



**Education
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Bridging the Gaps for Students in the Salinas Valley: Cross-System Efforts to Increase College Readiness

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A Series of Briefs from Bridging the Gap (BtG)

This brief is part of a series that also includes [*Bridging the Gaps for Students in Long Beach: Cross-System Efforts to Institutionalize Dual Enrollment*](#) and [*Bridging the Gaps through Cross-system Education Partnerships: Principles of Practice from Long Beach and the Salinas Valley*](#). The collaborations in Long Beach and the Salinas Valley were implemented through Bridging the Gap (BtG), an initiative funded by The James Irvine Foundation.

The Salinas Valley is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Most of the salad greens grown in the United States, along with many other crops, are cultivated along this fluvial valley floor. The basin extends about 70 miles and is dotted with towns spawned by agriculture, from King City in the south to Castroville in the north, near where the Salinas River spills into Monterey Bay. The City of Salinas is the county seat for Monterey County and used to be one of the most prosperous cities in the nation, with the highest per capita income in 1924.

Like many farming communities in California, Salinas Valley's residents now face high rates of poverty and have low levels of educational attainment, compared with state averages. About 43% of adults have less than a high school diploma, and over two-thirds of families speak a language other than English at home.¹ The valley's agriculture industry, meanwhile, is transforming itself into a high-tech enterprise and faces shortages of skilled labor and college graduates to fill career positions. Tourism offers minimum-wage opportunities, but the major industries offering well-paying salaries, including the health field and education institutions, depend on an educated labor force. In a land of bounty, many young people find themselves unqualified for the kinds of jobs that can support a family.

“Don't think college is the same as going to high school. The workload is a lot more than I expected it to be. It's just really hard.”

—College student

In light of these region-wide challenges, a group of public education institutions throughout the Salinas Valley came together in 2016 to help more youth in the valley prepare for and succeed in college. They applied for and joined Bridging the Gap (BtG), an initiative funded by The James Irvine Foundation to build and strengthen student transitions from high school to college, particularly for nontraditional college students. In this brief, we draw from interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as with student focus groups, in order to answer the following question for those interested in strengthening or developing a cross-system education partnership in their communities:

How has a relatively young education partnership worked across systems to improve college readiness for broad populations of students?

For the Salinas Valley partners, the answer to this question extends beyond a set of programs to implement and improve under the BtG initiative. To achieve their aims, the BtG partners developed common practices and values informed by student and community voices, rooted in the communities the partners serve, and driven by an intentional and sequential approach to change (see A Common Set of Practices and Values in the Salinas Valley on page 7).

History and Context

The BtG partnership in the Salinas Valley drew from several previous regional collaborations, but it also broke fresh ground in spanning the 70-mile length of the valley. The BtG team is led by Hartnell College (Hartnell), a community college in the city of Salinas. Hartnell is joined by the region’s public university, California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), located, about 10 miles away in Seaside, and by seven school districts throughout the valley (see Salinas Valley BtG Partners). The team also includes the Bright Futures Education Partnership (Bright Futures), a regional alliance in Monterey County and housed at CSUMB that supports local education institutions in improving student outcomes.

Student demographics.

The students served by the Salinas Valley partners are predominantly from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the vast majority are from homes where families speak English as a second language, and many are from migrant families. About 59,000 students attend the region’s public K-12 schools. Hartnell enrolled about 17,600 students in fall 2016 and CSUMB about 17,000 (headcount enrollment). Both are Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), about 62% of Hartnell’s students identify themselves as Latinx and about 42% do so at CSUMB. Two-thirds of Hartnell’s and over half of CSUMB’s enrollments are by first-generation college students (see Methodology).²

Salinas Valley BtG Partners

K-12 Partners

Alisal Union School District
Gonzales Unified School District
North Monterey County School District
Salinas City Elementary School District
Salinas Union High School District
Soledad Unified School District
South Monterey County Joint Union High School District

Postsecondary Partners

Hartnell College
Hartnell College Foundation
California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB)
Bright Futures Education Partnership (Bright Futures), at CSUMB

Support Providers

Facilitation and Support: Career Ladders Project
Documentation and Research: Education Insights Center (EdInsights)
Evaluation: Engage R+D, Equal Measure, and Harder+Company Community Research

Bridging the Gap is an initiative of The James Irvine Foundation.



Methodology

Our findings are based on studies by EdInsights that included: (1) interviews with 12 faculty, staff, administrators, and community members total (from Salinas Union High School District, Hartnell College, CSUMB, and Bright Futures) who were instrumental in planning and implementing the BtG education partnership in Salinas Valley; and (2) two focus groups at Hartnell College and CSUMB each, with a total of 34 students. Our findings are limited by these small sample sizes and are therefore exploratory. Some student data are drawn from internal reports by the education partners. Methodology and other citations are drawn from *Offering dual enrollment in a cross-system partnership: A case study in Long Beach*.³

Salinas Valley BtG's College Readiness Programs

The Salinas Valley BtG partners focused primarily on increasing the number of high school students who complete dual enrollment courses and the full “a-g” sequence of courses required for admission to the CSU and the University of California (UC). They also repurposed an annual summit to focus on college transitions, facilitated the development of the Salinas Valley Promise, helped to organize student focus groups about student supports at Hartnell and CSUMB, and supported several existing college-readiness efforts, such as outreach by CSUMB and alignment of career technical education (CTE) and a-g courses in the Salinas Union High School District.

Dual enrollment courses.

Most of these offerings are coordinated by Hartnell and local districts and are primarily student success courses taught on the high school campuses. The main challenges in increasing the number of courses included aligning schedules, meeting instructor qualifications, and funding.

“[Through a student success course,] we felt like, if we get ahead of it, and we're proactive, and we help our students understand, ‘What does it mean to be a college student?’ that we're going to give them the foundational skills.”

—K-12 interviewee

a-g courses.

The BtG partners focused on increasing the number of high schools offering the full a-g sequence, encouraging more students to complete the sequence, ensuring that students and parents understand grade requirements, and aligning CTE and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs with a-g requirements. Staff from Bright Futures served as facilitators in the high schools, bringing data to help make the case to offer more a-g courses to broader populations of students.

“The more students complete a-g, the more college ready they are when they arrive to us...a-g is typically, at least in the context of California, the proxy for college readiness.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

“When we were in the initial stages of the conversation, and we looked at the initial data, there was a big gap between the percentage of students who are earning a high school diploma in our comprehensive high schools and then the students who were graduating and being a-g eligible.”

—K-12 interviewee

College Transition Summit.

The partners revived an annual summit and repurposed it around college transitions, to engage broader groups of teachers, faculty, counselors, and administrators from all three systems in identifying and aligning the many college readiness and transition efforts underway. Challenges included understanding the impacts of recent policy change in each of the three systems, aligning the work with the Salinas Valley Promise, and supporting student success.

“What can we do as the partners to help you better prepare students, or what do you need from us in terms of curriculum guidance or alignment to better help in that transition? That's really the goal—to be seen as partners and to act as partners.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

Salinas Valley Promise.

The new Salinas Valley Promise encourages students to enroll in and complete college by covering the first-year of enrollment fees at Hartnell for all local high school graduates who enroll as full-time students and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application. The Promise also expands on an existing social cohort model that previously served only high-risk students and now serves all first-time, full-time students who enroll at Hartnell. BtG partners helped to market this opportunity to students and parents.

“Students who are part of social cohorts have almost twice the graduation rate as students who are not a part of social cohorts.”

—Community interviewee

Listening to Student Voices

The Hartnell and CSUMB BtG teams asked EdInsights to find out from students about their experiences with student supports during their first years on both college campuses. Based on two sets of focus groups at each school, we found that the students considered both academic tutoring and advising to be crucial to reaching their postsecondary goals. Students described the former, however, as much more widely and easily accessible than the latter. Students also

valued personal touches, including connections with faculty, peers, and targeted support programs.

Academic supports seen as a vital resource and widely accessible.

“The [learning center] was my backbone in helping me pass my class. Without it, I would have never passed math.”

—Student

Academic advising also seen as crucial, but access can be more complicated.

“I had struggled finding my advisor because I changed my major...I would go to the advisor that I was already in, and she wouldn’t tell me what advisor I was supposed to go to... So, I kind of struggled there.”

—Student

“I went into [the counseling office], and I probably wasted a year...It took a while for me to find the right person.”

—Student

No clear trend in how students select majors.

While most students we spoke with decided on their major before entering college, about a third changed their mind during college.

“It was not until I took my first history class...that I realized that I love history. A professor that taught it, he was really passionate about what he taught. That was contagious. From there on, I knew that that’s what I wanted to study.”

—Student

Unevenly distributed career exploration opportunities. Many students in targeted support programs, such as [Mi CASA](#), [EOPS](#), and [TRiO](#), said they had experienced internships or job shadowing through these programs. Students who were not in such programs were much less likely to have participated in these opportunities. While there were internship and other career opportunities available to students through academic departments or direct access to professors, many of these options were only available to students who were further along in their degree programs (not first- or second-year students).

“For students who really don’t know what they want to do, I don’t know if there’s anything in place for them. I don’t know if there’s any career day where you get a lot of professionals coming out to speak to students.”

—Student



Unevenly distributed information about financial support.

“Students don’t really know what other scholarships there are out there besides the Cal Grant. That [information] would be really, really helpful, I think.”

—Student

High value in personal touches.

Students said they particularly valued supports that felt personalized—for example, ongoing contacts with faculty, staff, and their own peers. Students in targeted support programs had experienced these kinds of touches regularly. Others could access these experiences, but they had to seek them out themselves.

“I think they (professors) are a huge support. I got a lot of advice from really good professors...about transferring, what I should take, and what I need to take.”

—Student

“[TRiO staff] treat you like family, but beyond that, if you have any questions, you can email your counselor. [They] answer even sometimes on the weekends, and I think that’s a big deal...They go above and beyond.”

—Student

“I always talk to the person next to me. ‘Can I get your phone number, and we’ll do a study session?’...In every class, try to be friends with one or two people every semester to get through it together.”

—Student

From these findings, several questions emerge for colleges and universities to consider in seeking to increase access to and personalization of advising services:

- What cost-effective models or practices can academic advising adapt from tutoring centers and targeted support programs on their own campuses?
- Can colleges encourage more faculty, through professional development and other means, to engage with more first-generation college students about academic and career choices?
- Can peer-to-peer models help connect more students with trusted advising information?

A Common Set of Practices and Values

Based on interviews with faculty, staff, administrators, and community representatives, we found consistent patterns in how the Salinas Valley BtG partners sought to mobilize change to support student readiness for and success in college. Over time, the team developed a set of practices



and values that, it said, shaped a common language and influenced the internal actions of the institutions in ways that supported the team’s aims. These practices and values coalesced around two broad themes: engaging the communities that the partners served and adopting an intentional and structured approach to change.

Engaging Communities to Embrace College-Going for All

The Salinas Valley BtG partners said that, in working to improve college readiness, they needed to transform college-going expectations in the valley and build trust among all stakeholder groups.

Changing mindsets about students’ potential.

The partners began with a series of guided conversations with constituent groups—including high school teachers and counselors, and college and university faculty and staff—to unpack the educators’ beliefs about their students’ potential. Based on those experiences, the partners developed a broader communications campaign, through videos and other means, that included peer-to-peer messaging (for students and parents) about the importance of college readiness.

“Some of the counselors admitted pretty openly that they thought not all students were college material, and it was their role to figure out who was in and who was out, and then they would only spend their time on those students that they thought had a shot at college.”

—Community interviewee

“We’ve worked on changing the way we do academic prep, because one of the things that I have pushed for, and we’ve put into our graduation initiative, is the recognition that academic preparation is about a great deal more than specific academic tools. That preparation has to be that we are ready for the students we serve, not just that they are ready for us.”

—CSUMB interviewee

Engaging and educating parents.

The partners adopted a grassroots approach—based on the “promotora” model—to arm parents in the valley with information to share with other parents about the importance of college and about the specific requirements and opportunities along the way. This model, adapted from health care, trains community members to use their relationships and networks to educate their peers without having to become professionals. The process remains in its early stages in Salinas.

“The parents are learning a-g, they’re learning dual enrollment, they’re learning FAFSA, they’re learning all these different things about college—and they’re teaching their peers. Along with that, there’s also a youth team, and the youth



team is also doing community organizing around higher ed and college readiness.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

Trusting the expertise and supporting the roles of all partners.

Interviewees said that building community also involves supporting one another and developing trust in working toward common goals. For high school counselors, for example, this included efforts to understand recent changes in state and system policies regarding developmental education at the community colleges and the CSU. For postsecondary institutions, a CSUMB interviewee said, it included educators examining their own practices and working to “move policies out of the way” that posed barriers to students’ transitions from high school to college.

“What I appreciate about Bridging the Gap is everybody really is passionate about the work. Their heart is in it, and there’s no egos. It’s all about our students and how...we make things better for them.”

— K-12 interviewee

“This is a shared responsibility...We don’t come in and say, ‘These are the classes you offer.’ We make recommendations, and then we see what works.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

Adopting a Structured Approach to Change

The Salinas Valley BtG partners connected their successes to being intentional and sequential in their approach in change.

Examining cross-system data to identify problems and evaluate progress.

Interviewees said that their BtG efforts helped to solidify institutional practices around using data (qualitative and quantitative) in order to identify barriers for students and to catalyze change efforts. They also said, however, that their institutions were not as far along in using data to evaluate programs as part of a continuous improvement cycle. One of the partnership’s goals is to develop a comprehensive, cross-sector data system.

“That’s a larger aspiration, but, in the short term, what we’re trying to do, given the new rules for college placement, is just to get transcript information automated, so that it’s not a matter of the student bringing the paper transcript, it’s really the click of a button, so that when they apply for college, you have the appropriate data-sharing agreement to access that information.”

—Hartnell College interviewee



Starting small and building on early successes.

To build trust and long-term relationships, the BtG partners started with relatively modest changes and addressed administrative, structural, and logistical challenges along the way before expanding. In dual enrollment, for example, they began with a student success course, since it appeared to be the most straightforward one to implement and the most useful for large numbers of high school students. They made sure to promptly resolve the implementation challenges that arose, such as with enrollment processes, scheduling issues, and outreach to students and parents.

“We chose to go very slow, and I think that’s what’s making it successful. We started just with one dual enrollment class, made sure that everybody had the same one to set a foundation. I think we worked out all the little things that we weren’t anticipating.”

—K-12 interviewee

The partners’ efforts to increase the number of students who complete the a-g sequence also started with a quick-win strategy: identifying students who are only a few courses short of completing their a-g sequence and ensuring that they enroll in those courses. Building from that momentum and from their outreach on educators’ beliefs about students’ potential, they are now looking at capacity and policy issues, including graduation requirements, to increase a-g enrollment and completion.

Beginning college readiness efforts before high school.

As the work to improve college readiness progressed, the partners reached consensus that they needed to engage with students and their parents well before the students’ final years of high school. They connected with existing programming, such as GEAR Up at CSUMB, to build college readiness information, including about a-g courses and college pathways, as well as education planning in middle school.

“We went from developing four-year plans with our students when they’re freshmen, to six-year plans, and starting them in 7th grade. [We are] starting the conversations earlier about college and career in 7th grade and having them meet with their counselors, developing a six-year plan, which will then be updated yearly.”

—K-12 interviewee

Leveraging funding and relationships for sustainability.

The BtG partners leveraged their partnership to sustain and expand their work. For example, they joined forces to receive an HSI grant to further strengthen dual enrollment efforts.



“One of the maybe unintended outcomes is the relationship-building with the other districts in the area and really utilizing each other’s strengths to build upon things that we need.”

—K-12 interviewee

“Sometimes, it’s about reallocating resources. Sometimes, it’s about figuring out how to leverage with each other. But it’s about focusing and building this energy towards these goals.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

Conclusion

Through Bridging the Gap, a relatively young partnership came together across education systems in the Salinas Valley to improve college readiness for underserved and first-generation college students throughout the valley. Early in their planning process, the partners agreed to pursue a common set of programmatic strategies centered on dual enrollment and a-g course offerings. In the process of engaging with each other to improve student transitions across systems, the partners also had the vision to create conditions for change within their own institutions; they developed a set of practices and values that were rooted in the communities that they served and that were driven by an intentional and structured approach to change.

“It speeds up the velocity of the partnership once you have established relationships. There’s more synergy, because we’re at the table talking about the obstacles, and we want to address them together.”

—Hartnell College interviewee

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About the Authors

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About the Education Insights Center (EdInsights)

EdInsights is a research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education. Our mission is to inform and improve policymaking and practice for K-12 education, community colleges, and public universities. We accomplish this through applied research, evaluation, the California Education Policy Fellowship Program, and the CSU Student Success Network.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Census, Quick Facts, 2017, based on the cities of Salinas, King City, Greenfield, Gonzales, and Soledad.

² For citations, see Methodology on page 4.

³ Jaeger, L., Bracco, K.R., & Nodine, T. (2018, November). *Offering dual enrollment in a cross-system partnership: A case study in Long Beach*. Internal report prepared for The James Irvine Foundation, San Francisco, CA.