Communication
Across Barriers

Opportunity College Model
Increasing Success For Students Who Live In Poverty

Research has shown that only 11 percent of students from poverty complete certificates and/or degrees1. Dr. Donna M. Beegle—the creator of the Opportunity College (OC) Model—knows this both personally and professionally. She dropped out of school in the 9th grade to get married. Then, at the age of 26, she completed her GED—earning her doctorate in Educational Leadership 10 years later. She developed the OC Model to improve graduation and completion rates for students living in the crisis of poverty. The model provides an evidence-based approach for systemic change to better support education success for underserved students.

In order to improve college success for students who face daily obstacles, it is imperative to create an inclusive, responsive environment where all students thrive. This includes working in new ways with internal and external stakeholders to close the opportunity gaps and creating a poverty-informed community that collaborates in ways it has never done before. The OC Model provides a path for bringing entire neighborhoods, K-12 districts, counties, and communities together with poverty-informed tools that remove barriers to education success.

The OC Model provides supports to colleges as they work to increase access, retention, grades, and graduation rates for students who live in the crisis of poverty and for historically marginalized populations. It provides a college with the opportunity to eliminate the achievement gap while increasing the success of all students; create clear, supported paths to transfer and to employment; and help prepare students for a changing world.

In addition, the OC Model helps establish the college as an institution dedicated to exceptional learning and increases the visibility and value of the college within the local community. Because of this increased community engagement, the college has additional opportunities for providing integrated student support while enhancing its communication and employee engagement.

The outcomes and impacts of the OC Model include:

- increased access for students and staff to resources and opportunities on campus and within the community
- strengthened student confidence and hope – such that they see themselves as learners, contributors to the community, and capable of earning a living wage
- increased capacity of staff to remove poverty barriers
- increased enrollment and retention
- decreased drop-out rates
- increased graduation rates for students in poverty
- earlier commitments to an educational pathway to a career
- stronger community partnerships for improving outcomes
- economic impacts of students who are educated, trained, and giving back to communities

The Opportunity College Model was customized from Dr. Beegle's ground-breaking Opportunity Community Model (OCM). Dr. Beegle developed the OCM and piloted it in 2007. The OCM is a community-based effort to break poverty barriers for children and families. Since the development of the community-wide model, Dr. Beegle received requests to modify the OCM to be used for improving college success. The OC Model was piloted at Amarillo College with tremendous success the first year including more than doubling the retention of students on Pell Grants.

Both the Opportunity Community Model and the Opportunity College Model are based on proven/best practices and evidence-based strategies along with extensive research focused on students from poverty who have achieved education success. The models are the first to be developed by people who have lived and researched best practices for breaking poverty barriers. In addition, both employ a comprehensive, systemic approach that uses existing human capital and community assets to leverage new ways to break barriers. The model encourages a collaborative and flexible approach—engaging local governmental agencies, nonprofits, businesses, institutions, churches, statewide networks, and volunteers.

The Five Pillars of the OC Model are:

1. Remove the shame/stigma taught by poverty experiences.
2. Rebuild the hope for both people in poverty and for those seeking to empower. It shifts the focus to fighting the poverty and building on the strengths of students in survival mode.
3. Reduce the isolation that perpetuates poverty by connecting people who are not in poverty to students who are (through the Navigator program).
4. Create a poverty-informed community by providing a structure for a connected, community-wide approach to address the obstacles of poverty.
5. Assist students in poverty to take advantage of the opportunities and resources needed to complete their certificates/degrees.

How Can We Become An Opportunity College?

Communication Across Barriers (CAB) provides structure and support for implementing and sustaining the OC Model. We will assign an Opportunity Coach who will walk your team through each step of implementation and provide you with the tools for sustaining the program for student success. Your Opportunity Coach will also assist with problem-solving advice, financial and grant-seeking assistance, regular phone and email coaching support, and identification of supports for each component of the program. The Opportunity Coach will provide a step-by-step guide and assist with the implementation of the model.

The Opportunity Coach will assist in gathering community support and identifing potential partners. Broad-based, diverse involvement is key to success. Successful OCs engage local non-profits, business, government/social service agencies, faith-based organizations, statewide networks, and volunteers. For example, consider the following groups in your community to be part of your Poverty Action Team.

- Business Leaders
- Department of Human Services
- Community Action Agencies
- United Way
- K-16 Schools
- Employment or Other Workforce Department
- Chamber of Commerce
- Non-Profits
- Foundations
- Health Organizations
- Justice Organizations

Who is a Scholar/Neighbor?

A Scholar/ Neighbor is a student living in poverty – students of all ages, races, families, and backgrounds. The OC Model serves all different types of poverty and specializes in serving students from generational poverty. The OC Model includes a Student Opportunity Summit, which is a 6-hour education program designed to share the five pillars of the OC Model (remove the shame that prevents people from moving forward, rebuild the hope that stops people from grabbing opportunities, reduce the isolation of poverty by connecting Scholar/ Neighbors to Navigators, and build community-wide networks of support and grass roots economic development). The Student Opportunity Summit gives the college and community the capacity to see all students prosper. It serves to both educate and motivate students so that they build their confidence, recognize their existing skills, and are receptive to support from Navigators.

Who is a Navigator?

The Navigator Program targets the isolation and segregation that perpetuate poverty and prevents college success. The program is a comprehensive effort to bridge the divide in our communities. It has unique, research-based best practices for increasing access to resources and opportunities for all students. This component is how community partners are able to work in a more connected way to address education barriers and come together to implement the Model.

Anyone can be a Navigator. Navigators are people in the community who are not currently in poverty. They agree to become trained to understand different experiences of poverty, to learn the structural causes of poverty,

and to gain communication and relationship-building skills. Navigators commit —for at least one year—to sharing their contact information, their wisdom, and their networks to assist their Scholar/ Neighbor in accessing resources and supports to help them on their education journey.

Who are Specialty Navigators? Specialty Navigators are members of the community who work in organizations that provide resources or opportunities (banking, hospitals, housing, courts, etc.). Specialty Navigators agree to take and return calls from Navigators and to assist them in understanding how to navigate their system.

Who are Super Navigators? Super Navigators are people who have experienced poverty, but have made strides to move out. Super Navigators offer support to Navigators who struggle to connect with their Scholar/ Neighbor in poverty.

When should we start?

Once you gather your community partners, it typically takes 4-6 months of preparation for implementing the OC Model and developing the tools for sustaining the initiative. This allows time for adequate planning, recruiting volunteers, training Navigators, registering Scholar/ Neighbors to attend the Student Opportunity Summit, securing donations and sponsorships, and building awareness and support in your community for creating an Opportunity College.

How much time and support are needed?

The program is designed to be annual—capturing more students who may fall through the cracks each year. The Student Opportunity Summit is annual with a class of Scholar/ Neighbors "graduating" at the end of the program. Graduates are invited to return and be involved. Many become Navigators as they move out of poverty. Project costs for subsequent years are significantly reduced with CAB's "train the trainer" program that prepares local trainers to serve as the Opportunity Coach and to train Navigators and recruit Specialty Navigators.

The Poverty Action Team/Leadership Committee and other committees working on the OC will typically meet once a month for the duration of the planning period (4-6 months prior to Student Opportunity Summit), meeting more frequently as needed. All community partners are also asked to attend a Supporting Student Success Summit with Dr. Beegle at the beginning of the planning period.

Colleges with the most success have designated an "anchor organization" which hires or uses in-house staff or volunteers to serve as an OC Coordinator (approx. 20 hours per week). The coordinator is key for model

sustainability, Neighbor/Navigator support, ongoing training of Navigators, recruitment of Specialty Navigators, coordination, and building community awareness and support. Navigators spend about 1-2 hours per week working with their Scholar/ Neighbor (for a minimum of one year) plus a one-day poverty training session, and attendance at the Student Opportunity Summit where they are matched with their Scholar/ Neighbor.
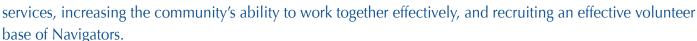
How are results measured?

The OC Model utilizes a variety of tools and methods to gather information about the results of a initiative. These can include:

- Pre- and post-evaluations from the Student Opportunity Summit - completed by Scholar/ Neighbors

- Navigator training evaluations

- Phone interviews and focus groups – conducted at 6-month intervals for two years by the OC Coordinator with the support of Navigators and volunteers

- Six month journals of Navigators

- Input of the Planning Team (and community partners)

What outcomes and impacts are expected?

The college, its partners, and CAB work together to determine key performance indicators and goals. The focus will be on improving students' access to opportunities and capacity to pursue those opportunities so they can gain the skills and education needed to secure a living wage job. Cost savings will be realized in reducing need for social services, increasing the community's ability to work together effectively, and recruiting an effective volunteer base of Navigators.

Outcomes could include:

- **Increased enrollment and retention; decreased drop-out and stop-out rates; increased transfer rates and post-transfer success**. Often, students who live in the crisis of poverty have difficulty having educational success due to the barriers of poverty—including transportation, childcare, food, shelter, and health care. With the assistance of their Navigator, students will have access to much needed supports which will allow them to stay in school and graduate with a diploma or certificate.

- **Earlier commitments to a pathway to a career**. Because of the 6-hour Student Opportunity Summit, opportunities will be presented to students which can help them engage early in their plan towards their desired career. These opportunities will assist them to access experiential learning opportunities, current employment possibilities, and future employment. These components of the OC Model will help students concretely connect their career options to their plans for college.

- **Increased and enhanced community partnerships**. The college will strengthen and develop partnerships with K-12 (public and private), four-year universities and colleges, community and civic agencies, faith-based organizations, businesses and future employers, and elected officials.

Why should we become an Opportunity College?

Results:

- **Empowered Scholar/ Neighbors** – low-income students with hope, tools, support, and connections to gain the skills and education necessary for getting out and stay out of poverty. The ability to use new tools and ideas as well as better awareness of the resources that are already available. An understanding that they are cared about by their community.

- **Trained Navigators and Specialty Navigators** – an increase in community members active and engaged in bettering their community.

- **Strengthened Social Safety Net** – new resources, more people engaged in fighting poverty, and enhanced use of existing resources.

- **Better-Connected Community** – across age, race, income, and education levels.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Visit us online: www.combarriers.com
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Become an Opportunity College! Start Here.

1 Engle, J., and Tinto, V. (vv2008). Moving Beyond Access, College Success for Low-Income and First-Generation Students. The Pell Institute, Washington, DC.