



Changing Syracuse Degree by Degree:

How On Point for College Is Transforming the Lives of Underserved Young Adults

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Ann S. Coles and Cathy M. Engstrom



About TG

TG promotes educational access and success so that students can realize their college and career dreams. As a public, nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans.

About On Point for College

On Point for College, Inc., is dedicated to making higher education accessible to low-income youth who have the desire and the will to continue their education, but who feel college is out of reach due to economic, academic and other barriers. Because income and parental educational levels strongly influence the decision to attend college, On Point for College generally targets:

- Teens who are the first in their families to go to college (98% of our students)
- Low-income students who assume that college is financially inaccessible
- Teens from single-parent homes
- Students who fall through the cracks, including GED recipients and high-school grads
- Young adults who have no parent in their life to provide guidance (over 30% of our students), including those who are homeless, aging out of foster care, or refugees

On Point for College was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization in August 1999. It is funded through private donations and grants. Contributions may be made with direct individual support, bequests, employers, organizations, mentoring, and in-kind services. Financial contributions are tax-deductible.



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Ann S. Coles and Cathy M. Engstrom

About the Authors

Ann Coles has played an instrumental role in improving college readiness and success for underserved populations for more than 40 years. Currently she is Senior Fellow for College Access Programs at uAspire, a non-profit organization that helps students from low-income backgrounds prepare for, afford, and succeed in college. She also is a Senior Associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, DC, and consults nationally on college access and success issues. Coles previously served as Senior Vice President of TERI where she provided leadership for national and local college access programs, including GEAR UP, TRIO, the Boston Higher Education Partnership, and the Pathways to College Network. Coles holds a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Cathy Engstrom currently is chair and associate professor of higher education at Syracuse University. Her work as a scholar and a student affairs professional focuses on promoting student success and learning, particularly for under-represented populations, and academic-student affairs partnerships. She and her colleague Vincent Tinto recently completed a multi-year study on the impact of curricular learning communities and collaborative learning strategies on unprepared students at urban community and state colleges. Currently, she serves as on the editorial board of the *Journal of College Student Development*. Previously she held executive board positions with the NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and ACPA-College Student Educators International. Engstrom's doctorate is from the University of Maryland at College Park.

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
PROLOGUE	5
STUDY BACKGROUND	6
STUDY DESIGN	8
A PROFILE OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED	9
A CULTURE OF COMMITMENT AND CARING	11
A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF COLLEGE	14
A FULL SUITE OF RETENTION SERVICES	17
A REMARKABLE RECORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENT	23
RECOMMENDATIONS	28
REFERENCES	33
APPENDIX	35

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a summary of an extensive descriptive study of On Point for College, a community-based organization in Syracuse, New York established in 1999 to increase college access and success for young adults from low-income backgrounds. The study was conducted in 2011 by Dr. Cathy Engstrom, Associate Professor and Chair of the Higher Education Department at Syracuse University and Dr. Ann Coles, Senior Fellow, uAspire, and Senior Associate, Institute for Higher Education Policy. The study's purpose was to identify factors inherent in the On Point model that help to explain the organization's remarkable record of success: of the 4,000 students served during On Point's first 12 years, 78 percent enrolled in college and 62 percent of those have finished degrees or are in process of doing so. A total of 88 in-depth interviews were conducted with On Point students, staff, campus liaisons, and community partners. Through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions with 65 On Point students, the researchers attempted to elicit and codify how they made meaning of their relationships with On Point. They also analyzed academic transcripts of the students interviewed to obtain documentary evidence of student progress.

Students served by On Point are largely African American youth from low-income neighborhoods in Syracuse in which drugs and violence are commonplace. A number of students are refugees from war-torn African countries. Most students have fallen between the cracks in public schools and are not well prepared academically. Many do not have responsible adults in their lives. Almost all On Point students are the first in their families to go to college; few have entertained thoughts of doing so prior to coming to On Point. In serving these young people, On Point expresses an unwavering belief in their potential for success and an abiding conviction that college can transform their lives. Staff members respond to the individual needs of students and provide unconditional support, encouragement, and guidance. On Point establishes personal relationships with students that are authentic, trustworthy, and lifelong.

On Point's wraparound services begin with frequent visits to community centers where teens hang out. Staff members offer college exploration advice, take students on campus visits, and provide assistance with application and financial aid forms. Transition-to-college services include orientation sessions and provision of basic necessities such as clothing, toiletries, bedding, and school backpacks and supplies. Staff regularly visit students on campus, reflecting On Point's genuine caring and dependability. Frequent phone calls, texts, and emails reinforce On Point's perceived 24/7 availability to help students in any way possible. Volunteers and staff provide transportation to and from campuses several times a year, a critical service for many students. Direct financial support includes money for housing deposits, books, supplies, food, and emergencies. "Campus angels," college staff who work collaboratively with On Point, steer students to the right places on campus for academic, social, and emotional support. The On Point Jobs Coordinator helps students find internships, summer jobs, and post-graduate employment. From high school through college and into careers, students interviewed made it clear that On Point maintains a passionate commitment to enhance the lives of urban youth.

Analysis of academic transcripts showed that On Point students interviewed for the study earned degrees at higher rates than students nationally (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, and Roth, 2012), and at substantially higher rates than students from low-income backgrounds (Mortenson, 2012). This is especially remarkable for the two-thirds of students in the study who began college at two-year institutions, 84 percent of whom went on to earn bachelor's degrees or were in the process of doing so. Nationally, only a third of community college students transfer to four-year programs, and even fewer ever earn bachelor's degrees (Roksa and Calcagno, 2008). The students in the study who began at four-year colleges all completed bachelor's degrees within four and a half years — better than national averages (Aud et al.)

Many students reported personal growth as a consequence of their involvement with On Point and the opportunity to go to college. They credited On Point with helping them become more mature, self-confident, responsible, and optimistic about their futures and their community. A number became involved in volunteer activities as a way of giving back for what On Point had done for them.

The study concludes with three sets of recommendations: for On Point, for communities that might wish to replicate the On Point model, and for schools, higher education institutions, and other organizations wanting to help inner-city youth succeed in college.

PROLOGUE

On Point for College began inconspicuously in some challenging inner-city neighborhoods of Syracuse. In 1999, Virginia Donohue had just quit her job as a corporate executive to launch a new career helping urban youth from low-income neighborhoods in this upstate New York city of 145,000 to make a leap she believed could alter their lives forever: the pursuit of a college degree. Every week, Ginny made the rounds to Boys and Girls Clubs, community centers, and homeless shelters where she knew she would find young adults who had fallen through the cracks in society. In her small car laden with college catalogs and financial aid information, Ginny soon became known as “the college lady” who brought a persistent, in-your-face message of hope for higher education and also the practical means to get there. She started out small, helping a few students complete college applications and financial aid forms and taking them on their first visit to a college campus. Before long, Donohue was attending commencement ceremonies, as one group after another of thriving, resilient college students from the streets of Syracuse not only made it to college but often flourished in a realm of libraries and laboratories, fulfilling countless dreams of unbounded opportunities.

Nearly a decade and a half later, On Point for College is an award-winning non-profit with Ginny Donohue as executive director and a staff of 20 operating in a warren of offices in the basement of Catholic Charities of Onondaga County. On Point’s mission of person-to-person advocacy for urban youth is unchanged, but its scope has expanded exponentially from the trunk of one Toyota to a legion of community volunteers and “campus angels” at colleges across New York state and dozens of partners and funders, and boasting hundreds upon hundreds of college success stories. Feeling the growing enterprise was at a crossroads in 2010, Donohue and her board commissioned two national experts on college access and success to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the organization’s singular wrap-around model, in which students are embraced unconditionally by On Point, many as teenagers, and guided throughout their college years and into meaningful careers.

Dr. Ann Coles and Dr. Cathy Engstrom completed their exhaustive two-year study in 2012, for which they collected data through in-depth interviews with 88 students, staff, volunteers, college administrators, and community partners. The researchers also analyzed extensive academic transcript data to trace the progress of On Point students, comparing student outcomes to national data on college achievement. Their 100-page report presented here in summary form for the general reader reflects more than 1,200 pages of analyzed data. The rich descriptive narrative from interviews, in tandem with empirical performance data, clearly validates On Point’s sustained belief in the college potential of low-income, inner city youth. The study supports On Point’s conviction that providing guidance, caring support and material needs to individual students in a consistent, timely fashion can have a profound positive impact on their educational attainment, careers, and indeed on their confident, optimistic outlook for the future.

John H. Watt, Jr., President
Board of Directors, On Point for College

MOHAMMAD

Mohammad's story reflects a nice symmetry: from On Point student to campus angel.

Mohammad was a first semester student at Onondaga Community College when he met Ginny Donohue at Southwest Community Center. He had done fine academically, but he was bored and uninspired. Ginny encouraged Mohammed to pursue his interest in music at SUNY Purchase and guided him through the application process. A volunteer drove him four hours each way for his audition, after which he was one of 20 out of 460 to be accepted. He took advantage of the On Point trip to the mall to get clothes and other essentials. Volunteers drove him to school in the fall, and back and forth to campus for school breaks. After his first year at Purchase when he couldn't go home, On Point arranged for him to live at Le Moyne College where he served as a resident assistant for other On Point students for three consecutive summers. During his time at Purchase, he received telephone calls from On Point every week, making sure he was alright. When he fell \$4,000 short for tuition, Ginny found

an anonymous donor to cover half, and persuaded Purchase to provide the rest. After graduation, On Point connected Mohammed with a job at a Syracuse media company where he worked for four years producing commercials. He then merged his passion for college student success with his communication interests, serving as a residence hall director at Tompkins-Cortland Community College while working on a M.S. degree in strategic communication and business administration at Ithaca College. For his master's project, Mohammed did a study that examined the relationship between developmental coursework and retention rates of students attending community colleges. This study reinforced his desire to pursue a career dedicated to helping young people get through college. Presently, he continues in his resident director position at Tompkins-Cortland Community College where he serves enthusiastically as a "campus angel" for the next generation of On Point students, and he is a member of several campus leadership teams.

STUDY BACKGROUND

As do young people everywhere, Syracuse youth need education beyond high school to earn a living wage, succeed in a knowledge-based economy, and contribute in meaningful ways to community civic life (Education Pays 2010: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society). Today, only seven percent of students from families in the bottom income quartile in the United States earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 versus 55 percent of students from families in the top income quartile. While degree attainment rates have nearly doubled over the past four decades for students from upper-income families, they have hardly budged for low-income students (Mortenson, 2010). As in many of our nation's cities, far too many students in the Syracuse

City School District do not graduate from high school. Only about half of those who started ninth grade in 2006 graduated in 2010, and less than 10 percent of those were deemed “college ready” (Central New York Public School Graduation Rates, New York Department of Education, 2011). Graduation rates for African American students (44%) and Hispanics (32%) were even lower.

Eighty percent of students served by On Point for College, a community-based college access and success organization in Syracuse, NY, meet the federal eligibility requirements for Free and Reduced School Lunch. More than 60% come from single-parent households; nearly a third are living with no parent. A few On Point participants are homeless with no income, some are recent refugees from African and eastern European nations, and still others have a history of court involvement, or parents serving time in prison. Eighty-nine percent are students of color, and 47 percent are males over the age of 20, the population nationally least likely to attend or complete college (Mortenson, 2009.) Virtually all On Point students are the first in their families to attend college, and so they do not have a parent who can advise them on how to gain access to and succeed in college. Even for those still in high school, students’ experiences with guidance counselors is uneven at best; many have fallen through the cracks in an overburdened system where expectations for them are low.

The challenges just described appear less daunting when students come to On Point. Every student who seeks assistance — there have been more than 4,000 in 13 years — receives unconditional support to achieve his or her college aspirations. Indeed, most participants share that they consider On Point staff and volunteers their “family.” On Point starts with the particular needs of each student and tailors an individualized plan of support. Staff make adjustments when students encounter new challenges as they progress into and through college. Through frequent interpersonal communication, On Point advisors build trusting relationships with students, as well as bolster students’ confidence in their own abilities.

Once students are identified — usually through initial contacts at neighborhood community centers — On Point services run the gamut from consultations with families, assistance in completing applications, trips to tour college campuses, financial support and help with basic necessities, transportation, and regular campus visits and phone calls by staff once students enroll. In addition to the full-time On Point staff, over 150 volunteers from the Syracuse community lend assistance with everything from giving students rides to and from college, to fund-raising, to coaching students on job interview skills, to tutoring, and providing students with free dental, eye care, and legal assistance. A cadre of “campus angels” among college administrators and staff cultivated by On Point provides an important on-site, immediate resource for students, helping them resolve financial aid issues, connecting them with support services, helping them understand college policies and procedures, and advocating on their behalf when problems arise. In addition to assisting students with college access and retention issues, On Point helps students to develop job-seeking skills, organizes job fairs, and places them in internships, summer jobs, and full-time employment after they complete college.

STUDY DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to document the transformative effects of On Point on the students served. We sought to understand more deeply what attitudes, practices, and policies do, in fact, work for a group of urban, low-income youth who face seemingly insurmountable barriers to postsecondary education and to productive, fulfilling lives. We also considered how On Point could sustain these outcomes and replicate them in other urban centers. Our study had two elements: in-depth interviews with students, staff, and community/campus volunteers, and an analysis of student transcripts for documentary evidence of academic progress and degree completion.

Interviewees were selected from a purposive sampling of On Point participants; two-thirds had completed college and one-third were still in college. We conducted interviews over a three-month period in late 2010 and early 2011 with 65 students and graduates, reflecting a diverse array of life experiences.

Eight On Point staff and 15 community partners and campus angels/liaisons were also interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions, and follow-up probes were used to gain deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Rather than assume what experiences or services were important, we strove to elicit how participants made meaning of associations with

On Point. We developed common conceptual codes through a line-by-line coding technique and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); we then organized these codes into a coding tree that linked related ideas or constructs.

All but one of the student interviewees signed transcript release forms that permitted us to obtain their official academic transcripts. We analyzed transcripts to determine the number of credits students completed at different points in college, how many semesters they spent at each college they attended, whether they attended college every semester or stopped out occasionally, and what degrees they earned. The transcript data provided evidence of the impact of On Point on the students' college progress, achievement and degree attainment.



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A PROFILE OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED

One of the most striking characteristics of the students who have participated in On Point is how different their experiences are from young people who routinely make it into the ranks of college-educated Americans. There are no comfortable suburban homes in their lives, no college savings plans, few honors or Advanced Placement courses offered in their school, or few opportunities to develop long lists of extra-curricular activities. Most were African American youth or young adults who grew up in Syracuse and had rarely traveled outside the city. Fourteen of the interviewees were refugees from war-torn African countries, including nine who were among the Lost Boys of Sudan who had been resettled in the United States. Tragically, what the American-born students and émigrés alike shared as a central feature of their lives was exposure to violence at a young age. Those fleeing from African civil wars had spent extended time in refugee camps before coming to the U.S. Some had witnessed the killing of parents and other family members and were even serving as soldiers as young boys. The Syracuse natives often lived in inner-city neighborhoods and housing developments where they witnessed gang violence and drug dealing. One young woman told us that of her childhood friends, one was now in jail, one had been murdered, and several were out of school and on the streets. Others described instances of domestic violence in their homes, involving either their mothers or themselves as victims.

The support students receive from their families varied. Some described their parents as undependable; they received little supervision or support on a day-to-day basis and had to care for themselves. They often had responsibility for younger siblings. Other students reported having been thrown out on the street and becoming self-supporting while still in high school, while others found themselves homeless for months at a time. Some students' parents had died when they were young, and a few parents had been incarcerated for long periods, leaving their children to be raised by relatives or in foster care. A few students also described their parents as alcoholics or drug addicts, including some who dealt drugs. One student vividly recalled being only five years old when the Syracuse police raided her apartment looking for drugs and hauled a parent off to jail.

Other families were deeply committed to their children's well being. Students described parents and extended family members who kept them focused, pushed them to do well in school, and tried to protect them from the violence in their neighborhoods. They related how their parents or relatives took them to the library and got them involved in every youth development program they could find. One of the Sudanese students recalled how his father had taught him at a young age how to use his mind. Students also talked about how their parents influenced them by their tenacity, struggling through rough times, working two or three jobs, and never giving up.

All the students in our study but one were the first generation in their families to go to college, and some were the first generation to graduate from high school. A number left high school before finishing because they needed to work, their parents wanted them to stay home to care for siblings, or they got into trouble with the law. One student was the only person among his neighborhood

peers to finish high school. Two students were home-schooled. Among the students who completed high school, some made good grades and participated in extra-curricular activities. One was elected president of his class, and another served as president of her school's chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers. While these students had done well in high school and expressed interest in going to college, few received encouragement from guidance counselors to plan for college. Some students had attended the local community college prior to becoming involved with On Point but did poorly or dropped out. A few had participated in job training programs such as the Job Corps. A number of students had held jobs, typically minimum-wage janitorial, fast food, car wash, and retail work. The dead-end nature of those jobs was for most a key factor in deciding to pursue college. None had attended a four-year college before they began working with On Point.

Forty-two of the students interviewed started college at two-year public institutions — either community colleges or colleges of technology. Of the 23 students who began at four-year institutions, 12 enrolled in State University of New York (SUNY) institutions and 11 attended private colleges and universities. Two students started at out-of-state institutions but transferred back to New York colleges after their first semester.

Table 1: Type of institution at which students first enrolled

Institution	Number of students
2 yr. public	42 (65%)
4 yr. public	12 (18%)
4 yr. private	11 (17%)
In-state	63 (97%)
Out-of-state	2 (3%)
Commuter	17 (26%)
Lived on campus	48 (74%)

On Point staff generally advise students to attend in-state public colleges and universities for several reasons, the most important of which is affordability. Having students within reasonable driving distance from Syracuse is important to the On Point service delivery model, which includes rides to and from college as well as regular campus visits by staff. At the same time, because too much proximity to home can present challenges, advisors encourage students to consider going to college outside Syracuse to buffer themselves from potential negative or distracting hometown influences so they can concentrate on their studies. Several two-year and technical institutions in upstate New York located in rural areas have residence halls. Forty-eight of the students lived on campus for at least their first year of college, including 26 of the 42 students who started college at two-year institutions. Among the 17 students enrolling in two-year colleges who lived at home and commuted to campus, nine were immigrants, including seven of the Sudanese students who were fairly recent arrivals to Syracuse and had established supportive ties with each other.

Since the students interviewed had first enrolled in college between 1998 and 2010, they were at different points in their college careers at the time of the study. Forty-five students had earned at least one degree: 23 had completed associate's degrees, while 32 had finished bachelor's degrees, including 18 (50%) who had started college in two-year programs and transferred. In addition, there were 11 students who had started in two-year programs and were now in the process of completing bachelor's degrees. Eighty-six percent of students who began at a four-year college earned a degree from the institution at which they originally enrolled, while only 34 percent of the students who started at a two-year college earned a degree from the institution they first attended. The reasons for students beginning at two-year colleges not completing degrees at the first institution they attended varied, including the fact that these students were not as well prepared for college as those who started at four-year institutions, and/or they initially enrolled in a program that turned out to be not a good fit with their interests and academic preparation.

The section of this report titled, "A Remarkable Record of Achievement," provides a fuller discussion of students' college achievement and how going to college affected their lives. We move now to better understand those factors that study participants repeatedly emphasized were at the heart of On Point's remarkable accomplishments.

A CULTURE OF COMMITMENT AND CARING

Our analysis of the interview data yielded a set of core values and beliefs that arguably underpin all of the services provided by On Point. Here, we have distilled the commentary of students, graduates, staff, and community partners into eight principles that guide the work of On Point and reflect norms for the way staff perform their duties. The reliable, consistent enactment of these values by staff and others, and how students in turn make meaning of them, are key to understanding On Point's success.

1. A passionate commitment to enhance the lives of urban youth and unwavering belief in their potential for success

"This work is almost like a ministry," is the way one staff member described her attitude toward her job at On Point as a student advisor. Another advisor told us that putting in long hours each day didn't feel at all like work, and his rewarding interactions with students always made him want to work even harder on their behalf. It's fair to say that most of the staff On Point hires see their role as a calling to improve the lives of inner-city youth, rather than simply a job to perform. Community partners give Ginny Donohue plaudits for finding compassionate, caring staff members who develop strong relationships with students. *"It's just like family,"* one partner said. The staff's authentic concern is not lost on the students. Tyshawn put it this way: *"They are not fake. They are so genuine and they really care about you a lot and they want to see you do good and they will go that extra mile."*

2. A conviction that college can be transformational for students, their families, and the community

On Point graduates as well as several staff related their own college experience as a personal game-changer. A belief in the power of a college education is clearly a heartfelt part of the staff's mission; student reflections about their college experiences validate that belief. Jerome, who holds a master's degree from Cornell, told us how important a college environment is for On Point students. *"If you see how many students actually made it through this program and got the degrees ... It's almost like pulling them out of the water and pushing them to a better place."* With its outspoken insistence that young people from low-income neighborhoods can go to college, community partners consider On Point to be a major agent of change for the Syracuse communities they serve.

3. A commitment to serve vulnerable youth who have slipped through the cracks

Approximately 47 percent of the students served by On Point are males, a higher percentage than is typically served by college access programs. The majority are young men of color age 20 to 25, a population of special concern to civic and educational leaders across the country. No longer in high school and largely untethered in the community, they have few places to turn for help. According to community partners, On Point has filled a critical void in helping to get these young people into the college pipeline. For the Lost Boys from Sudan, On Point has been the only Syracuse-based college access and retention program serving their needs. On Point also has developed strong partnerships with the city's vocational high school, a residential agency serving troubled adolescents, and an organization providing transitional services for incarcerated populations in each instance to help plant the seeds about underserved youth going to college.

One student rified eloquently about the time Ginny Donohue spotted a wheelchair-bound acquaintance of his who had been shot and paralyzed years earlier. Ginny did a U-turn and pulled over on a dangerous block to chat with the young man about how it was never too late to go to college. *"So Ginny knows him, and she sees him, and she's talking to him like he's got every opportunity in the world to be anything he wants to be. Whereas I'm in the back of my mind saying, 'Can we get out of here, please?'"*

4. A commitment to respond to the individual needs of the students they serve

"On Point reaches you where you're at" is the way Jennifer described how the staff honed in on her particular needs, whether it was a bus ticket home or help getting books. Staff has a list of some 30 different services that they provide on a regular basis, and they are always on the lookout for new ways to help. *"What do you need in order to be successful in college?"* is the staff's mantra, and their commitment to come up with individual solutions time and again means they have to be flexible, intuitive, and creative problem-solvers. On Point's list of solutions includes everything from medical attention to rides, eyeglasses, housing, childcare, and legal assistance. Carmella suffered with a toothache for weeks at school before calling Sam Rowser, desperate to have her tooth extracted. Sam was able to calm her down and figured out that Carmella really didn't want to lose that tooth. He quickly found a dentist

who saved the tooth at no charge. The emotional bottom line for most students is On Point's utter dependability — an abiding sense of earned trust that goes a long way toward erasing skepticism for students who have had their share of neglect, disappointment, and failure. An agency partner spoke of the self-reliance instilled by On Point in students: *"These youth feel like they belong and someone cares about them. It gives them something to believe in."*

5. The provision of unconditional support, encouragement, and guidance

Students thrive on the constant encouragement and support they receive. The staff's unreserved support pushes students to appreciate their own potential and abilities and motivates them to persevere, be resilient, and work hard. *"I'm very grateful for all the stuff that they've given me,"* Mohammad told us, referring to clothing and supplies for college, *"but at the same time it's just the fact that they believed I could do it is more important than all that stuff."* Students come to know that On Point will stick with them even if they falter. On Point holds students accountable for bad decisions in a non-judgmental manner, and then helps them move forward. As Sam came to pick Samantha up when she flunked out of school after a semester of partying, he took note of a laundry basket filled with empty liquor bottles. *"Alright, let's just go,"* she remembered him saying. *"What's your next step, what's your next move?"* Sam challenged Samantha to reflect on this crossroads in her life and make the most of it. She attended community college in Syracuse to improve her grades and transferred to a SUNY institution where she received her bachelor's degree in 2011.

6. Dedication to promoting students' development and maturity by encouraging accountability and respect

From fully engaging students in the college application process to putting together resumes for jobs after college, On Point staff promote student learning opportunities, self-reliance, and personal growth. Along with a full measure of support and encouragement, they give students responsibility throughout the process of getting into and through college, from completing paperwork to managing schedules. If students are having trouble paying back a short-term loan, On Point asks them to work in the office or go to a high school and encourage other youth to attend college. *"They made me more responsible for myself,"* Ciara told us. *"They made me step up to the plate and just do what you have to do for you."*

7. A commitment to developing relationships with students that are "real," reliable, and lifelong

Students repeatedly described their enduring relationships with On Point staff as cultivated through sustained contact, mutual respect, support, validation, and love. These relationships are often built on mutual sharing and self-disclosure. When Indigo revealed her "self-destructive behavior" to Sam Rowser, he reciprocated with his own life story, which included pitfalls he didn't want for her. *"So when I heard the story I said there's something different I have to do ... him being business as well as personal helped me a lot because it showed he cared."* For Hassan, Sam filled a void of *"not having a father figure or positive male image in my life."* They had frequent conversations, sometimes on a two-hour ride to school, and Hassan came to value greatly the advice he received from Sam. Countless students described On Point as "their family," which for some is about all they have. *"When you come from a family where no one*

cares,” Jerome said, “not in the way they should ... it’s always good to know there are some adults, somewhere, that I can count on.”

8. A commitment to enhance the Syracuse community

On Point staff members have secured enormous respect within Syracuse for the work they do. They are familiar figures at the community agencies they visit every week, and are known by students and community partners alike for their understanding of the issues faced by families in poor neighborhoods. Of Ginny Donohue, Eric said, *“She understands where people are coming from, she understands the issues, she understands everything that is not said. She reads between the lines of people, you know, Syracuse youth.”* On Point is also well known in the community for its dependability, tenacity, and follow up. Aimee, a student, expressed it this way: *“[Other agencies] don’t always follow through with youth. They make a lot of promises and a lot of those aren’t followed through on ... with On Point, if they say it, they’re going to do it, and it’s done.”* On Point’s reputation extends to the campuses where its students enroll. Linda, a senior-level college administrator, was impressed by how effective On Point is in fostering respect among campus staff in working together on behalf of students. On Point staff members are able *“to ‘infiltrate’ the institution not just at one level, but at multiple layers,”* is the way she described how retention advisors seek out the right kind of on-campus help for On Point students, and work cooperatively with faculty and staff to make sure it is forthcoming.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF COLLEGE

Linking up with On Point’s college access services is the first hurdle for students to get over, but On Point staff members try to make sure it’s an easy one. For most students, On Point’s visibility at community centers gets them thinking about the possibility of going to college. Agencies like the Southwest Community Center, Dunbar Center, Hillside, and the Boys and Girls Club can be places of refuge from problems at home, or simply alternatives to hanging out on the streets. Thomas characterized his home life as full of alcoholism, abuse, and neglect. *“I used to look forward to going to Southwest,”* he told us. *“It was nice having adults that talked to me like I’m a person.”* Community center staff, who are unencumbered by preconceived notions of which students are capable of college-level work and which are not, welcome On Point’s interest in helping the young people they serve. On Point’s weekly visits to neighborhood centers follow from a simple logic: *“The goal is to capture youth who are falling through the cracks, and the way you do it is by going where they are.”* Unlike many forms of public assistance for low-income families, On Point makes it easy to sign up: just say, “I’m interested.” The staff works collaboratively with 15 community centers, agencies, and the Syracuse City School District to capture a population of potential college students that is otherwise not being served. Through its multifaceted relationship with Catholic Charities of Onondaga County, On Point also provides on-site college access advising at several of the agency’s neighborhood centers, including those that serve refugee populations. In addition, *Say Yes to Education*, another Syracuse partner, contracts with On Point to provide college access services.

Students' reasons for wanting to go to college are not surprising. All seek a better life. They are looking for a way out of the cycle of poverty in which family members and friends are trapped. They see college as a means to obtain knowledge and skills that will lead to a decent income and rewarding careers. For some, college is an escape from a difficult living situation; others spoke of higher education in terms of self-discovery and a path to learning what they're good at.

Initially, most On Point students face a similar set of challenges. Many of the students interviewed felt ill-prepared academically. Most had not taken college preparatory courses; others had dropped out of school and later completed GEDs. Whether or not families were supportive of college goals, virtually none had the information or experience to help their children pursue college. Financial barriers seemed overwhelming. Some students had difficulty getting their parents to provide financial information and complete forms; one described the FAFSA as being *"like a foreign language."* Because of negative family experiences with borrowing, many students were nervous about taking out loans for college. A few students who had previously stopped out of college had to correct their default status on old loans before they could get aid again. For students with no family support whatsoever, securing the documentation needed for independent student status proved difficult. We also discerned a subtle hurdle for students to overcome, that is, reconciling familiar social-cultural norms with new ones on college campuses. For some native-born Syracuse youth it was just as difficult to make a transition from home neighborhoods to campuses as it was for the Sudanese students to pursue college studies in a foreign culture and language.

The support students received from their high schools in pursuing college aspirations varied, but some patterns emerged. With a few notable exceptions, students reported that their schools did not provide much assistance with planning for college. While high school guidance counselors generally received mixed reviews, there were exceptions. One was exemplary in shepherding a student through the admission process; a few referred students to On Point. On Point clearly addressed needs that students' schools could not meet.

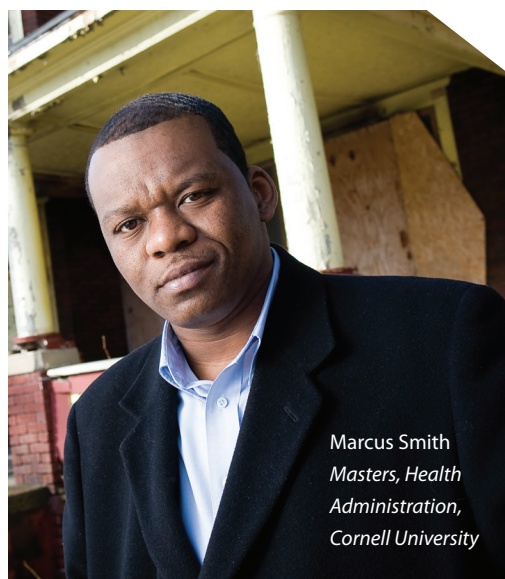
Students found On Point's support throughout the process of applying to college to be crucial. At first, some didn't fully understand that they had to apply and be admitted before they could attend, or that they had to know how much financial aid they were receiving before they could decide where to enroll. Most had never been on a college campus before, so visiting colleges with On Point was eye-opening: *"Once you get on a campus and you see all the programs and the dorms and the athletic center, whatever ... it really opens your mind and you're like, whoa, I can actually come here and be part of this."* Students also repeatedly told us how much they enjoyed the camaraderie with peers on those trips, and the chance to talk things over with staff during the drive. On Point places a high priority on campus visits: spending time at several colleges increases the chance that students will succeed at the one they select. Bringing 350 students to visit two to four colleges every year is a tall order, but On Point pulls it off with regularity at campuses across New York state.

On Point encourages students to fill out a college application immediately upon entering the program; usually, this is the common application used by most of the State University of New

York's 64 campuses. The sooner students discover that they are admissible, On Point reasons, the more motivated they will be to complete the process and enroll. As one advisor put it, *"... the minute they got accepted to any school, whether it's their first choice or not, they were a whole different human being."* On Point advisors guide students through the application process; they don't dictate where students should apply and they don't do it for them. *"... They gave me the right tools and everything to work with me to fill it out ... they made sure I understood what I was doing."* Staff members secure application fee waivers and provide rides to campuses for performance auditions and open houses for admitted students. They advocate with admission officers for applicants with special circumstances, such as having served time in prison or — as with the Sudanese refugees — not having documentation of high school graduation. On Point staff members also walk high-need students through the financial aid process, sometimes visiting families at home to reassure them about sharing required financial information. They counsel students and families about the various types of loans and help interpret financial aid award letters, making sure families understand the net price of different institutions after taking grant aid into account. On Point also provides financial assistance with housing deposits, fees for required pre-college summer programs, and other costs associated with the admission process.

When the time comes to make the transition to college, On Point provides students with a range of bridging services. Summer orientation sessions with staff give students a realistic preview of what to expect once on campus. These group sessions stress the importance of clear communication with college officials, faculty, and fellow students. Staff teach students coping strategies for roommate squabbles, and how to approach faculty about problems in class. A planning approach that stresses time management has students map out a weekly schedule for classes, study time, work, and relaxation. Before they even attend on-campus orientation, On Point students receive concrete tips on how to navigate the add-drop period, take notes in class, and handle roommate conflicts. Students repeatedly told us how well these orientation sessions prepared them for the realities of college life, and made them more resilient in the face of challenges.

"Who knows what my 'I quit' level would have been just because of not knowing?" Phillip told us. *"When I did know, like I realized, look, this is a process. This is what everyone goes through ... I just have to be able to endure, keep my head up, and maintain a positive attitude."* One young woman observed that she found On Point's orientation better addressed her concerns than the one she received on campus, because college staff presumed her needs for basics such as books, supplies, clothing and even food were taken care of — which is clearly not the case with most On Point students.



Marcus Smith
Masters, Health
Administration,
Cornell University

Most On Point students recall the “trip to the attic” experience as a high point in their transition to college. A storage room near the On Point offices is well-stocked with donated items such as pillows, sheets, towels, and toiletries. Students are invited to help themselves to whatever they need, no questions asked. Following that, students go in small groups on a shopping excursion to a local mall where each is allowed to pick out \$150 worth of clothes. Indigo was still thrilled when she recalled how On Point had provided her with things for college she otherwise would not have had. *“They gave us book bags, gave us sheets and stuff ‘cause my grandma didn’t buy me that, and they gave me money to buy clothing and they gave me my school supplies and I was like wow, this is amazing, thank you so much.”* Diana was equally grateful for her trip to the mall: *“... \$150 was probably more money than we’ve had and we get to take it and spend it all on like shoes that we’ve probably never had — brand new pairs of shoes — or at least not for a long time. And we got to spend it all. Like I remember getting this bathrobe and I always wanted a bathrobe.”* One forward-looking young man told us how he’d bought khaki pants and dress shirts to wear on interviews for the internship he planned to get after his first year in college.

We were struck with how clearly these transitional services marked a beginning of On Point students’ self-identity as college students. Most had never before truly envisioned themselves as college students — but these concrete, practical interventions seemed to trigger a deeper realization that college was for them now a new and most welcome reality.

The final step in getting On Point students off to college takes place at the beginning of each semester, as the offices close for two weeks while staff fan out to over 70 campuses across the state to make sure students are settled in and off to a good start. Interventions necessary to get students settled in range from simple encouragement, to getting bills paid, to walking them over to the writing center, and providing basic furniture for an off-campus apartment. These early fall visits reinforce the sense of caring that On Point staff believes is essential for them to project throughout students’ college years. As one staff member put it, *“... if they have issues, you could still fix them in the first two weeks ... they really know you care about them when you show up on campus and make sure they’re okay.”* Another advisor told us she makes a point of taking students to various support service offices and introducing them to their “campus angel” so they know whom they can go to when problems arise. Staff members have found that offering verbal or written advice in advance is not sufficient; accompanying students at the outset to the right places on campus makes all the difference.

A FULL SUITE OF RETENTION SERVICES

Once On Point students arrive on campus, they face a host of new challenges that can seem overwhelming. Financial stresses, academic challenges, and a lack of college knowledge were virtually universal among the students we interviewed. Many described common issues of social and cultural isolation, lack of confidence in their ability to succeed, and tensions between the very different environments of home and college. Personal problems relating to family, health, childcare, and legal entanglements also followed many On Point students to college. For these reasons, personal communication with On Point staff and transportation to and from campus topped students’ lists as most important to their success. Other high priority retention-oriented services include financial support and advocacy, advising, career development, and community involvement.

Communication and Transportation

“It’s almost like they’re a 24-hour gas station” is the way one college freshman captured how On Point students perceive staff as accessible to them 24/7. Their belief is well-founded. Phone calls, text messages, Facebook updates, e-mails, and campus visits are the tools On Point uses to keep in touch. When a student is alone at night in a residence hall room on a strange campus surrounded by people who come from entirely different backgrounds, getting a simple text message from home can be a lifeline: *“How are you doing? Do you need anything?”* Students reported that staff efforts to be in touch were persistent and even relentless at times. *“If you don’t answer their calls ... they’ll call you a whole bunch of times until you pick up.”* Retention advisors give students their cell numbers with the understanding they can call any time. *“... the funny thing about that is her phone is always on ... we can reach her any time, any day. You know, it didn’t matter what. She would always answer for us.”*

On Point staff members cement their ties with students through regular campus visits: they visit four-year colleges each semester, two year colleges monthly, and spend a full day every week at Onondaga Community College in Syracuse where On Point typically has three or four hundred students enrolled. *“So you kind of got a piece of home that kind of travels to you,”* is how Tyshawn expressed his sense of On Point’s campus visits. Visits focus on how students are coping with academic schedules, test-taking, time management, and all the variegated realities of campus life. One retention advisor spoke about the give-and-take of these visits: *“I think one of the biggest things is going out to see them on their own campus. I believe it’s a huge thing, because we are now on **their** turf ... they can then give **us** advice on things ...”* On-the-ground encounters with students in their new environments often prompt personal disclosures that can be critical to keeping them on track: *“You’ll find out about a relative who is not doing well that you can talk to*

“Nobody works harder than these people ... they’re on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week ... they deal with every single kid and every single issue.”

Rick, community partner

a student about and support them ... Let’s face it, if you’re up in Canton and your grandmother is sick and you don’t know who to talk to up there, having someone come and say ‘Oh really, let’s go for a walk and let’s talk about it.’ I think that can mean a lot.” Our overall assessment based on interviews with students, staff, campus angels, and community partners is that the frequent communication and contact between On Point and students once they are in college is probably the most powerful support students receive. It’s as if On Point weaves a broad safety net under them that students trust as utterly reliable.

“It’s like a trip full of memories,” is how one college junior described rides back to Syracuse with a car full of fellow On Point students he knew from high school. Shuttling back and forth from college isn’t a big deal for most students. But for youth from low-income backgrounds with no means of transportation, getting a ride can make a big difference in going to college and persisting. Tasha put it simply, *“If I didn’t have the ride, I wouldn’t be able to go to school.”* Many On Point volunteers routinely pick up the same students and develop sustained relationships



Delvina Uka

with them. Over 950 rides (including 139 bus tickets) were provided last year. Students clearly recognized and did not take for granted the generosity of volunteer drivers, and the reliability of the On Point staff or volunteers driving a vanload of students back to downstate campuses after a Thanksgiving break. Many recalled fondly experiences of being in a packed van on one of those trips. It was more than just a ride; these shared events contributed to a common identity and pride in being On Point students. That common identity and pride helped them to persevere in college.

Financial Support and Advocacy

Direct financial support to students takes the form of short-term loans, money for textbooks and supplies, summer grants for math and science courses, and emergency funds to meet basic living needs. On Point spends about \$20,000 on textbooks every year, an allocation of funds reflecting the organization's priority that students get their books right away each semester. By making arrangements for vouchers or paying for texts directly, On Point underscores to students the critical importance of having and using their books from day one. On Point also provides special supplies as necessary, such as uniforms, tools, calculators, and chef's knives for culinary students. Staff members place an equally high priority on making sure that students' everyday needs are met so they can concentrate on their studies. When students run out of money on their meal card, or when they need groceries, staff members make sure they have enough to eat. On Point frequently pays deposits for housing or utilities, and medical expenses not covered by student insurance, such as eyeglasses and dental work. During the summer, On Point arranges free housing at Le Moyne College in Syracuse for up to 20 students who do not have a safe place to live between the spring and fall semesters. Le Moyne's generosity has been a lifesaver for many students: *"We were all in the same boat; we didn't have a place for the summer. We all needed a place to stay, we all needed to eat ... So now I'm on a floor with everybody who goes to college like me, everybody who's doing well like me, and it meant a lot."*

RIANNA

Rianna came to the United States from Puerto Rico at age six. She learned English in elementary and middle school, and she did her best to adjust to a new culture in the world outside her home. As she progressed through Syracuse city schools, she had no one to speak to about her education. A friend had told her about On Point, and she connected with them through Catholic Charities. Sam Rowser made her feel comfortable, talking about her hopes for higher education. Before long, she was visiting colleges. On Point assisted her with applications, financial aid, transportation, and books. As a Gates Foundation Millennium Scholar, Rianna completed an associate's degree at Morrisville State College, then she transferred to SUNY Stony Brook, where she earned a B.S. in environmental health and safety. On Point taught Rianna self-reliance from the beginning: speaking up and taking responsibility for her own future. But the staff were also with her every step of the way,

and she knew she could count on them to help however they could. Looking back, she credited On Point for making her college education possible, beginning to end:

“I learned that I could do this by myself. Of course, they were there for the support and that anything that I wanted to achieve, I could ... On Point was there at all times making sure my grades were good, making sure my financial aid was good, that I was stable, that everything was like it was supposed to be.”

Working with the On Point jobs coordinator, Rianna got her first full-time position with a major engineering firm in Syracuse as an environmental health and safety technician. She currently owns and operates a language translation business in Syracuse.

On Point staff members spend countless hours educating students on financial aid issues. They help students navigate through the maze of federal, state, and institutional policies and procedures that students and families find bewildering. Staff members go to bat for students with college officials, often getting aid awards increased to help reduce unmet financial need. On Point has also served as a public interest advocate on behalf of students from low-income backgrounds, and has advocated successfully for changes to some state financial aid policies. In some cases, On Point has identified private donors to help individual students with college expenses. In instances where families facing financial difficulties used their child's student loan checks to help pay bills, On Point has intervened to ensure that these funds go toward college expenses. *“A lot of my youth will get their financial aid checks, and they'll send them home to their parents,”* one campus angel told us. *“I've got one young man that has to pay the landlord directly because the first year he was here the mom took the money for drugs.”* As with everything else, On Point seeks to make students self-reliant in financial matters; many students reported how much they had learned about loans, repayment obligations, and making their own case with the financial aid office.

Academic Advising and Emotional Support

On Point plays a strong supporting role in guiding students' academic progress. Retention advisors steer students to academic advisors and others on campus for course selection, support services, and monitoring of academic progress. On Point staff advise students directly on areas such as time management, following course syllabi, and test taking. They coach students on how to handle conflicts with faculty, and they step in to help if students cannot get the tutoring or other support they need through campus resources. Knowing that students do not always keep track of their own grades, On Point requires them to sign a FERPA release so that staff can monitor their academic performance. On Point assists students with readmission to college if they have been academically dismissed, or if they have lost their federal or state grants. Frequently health or family circumstances have been the cause of such problems. Staff members write influential letters of support for students applying to different institutions. They also provide a critical dimension of personal support, becoming students' cheerleaders, helping to motivate them, and to hang in there and not give up. *"... you can talk to them, and they will guide you (in) the right direction ... just to know that resource was there was very comforting to me."* One student recalled her struggle in dealing with the death of her father, and how On Point gave her the *"courage and strength"* to deal with the shock of that loss. Taban contracted a near-fatal virus that put him in the hospital for a month. He told us how On Point staff were continually at his bedside, making sure he was recovering and communicating with the college so he could eventually return to classes.

Career Development and Community Involvement

"Well, On Point is almost like a career center," one student told us. *"It's not just for college, but also for jobs."* On Point's focus on career development throughout college and following graduation reflects the importance of translating education into meaningful employment. A full-time On Point for Jobs coordinator works with campus career planning offices and employers in the Syracuse area to help students secure internships, summer jobs, and post-graduation employment opportunities. From the outset, staff members teach students skills in resume writing, interviewing, and networking to prepare them for the world of work. *"I know how to talk to people,"* Tyree told us proudly in describing how his tutelage included donning a tie and attending a business lunch with On Point's executive director. The jobs coordinator makes sure that students connect with campus career services early on, and insists that they come home at Thanksgiving break with a draft resume in hand. During spring break, On Point sponsors career success seminars where local human resource professionals instruct students on the job search process. Some four dozen area employers regularly employ On Point students in the summer; the jobs coordinator told us that strong mentoring relationships often result between supervisors and students. Job fairs held by On Point are well-attended by Syracuse employers and invariably produce results. For example, one student secured an internship at Upstate Medical Center where she used her Spanish and social work training as well as her singing talents with patients. Samantha's summer internship gave her the insight that working at a shelter for abused women was not for her. *"Traumatizing experience, I just don't have the heart for it, you know, every day. That was hard."*

A number of students told us that some of the most valuable advice they received from On Point was to get involved in co-curricular activities on campus, and also in their home community. One student described the sense of belonging he felt when he joined the Black Student Union on his predominantly white campus. Another became a resident advisor, working with the students on his own floor, “... *kind of coaching them in my own way. It felt good to be looked up to.*” A graduate of Herkimer Community College had worked in student activities before being elected vice president of the student government. She was later inducted into a national honor society, and she was sent on an all-expense-paid trip to San Francisco. Many students shared with us how much they enjoyed participating in On Point’s early awareness program, through which they visited Syracuse schools and community centers to share their college experiences with younger students. They were honored to be trusted with that responsibility, and embraced On Point’s hope that they would give back to their community.

Campus Angels

“Campus angels” are college staff members who have agreed to reach out and assist On Point students. They include admission and financial aid counselors, Higher Education Opportunity Program and residential life staff, and a few senior administrators. Campus angels collaborate with On Point staff to provide on-campus resources for students. On Point staff typically introduce students to their campus angel, and encourage them to ask the campus angel for help when they find themselves in a jam. Campus angels are familiar with the challenges On Point students face, and they often serve as their advocates on campus. For example, one angel was able to persuade her institution to modify its declining balance meal program to mitigate the negative effects such a plan can have on students who suddenly find themselves out of food money. As designated On Point liaisons, campus angels help their institutions appreciate how collaboration with On Point is mutually beneficial. Many institutions, because they hold On Point in high regard, are willing to go the extra mile for students whom they know have On Point’s support. One campus angel recalled a financial aid committee meeting in which a student’s appeal was being considered: “... *And they actually said we’re only approving this if he stays in contact with On Point ... we knew he had that support and that pushed us over the fence ...*”

Assistance with Transferring

Analysis of students’ academic transcripts showed that 72 percent of all students interviewed for the study, and 86 percent of those who began college at two-year institutions, transferred at least once; 29 percent transferred twice or more.

Table 2: Students’ transfer patterns

Transfer pattern	Percent of students transferring
Never	28%
Once	43%
Twice	22%
More than twice	7%

The reasons students gave for transferring were personal, financial, programmatic, and, for many, wanting a four-year degree. On Point helped students with every aspect of the transfer process: from identifying institutions according to students' evolving interests, through the admission and financial aid processes, and on to making a successful adjustment to the new campus. Students reported that the colleges from which they were transferring provided little or no assistance with this process, and they credited On Point with making it understandable and manageable. As Tyree said of (his) retention advisor, *"I had no clue ... she helped me from the start ... She had a step-by-step process ... She had a check-off list and we checked everything off. If there were anything missing she would make sure that step was taken care of before moving on to the next step."*

A REMARKABLE RECORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

Degree Attainment

Of the 65 students included in this study, 45 had earned degrees as of the summer of 2011, including 32 who had completed bachelor's degrees. Among the bachelor degree recipients, 10 also held associate's degrees. Of the 46 students who had been enrolled in two-year programs (including four who had first spent 1-2 challenging semesters at four-year colleges), 18 (39%) had earned bachelor's degrees, and another 11 (24%) had transferred to four-year programs and were close to completing bachelor's degrees. This achievement is impressive: nationally, only one-third of community college students transfer to a four-year program, and an even smaller number ever earn a bachelor's degree (Roksa & Calcagno, 2008.)

Table 3: Students' degree status

Students' degree status (as of summer 2011)	Number of students
Earned degree(s)	
Associate's only	7
Associate's — working on bachelor's	6
Associate's and bachelor's	10
Bachelor's (transferred from two-year program)	8
Bachelor's (started in four-year program)	14
Total degree holders	45
Enrolled in college — no degree yet	
Two-year program	10
Four-year program	5
Transferred from two-year to four-year program	5
Total enrolled in college — no degree yet	20

The bachelor's degree attainment rate for On Point graduates is especially notable given that so many of the students who started at two-year colleges were not on track to complete degrees at the end of their first year. We defined being "on track" as having earned, by the end of the first year of college, 24 credits for students aspiring to a bachelor's degree, or 20 credits for those enrolled in a two-year program both with a grade point average of 2.0 or higher.¹

Table 4: Students on-track to earn a degree within 3/6 years of starting college

	On track to graduate at end of second semester	Not on track to graduate at end of second semester
First college attended		
4-year public	80%	20%
4-year private	82%	18%
2-year public	33%	67%
Race		
African American	47%	53%
Hispanic	100%	0
White	50%	50%
Gender		
Male	49%	51%
Female	53%	47%
First contact with On Point		
High school	51%	49%
After high school	50%	50%
Unknown	0	100%
Living situation		
Commuted from home	33%	67%
Lived on campus	29%	71%

As shown in Table 4, two-thirds of On Point students beginning at two-year institutions were not on track to earn a degree as of the end of their first year. Yet, despite this potential "at risk" level of progress in the first year, they persisted and graduated. By contrast, four-fifths of those enrolling initially at four-year colleges were on track to earn degrees within six years after starting. Because all but one of the students beginning college at a four-year institution

¹ "On-track indicators" are defined in a study by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership Policy (IHELP) and Education Trust (*Advancing by Degrees: A Framework for Increasing College Completion*, 2010) as "measurable academic and enrollment patterns that, if followed, give students a good chance of reaching key milestones and earning a degree (pp2-3). The study found that students who earned at least 24 credits in their first year of college were more than twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree within six years than those with fewer than 24 credits.

had joined On Point while still in high school, it may be that they had early aspirations for a bachelor's degree, and were better prepared academically for college. Whether students lived on campus, or at home, or commuted from home, to classes did not make a difference in being on track, nor did students' race/ethnicity or gender.

Table 5 indicates the length of time it took the On Point students we interviewed to earn degrees, according to whether they were on track or not on track at the end of their first year of college. Across the board, these students achieved college degrees at higher rates than students nationally, and at much higher levels than students from low-income backgrounds (Mortenson, 2012; NCES IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey, 2009).

Table 5: Time to degree by on track and not on track

	On track	Not on track
Time to degree for students earning only an associate's degree		
2 years		25%
2.5 years		25%
3 years		50%
More than 3 years	100%	
Time to bachelor's degree for students transferring from a 2-year college		
4 years	0	0
4.5 years	17%	13%
5 years	25%	7%
5.5 years	42%	40%
6 years	0	20%
Over 6 years	8%	7%
Unknown	8%	13%
Time to bachelor's degree for students attending only a 4-year college		
4 years	77%	0
4.5 years	23%	100%
5 years or more	0	0

Half of the “not on track” students who began at a two-year college and completed an associate's degree only, did so in less than three years — compared with 29.2 percent of such students nationally, and 21.4 percent in New York State (NCES IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey, 2009). Even better, 100 percent of students who began at a four-year college completed bachelor's degrees within four and a half years of starting, as compared to 66.6 percent of such students nationally, and 59.2 percent of students in New York who completed a bachelor's degree within six years (NCES IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey, 2009). While our study was not

designed to establish cause-and-effect, students consistently attributed much of their success to the academic, social, and financial support they received from On Point.

Another interesting set of data gleaned from students' academic transcripts is the total number of credits earned by the time they completed degrees. Typically, an associate's degree requires students to earn 60–70 credits, and a bachelor's degree, 120–130 credits. As seen in Table 6, On Point students tended to accumulate credits in excess of usual requirements.

Table 6: Total credits students accumulated by on track and not on track students

	On track	Not on track
Two-year college only		
Less than 70		50%
70 – 90		25%
Over 90	100%	25%
Two-year to four-year transfer		
Less than 130	0	0
130-150	67%	33%
Over 150	25%	34%
Unknown	8%	27%
Four-year college only		
Less than 130	54%	0
130-150	31%	100%
Over 150	15%	0

Both the students on track and those not on track who completed associate's degrees only earned more than 70 credits, while nearly half the on track students with bachelor's degrees who began at four-year institutions and all of those not on track earned more than 130 credits. The students transferring from two- to four-year programs also earned significantly more credits than they needed

to complete bachelor's degrees. This tendency to accumulate more credits than necessary is especially problematic for On Point students. Higher out-of-pocket costs for added credits, as well as the "opportunity cost" of delayed employment, are significant factors for students from low-income backgrounds. On Point staff we interviewed were aware of this problem and consistently encouraged students at two-year colleges to complete associate's degrees so they could benefit from articulation agreements guaranteeing that four-year colleges would automatically accept all their previous credits.

“We’re shocked that we’ve made it from where we came from ...”

Precious

DYMOND

By the time she connected with On Point, Dymond had dropped out of one community college with a lackluster record and no real interest in academic or career pursuits. A gifted athlete, she had enrolled the fall after graduating from high school at the urging of a friend. When the basketball season ended, Dymond saw no point in continuing with school. She quietly left, drifted into minimum-wage work, and ignored repaying her student loans. On Point had helped her brother go to college, so Dymond figured the staff might be able to help her make a fresh start. She was right. Sam Rowser guided her through the application process, got her loan status squared away, and saw to it that Dymond received a full financial aid package so she could begin over at Onondaga Community College. This time Dymond was committed to succeeding academically. She participated in the On Point orientation, gaining critical time management and organizational skills. Inspired by other students' success stories and her own interests, Dymond selected and graduated with a dual degree in interior design and architecture. With On Point's weekly campus visits and phone calls checking to make sure she had what she needed to do well, Dymond came to regard the advisors as her extended family members.

Dymond struggled financially, so the On Point's trip to the mall and book assistance were a big help. Sam even helped her complete her tax returns and obtain unexpected refunds! On Point also hired Dymond during school breaks and summers to work

on early awareness outreach initiatives to middle school students. As a 24-year old college student, she became coordinator of the program. Talking to middle school students on behalf of On Point and attending several business leadership functions as the guest of Ginny Donohue, Dymond developed confidence, honed her social skills, and gained a fuller appreciation of what the program did for others, even as she herself benefitted. Dymond earned her associate's degree in two years — magna cum laude. Her internship with an architectural firm led to a salaried position with YouthBuild, a national program to help low-income young people finish high school, while preparing for careers in the construction trades. Today, at age 26, Dymond is a lead construction trainer, running a \$750,000 program and coordinating the efforts of 32 worker-trainees, all whom are building affordable housing in the Syracuse area.

“A lot of the times, I just sit back and I just think to myself, man, where would I have been had I not gone to On Point? Had I not actually met these people who told me I can go back to college? Like, what I, would I even be this impactful, like, I would probably be sitting on the couch somewhere eating cereal, versus taking 16 to 24 year-olds off the street.”

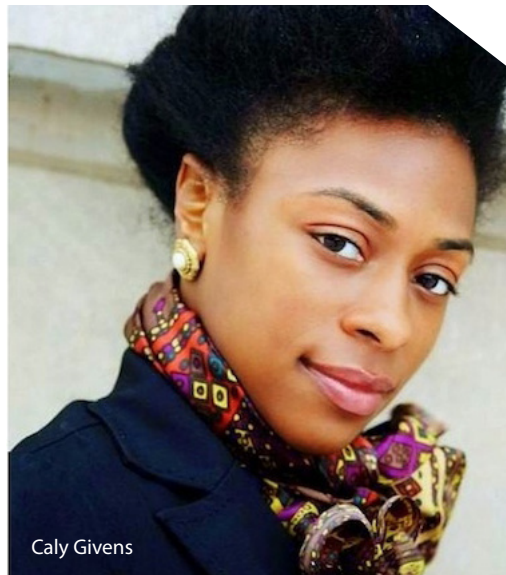
Personal Transformation

Many students credited On Point with helping them become more mature and responsible along the way to their college degrees. They felt they gained greater confidence and are now more open-minded and patient in their interpersonal relations. Students also spoke about how their college experiences have made them want to continue learning and given them a brighter outlook on life. Several told us they now have increased hope for the future, and are breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

“The generational curse in my family has been broken, being down and out and not having anything,” is how one young woman put

it. Even though she had not yet landed a job related to her career goals, Tameka’s outlook was positive: *“Working with On Point changed my life because even though I don’t have the greatest job right now . . . I’m still pushing, still striving. I have optimism in my heart.”*

Students also talked about how encouraging On Point’s work was for their communities and how their college success provided a much-needed sense of hope to others. Students took to heart On Point’s exhortation that they should give back to their communities: it is striking how many spoke of a newfound commitment to serving others as a result of the help they received from On Point. A number highlighted the benefits they accrued from participation in volunteer activities, including mentoring, giving presentations to encourage younger students to go to college, and working at food pantries. Some have chosen to take jobs at nonprofits, and several shared their plans to start new organizations to help low-income youth.



Caly Givens

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study yielded three sets of recommendations. The first are for the On Point leadership and staff, and relate to issues of sustainability, infrastructure, capacity, and other management challenges. A full discussion of these recommendations is included in the full version of our report, and they are summarized briefly here. The second set of recommendations identifies core elements that would have to be put in place to replicate the On Point model in other communities. A third set suggest specific steps schools, higher education institutions, and community organizations can take to support youth from low-income backgrounds with attending and graduating from college.

Recommendations for On Point

1. **Maintain adequate staffing levels to provide services commensurate with demand.**
Adequate human resources represent an enormous challenge for a relatively small staff that is providing essentially 24/7 services to growing numbers of students. In some respects, On Point is a victim of its own remarkable success. As student demand has grown, so have caseloads for the advisors. Maintaining the passion, commitment, and level of service required by the On Point model remains a daunting task for such hard-pressed staff. Since we completed the study, some of our recommendations in this area have been implemented, including the filling of two critical full-time positions in accounting and development. Reflecting student concerns expressed in interviews, new hires in access and retention now better reflect the diversity and experiences of the students On Point serves. In addition, we encourage development of linkages with the Syracuse University Higher Education Graduate program to develop internships or practicums at On Point as a low-cost, mutually beneficial way of bolstering staff capacity and preparing future higher education administrators to support inner-city students in effective ways.
2. **Improve data management systems.** On Point is working to make a transition from an Excel spreadsheet and ad hoc management of paper files for hundreds of students toward a more integrated, automated system. By the time we completed data-gathering for the study, On Point had acquired Intelliworks database software for tracking students and managing caseloads, and the staff is now in the process of converting to that system. A comprehensive data management system will help On Point better reach and follow through with students, and meet funder reporting requirements. We also recommended that On Point acquire devices that will provide the advisors easy remote access to student records as well as resources for scheduling transportation and maintaining communication with campus staff. Mobility and flexibility are key to an effective On Point data management system that meets the needs of staff members working with ever-growing numbers of students.
3. **Strengthen college and university partnerships.** Based on interviews with students, staff, and college officials, we recommend a review of the “campus angels” program as the centerpiece of On Point’s campus relations. Steps need to be taken to clarify the angel role, and eliminate confusion of some campus staff members and students about the expectations and responsibilities of this role. Increased and on-going communication will ensure that campus staff members understand On Point’s efforts and clarify how On Point staff members and college officials can best collaborate to support student success.
4. **Monitor students’ academic progress in order to shorten time to degree.** Since we began our study, On Point has put into place a requirement that students sign waivers during orientation giving staff direct access to their college transcripts. This important step will strengthen the academic advising On Point staff members provide, potentially shortening the time it will take for students to earn degrees. Regular meetings with students and college staff members to review progress and provide advice on course selection can also reduce the accumulation of excess credits.

5. **Expand the role of volunteers, heighten community awareness, and continue to develop career-related opportunities for students.** These are inter-related themes on which On Point should continue to focus. The majority of On Point's current volunteers seems to have somewhat limited involvement with the organization. If an experienced and energetic volunteer could be persuaded to take a leadership role in helping to engage volunteers in meaningful, recurring tasks that would serve to increase organizational capacity as well as heighten On Point's visibility in the Syracuse community. Ensuring that community and business leaders fully appreciate what On Point is doing for Syracuse youth will spark sustained funding from public and private sources, as well as open up more opportunities for internships and summer employment.

Recommendations for Replicating the On Point Model in Other Communities

1. **Attract caring, multi-talented staff members who have a passion for working with urban youth from low-income backgrounds.** On Point is all about people. Stakeholders we interviewed spoke with one voice in stressing the importance of having wholly committed staff capable of developing strong, trusting relationships with students. Staff members must have an abiding belief in the transformative power of a college education for urban youth. They must be willing to embrace unconditionally all students who seek assistance, and have the drive to relentlessly support students' educational goals.
2. **Establish strong partnerships with community organizations, volunteers, and campus leaders.** An extensive web of effective partnerships is essential to an organization with limited staff capacity as well as one that depends on other entities to meet the needs of its 'customers,' in this case, students who need wrap-around support getting to and through college. Collaborative relationships with community centers and schools serving low-income neighborhoods, key campus officials, and area employers, along with developing effective volunteer roles, all have the effect of expanding organizational capacity to serve students.
3. **Provide wrap-around services that focus on individual student needs through degree completion and beyond.** Beginning as early as high school, provision of a range of seamless access and retention services, such as those documented in this report, are key to the On Point model. Close, supportive relationships with students through sustained interpersonal communication enable staff to anticipate and respond to individual student needs from the early stages of exploring college options through degree completion.
4. **Create a flexible organization that can be nimble and effective in meeting a wide array of student needs.** The organization should have adequate staffing, training, and resources to ensure high quality support services that enable students to achieve their college goals. Policies and procedures should be sufficiently flexible to allow for effective response to complex and often unpredictable student needs.

5. **Build organizational capacity to sustain programs over the long haul.** Committed board members and visionary staff leaders are needed to secure a long-term future for the organization. Staff and board experience with fund-raising is essential, as are connections with local corporations, foundations, and public funding sources. Diverse and flexible funding sources will help ensure that the individualized services students and their communities come to depend on will be provided reliably into the future.

Recommendations for High Schools, Higher Education Institutions, and Community Organizations

1. **Build strong partnerships with stakeholders across sectors that play key roles in promoting and supporting college access and success for underserved students.** Cross-sector partnerships can make a huge difference in the college success of students from low-income backgrounds, making the transition from their home community and high school to campus much easier, and helping them adjust to the academic demands of college. On Point's experience provides numerous examples of the specific ways in which collaboration between higher education institutions and community organizations contributes to students' college success.
2. **Support students with navigating the college choice process, and selecting an institution to attend that is the best possible fit for their academic strengths and needs, career interests, and personal aspirations.** Going to a college that fits students' interests and needs significantly increases the likelihood of them persisting. The value On Point students placed on campus visits and support with every step of the college selection process and their subsequent college success provides clear evidence of the importance of providing such support.
3. **Develop and implement strategies for addressing the non-academic challenges faced by students with limited financial and family resources that make it difficult for them to focus on achieving their college goals.** Policies that make it possible for students to purchase textbooks and cover food costs before they receive their financial aid refund checks arrive allow them to start their courses on strong footing. Employment on campus provides a way for students to earn money, while at the same time developing supportive relationships with adults and peers, thereby integrating them into the campus community.
4. **Help students to develop self-management skills that will enable them to successfully achieve their college goals.** On Point students frequently stressed the importance of the help they received with time management, how to talk with professors, persisting in the face of setbacks, and other 'executive functioning' skills. Self-management skills for college success should be introduced during both the senior year of high school and college freshman orientation, and reinforced through the curriculum of twelfth grade and first-year college courses. How to effectively use campus support services and resources should be emphasized. Students also need regular feedback on how effectively they are practicing self-management skills, and what more they need to do.

MADHI

On Point's close collaboration with Catholic Charities of Onondaga County is at the heart of understanding the college success stories of a number of refugees from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Madhi, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, was forced to join the South Sudanese revolutionary movement at age 10, and he lost his father at age 12 in this civil war. Madhi fled to a refugee camp in Kenya and took advantage of the limited educational opportunities there to finish primary school and begin secondary-level studies. A strong student, he had not yet finished high school when he was thrust into his new life in Syracuse at age 20. With help from Catholic Charities, Madhi enrolled at Onondaga Community College, where he balanced full-time study with full-time work.

On Point connected with Madhi as he was transferring to SUNY Albany. They paid his housing deposit and made sure he had food money as he made a rocky transition to a campus far from his friends in Syracuse. Madhi hesitated to ask On Point for help during his two years at Albany, but the staff persisted, checking in often, helping him get books, and providing rides back to Syracuse.

“ Sam would come and we would go over things pretty much ... the mentoring part makes a huge difference if you are somebody with nobody to check on you.”

At Albany, Madhi again worked full-time while carrying at least 19 credits each term. He was thrilled when On Point staff came to his college graduation, where he proudly carried the United Nations flag in the commencement procession. On Point also assisted Madhi with another transition — to a graduate program in public administration at SUNY Binghamton. After receiving more books, housing, food, and encouragement from his Syracuse “family,” Madhi earned a master's degree

Following a stint working in New York City, Madhi returned to Syracuse as a full-time counselor at On Point, using his life experiences, education, and linguistic skills to help other refugees and Syracuse youth achieve their college aspirations. Over several years he helped dozens of Iraqis, Burmese, and fellow Africans attend college. Madhi returned to his homeland to vote for independence from Sudan in January 2011 and provide leadership for the new Republic of South Sudan. Currently, he is a professor of public administration at John Garang University, one of the country's newest universities. In the summer of 2011, he reached out to Ginny Donohue and On Point staff and friends, professors at SUNY Oswego, and many Sudanese immigrants in Syracuse to organize a massive book drive to ship over 20,000 textbooks to fill the barren library at his university. This successful collaborative project was a testimony to how Madhi and his peers — themselves once displaced by war and poverty were now helping build the basic infrastructure of their native land.

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Appendix

APPENDIX A: On Point for College Research Study Advisory Committee

Cerri Banks, Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of the College, Mount Holyoke College

Phil Benson, Admissions Counselor, Mohawk Valley Community College

Alberto Cabrera, Professor, Department of Education Leadership, Higher Education, and International Education, University of Maryland College Park

Denise Dyer, Regional Youth Development Coordinator, New York State Office of Children & Family Services

Rachel Gadzick, Executive Director (former), Say Yes to Education, Syracuse

Margaret O'Connell, Interim President, Onondaga Community College, and Executive Director, Allyn Foundation

Frank Ridzi, Director, Research and Community Initiatives, Central New York Community Foundation, and Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of Urban and Regional Studies, Le Moyne College

William Trent, Professor, Educational Policy Studies and Sociology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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