

EGS RESEARCH & CONSULTING

Effective Dropout Recovery Strategies & The Graduation Alliance Approach



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I. Executive Summary

The dropout crisis continues to plague public schools in the United States. Reports from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate:

- Nationally, there were over half a million (613,379) dropouts from high school in 2007-2008 (Stillwell 2010).
- There was no measurable change in the dropout rate between 2007 and 2008 (3.5 percent). While the event dropout rate has decreased from 6.1 percent in 1972 to 3.5 percent in 2008, most of the declines occurred between 1972 and 1990, and while dropout rate fluctuations (both upward and downward) have occurred between 1990 and 2008, the event dropout rate has remained, overall, unchanged since 1990 (Chapman, et al 2010).
- Across all reporting states in 2008, dropout rates increased as grade level increased. While 3.0 percent of ninth graders dropped out of high school, 6.1 percent of twelfth-graders dropped out (Chapman, et al 2010).
- The dropout rate in 2008 varied greatly by ethnicity. The dropout rate was lowest for Asian/Pacific Islanders and White students (2.4 percent and 2.8 percent, respectively), and was greatest for Hispanic students (6.0 percent), Black students (6.7 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (7.3 percent) (Chapman, et al 2010).

Certain strategies and activities are emphasized again and again as having had a positive effect on the recovery and persistence of students who had dropped out of high school. These strategies generally fall under three broad concepts: **flexibility, accountability and support.**

The dropout rate in 2008 also varied greatly by family income. The dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about four and one-half times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families (8.7 percent and 2.0 percent, respectively) (Chapman, et al 2010).

While a great deal of research is available on dropout prevention, research on dropout recovery programs tends to base its results mostly on anecdotal data, and little data is available to identify specific strategies that may have most strongly contributed to a program's success.

Nonetheless, in examining the diverse findings of research, certain strategies and activities are emphasized again and again as having had a positive effect on the recovery and persistence of students who had dropped out of high school. These strategies and activities are described individually in this report, and generally fall under three broad concepts: Flexibility, Accountability and Support. The following charts summarize specific strategies used by successful dropout recovery and re-entry

programs and the approaches taken by Graduation Alliance to incorporate each strategy into the Graduation Alliance program.

Flexibility: Serving this highly vulnerable and highly variable population of students requires the ability to address challenges quickly, effectively, and in ways that are inherently motivational.

Characteristics of Effective Programs: The Graduation Alliance Approach	
<p>Recruitment through Multiple Channels: Programs must use multiple strategies for identifying and recruiting this highly-variable and often-mobile population of students.</p>	<p>Graduation Alliance handles recruitment from start to finish, using multiple methods to locate students (including phone calls, emails, community visits, use of Spanish-speaking recruiters, and use of a search service) to locate and recruit as many dropouts as possible.</p>
<p>Tailored Program Options: Students drop out for a variety of reasons; successful programs identify the specific challenges associated with the dropout event and present a program customized to resolve each set of challenges.</p>	<p>Intake procedures identify specific reasons for dropping out. Program staff tailors interventions and supports based on these reasons and adapt the program in a timely manner as academic and personal challenges occur.</p>
<p>Anywhere, Anytime Learning: Dropouts tend not to be able to return to a regular school due to a variety of social/emotional and life challenges, and require learning solutions that work within their schedules.</p>	<p>Graduation Alliance’s technology-rich environment provides both high-quality instruction and comprehensive support at a place and time convenient to each student who cannot or will not return to a traditional facility-based program.</p>
<p>Accelerated Learning: Dropouts may be daunted by the number of credits required to receive a high school diploma; enabling them to recoup credits more quickly than they can earn in a traditional school year can be highly motivational.</p>	<p>Course credits are strictly based on academic performance and effort; students work year round and can earn up to twelve credits per year.</p>

Accountability: Every aspect of the dropout recovery program — from staff, to process, to curriculum — must aspire to be of the highest quality possible by maintaining accountability for outcomes as well as processes.

Characteristics of Effective Programs: The Graduation Alliance Approach	
<p>High Standards: Students are held to the same high standards as students in regular schools, are aware of these standards and the consequences of not meeting them, and are held to consistent, clear consequences when standards are not met.</p>	<p>Academic and behavioral expectations are clearly spelled out, and students must agree to them before they can be enrolled. Each student receives a customized Written Student Learning Plan that sets manageable progress and pace toward graduation. Progress is monitored frequently and intervention occurs in a timely manner. Students must complete the same requirements as other students in the district, including taking and passing the state exam(s).</p>
<p>High-Quality Instructional Materials: Curriculum and instructional materials are standards-based, student-centered, and grounded in experiences related to students’ lives.</p>	<p>All courses are aligned to state standards. Criteria for developing and selecting courses for Graduation Alliance are based on high standards and best practice in instructional design, pedagogy, and content area to facilitate student learning and engagement. The instructional program and materials are regularly reviewed by the Northwest Accreditation Commission.</p>
<p>Frequent Assessment and Remediation: Students’ academic progress is assessed frequently, but more importantly, specific interventions are implemented in a timely manner when students’ academic success is in jeopardy.</p>	<p>Student progress is instantly accessible to students and all members of their support team through the online environment. Clear procedures for academic intervention are articulated and implemented at every level.</p>
<p>High-Quality, Well-Trained Staff: Dropouts Instructional and support staff demonstrates expertise in their areas of responsibility and receive ongoing training in effective curriculum and instruction methods and in addressing the special needs of the dropout population.</p>	<p>Graduation Alliance hires highly qualified, credentialed instructors, advocates, and coaches who are held accountable for student success. In addition to comprehensive initial training, teams meet weekly/monthly to discuss best practice and attend an annual “dropout recovery summit.”</p>

Characteristics of Effective Programs: The Graduation Alliance Approach

<p>Continuous Program Improvement: Programs must engage in routine, comprehensive program evaluation activities using high-quality data in order to make program adjustments and modifications.</p>	<p>Departmental and inter-departmental teams review student performance data weekly/ monthly to make minor course corrections. Graduation Alliance’s management team and board uses a variety of metrics to set priorities and implement any substantive changes needed on an annual basis.</p>
<p>Maintenance of Quality: Programs provide consistent quality in the services they offer irrespective of available funding or number of students requesting services.</p>	<p>Most of the costs associated with the program are tied to the student and are based on per-pupil funding allocation. In addition, the use of technology facilitates accommodation of increasing numbers of students without sacrificing program rigor or quality.</p>

Support: The dropout population often faces overwhelming academic and social obstacles. Successful programs build and maintain intensive support networks to address both areas of student need.

Characteristics of Effective Programs: The Graduation Alliance Approach

<p>Adults Who Care: Students receive ongoing personal support from instructional staff, coaches, and advocates who truly believe and have a keen interest in their success.</p>	<p>Staff members from the principal to instructors, coaches and advocates are screened to ensure an inherent motivation to see highly at-risk students succeed. Staff members frequently communicate their pride in, and their concern for, students.</p>
<p>Case Management Approach: Each student receives tailored interventions that address their social and academic needs; follow up is frequent.</p>	<p>Staff members work from students’ intake interviews to craft customized academic plans and social supports, including life skills development. Staff members review academic performance routinely, and communicate with students frequently. Staff members also communicate with each other about potential social and academic challenges and work together to develop solutions for the student.</p>

Characteristics of Effective Programs: The Graduation Alliance Approach

<p>Parental Support: Programs build capacity for parents to become engaged in and support their children’s educational progress.</p>	<p>Parents are provided online access to students’ academic records. Parents are invited to weekly “meetups,” and sometimes receive home visits.</p>
<p>Life Planning: Students’ aspirations are validated and supported through careful planning and frequent, productive follow-up.</p>	<p>Each student is required to create a “High School and Beyond” plan that specifies a post-secondary trajectory and maps out specific steps students must take to meet their goals. Academic and support staff review students’ progress frequently and help them make course corrections as needed.</p>
<p>One-On-One Instruction: Students are not simply seats in a class; frequent opportunities for one-on-one academic support are available.</p>	<p>Graduation Alliance provides a host of academic resources, including weekly tutorials by all instructors; one-on-one academic support through the student’s Academic Coach, and 24/7 access to one-on-one tutoring through a partnership with Tutor.com.</p>

II. The Cost of Dropping Out

II.1 ECONOMIC COST

The cost of dropout crisis is often described in terms of the personal earning power of students who drop out versus those who graduate from high school (Rumberger 1987). However, personal income impacts the national economy in myriad ways. Several studies have offered a number of staggering statistics to describe the devastating economic impact the current dropout rate can have in the short and long term. For example:

- The National Conference of State Legislatures notes that the education level of America's current generation of workers will not approach that of the previous generation (Deyé 2011).
- In 2006, women who dropped out of high school earned only about 65 percent of the income of their counterparts who had graduated; male dropouts earned slightly less than 70 percent (Tyler & Lofstrom 2009).
- Annually, dropouts pay about 58 percent less in federal and state income taxes yearly; assuming a dropout cohort of 600,000 eighteen year olds, this equates to a yearly loss of \$36 billion (Rouse 2007).
- Dropouts are more likely to rely on social programs such as welfare throughout their lives (Woods 1995). One study of families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) found that half of all single-mother TANF recipients are high school dropouts, and posited that if all welfare recipients who were high school dropouts had instead completed high school, the annual savings to these programs would approach \$2 billion (Waldfogel, et al 2007).
- Public health insurance spending is nearly 30 percent more for high school dropouts than for high school graduates (Muennig 2007).
- As the number of dropouts increases, so will the income gap widen as more young people are forced to take unskilled, lower-paying jobs (Woods 1995).

II.2 SOCIETAL COST

Because low socioeconomic status is so closely linked with a variety of negative social outcomes, the drop-out crisis is one of great social importance. For example, research has found that:

- Dropouts are more likely to engage in ongoing high-risk behavior than their graduate counterparts, creating a self-replicating pattern, such as teen pregnancy, delinquency, crime, violence, substance abuse, etc. (Woods 1995).

- 68 percent of the nation's prison inmates are high school dropouts (Harlow 2003).
- Even one additional year of high school education may reduce the murder rate by 30 percent and nonviolent crimes by up to 20 percent (Lochner & Moretti 2004).

III. Dropout Risk Factors

Universally, literature on dropout prevention and recovery cites the complexity of dropout risk factors as a major barrier in effective intervention. Put simply, no two students may drop out for the same set of reasons, and the effective recovery of the student is highly dependent on the provision of a program tailored to each student’s unique situation, addressing both academic and social factors (Lee & Burkam 2003; Rumberger 1987; Woods 1995).

Recent research is challenging the old belief that dropouts are mostly poor students with a history of academic failure. For example, using data from the 1998-2000 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), one research study found that 20 percent of all students drop out, including 40 percent of students in the lowest socioeconomic group, but also 10 percent of students from the highest two socioeconomic groups (Almeida, et al 2006). And according to the 2006 seminal report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, academic failure was only the fifth reason most frequently given for dropping out (Bridgeland, et al 2006).

Significant dropout risk factors can be classified into two general categories: School/Academic Factors and Personal/Social Factors. The following table illustrates some of the most commonly cited risk factors in each category.

COMMON DROPOUT RISK FACTORS	
School-Related Factors	Personal/Social Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of interest in school (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Woods 1995, Philadelphia Youth Network 2006) • Lack of credits (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; New York City Department of Education 2006) • Significant absenteeism (Bridgeland, et al 2006) • Interaction with peers who did not value school (Bridgeland, et al 2006) • Too much freedom/too few rules (Bridgeland, et al 2006) • Academic failure (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Woods 1995) • Language deficiencies (Steinberg & Almeida 2004; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; Martin & Halperin 2006) • The feeling that no one at school cares (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006) • Fearing for safety/bullying (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to work (Martin & Halperin 2006; Woods 1995) • Pregnancy/childcare (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006) • Legal issues (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006); National League of Cities 2007; Harris 2006) • Substance abuse issues (Woods 1995) • Lack of family support (Woods 1995) • Foster care/homelessness (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; National League of Cities 2007) • Migrancy (Cranston-Gingras 2003) • Transportation/Geographical Isolation (Harris 2006) • Social Anxiety (Van Ameringen, et al 2001)

Complicating the process of identifying specific dropout risk factors and targeting them for intervention, individual factors are often part of larger, complex cause-effect chains. For example, a student may lose interest in school, causing him/her to engage with a negative peer group, causing him/her to begin abusing drugs and alcohol, causing a significant absenteeism problem. While early intervention and effective remediation of these risk factors is critical, it is just as important to consider all of the confounding factors and to assess and address the originating risk factor(s) (Stern 1986).

IV. Successful Strategies in Dropout Recovery

While a great deal of research on dropout prevention programs exists, only a small segment addresses dropout recovery. Dropout recovery research tends to be based on anecdotal — rather than scientific — evidence of effectiveness. In addition, dropout recovery research reviewed for this paper tends to focus on overall success, and does not delineate, for example, specific strategies within a particular successful program that may or may not have had a significant impact on the program's overall success. Even so, an analysis of dropout recovery research reveals specific activities and strategies associated with successful programs that are highlighted again and again. These activities and strategies generally fall under five broad categories: Program Management and Administration; Identification and Recruitment; Academic Support; Post-Secondary Advancement and Support; and Coaching/Mentoring.

IV.1 PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The task of identifying, recruiting, and re-enrolling dropouts has traditionally fallen to high schools and school districts. While research indicates that there are a number of successful practices and challenges associated with the management and administration of programs, this area also represents the greatest source of challenge. Most of the available research in this area focuses on the importance of, and challenges relating to, program funding, location, staff, and monitoring/evaluation.

Funding/Reporting Mechanisms

Typically, dropout recovery programs are funded using state and federal funds—perhaps augmented with local grant money and contributions. The challenge of this funding model for dropout recovery programs is that funding may vary from year to year— sometimes significantly. In some cases, loss of public funding can be devastating to a program (Knepper 1988; Harris 2006). With such vagaries in funding, programs are not able to plan for or implement long-term activities and strategies, or to reliably offer the same services from year to year. In addition, abrupt changes to funding may cause programs to lose a substantial investment made in recruiting and training highly qualified program staff, as budgets are no longer able to accommodate salaries commensurate with staff expertise and experience (Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

Compounding the challenges associated with fluctuations in program funding, districts with a high percentage of dropouts — particularly those who may drop out multiple times over the course of their high school careers — can experience loss in state funds tied to enrollment and attendance (Berliner & Barrat 2009). In essence, the schools and districts with the greatest need for effective dropout recovery programs may also experience the most significant funding challenges.

Graduation Alliance's cost model reflects a keen understanding of districts' funding challenges. All costs associated with the program are directly tied to the individual student and are generally based on the basic funding allocation for a student in a given state. For example, Instructors and Local Advocates are

paid per student based on the satisfactory progress of the student. Basing costs on student enrollment virtually eliminates unanticipated funding changes and ensures that a consistent and comprehensive suite of services is available to districts of any size — large or small. By basing its cost structure on the basic funding allocation for a student — a stable benchmark — Graduation Alliance is able to offer districts a complete program with little financial risk.

Program Location

Research on dropout prevention and recovery indicates that the physical location of a recovery program may be critical in attracting and retaining students. Because many dropouts have experienced a significant “disconnect” from their home school or the school setting in general, offering a program that would require them to return to their school building may actually create a disincentive to complete high school (Hoyle & Collier 2006; Woods 1995).

In fact, several dropout programs deemed successful attribute their success to locating their programs outside the school walls. For example, a dropout recovery program in Colorado Springs created a “digital campus” in a local mall. The program became so popular — both with dropouts and with students simply wanting to recoup lost credits — that it quickly expanded to a second location (Hoyle & Collier 2006). Another program linked nearly 30 “satellite” program sites throughout the community to offer year-round classes available weekdays and weekends (Martin & Halperin 2006). One of New York City’s most successful recovery programs, the Young Adult Borough Center program, provides access to instruction with full-time evening classes at community-based sites (New York City Department of Education 2006).

The location of programs outside of traditional school walls is beneficial for several reasons. First, when simply getting to school is a challenge for students (e.g., in rural areas or when traditional school hours conflict with work requirements), having “anytime, anywhere” access to academic instruction can be an effective solution (Harris 2006, Woods 1995). In addition, often school capacity can be a stumbling block for effective alternative education programs. Implementing instruction off campus can allow programs to accommodate more students (Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

Locating programs outside of the school can also help students overcome strong negative associations they may have with the high school experience (Stern 1986, Deyé 2011). For example, services offered in an Oregon school district purposely located the program off campus because students were unwilling to attend workshops or receive services in the high school — even if such services did not require their full-time attendance at the school (Knepper 1998).

Research suggests that the use of technology is an effective strategy for re-engaging dropouts without having them return to the physical school location. Technology tends to be inherently motivational to students — it is a “youth friendly” option (Harris 2006). In addition, technology affords remote access to instruction and communication — a benefit that is particularly important to students who have negative perceptions of or simply feel out of place in traditional high schools, (Cranston-Gingras 2003; American Youth Policy Forum 2006). Technology also provides an important option for students who are work-bound or home-bound, for example due to parenting responsibilities (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006).

Finally, technology represents an effective way to stay in touch with students who may be highly mobile — such as migrant students (Cranston-Gingras 2003).

One of the hallmarks of the Graduation Alliance approach to dropout recovery is its use of technology to deliver both instruction and support. Graduation Alliance provides each student, as needed, with a laptop (including 3G wireless connectivity and an offline player for times when Internet connectivity is not available). Thus, students have access to “anytime/anywhere learning,” and can complete courses at a pace and schedule that works within their lives. In addition, Graduation Alliance students have access via email, phone, instant messenger, and feedback mechanisms within the learning management system to Instructors, Academic Coaches, and Local Advocates, as well as 24/7 tutoring provided through Tutor.com.

Program Staff

Research also indicates that both the qualifications and attitudes of staff providing dropout recovery services and instruction are critical in retention of students in the program. In particular, staff must:

- Participate by choice in the program. Programs that constitute a “dumping ground” for unqualified, unmotivated staff can further alienate students from the educational setting (Aron 2006; Woods 1995);
- Play a role in designing the program they are implementing to increase educator buy-in (Aron 2006);
- Have the capacity and training to create a caring and respectful learning environment in addition to content-area competency (Woods 1995; Brush & Jones 2002);
- Receive ongoing, high-quality professional development — both in instructional pedagogy and in at-risk youth issues (Aron 2006; NCYCDE 2006; Harris 2006);
- Receive frequent formal and informal feedback and evaluation to ensure continued growth and effectiveness (Woods 1995).

Graduation Alliance emphasizes both professional qualifications and temperament in all staff members who work with students. Its comprehensive staff interview process focuses on identifying positive motivations for working with the dropout population.

Graduation Alliance staff also looks for experiences or activities that corroborate these motivations. For example, staff members may have dropped out of school themselves or have left the teaching profession because they wanted to reach highly at-risk students and were unable to do so in the traditional school structure. Staff members may also have a keen interest and involvement in community and charity activities.

In addition to careful screening to ensure that staff members have the desire necessary to work with this highly at-risk population, each Graduation Alliance staff member must demonstrate professional qualifications and must participate in regular formal and informal staff development. For example:

- All staff members receive in-depth orientation training focusing on their specific areas of student support;
- All staff members participate in staff meetings at least monthly;
- All staff members participate in periodic review/discussions of “best practice” in dropout recovery;
- Annually, all employees participate in a company-wide “Dropout Recovery Summit.”

Graduation Alliance also emphasizes that clear, consistent, open, and timely performance feedback is critical to improving the quality of its staff and the program, and, ultimately, to improving student outcomes and parent/student satisfaction. The Graduation Alliance Principal conducts formative performance reviews with Instructors every six months, and an official, summative performance review is conducted once each year. Academic Coaches and Local Advocates receive formal performance evaluations yearly. In addition, all staff members are evaluated based on student performance.

Program Monitoring and Evaluation

Effective programs use comprehensive data to assess students’ status and overall program effectiveness at regular intervals and to make course corrections as needed. Yet, many schools and districts lack the resources to engage in the level and intensity of data collection and analysis needed to make well-informed program decisions (Weiler 1994, Aron 2006). Often, dropout recovery and other “second chance” programs are held up to much less scrutiny than regular school programs. Yet, argue some researchers, programs serving students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out must be held to at least the same standard of data collection and close monitoring as regular school programs (Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

In other cases, schools and districts may simply lack “good” data. Their data may be limited to student academic performance and broad demographic information. However, as previously stated, students drop out for a host of interconnected reasons, and failing to consider data about the “whole child” can dilute a program’s effectiveness (National League of Cities 2007).

Graduation Alliance uses a robust data collection system that incorporates comprehensive data on a variety of student factors. During the enrollment phase, recruiters record data specific to students’ reasons for dropping out of school, attitudes toward schoolwork and the future, available family supports, special circumstances (e.g., teen pregnancy/parenting, foster care, substance abuse, migrancy, etc.). This data is used to craft a tailored program providing specific supports to the student, and to inform general program implementation decisions. As students progress through the academic portion of the program, academic performance data (including time on task) is available at any time. In addition, students are

held to district diploma standards, including state assessments, and student performance in relation to these standards is an important part of individual student and overall program effectiveness review. Graduation Alliance’s management team meets weekly or monthly to gather feedback from the Academic Coaches, Instructors, and district partners. The sales team meets with the customer services director and program implementation manager at least monthly to ensure that communication and feedback is flowing between the two groups. Graduation Alliance makes minor course corrections based on this feedback. Every six to eight weeks, the executive team provides to the Board of Directors recruitment and retention data, business-impact metrics, and other data. This data is also used to make minor program adjustments.

Additionally, once a year, Graduation Alliance brings all employees together for a company-wide “Dropout Recovery Summit.” Staff members review past-year performance and explore the latest best practice research in small groups, determining which promising practices might be incorporated into the program. Following the Summit, the management team meets to prioritize initiatives for the year.

IV.2 STUDENT IDENTIFICATION & RECRUITMENT

The re-engagement of a student who has dropped out is a complex and challenging process. Schools and districts must contend with outdated or inaccurate contact information, challenges associated with segments of the dropout population that may be particularly difficult to locate, and the negative associations dropouts and their families may have with school. In many cases, even effective dropout recovery programs fail to recruit enough students to fill the available slots (Bloom 2010).

Recruitment through Multiple Channels

Research indicates that effective programs tend to recruit students through multiple channels. In fact, a study of dropout prevention and recovery programs in California found that a major reason for the programs’ ineffectiveness was that students simply did not know about the programs (Stern 1986). In recruiting dropouts, research indicates that having a good “referral system” that might involve, for example peer-to-peer outreach or outreach through community-based organizations, is critical (Hoye & Sturgis 2005, Harris 2006). In addition, communication content and methods should be geared to attract young people (Harris 2006; Bloom 2010).

For highly mobile populations (such as migrant students or students in foster care), the identification and recruitment process is particularly challenging and requires a great investment both of staff and time (Cranston-Gingras 2003; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006). One successful program that focused on recruiting migrant dropouts employed a full-time outreach specialist as well as several “on-the-ground” recruiters. Recruiters relied heavily on migrant agencies and other community organizations to reach this highly mobile population (Cranston-Gingras 2003).

One study of programs assisting dropouts in transition from high school also suggested that providing tangible and intangible incentives for joining a program may be a highly effective recruitment tool. This

may include a financial or material incentive or the opportunity to provide community service (Bloom 2010).

Graduation Alliance implements a consistent, clearly articulated, and comprehensive process for handling recruitment of students from start to finish. Each recruiter receives thorough training on effective recruitment strategies, and uses scripts customized to each phase of the recruitment process to ensure accuracy and consistency. Using a contact list of eligible students provided by the district, local recruiters begin with a series of phone calls to students and/or their families. Graduation Alliance staff reports that over 90 percent of the students who enroll in the program are recruited within the first three phone calls.

Additional recruitment strategies include:

- Letters and post cards sent by Graduation Alliance on behalf of the school district;
- Use of a search service to locate an eligible student's family, friends, and/or neighbors;
- Flyers with tear-off contact information hung in community centers (with District approval);
- Meetings with community resource centers to introduce the program and ask for referrals;
- Postcards left with school district and community resource center staff to hand out to students and their families.

Graduation Alliance staff also emphasizes a very short time frame between initial recruitment and follow-up. For students who are pre-approved for eligibility by the school district, if a student wants to join the program, recruiters sign them up immediately and then hand them off to their Academic Coach to walk them through the orientation, and get them registered for the first course. They then coordinate a laptop pick-up and meeting with their local Local Advocate within the first week of program implementation.

Students who are not on the “pre-approved list” are often referrals to Graduation Alliance. These students require district eligibility verification, which typically only takes between 24 and 48 hours. Once the district has approved the student, Graduation Alliance staff follows up within one business day of receiving the approval.

The Graduation Alliance approach to students is inherently motivational. In fact, of the students contacted by Graduation Alliance staff during a recruitment drive, typically only nine percent of eligible students do not want to enroll. In addition, Graduation Alliance has created a Points/Rewards program that gives students tangible, desirable rewards for performance. Student can earn points for:

- Logging into classes;
- Submitting assignments (with a passing grade);
- Passing a final exam;
- Completing a quarter-credit class;
- Reaching the Honors pace (3 quarter-credit classes a month);
- Completing a monthly student response form;
- Attending a meetup with a Local Advocate.

Points can be redeemed for real-world merchandise, such as gift cards, cellular phone credit, electronics merchandise, or a cap and gown for their graduation day.

Tailored Options

As previously stated, the reasons for dropping out are numerous and complex, involving both academic and social issues. Thus, in order to successfully recruit and retain dropouts, programs must demonstrate that they have a variety of options and strategies available to address the specific challenges of each student (Rumberger 1987; Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; National League of Cities 2007). In some cases, programs that have demonstrated high levels of success create differentiated “tracks” within the program based on the specific over-age, under-credited youth—a significant portion of NYC’s dropout population (New York City Department of Education 2006). And at an Austin, Texas, dropout recovery program, an Impact Team was assigned to tailor intervention programs for all Austin campuses. Eighty percent of the interventions resulted in improvements in student discipline, attendance, and grades (Chmelynski 2006).

Personal choice is also a key ingredient in motivating students to return to school, and offering a variety of options and supports can help students buy into the program. Students must feel they have a choice in how they attain their high school diploma. This requires the availability of many options and that students really think about what they want for the future and what will work for them in terms of attaining an education (Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

As previously described, the technology used to deliver Graduation Alliance programs affords significant flexibility. Courses are broken into manageable units, and students are able to work through the program at their own pace, based on a mutually- agreed upon Student Learning Plan developed with the help of the student’s Academic Coach. The initial Learning Plan is developed after the student takes a career interest inventory and completes a High School and Beyond Plan. A Student’s Learning Plan can be modified based on life events or evolving interests. In addition, the provision of a personal Academic Coach and Local Advocate affords the highest level of program customization.

Case Management

Research also suggests that successful programs must coordinate both academic supports and social supports (Woods 1995; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; American Youth Policy Forum 2006; Brush & Jones 2002, Aron 2006). Often, successful programs provide a “case management” approach, in which an individual or team is assigned to identify current academic and social barriers to graduation and to marshal appropriate academic and social resources. If a suitable option is not available for a particular student, and there is no one in charge of creating one, students are less likely to enroll and persist in a dropout recovery program (Stern 1986).

The ability to serve youth well depends greatly on the quality of the case management staff, and high-quality, sustained professional development is critical. For example, program staff interacting with students should be trained to identify and access local resources and social supports (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; Aron 2006). However in publicly funded programs it can be difficult to retain trained staff (Harris 2006; Berliner & Barrat 2009).

Graduation Alliance case management features a comprehensive intake process resulting in interventions tailored to each student’s academic and social needs. During the intake interview, Graduation Alliance staff members determine specific academic and social needs, such as:

- Academic history;
- Reasons for dropping out;
- Current activities and time commitments (e.g., working, parenting, caring for a parent, etc.);
- Level of home support available;
- Access to and comfort with technology.

Recruiters log student responses into Graduation Alliance online system; the Academic Coach creates a customized student learning plan, and the Local Advocate works to address any social needs the student may have. Both the student’s Academic Coach and Local Advocate stay with the student through successful completion of the program, ensuring the highest level of follow-up. Additional staff, including Instructors, Graduation Alliance Principal, and Graduation Alliance Student Services Specialists, provides ongoing support to the student based on cues from the Academic Coach and Local Advocate.

All Graduation Alliance staff members are rigorously trained to provide academic and social support to students. Training encompasses theory and practice related to highly at-risk students, the process of creating and monitoring student programs, accessing community support services and resources for students, developing effective study habits, and implementing interventions when needed. In addition to comprehensive initial training in these areas, staff members attend regularly scheduled meetings to discuss promising and best practices in dropout recovery.

IV.3 ACADEMIC STRATEGIES

While academic failure is not the only factor that causes a student to drop out, it is nonetheless an important one. Research indicates that some of the most effective academic strategies include holding students to the same high standards as their peers in regular schools; providing the opportunity to accrue missing credits very quickly and at times convenient to the student; providing high-quality curriculum and instructional support, remediating English language proficiency challenges, and incorporating technology.

Academic Rigor

A significant amount of research indicates that one of the key strategies in engaging/re-engaging students is the provision of an academic program based on very high standards and with strict codes of conduct (Bridgeland, et al; Lee & Burkam 2003; Woods 1995; New York City Department of Education 2006; Bloom 2010). This may be an effective strategy, in part, because it helps to counteract the chaos that a dropout may have experienced in his/her home life or previous school experience (Bloom 2010).

While academic failure is not the only factor that causes a student to drop out, it is nonetheless an important one.

Further, it is critical that both teachers and students are keenly aware of the standards and of the consequences for failing to meet them (Aron 2006; Martin & Halperin 2006). Some research indicates that requiring students and/or their parents to sign formal agreements to adhere to the standards—for both academic performance and student conduct—is an important step in ensuring student and parent buy-in to the program (Chmelynski 2006; Martin & Halperin 2006).

Traditionally, many dropout recovery programs have focused on helping students attain a GED, as opposed to graduating with a high school diploma. Yet, research has found that this pathway may not be desirable for students who have dropped out. In a study of two GED-focused dropout recovery programs in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), for example, the majority of students who entered either program dropped out of the program without receiving a high school diploma or a GED. Researchers concluded that the estimated impact of these programs on AISD's dropout rate was nominal (Wilkinson 1994). In addition, dropouts who earn a GED typically experience a significantly lower rate of college enrollment and persistence and lower lifetime earnings than their counterparts who receive a high school diploma (Almeida, et al 2006; Tyler 2005). There is also a danger that, once set on the GED attainment “track,” students may be less likely to re-enroll in regular high school classes and continue on a trajectory toward post-secondary education (Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

The Graduation Alliance program is designed not only to re-engage dropouts in school, but to help them persist toward a high school diploma and beyond. Graduation Alliance holds students to very high standards of both academic performance and personal conduct. Upon enrollment in the program, students and their parents must read and sign the Student Honor Code, terms of use, and a student

contract. These documents clearly outline both students' rights and responsibilities, and describe the process for discipline based on failure to meet responsibilities. The first month a student does not make satisfactory progress, the student will be informed that he/she must make satisfactory progress in the next month or he/she will not be eligible to continue in the program. If a student has not made satisfactory progress for two consecutive months, the student will be removed from the program. Students are eligible to apply for re-entry, at which time the Graduation Alliance Principal evaluates the student's application, meets with him/her personally, and helps to reset and redefine student expectations.

Acceleration Opportunities

The ability to quickly accrue credits has been emphasized as a key motivator for students who enroll in a dropout recovery program. Many dropouts feel overwhelmed at the possibility of having to repeat entire years of coursework in order to graduate. Allowing students to accelerate their learning can motivate them to re-enroll (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; New York City Department of Education 2006; Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Berliner & Barrat 2009; Deyé 2011). New York City schools found this strategy particularly successful in recouping its most significant group of dropouts—over-age, under-credited youth (New York City Department of Education 2006).

In addition to making high school graduation seem a realistic possibility for dropouts, accelerated credit accrual provides significant flexibility critical in getting dropouts back on track. Accelerated credit accrual enables students with competing time demands, such as work and parenting, to “attend” school at their own pace and at a schedule that works within their daily lives (Brush & Jones 2002; Chmelynski 2006; Deyé 2011; Woods 1995; Martin & Halperin 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom 2009).

While one of the most frequently cited successful strategies, offering credit recovery/acceleration can pose challenges for schools and districts. First, when offering such programs within the walls of a school or other physical location, demand can exceed supply. In one study of dropouts returning to school in a California school district, researchers found that while accelerated credit recovery was an effective strategy in both recruitment and persistence of dropouts, more students requested enrollment in the district's credit recovery program than the district had the capacity to serve. Second, students may use multiple avenues to accrue credits—for example, high schools, colleges, work-study programs, etc. However, without a clearly articulated and carefully monitored graduation plan, these disparate efforts may not culminate in the correct number and distribution of credits needed to receive a high school diploma (Berliner & Barrat 2009).

Graduation Alliance offers a variety of methods for accelerating student progress. At its core, the program provides access to high school credit classes that will result in the attainment of a high school diploma. There is no minimum time for students to complete the classes, allowing students to accelerate their credit accrual to the level at which they are comfortable and their coursework is acceptable. In addition, Graduation Alliance has the capacity to serve any number of students who meet eligibility requirements and wish to enroll in the program.

Upon request by a student and approval by Graduation Alliance and district staff, the Alliance offers some courses that allow students to earn credit for life experiences, such as work-study experience. Students who wish to participate in these experiences must register and complete the requirements of the associated course, including logging time spent on the activity, providing documentation of time spent, and meeting the minimum contact/supervisory conditions established in the course contract.

A Written Student Learning Plan is integrated into the online coursework and course management system used by Graduation Alliance. Each student must have a completed learning plan prior to enrollment. The Academic Coach assigned to the student works with the student to create the Plan, which includes all information necessary to guide student learning, including:

- A beginning and ending date;
- A description of how weekly check-ins with the coach of record will occur;
- A list of all courses the student will be taking during the school year;
- A list of all exams the student should take during the school year, including district, state, and national exams.

The Plan is carefully monitored by the student's Academic Coach, and deviations or delays in timely completion of the plan are remediated immediately.

Quality of Instruction

In addition to an academic program focused on maintaining high standards, research suggests that for students who have dropped out, providing academic content that is interesting and relevant is critical. Simply providing “more of the same” instruction as students had before dropping out is not effective. Specifically, learning experiences are most beneficial and motivational to recovered dropouts when they are:

- Relevant to students' daily lives (Bridgeland, et al 2006);
- Grounded in “real-world” contexts (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Woods 1995);
- Related to experiences from the world of work (Martin & Halperin 2006);
- Process oriented, not just content oriented (Woods 1995);
- Aligned to individual student passions as a way to motivate persistence (Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Stern 1986).

It is important to ensure that the instructional methods and materials provided are standards based—particularly when students will also have to pass graduation exams to earn their diplomas. Evaluating instructional materials to ensure that they are standards based may be particularly important for students completing the program within juvenile justice facilities. One review of existing and recommended supports for dropout recovery found that curriculum materials provided to incarcerated students were not well aligned with school district standards. Thus, when students returned to their regular schools, they were often under-prepared to meet the academic challenges associated with the school district’s curricula and assessments (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006).

In addition to high-quality, motivational instructional materials, students must also have access to one-on-one instruction and frequent, personalized feedback in order to stay engaged in the academic content. Because many dropouts had been “lost in the shuffle” at their previous schools, research indicates that a low student-to-teacher ratio, use of small learning groups, and other strategies that provide students faster and more direct access to instructional support are important to help students feel like their progress matters (Aron 2006; Woods 1995; Steinberg & Almeida 2004).

Graduation Alliance ensures quality in its curriculum and instruction through multiple mechanisms. First, Graduation Alliance courses implement sound instructional theory and practice. Learning objectives, including both mastery of principles and concepts and their application, are clearly defined for each organizational unit. Courses use a blended approach of objectivist content presentation and constructivist application of content. Content is presented in instructionally effective, efficient, and appealing ways; students have the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of new material and to apply the concepts to unique and relevant situations, thereby making the content their own. Ongoing research in best practices of online course design and implementation continuously informs the course design, development, review, and revision process for Graduation Alliance content.

Students also have access to third-party courses, in addition to courses created by Graduation Alliance.

Third-party courses are evaluated against stringent criteria, including:

- Clear, logical, easily accessible course organization and structure;
- Consistently presented, well-articulated lessons, including objectives, introduction and presentation of concepts, guided practice, application of concept, and assessment of understanding;
- Authentic, challenging, and, where appropriate, interdisciplinary approaches to learning;
- Adaptable, customizable pacing options;
- Use of graphic design best practice to enhance students’ learning experience;
- Provision of frequent opportunities for students to interact with the content, with other students, and with the teacher;

- Reliable, appropriately-used communication tools;
- Clearly articulated student requirements, rules, and expectations;
- Audience-appropriate readability;
- Content that has depth and richness, is accurate and current, is engaging, incorporates interactive simulations and multimedia presentations to reinforce concepts; and reflects the multicultural world in which students live;
- Includes Web resources that are redundant and stable, are directly related to the content of the course, direct students to trustworthy sources, and guide students through appropriate use of the source;
- Compliance with ADA section 508 accessibility requirements and best practice in online learning.

In addition, third-party courses are evaluated against the Southern Regional Education Board's Standards for High Quality Online Courses and the National Standards of Quality for Online Courses, published by the International and North American Council for Online Learning (iNACOL), the primary association for K-12 online learning.

Graduation Alliance core academic courses are fully aligned to state standards. This ensures that students receive the same high-quality instruction as their peers in regular high schools and that their mastery of course content will be evidenced in their ability to pass state assessments. Standards mappings are maintained with other Graduation Alliance documentation related to courses.

Students enrolled in Graduation Alliance programs have significant access to instructional support, both one-on-one and in small groups. For example:

- Instructors are required to conduct office hours/tutorials a minimum of one hour per week per course. They must also answer students' individual questions via email or phone in a timely manner, and are responsible for providing timely, meaningful, individualized feedback on assignments.
- Each student has an Academic Coach who is responsible for monitoring student academic performance, addressing concerns, and answering students' academic questions via email, phone, IM, or SMS in a timely manner. Academic Coaches monitor student progress and performance daily and coordinate proactive interventions when students pace or progress starts falling off target.
- Students have 24/7, unlimited access to academic tutors through a partnership with Tutor.com. At any time and within any course, students can simply click a sidebar to be transported to the Tutor.com site, so instructional support is truly available at point of need.

Assessment and Feedback

Holding dropouts to the same high academic standards as their counterparts in regular high schools is important. However, researchers also warn that demanding increased academic performance without providing appropriate student-centered supports is likely to result in a second dropout event (Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Stern 1986). To reduce the likelihood of academic failure, student academic performance must be closely monitored, and a rigorous “early warning system,” including frequent academic assessment, and most importantly, timely and sustained intervention, must be in place (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006). In addition to assessing students frequently and remediating academic deficiencies, some research also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and rewarding student successes (Woods 1995; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006).

Graduation Alliance focuses on frequent assessment with timely follow up. For example:

- Assessment opportunities are authentic and mapped to the learning outcomes;
- Opportunities for pre-assessment are provided (as appropriate);
- Self-checks with automated feedback are used frequently to help students and teachers gauge student acquisition of course content;
- Multiple approaches to assessment, including objective and subjective quizzes and exams, creative writing assignments, research papers, and group projects, are included in each course;
- For courses developed or enhanced by Graduation Alliance, course design is informed by the ADDIE model for instructional design and development. The ADDIE model consists of the assessment of learner needs; a comprehensive design plan produced by the development team, including a subject-matter expert, instructional designer, and multimedia developers; development of high quality, relevant instructional content, including multimedia and simulations; implementation of the course in a pilot environment; and an ongoing evaluation and revision process.

As soon as a student starts to fall behind on pace or progress, the intervention process begins.

On a daily basis, Graduation Alliance staff track students’ pace (how quickly a student moves through a course), progress (how well a student performs on assessments), and attendance (tracked through logins) through the program. Instructors, Academic Coaches, and Local Advocates have access to a “dashboard” with tabs for pace, progress, and attendance. Under each tab is a list of students who have fallen into a danger zone, or “yellow” (warning) or “red” (unacceptable) status.

When a student moves into warning or unacceptable status on the pace, progress, or attendance lists, the intervention process begins. First, Graduation Alliance staff determines the cause of the change in status. For example, a student struggling in Pace typically is struggling with a life issue that is impacting

the time he/she has available to complete coursework. If this is the case, the Local Advocate steps in to identify potential solutions and to connect the student with the appropriate community resources. A student struggling in Progress typically requires an intervention from the Instructor, who may invite the student to a web meeting to walk through the material and re-teach the concept one-on-one as needed. If a student is struggling in Attendance, this triggers contacts from all staff members. In many cases, a student simply needs to know that his/her absence was noticed.

Confounding Academic Factors

Research also suggests that two confounding academic factors—LEP and Special Education status—may play a significant role in the decision to drop out of school. (Blackorby & Wagner 1996; Harvey 2001; Zhang & Benz 2006; Kortering & Christenson 2009; Kortering & Braziel 1999; Cornell 1995).

While there is little research on specific strategies for promoting academic persistence in Special Education students, some studies suggest that Special Education students may benefit significantly from:

- Greater “self-determination” in their educational experiences (Zhang & Benz 2006; Kortering & Christenson 2009);
- Academic content grounded in real-life situations, incorporating a variety of interesting teaching techniques (i.e., avoiding the traditional teacher/lecturer model), and utilizing technology (Kortering & Christenson 2009; Kortering & Braziel 1999);
- Teachers who are genuinely interested and demonstrably supportive of students’ needs are an important ingredient in reaching Special Education students (Kortering & Braziel 1999).

Graduation Alliance curriculum and instructional content and practices emphasize the use of engaging, motivational, technology-rich learning. In addition, Graduation Alliance staff involves students directly in the development of both their written student learning plans and their High School and Beyond plans.

An important component of this planning process is the review and coordination of Special Education Students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Graduation Alliance staff receives each student’s IEP from the school district and works with the district and the student to ensure an educational experience that addresses the student’s academic needs and future plans. Special Education students benefit from routine, consistent communication with their Instructors, Academic Coaches, and Local Advocates.

Additionally, many Special Education students benefit significantly from the very nature of Graduation Alliance online classrooms:

- Expectations are clearly delineated in writing;
- Each course follows the same organizational structure;

- Students can “pause,” “rewind,” and “repeat” lesson presentation as often as needed;
- Students can take extra time on assignments without the implicit peer pressure of students around them finishing earlier;
- Students have unlimited access to academic tutors, 24x7x362;
- Students can create their own learning environment that is most conducive to their learning needs;
- Students take a Learning Style Inventory and discuss the results and recommendations with their Academic Coach as one of their first activities in the program.

Research has found that if an underlying English language literacy problem exists, it must be addressed prior to, or alongside, the student’s academic deficiencies (Woods 1995; Philadelphia Youth Network 2006). In one program, LEP support and tutoring for the migrant population—alongside academic instruction—was reported to be critical to the program’s overall success (Cranston-Gingras 2003).

Although Graduation Alliance does not have a formal ELL program, many of its Instructors are ELL endorsed or certified. In addition, many of the courses offered by Graduation Alliance include the following ELL accommodations:

- Video lectures can be paused and replayed and include transcripts in PDF format, allowing students additional review time;
- All novels and literature readings are available in audio format;
- Several Local Advocates, Academic Coaches, and teachers who are bilingual (English/Spanish) are available to help students translate and interpret reading assignments and activity instructions;
- Note pages to help students identify key concepts and terms are provided with most lessons;
- Vocabulary terms are glossed in-line.

IV.4 POST-SECONDARY ADVANCEMENT AND SUPPORT

Research indicates that helping students to envision a bright future and to take appropriate steps toward that future is an important component to successfully recovering dropouts (Knesting 2008). Some programs emphasize workforce skills training, while others emphasize post-secondary advancement. Many programs also incorporate formal planning for the future.

Programs that focus on preparing students for careers provide a variety of training and services. Some programs help students work toward a certificate in high-demand fields alongside regular coursework

(Martin & Halperin 2006). In New York City schools, for example, community-based organizations provide such services as job training, career counseling, and job placement assistance (New York City Department of Education 2006).

Research has shown that many dropouts pursue post-secondary education. However, few persist long enough to attain a degree (Almeida, et al 2006). Some successful recovery programs work with local universities and colleges to allow students to earn college credit while completing high school work, so that students enter college with the skills and knowledge to make them “college ready” (Martin & Halperin 2006; Woods 1995, Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; Harris 2006; American Youth Policy Forum 2006). For example, Portland, Oregon’s Gateways to College program enrolls students in combined high school and college courses after one semester of intensive academic instruction. An evaluation of the program found that more than 83 percent of students reached college-level reading proficiency and 70 percent successfully completed college preparation courses (Steinberg & Almeida 2004).

Some programs have found that while students often believe they have a bright future, with specific goals and aspirations, they have little sense of the specific steps needed to help them reach their goals (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006). Thus, programs often incorporate the development of a “life plan” that identifies career or college goals and specific steps needed to attain those goals (Woods 1995; Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Cranston-Gingras 2003).

Still, many students find that after they have completed their high school education, the transition to college or to the world of work is not an easy one, and positive program effects may diminish as students leave the structured environment of the program and are set “adrift” in the world of college or work (Bloom 2010). Thus, some programs are beginning to emphasize additional support for post-program transition. One successful program employed a full-time “transition specialist.” In addition to helping participants transition into post-secondary opportunities, the staff followed up with students to ensure that their plans were on track (Cranston-Gingras 2003; Bloom 2010).

All students participating in Graduation Alliance programs are required to develop a “High School and Beyond” plan with the assistance of their Academic Coaches. The plan covers the students’ high school experience and one year following graduation, and is intended to help students begin thinking about their future and focus on courses they need to best prepare them for their career interests, whether those interests lead to additional schooling or directly into a vocation.

In addition, students participating in the program complete the Do What You Are self-discovery assessment to learn more about career paths that match their skills and passions. Students also complete a more in-depth survey of careers, identify colleges where related majors are offered, and research the financial outlook for those careers during the creation of the High School and Beyond Plan during program orientation; they review and refine the plan during most of their senior projects.

Because students enrolled in Graduation Alliance are considered “diploma-seeking students” within their public school districts, they generally have access to all of the district’s established career and college counseling services. However, students may also contact their Academic Coaches for additional counseling.

IV.5 FOSTERING PARENTAL SUPPORT

Research suggests that students are more successful in returning to and persisting in high school when parents are involved—talking about school and emphasizing their concern over school performance, watching for risk factors and seeking help when needed, and learning about the programs available to help their children (Philadelphia Youth Network 2006; Hoye & Sturgis 2005).

However, many dropouts lack a support system at home to help them stay focused on and succeed in school (Hoye & Sturgis 2005). Some successful dropout recovery programs not only provide direct mentoring support to students, but also foster improved home support for students by increasing communication with parents (Bridgeland, et al 2006; Woods 1995).

A student’s social “disconnect” from schools cannot be ignored in attempting to re-engage and sustain student participation.

Graduation Alliance uses several approaches to foster improved parental support of students. Local Advocates frequently invite parents to weekly meetups, and contact parents via phone weekly. Local Advocates also make in-home visits, which tends to foster improved family/Graduation Alliance relationships. In areas with large Latino populations, where a student may be fluent in English but his/her parents may not be, bilingual Local Advocates are often hired to build positive school-parent relationships and to help parents become more involved in students’ academic activities. In addition, Graduation Alliance provides access to student data for parents (where allowed by FERPA) through the Parent Portal.

IV.6 COACHING/MENTORING

Many research studies indicate that students’ social “disconnect” from schools cannot be ignored in attempting to re-engage and sustain student participation in academic work. Coaching/mentoring appears to be an important component. Research indicates that coaching/mentoring must address a variety of student needs—from social/emotional, to academic, to practical (Aron 2006; Woods 1995; Bloom 2010).

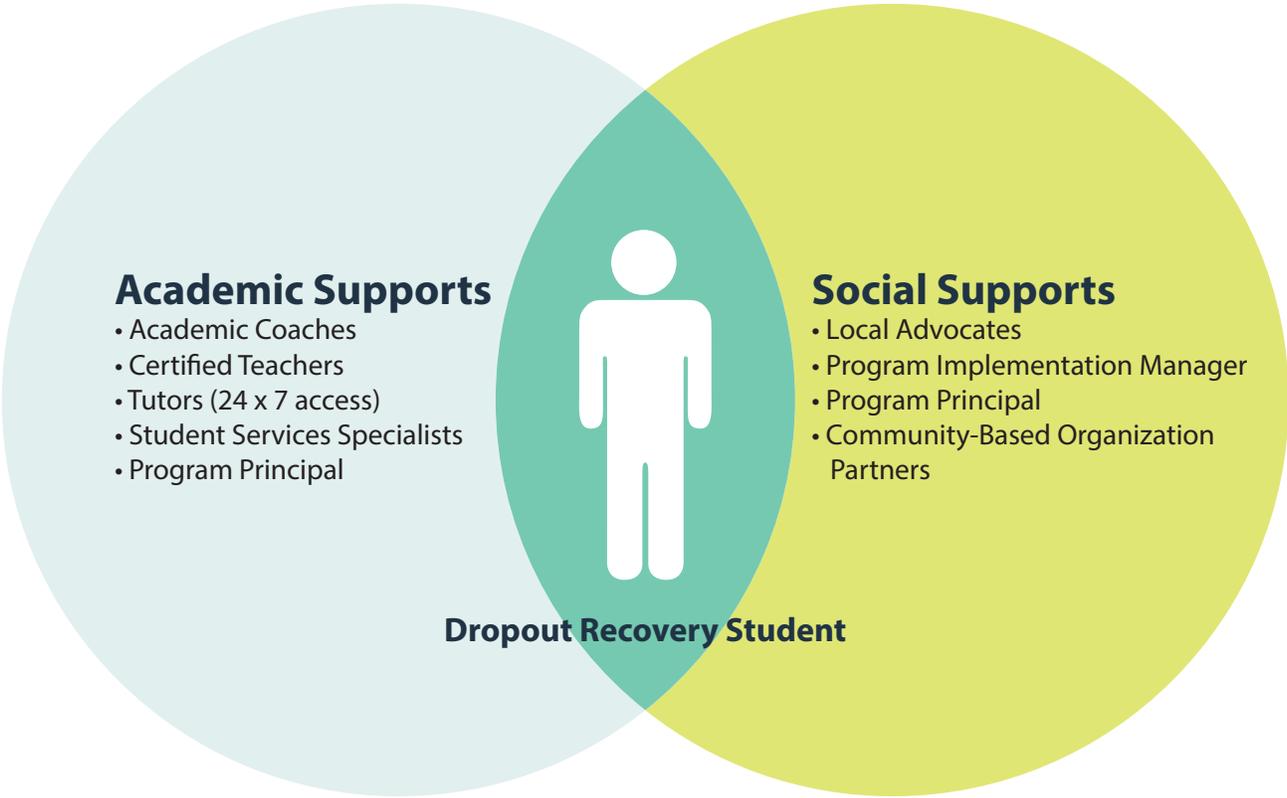
Often, students have left school because of a social/emotional disconnect. Many programs focus on rebuilding students’ trust and sense of belonging in school. Strategies to accomplish this may include a focus on developing exceptional teacher/student relationships (Lee & Burkam 2003; Martin & Halperin

2006; Knesting 2008). Group mentoring can also be effective because it may bond students to the program as social bonds are formed (Stern 1986; Steinberg & Almeida 2004; Martin & Halperin 2006; Hoye & Sturgis 2005; Bloom 2010).

Coaches and mentors are also important in keeping students “on task” academically. This may include simply knowing that a teacher believes in a student’s ability to achieve. For example, in a study of students who had dropped out and re-enrolled in school, researchers found that a significant factor influencing students’ persistence after re-enrolling was the support they received from teachers who believed in them and wanted them to succeed (Knesting 2008).

In some cases, the role of coach/mentor expands beyond the school walls to help students overcome barriers in their personal lives. Frequently, this includes helping students access social services, such as clothing, shelter, childcare, substance abuse support, etc. (Chmelynski 2006; Hoye & Sturgis 2005). Several programs also use a liaison to work with local law enforcement for students who are incarcerated or have a history of juvenile offense, or with Foster Care systems (National League of Cities 2007; Harris 2006). Yet, school staff may lack the time or expertise to provide access to these services. Some programs partner with community-based organizations to provide access to social services (Chmelynski 2006).

Graduation Alliance provides students with a comprehensive support network encompassing and supporting students’ academic and social needs. This support network is facilitated through the use of technology and is summarized in the following graphic.



Upon intake, students are asked a series of questions to determine the specific reasons they had for dropping out, the life circumstances that might complicate their completion of high school, and the support mechanisms they may have available in their personal lives. Acting on this information, the student's Academic Coach creates a personalized Student Learning plan that, upon successful completion, will result in a high school diploma. Simultaneously, the Local Advocate identifies various supports needed to address the students' challenging life circumstances.

While the Academic Coaches and Local Advocates represent the "front line" in terms of student coaching and monitoring, as students progress through the program, staff at any level may become involved in resolving a specific barrier to students' program completion. Communication between staff members is critical, and often a challenge or barrier requires input from multiple staff members. For example:

- If a student is incarcerated, hospitalized, or in treatment, the Program Implementation Manager (who supervises Local Advocates) may work with the Academic Coaches and Curriculum Director to print packets of the student's course work. These are given to the Local Advocate, who then works with the facility to deliver and pick up the work for the student. Additionally, some Advocates have appeared in court and written letters of reference to help support incarcerated students. If students are required to complete community service for sentencing, local Local Advocates have helped them locate resources to complete the required hours.
- If a student drops out or is removed from the program following a series of interventions, the student's Academic Coach and/or Local Advocate may work with the student to apply for re-entry. The Graduation Alliance Principal then meets with the student to redefine and discuss expectations, potential barriers, etc. Often, having the Principal demonstrate her desire to see the student succeed in the program, while framing specific expectations with consequences, is enough motivation for the student to make a "fresh start" and get back on track.
- An Instructor may identify a potentially challenging life issue as they are reviewing student work (e.g., if a student writes about a traumatic experience). The instructor alerts the Local Advocate, who makes contact with the student to discuss the occurrence, and if necessary, connect the student with local support/counseling services to address the emotional effects of the experience.
- Academic Coaches, as the educational navigators for students, guide students through the educational experience. Academic Coaches are responsible for monitoring the early warning system, identifying academic and social barriers, and coordinating interventions.
- Local Advocates are responsible for coordinating social service interventions for students. As members of the communities in which their students reside, these advocates meet regularly with students face-to-face, build relationships of trust, and bring their knowledge of community resources to bear in the identification and mitigations of social barriers.

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