maximizes effective communication in its partnerships is by employing a cascading leadership model. In a cascading leadership model, leaders value prosocial motivation and encourage both knowledge sharing and social learning, causing a cascade effect in which employees outside leadership roles begin to practice leadership behaviors.⁷⁰ Using this model, AATL's organizational leaders facilitate partnership through external relationship building and internal knowledge distribution, aligning internal communication with partnership engagement.

“Another thing that makes our approach unique is our intentionality around the cascading leadership model. On the college campuses my point person is the college president, and at the district, the superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools. Our vice presidents liaise with the next level of leadership, and so on. This communication and relationship approach allows us to relay information that is tailored to the audience in a way that makes it meaningful and actionable. We have teammates who are communicating with the partners every day. For me, it might be three to four times a year, but we’re crystal clear on what each person on the partnership side needs to feel informed and invested in the partnership.”

—Dr. Cheryl Watson-Harris

AATL President/Executive Director

In practice within AATL, cascading leadership involves facilitating intentional information exchange, with executive leadership communicating relevant components of their leadership conversations to mid-level leadership, and individual contributors feeding back important learnings from the ground.⁷¹ This internal knowledge sharing strengthens the efficacy of AATL's external strategies.

In practice externally, AATL's leaders have regular check-ins with executive-level leaders at all partner institutions.⁷² In the college success realm, multiple levels of leadership attend quarterly informational meetings. Student-level counselors meet with AATL mid-level leaders in the learning cycle cadence and more frequently as needed to respond to immediate needs and make course corrections.⁷³ For example, with partner organization Beyond 12, team members at various leadership levels meet consistently to facilitate information sharing and relationship building. Program managers from the organizations meet with one another monthly to discuss strategies for coaching and student-support progress. Director-level team members meet in quarterly planning meetings, which include directors of data and analytics, so that partners can review data and conduct long-range planning. Finally, Beyond 12's executive director meets periodically with the executive director and vice president at AATL to discuss overall strategy and salient organizational updates.⁷⁴

As another component of a socially intelligent 360-degree communication strategy, AATL has a practice of guiding internal alignment at partner organizations to improve the collaborative initiative. This includes establishing communication with multiple departments inside large organizational partners, thus encouraging cross-department communication and even embedding representatives in-house at partner locations. At times, AATL uses multiple meetings across a partner organization to repeat information across divisions, thus ensuring consistency and uptake of messaging and collaborative activities.⁷⁵

For example, AATL's partnership with APS involves AATL team members coordinating between the different departments within the district, including counseling, academics, data and information, and more. AATL discerns each department's distinct goals, focus areas, and constraints and is cognizant of the goals and needs even of individuals within the departments. Using this information, AATL staff can reframe objectives and information to find solutions that will benefit all.⁷⁶ The combination of embedded roles and frequent direct meetings with multiple parties encourages divisional collaboration inside APS for maximum impact.

Promotion of an experimentation mindset

Finally, AATL's practices promote an experimentation-based mindset throughout its initiatives. This experimentation mindset fosters trust, such that partners can honestly reflect on their own areas for improvement without fear of negative consequences.

Examples of experimentation include: testing different types of community-building opportunities to see if they gain traction with improving student milestone completion, adjusting technology platforms and databases to expand service delivery, and trying out different uses of coaching and advising conversations.



An experimentation use case happened when AATL noticed that the data it was collecting on Scholars were not telling the full story of student success. AATL and its partners initially assumed that a Scholar who is academically successful in college would also otherwise thrive and persist.⁷⁷ Then AATL, Beyond 12, and university partners noticed a trend that some academically strong students still struggled to persist through college. Because academic data points were not sufficiently predicting students' success, the partnership shifted their strategy. They began to include deeper analysis of qualitative data points for each student, such as social emotional supports, mindsets, engagement, and sense of belonging. AATL gathers these data from college coaching partners and also from qualitative surveys during scholarship renewal, so the teams gain information on student concerns even when a Scholar isn't communicating about their struggles to a coach. When partners started using qualitative and quantitative data to assess student experience, they were able to craft more effective plans for Scholar outreach, improving persistence through targeted support.

The innovative conditions, structures, and practices that AATL has established and developed drive their cross-sector collaborations to reach thousands of students and achieve profound impacts.

Partnership in action: path to upward mobility

To explore all the conditions, structures, and practices that AATL uses for cross-sector collaboration, we highlight the Peer Work Group, a cross-sector partnership focused on the upward mobility of Scholars. For a closer look at this partnership, see [page 22](#).

IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

AATL's cross-sector collaboration model has propelled its work to reach more students and achieve higher levels of impact. AATL's framework is a valuable example for the field that can help organizations develop sustainable partnerships across multiple contexts and increase their capacity to support their communities. The lessons below are key components for collaborative leaders to consider when developing partnership solutions that fit their context.

Invest in internal clarity.

AATL invests substantial time and resources in identifying advantageous opportunities for partnership. It finds the right partners to operationalize its vision by maintaining an evolving understanding of its own values, expertise, and limitations. Collaborative leaders must reflect on their organizational values in the context of both their publicized missions and the organization-specific conditions necessary to collaborate effectively. Leaders need to have a lucid vision of the problems they aspire to solve. It is also critical for the organization to reflect on the competencies it brings to the table, identifying and assessing strategic areas for partner contribution.

Commit to due diligence.

AATL finds partners that will be sustainable companions in cross-sector collaboration by identifying the aligned organizational values of potential partners and understanding their infrastructure, reach, and priorities. To assess these factors, collaborative leaders must ascertain how potential partners connect to the challenge and evaluate whether they approach complex problems with a similar mindset. It is also helpful to gain knowledge of potential partners' positionality in the local or national landscape, in terms of community connections and networks across industry sectors.

Lay strong foundations.

AATL establishes strong partnerships by choosing partner organizations with complementary frameworks and approaches. AATL trusts its partners' expertise, while setting clear expectations for the conditions and practices that it requires for thriving collaboration. Collaborative leaders should initiate partnership by clearly articulating the most effective conditions for work together, including non-negotiable values. Together, partners should clearly delineate responsibilities, set expectations for the direction of the partnership, and establish basic collaborative processes.

Establish structures and practices in service of learning.

For each of its program models, AATL has created a highly effective learning ecosystem based on a continually reviewed and adjusted set of data-driven meetings, communication processes, and reflection structures. AATL facilitates multiple spaces where partners can collaboratively grapple with real issues that no individual partner organization can solve alone. The experimentation-based environments that AATL establishes using convenings, data, and continuous learning enable partners to collectively develop strategy pivots and solutions to challenges.

Partnerships benefit from a routine meeting cadence, including careful strategy around how the partnership work can be built into existing systems at partner organizations to avoid unnecessarily additive structures and procedures. Partners also need the flexibility to check in and manage challenges as they arise. Navigating constructive conflict is also a strong facilitator of program advancement. Collaborative leaders must create shared spaces where partners can face challenges together and advance goals. Collaborative leaders should also take into account small operational flexibilities that might remove roadblocks and ways to celebrate successes to increase partner buy-in.

Value human-centered strategy.

AATL is effective at cultivating trust and preserving collaborators' learning mindsets because of their awareness that every system is a collection of the individuals inside it. Collaborative leaders notice barriers to collaboration and workflow and aim to seamlessly integrate partnership activities into partner teams' daily tasks. Collaborative leaders serve the partnership when they value establishing rapport and gaining trust at the individual level. In addition, leaders should be comfortable actively engaging in frank conversations, making space for constructive conflict when necessary.

Develop shared goals that maximize partnership impact.

AATL develops impactful partnerships because collaborators set realistic but ambitious goals together, deciding collectively on a trajectory that no single organization could accomplish independently. AATL's initiatives work because all partners hold themselves responsible for meeting targets that are synergistic and make progress toward the cooperatively created goals. Collaborative leaders should consistently use data for learning and improvement, creating reflection points to develop new objectives from. Collaborations may also benefit from partners establishing both leading and lagging indicators of success. Collaborative leaders should then delineate which drivers and actions partner teams are accountable for, revisiting measurement plans often. Fluidly communicating needs, challenges, and implementation shifts also improves the potential for initiative success.

Encourage 360-degree communication.

AATL's multidirectional communication approach and cascading model involve multiple levels of leadership in communications and visioning with partners, deploying higher-level leaders for strategic conversations and a big picture perspective of partnership progress. AATL also values open internal communication and knowledge sharing and works to increase alignment inside partner organizations when it will benefit partnership initiatives. Whether or not a cascading leadership model is suitable for their organizations, collaborative leaders should steward the alignment between leaders and program-level staff both internally and externally. To this end, it is beneficial to have processes in place for internal knowledge sharing and cultivating relationships with partner organizations at varying program and leadership levels.



CONCLUSION

AATL's cross-sector collaboration approach is highly successful across its partnerships and program models, enabling AATL to vastly expand and deepen its impact. Through collaboration, AATL sets more ambitious goals and extends its reach farther than AATL would be able to do alone. Years ago, the organization could have chosen to focus solely on the service that it has the internal infrastructure to offer on its own—scholarship assistance—but it saw the significance of providing more services and support to its community through partnership. The collaborations AATL has established are impressive, distinctive, and contain many transferable elements. AATL provides an essential template for other organizations hoping to establish their own pathways to impactful partnerships, contributing to the field of postsecondary pathways and educational equity at large through its example.



PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

PATH TO UPWARD MOBILITY

In keeping with its own practices of self-awareness and continuous learning, Achieve Atlanta (AATL) has acknowledged an impediment to realizing its vision of “an Atlanta where race and income no longer predict postsecondary success and upward mobility.”⁷⁸ A spring 2022 survey of AATL alumni found that roughly 1 in 3 were unemployed or underemployed, meaning that access to an affordable postsecondary education and support for persistence through college are sometimes not enough to help a Scholar acquire employment that leads to upward mobility. To meet this challenge, AATL convened a pilot initiative called the Peer Work Group (PWG). The PWG’s work is demonstrative of all the key conditions, structures, and practices that AATL uses to sustain flourishing cross-sector collaborative partnerships.

The peer work group pilot found a key opportunity and sought partners with aligned missions.

AATL perceived Scholar underemployment as a crucial hurdle to advancing its vision. When considering employment right after college, AATL knew who it would need at the table: representatives from nonprofits who worked on upward mobility, colleges who were eager to do upward mobility work, and industry partners. AATL established the PWG by gathering pathways partners from Georgia State University (GSU), Spelman College, and the nonprofit Braven, which aims to “empower first-generation college students, students of color, and those from low-income backgrounds by equipping them with skills, networks, experiences, and confidence to secure strong first jobs.”⁷⁹

AATL recognized that involving industry stakeholders would be critical to the success of the PWG and determined that state and local chambers of commerce would be a strong fit for the pilot. The Metro Atlanta Chamber had a key focus area of “helping area leaders come together around programs that grow Georgia’s skilled, diverse talent pool and improve economic mobility.”⁸⁰ This goal clearly aligned with AATL’s goal, which made them a fit for partnership. Similarly, the Georgia Chamber of Commerce had a coalition that aimed to find “solutions to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion that build Georgia’s workforce of the future,” which also made them a natural fit for the PWG.⁸¹ Both chambers joined, and AATL established new partners in the workforce sector.

AATL established Peer Work Group structures and processes that were generative of collective learning.

The PWG collectively defined and centered its work on the problem statement “Achieve Atlanta alumni struggle to gain employment within their chosen career path and to earn compensation that reflects their achievements.”⁸² AATL developed a cadence of meetings through which PWG members could strategize and collectively learn. The convenings included conducting a root-cause analysis and an activity prioritization matrix.⁸³ These analyses helped the PWG develop priorities, which they defined as “major areas of work that enable progress toward the problem statement.”⁸⁴ The group set goal activities for pathways programming with students at Spelman and GSU, including meeting with a career adviser or coach, developing complete résumés, creating LinkedIn and Handshake profiles, and participating in career-accelerating experiences and mock interviews.⁸⁵ AATL then convened the PWG to determine the target percentage of students completing these activities.

AATL team members employed socially intelligent principles, which fostered trust and experimentation in the Peer Work Group.

AATL staff held consistent check-ins with each PWG partner representative individually, particularly supporting staff doing challenging direct-service work on college coaching and retention teams. PWG convenings were productive places to reflect on the group’s measurement plan and assess where they met, exceeded, and fell short on particular target areas to hone their support of student-facing work.

AATL also cultivated mutual accountability for all partners, all of whom contributed to meeting the targets set by the PWG. College-advising and career-services teams were on campus with students, but AATL staff held themselves accountable for co-developing workshops and events, facilitating community partner attendance, and at times, leading training.⁸⁶ The industry and nonprofit partners held themselves accountable for providing classes on campus and event support and engaging business sector representatives in career-building experiences such as mock interviews.⁸⁷

PWG Team Commitments

We will seek to understand before being understood.

We will celebrate transparency and vulnerability.

We will promote experimentation and learning.

We will resolve conflict respectfully and directly.

PWG outcomes

The PWG is in the third year of its pilot to respond to the employment challenge the group identified.⁸⁸ The PWG has two primary priorities: (1) offering career-building experiences, and (2) providing ongoing career guidance and direction.⁸⁹ These flow into its secondary priority: employment outcomes.

The PWG and its partners at GSU and Spelman have increased career-building experiences and career-coaching sessions for Scholars at the two schools over the last three years, including events, trainings, and 1:1 support with resume-building and interviewing skills.⁹⁰ Partners Braven, Metro Atlanta Chamber, and Georgia Chamber connect Scholars with real-world hiring managers and local companies and are also exploring internship aggregator models. These collaborations have made it possible for Scholars to gain access to experiential learning, academic courses, and events that help them leverage their education toward career opportunities.

For example, in spring 2023, **10%** of AATL Scholars at GSU participated in a co-planned mock-interview event their senior year, but in the 2024 academic year, **40%** of GSU senior Scholars participated in the same event. Furthermore, by May 2024, **92%** of AATL Scholars in their senior year had engaged in some type of interview preparation to further their career readiness. Spelman also had impressive results: In spring 2023, **40%** of sophomore AATL Scholars had engaged in a career conversation with their Spelman Pathways' coach, but by May 2024, **100%** of AATL Scholars in their sophomore year had completed a career conversation.⁹¹

The PWG also developed new career pathway goals for AATL Scholars, experimenting with what would be the most important milestones for students. New goals included completing a CV or résumé earlier in a Scholar's college career and participating in an internship, fellowship, or gaining research experience during college. As a result of these goals and the group's efforts, by May 2024, **50%** of freshman AATL Scholars at Spelman and **77%** of GSU sophomore Scholars had developed a professional résumé. Along the same timeline in spring 2024, **75%** of Spelman sophomores—through their participation in the Spelman-Braven Leadership Accelerator program—had participated in an internship, fellowship, or gained research experience.⁹²

The PWG is laying the foundation for more career-inclusive program models at AATL

As a result of its learnings through the PWG, Achieve Atlanta has more intentionally called out the importance of a path to upward mobility in its next strategic plan and will incorporate this focus across AATL Scholars' journey from high school through postsecondary. Because the PWG employed carefully developed cross-sector partnership structures and practices, the career-focused work of the group can easily be incorporated into AATL's college access, college affordability, and college success programs.

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