
COLLEGE ACCESS IN THE SOUTHCOAST

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**Prepared by
The UMass Dartmouth Urban Initiative
Summer 2013 High School Interns:**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gabrielle Healy is a senior at Sturgis Public Charter School West, and lives in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. She enjoyed working at the Urban Initiative this summer, and as a result, would like to study public policy and economics in college.

Adam Vieira is a senior at New Bedford High School. Adam has interned with the Urban Initiative for the past two summers, and intends to study public policy in college.

Emma York is a junior at New Bedford High School and a second year summer intern at the Urban Initiative. She has been provided a comprehensive and engaging education which has explored the abundance of economic, racial, religious, and political diversity integral to New Bedford, fostering her interest in the social sciences, an interest which she has explored in her work on the Mayor's Youth Council, Connecting for Change Youth Council, Student Committee for Educational Progress, and NBHS Debate Team.

ABOUT THE URBAN INITIATIVE

The Urban Initiative (www.umassd.edu/urbaninitiative) is a division of the Center for Policy Analysis that addresses challenges and opportunities in the region's smaller industrial cities, with a particular emphasis on Fall River and New Bedford. In addition to conducting applied research, evaluating programs and policies, facilitating collaborations, and providing technical assistance to cities and organizations therein, the Urban Initiative serves as a knowledge base for urban policy issues in the region. Perhaps most importantly, our work to support cities engages UMass Dartmouth—and in this case, area high school—students. Prospective high school interns should contact UI Project Manager Colleen Dawicki to learn more about applying to join next summer's high school intern team.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The rest of our summer 2013 high school interns undertook complementary projects on college access: Jessica Barros, Caitlin Hills, Olivia Owens, and Miranda Prevost developed [Let's Go to College](#), a site aimed at engaging their peers in the conversation through social media. Meanwhile, Maria Victoria Ponte researched the role of social media in promoting college access.

Urban Initiative Research Assistant Michael McCarthy (UMD '14) coordinated this year's high school internship program and provided research and editing support to this report's authors.

Stephanie Wick helped kick off this project with a presentation to our high school interns on the importance of college access and resources to support their research efforts.

The Leduc Center for Civic Engagement at UMass Dartmouth provided the inspiration for this project after identifying the need for more information where college access in the SouthCoast is concerned.

Thanks also to the many community members who provided our interns with information and ideas!

1.0 Introduction

This report by the Urban Initiative 2013 High School Interns reviews the state of college access for high school students in Gateway Cities of the SouthCoast of Massachusetts. Using a data-driven approach, the team identified three overarching indicators for college accessibility, and has studied and addressed them: quality of kindergarden-12th grade education, community attitudes and influences surrounding the student, and general economic factors. Also included in the report are recommendations for the improvement of college access, as well as anecdotal data from various community figures.

Through this report we hope to detail social solutions that will support the education of area youth and serve as a guideline for similar solutions across our nation so that all students may become aware and active citizens.

2.0 College access, defined

We define **college access** as the ability of all individuals to pursue and succeed in post-secondary education.

3.0 The role and importance of college access

New Bedford and Fall River exhibit a number of factors that negatively impact college access – an abundance of low income, minority, and first-generation college students with non-English speaking parents. In New Bedford 73.4 percent of public school students are considered low income, and in Fall River the rate is slightly higher at 77.9 percent. Furthermore, New Bedford and Fall River are ill-prepared for the emerging economy. According to the bi-partisan education policy organization Achieve, 80 percent of future jobs will require post-secondary education or training¹. Yet, only 19.3 percent of New Bedford’s adults have achieved an Associate’s Degree or above, and 21.1 percent in Fall River. Post-secondary education benefits society, government, and individuals, increasing employment, tax revenues, and civic engagement while decreasing crime and welfare costs. According to the Economic Benefits of Academic and Career Preparation, individuals with a Bachelor’s Degree annually earn \$27,400 more than a high school graduate.²

4.0 Measuring college access

We measured college access by assessing the factors that influence college-going, including the quality of K-12 education, admissions testing, family and community influences, and affordability.

1 Achieve (2012). *The Future of the U.S. Workforce. Middle Skills Jobs and the Growing Importance of Postsecondary Education*. Accessed at: <http://www.achieve.org/files/MiddleSkillsJobs.pdf>.

2 ACT Inc. (2008). *The Economic Benefits of Academic and Career Preparation*. Accessed at: <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/EconomicBenefits.pdf>

5.0 Quality of K-12 Education

Whether or not students succeed in their K-12 education will directly connect to their ability to attain a post-secondary degree. Therefore, students often meet a barrier to continuing their academic career based upon the quality of education provided by their school district.

In Massachusetts, one of the main indicators of a school's effectiveness and progress is the MCAS. In high school, MCAS testing is conducted in ninth and tenth grade. Though college readiness does not begin in high school, we have focused on analyzing the 2012 spring MCAS results for New Bedford and Fall River high schools and also breaking down the SAT scores in the region.

In the spring of 2013, 390 tenth grade students at New Bedford High School took the English Language Arts MCAS. Of this group, 76 percent scored a proficient or higher. Additionally, of the 393 NBHS students who took the Mathematics portion of the MCAS, 49 percent ranked as proficient or higher. Although these results are an improvement from 66 percent of students scoring proficient or higher in ELA and 44 percent on math in 2012, these performances seem to indicate that more than 20 percent of New Bedford High School students will not be academically ready for college when the application process begins in two years.³

At B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, the story is similar. In the spring of 2013, 83 percent of 484 test takers scored as proficient or higher on the English Language Arts MCAS exam. In the same bracket on the math exam were 61 percent of 490 test takers. Again, these numbers do indicate that student performance has improved since the previous testing session, but the result still raises concerns about the college readiness of students from Fall River.⁴

Both NBHS and Durfee saw numbers well below the state average for students scoring a proficient or higher; in 2013, 91 percent of grade ten students taking the ELA section and 80 percent of students taking the mathematics section scored in that range.

6.0 College Admissions Testing

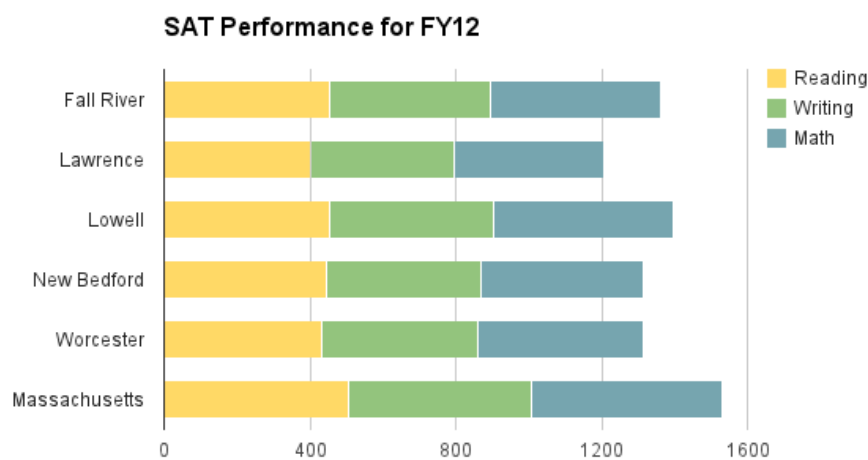
Because most high school students in the Northeast take the SAT exam, it is a useful indicator for measuring college access on a national scale. In the 2011-12 school year, 247 NBHS students took the SAT. These students averaged a combined score of 1313, with their best performance score of 447 on the critical reading portion of the exam and their lowest score was 424 on the writing section. At Durfee High School in Fall River, the 219 students who took the 2012 SAT scored a combined 1377, with their highest score of 472 on the math section and lowest of 447 in writing. The combined average score nationwide for the class of 2012 was 1498.

3 [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. MCAS Annual Comparisons – New Bedford High School.](#)

4 [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. MCAS Annual Comparisons – \(Fall River\) B.M.C. Durfee.](#)

According to the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT, only around 30 percent of the students who score in the same bracket as Durfee and NBHS student are predicted to graduate for college within four years. This delay could be caused by a variety of reasons: a student may be enrolled in a five-year masters program, may take a gap year, et cetera. Perhaps the most alarming possibility is that these students require remedial college classes to compensate for their unpreparedness.

School	# test-takers	Reading Score	Writing Score	Math Score	Total Score
New Bedford HS	247	446	424	443	1313
Durfee HS	219	458	447	472	1377



In that same year, only 10.8 percent of eligible students at New Bedford High School and 11.7 percent of students in Fall River (sophomores through seniors) took AP exams, which at most institutions for higher education is used as college credit and is another clear indicator of college readiness.

7.0 The Influence of Community and Family

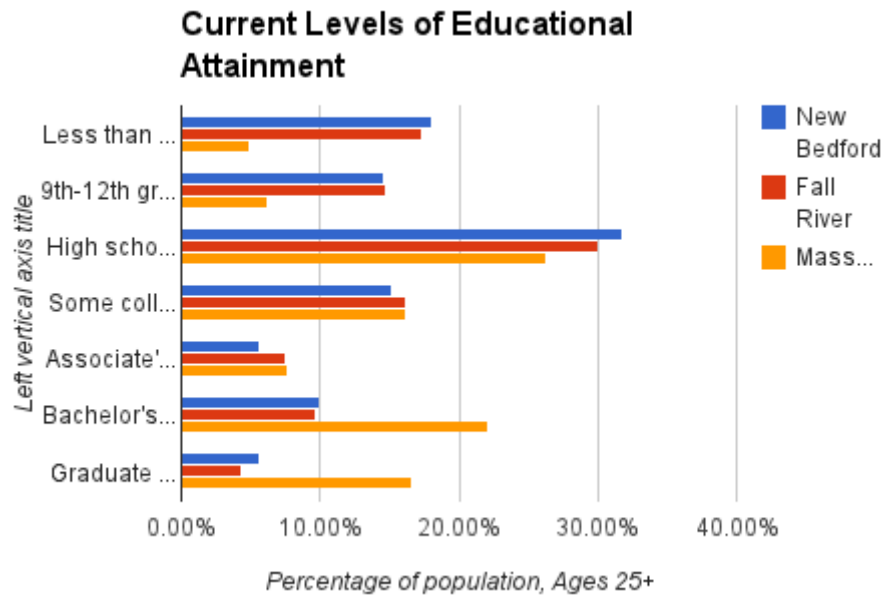
There is a vast array of factors that determine whether or not someone will ultimately attend and complete college. However, the attitudes of a child's community and family towards post-secondary education can be the significant barrier. In many cases, this may mean growing up in a region where furthering one's education is not a cultural construct or norm. As we move forward in attempting to gauge where students in the SouthCoast's Gateway Cities are inhibited in pursuing a post-secondary education, we must be cognizant of the cultural climate in which potential college students are born and raised.

7.1 Community Educational Attainment

Almost every smaller industrial city grapples with the challenge of raising the degree attainment of its population. For New Bedford and Fall River, producing and retaining college graduates is necessary for two reasons. First, it is well-documented that higher levels of education

correspond with higher earnings, offering graduates an important chance to escape poverty. Another reason driving cities to address education is the need to better attract outside investment from the kind of knowledge-sector industries that are driving Massachusetts' economic growth.

Provided below are the statistics regarding current levels of educational attainment in the cities of New Bedford and Fall River, in addition to Massachusetts as a whole.



In comparison to the majority of Massachusetts, New Bedford and Fall River have low levels of adult educational attainment. In both cities, the percentage of adults without a high school diploma (or equivalent) is more than double the state average. Furthermore, the proportion of Massachusetts citizens with a college education is well above that of both Gateway Cities.⁵

7.2 Language Other Than English Spoken At Home

Fall River and New Bedford are diverse cities, a fact that is recognized and celebrated. However, if they fail to account for the language barrier that can arise between non-English speaking parents and the local school system, potential college students may be prevented from furthering their education.

In the city of New Bedford, English is not the native language of 21.7 percent of public schools students. Meanwhile, in the Fall River public school system, 22 percent of students possess a primary language other than English. Crossing the language barrier between English-speaking college-prep services and foreign-language homes is essential for engaging families in the process of learning about and accessing post-secondary educational options.

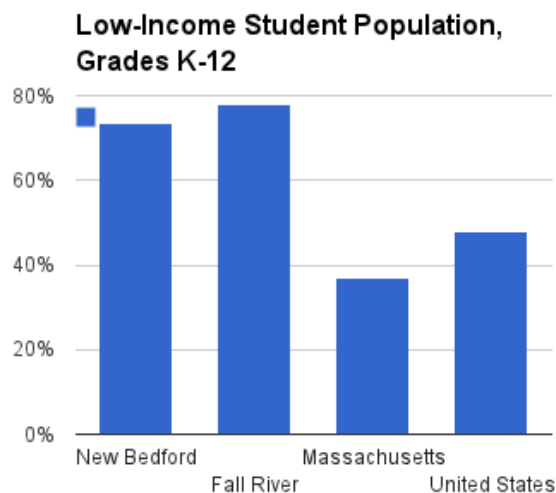
⁵ U.S. Census 2007-11 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates. To access this data, visit <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

8.0 Affordability

Like many students across the nation, SouthCoast youth are confronted with a large financial barrier to continuing their education past graduation day. Post-secondary education is an investment that will benefit students greatly in the grand scheme of their professional lives. This was shown by a 2011 Georgetown University study that found that people holding bachelor's degrees make 84 percent more money in their lifetime than citizens with only a high school education. Nevertheless, the financial burden of college is a massive inhibition to furthering one's education.⁶ For many low-income students living in urban districts, such as New Bedford and Fall River, the price tag for a post-secondary education appears insurmountable. Thus, when trying to better understand college accessibility for SouthCoast Massachusetts' urban youth, it is helpful to view reality through a socioeconomic lens.

8.1 Economic Status of Students in New Bedford and Fall River

The Massachusetts Department of Education defines students as “low-income” if they are eligible for the Free Lunch program, receive Transitional Aid to Needy Families benefits, or are eligible for food stamps.⁷ Students demarcated as low-income are more likely to experience financial difficulties that can hinder their education in the public school system. Furthermore, low-income students have fewer opportunities, a less-likely family history of post-secondary education, and a higher likelihood of not finishing high school. Low-income students, without the support of a sturdy financial base, may encounter myriad obstacles as they attempt to fund a post-secondary education.



6 The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2011). *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings*. Accessed at:

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/collegepayoff-complete.pdf>.

7 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2013). *Student Information Management System (SIMS) Data Handbook*. Accessed at:

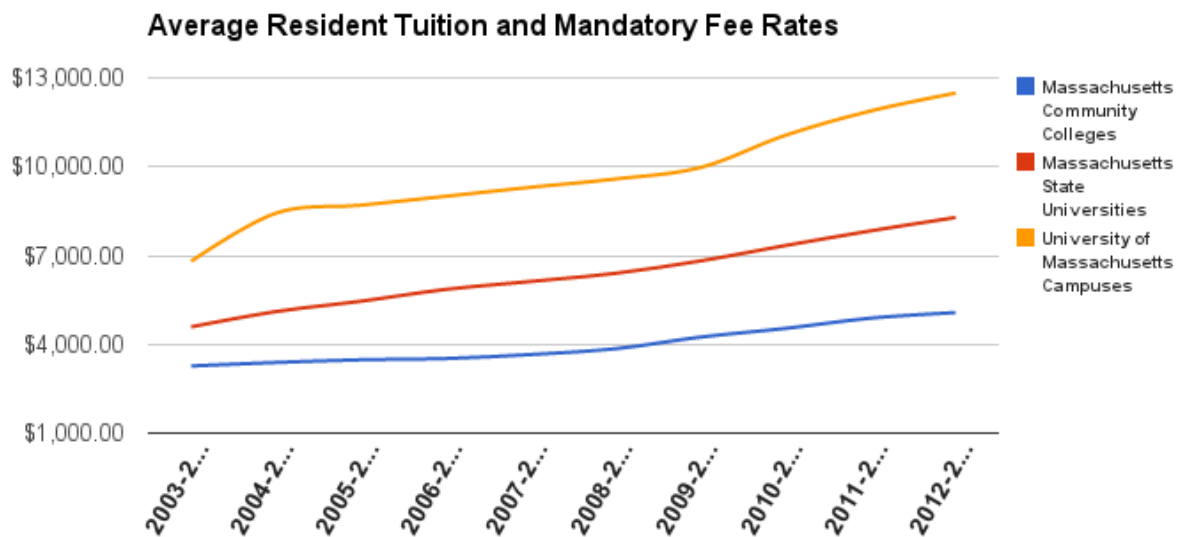
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/data/sims/DataHandbook.pdf>.

The average percentage of students in Massachusetts who are low-income is 37 percent. In New Bedford, 73.4 percent of students are considered low-income. Similarly, 77.9 percent of Fall River students are low-income. These figures highlight the significant disparity between SouthCoast cities and the state as a whole. With such large percentages of low-income students, both New Bedford and Fall River face significant challenges in terms of raising awareness among these populations regarding the availability and the need for financial aid.

8.2 Local Institutional Affordability

According to “Measuring Up 2008” by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, from 1982 to 2008 the national median income has increased 147 percent while the average college tuition and fees cost has increased 439 percent.⁸ However, this dichotomy between income and higher education costs is not strictly a national phenomenon; the cities in Southeastern Massachusetts act as representative microcosms of the current income-collegiate fees crisis.

Historically speaking, public universities provide students of less-prosperous incomes an alternative to more costly private institutions through a government subsidy. The Massachusetts public university system is composed of 16 community colleges, 10 state universities, and four University of Massachusetts campuses that act as local and relatively low-cost public universities, offering students access to a quality post-secondary education. However, the past decade has seen an upward trend in the price of tuition, room and board, and many other mandatory fees in the Massachusetts public university system.



There has been a substantial ascent in regards to average state university fees in Massachusetts. Since the 2003-2004 school year, the total cost of attending school at a UMass campus has increased by 46 percent (from \$6,803 to \$12,486). This trend is aligned with the total costs of

8 Accessed at: <http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/>.

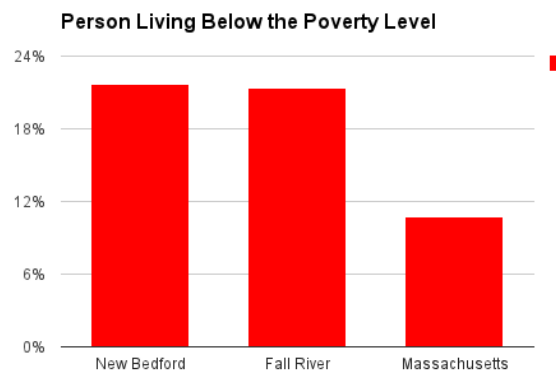
attending community colleges and state schools (Fitchburg, MassArt, etc.), which have also seen large price-hikes in recent years. For community colleges, total costs have risen 36 percent in the past 9 years. Meanwhile, for state schools, total cost of education has risen roughly 45 percent in the past 9 years.⁹ With ever-increasing fees of Massachusetts state schools, an attrition of college-attending low-income youth may be suspected.

With public universities rising in price, students no longer have the “cheap” alternative to more costly private institutions. With no signs of this trend changing any time in the near future, one must infer that making college education an affordable reality will become harder and harder for potential college students.

8.3 Poverty Level

The percentage of people living below the poverty level presents the socioeconomic condition of a city’s population as a whole. People living below the poverty level are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed. The cities of New Bedford and Fall River are confronted with equally concerning high poverty levels. New Bedford’s percentage of people living below the poverty level stands at 21.7 percent, while Fall River’s is an equally dismal 21.4 percent.¹⁰ This is in comparison to only 10.7 percent of the Massachusetts population, as a whole, that is living below the poverty level.

This data describes an economic disadvantage for low-income youth as they research a post-secondary education. Firstly, many students will be thwarted by coming from poor backgrounds. Secondly, many students who comprise the percentage of citizens living under the poverty level may not have the value of education instilled in their family values.



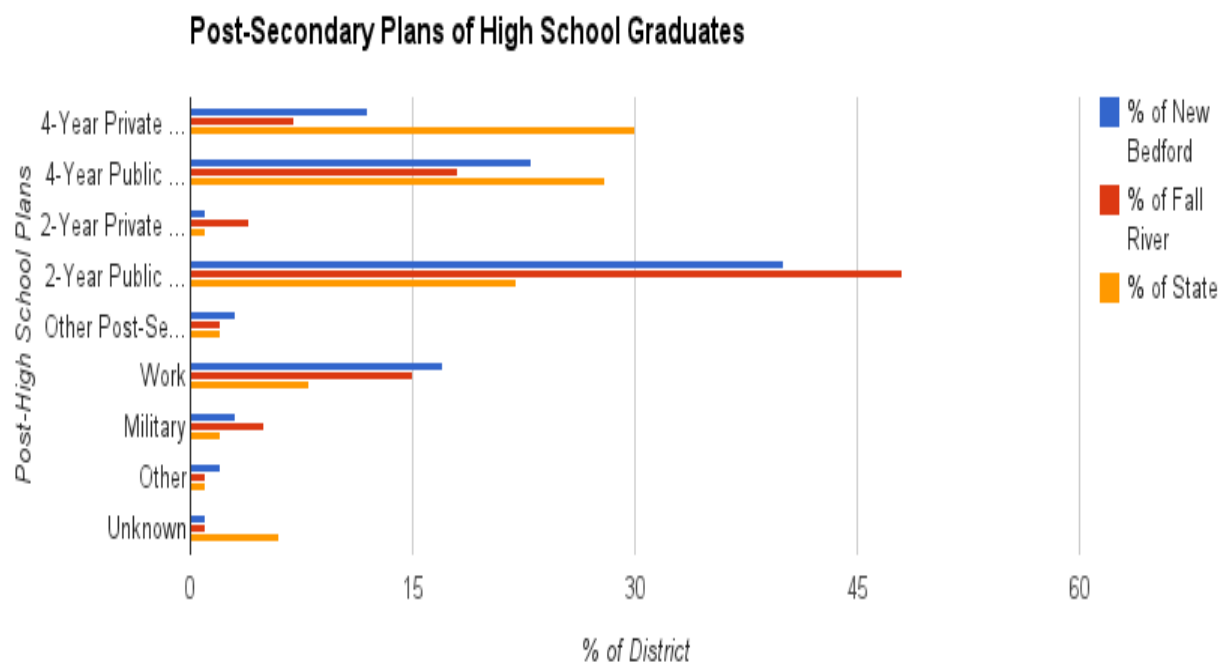
Though living beneath the poverty level presents economic disadvantages for families, this distinction provides youth with more opportunities for need-based aid, scholarships, and federal financial aid as they embark on the college admissions process.

9 Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (2013). *Resident Tuition and Mandatory Fees (Totalled)*. Accessed at: http://www.mass.edu/campuses/res_total.asp

10 2007-11 ACS <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

9.0 Plans of high school graduates

Graduation day marks a transition where students will decide to either continue their education, enter the workforce, or serve their nation in the armed services, amongst other options. Exhibited below are the post-secondary plans of New Bedford and Fall River seniors.



The proportion of students who plan to attend typically pricy, 4-year private colleges is low for New Bedford and Fall River graduates in comparison to the state average. Similarly, Fall River and New Bedford graduates are less likely to attend a 4-year public institution than their Massachusetts counterparts, although the gap is much smaller than that for private colleges.

Interestingly enough, high school graduates in New Bedford and Fall River are far more likely to attend a two-year public institution after high school than students from across Massachusetts. This may be due to the nearby Bristol Community College campuses in New Bedford and Fall River.

Also evident is the fact that graduates of New Bedford and Fall River are more likely to go directly into the workforce than the average Massachusetts high school graduate.

10.0 What's being done to address college access in the SouthCoast?

The old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," is relevant to the discussion of college accessibility and preparation in the SouthCoast. The success of students is often determined by the quality, productivity, and awareness of the publicly and privately-funded programs that are specifically designated for making college a reality for young adults.

In the SouthCoast, a wide array of both privately-funded and publicly-managed organizations and programs work to address the financial barriers that stand in the way of potential college students continuing their education past graduation day.

Seven Hills Behavioral Health, an active private foundation, has worked diligently to provide ample services for college readiness for students within the SouthCoast. Resulting from a partnership with New Bedford and Fall River public schools, programs like “Educational Talent Search” and “Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)” have provided students the opportunity to receive services regarding financial aid, tutoring, and admissions assistance. These programs have a physical presence in schools in both districts and are supplemented by the Seven Hills offices located in New Bedford, Fall River, and throughout southeastern Massachusetts.

Upward Bound (UB) is a year-round, multi-year program designed for high school students who have the potential to succeed in college. They offer tutoring, academic enrichment, pre-college skills development, career counseling, college visits, cultural enrichment and year-round academic and social support. UB provides opportunities for its scholars to succeed in high school and ultimately in college. The goal of UB is to increase the number of scholars that enroll in and graduate from college.

Kids2College is a partnership between Fall River elementary schools and the UMass Dartmouth that exposes Fall River youth to college life during the formative years of K-12 education. Students are given tours of the campus, participate in hands-on activities, and are given chances to inquire what a college degree can do for them in the future. The scope of this program is somewhat unique in that they focus their outreach on students before high school.

New Bedford High School recently opened The College & Career Readiness Family Engagement Center, which supports students and their parents with college and career planning.

11.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

As the stakes of achieving a higher education in the United States grow higher and higher, getting students beyond graduation day and into a college classroom becomes more and more of a societal obligation. To best attain upward mobility, community success, and proper self-investment, a post-secondary education is essential. Moving students in the direction of receiving a college education is no easy feat, and the difficulties are evident in New Bedford and Fall River. Various cultural, financial, and institutional barriers consistently stand in the way of student accessibility to post-secondary education, with each jeopardizing the future livelihoods of potential scholars and cities at large.

However, the problems that inhibit college accessibility for SouthCoast youth have viable and workable solutions. On all fronts, accountability, awareness, attainability, and advocacy are key to potential students entering post-secondary educations leading them to personal and financial security. For K-12 schools, this means providing educational instruction that is comprehensive and will fully prepare students for the rigors expected at the collegiate level. For public and

private firms designed to aid students in the college admissions process, a system of promotion must be proliferated throughout the community so that students who need help are aware of often-plentiful resources. For public, state universities, this means keeping costs low for students struggling to make educational ends meet. And lastly, local and municipal government must make the funding, sustaining, and promoting of college-preparation courses a top priority.

As we take into account these college access barriers, we must also consider the potential success of each pupil. Every child has the ability to live out their wildest dreams through hard work and education. We must continue to see that all students who *can* accomplish *will* accomplish, regardless of their handicaps. For the prosperity of local communities, citizens, and their futures, we must realize that it is in our hands to foster an environment that is conducive to college attendance and will directly lead to personal success for all students. Through strident support and powerful community effort, the goal of seeing a higher proportion of SouthCoast youth attending college can be met.