

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Lynchburg Beacon of Hope: Building a Collaborative Framework for Student Success

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Introduction

Lynchburg Beacon of Hope is a local promise program situated in Central Virginia that has found success through establishing strategic alliances and flexible programming that spans from kindergarten to college. The development of a city college promise was the product of community dialogues held by the City Council regarding race and racism in 2008. One of the items the education subcommittee found most concerning, according to Lynchburg Beacon of Hope Executive Director Laura Hamilton, was the low rate of college attendance by high school graduates. Only 30% of Lynchburg City high school graduates attended college. Recognizing the importance of postsecondary education in addressing equity and the overall vitality of the community, City Council developed a goal and vision to increase the number of Lynchburg City students that attend college.



Photo courtesy of Lynchburg Beacon of Hope.

The education subcommittee of the City Council created a working board of directors, and the concept of Beacon of Hope became a reality. Over the last 11 years, Lynchburg Beacon of Hope has implemented future centers that serve as hubs for college and career readiness programming at both city high schools and Central Virginia Community College (CVCC); created a “Kids to College” K-12 outreach initiative; implemented FAFSA completion and SAT Prep programs; hosted regional 8th-grade college symposiums; and, created the Stay Close, Go Far scholarship,” which removes financial barriers for Lynchburg City students to attend college.

Lynchburg Beacon of Hope has been so successful with the implementation of future centers that the non-profit was recently awarded a state planning grant from GO Virginia to create a future center playbook other communities across the commonwealth.

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Project Overview

The structure of Lynchburg Beacon of Hope has evolved over time. Beacon of Hope leaders rely on data for decision-making, and made an intentional choice to implement student programming through hiring key staff and establishing future centers before launching a capital campaign that would secure funding to create a city-wide promise scholarship.

Planning committee members found that only 39% of Lynchburg City School students had completed a FAFSA in 2012. Seeing this metric as an important starting point for programming, the organization moved forward with the creation of future centers in each of the two high schools in the division with a central focus of increasing the number of students completing FAFSA applications. A sample future center budget is included in this brief with the understanding that costs can vary significantly from one locality to another.

Figure 1. Provided by Laura Hamilton, Executive Director of Beacon of Hope

Sample Future Center Start-up Budget	
Staffing	
Future Center Director	\$50,000
Cell phone/annually	\$1,000
Programs and Events	
Signing day and FAFSA nights	\$2,500
SAT/ACT prep	\$6,000
Future Center Supplies/Technology	
5 onsite laptops	\$3,000
materials/supplies/printing/signage	\$1,000
Furniture/pennants	\$2,500
National Student Clearinghouse/baseline	\$800
Field Trips/Transportation	
fall visitation and local visits	\$2,000
Total Future Center Year 1 Start-up Costs	\$68,800

Fundraising was completed to hire two full-time center directors to lead the effort and create a presence on high school campuses. Lynchburg City Schools provided the space and facilities for the centers to operate. As of the most recent evaluation report of Lynchburg Beacon of Hope in 2020, the FAFSA completion rate of LCS students is now at 79%, an impressive 40% increase in students interested in continuing their education (Glover, 2020). Once FAFSA completion rates began to increase, the future centers also found a need to implement SAT prep programming at each of the schools. Analysis in the 2020 annual report revealed that students attending SAT prep had an average improvement of their scores by 104 to 112 points.



After the high school future centers became operational, the Beacon of Hope team found that too many students had not thought about college until they were in their final years of high school. Lack of planning and poor academic performance were barriers to postsecondary education. The team implemented a 2-day 8th grade symposium on a local college campus annually. In addition, they piloted a “Kids to College” program at a local elementary school. The program received so much community support and encouragement that within two short years it had been expanded to all 11 elementary schools and now has a full-time director.

Once the high school future centers became operational and were successfully assisting students with the transition to college, staff became aware that the financial and academic barriers students were experiencing in high school were even more of a challenge in college. The “Hope Scholars Program” was developed to create a bridge for Lynchburg City students to transition to a community college campus. The components of the program included a last-dollar scholarship to address gaps in financial need and programming to introduce students to the skills needed and resources available for success on a community college campus.

The collaborative effort with CVCC continued to mature with the creation of a strategic alliance to establish a future center on the community college campus. Beacon of Hope and CVCC both invested financially in the effort by creating a co-funded director position for the center.

The goal of the CVCC Future Center is to create a seamless transition from high school to community college. The location of the future center on the college campus provides a safe place for students to interact with Beacon of Hope staff and network with other students from their cohort. Within its first two years of operation, the CVCC Future Center has seen success, particularly with student retention. Beacon of Hope cohort students’ fall-to-spring retention rates have gone from 75% in 2019 to 85% in 2020. Beacon of Hope future center students achieved a 13% higher fall-to-spring retention rate in 2020 than other Lynchburg City students enrolled at CVCC (Glover, 2020).

In 2017, Lynchburg Beacon of Hope began a \$5 million dollar campaign to expand staffing and introduce a community-wide Promise. By 2018, the Board of Directors announced the launch of Stay Close, Go Far, the first college promise program in the Central Virginia region to provide last-dollar scholarships to Lynchburg City School (LCS) graduates. Stay Close, Go Far provides up to \$8,000 per student to LCS students wishing to attend one of six local institutions of higher education. In preparation for Stay Close, Go Far, Beacon of Hope leaders identified the average financial gap for high school students considering college. It was approximately \$3,000 per year. According to Hamilton, the goal of Stay Close, Go Far is two-fold: first, to eliminate financial barriers to postsecondary participation; and second, to support the development of a skilled local workforce. In 2020, 46% of LCS graduating seniors used a Lynchburg Beacon of Hope scholarship. In 2020, 46% of LCS graduating seniors used a Lynchburg Beacon of Hope scholarship.

The Stay Close, Go Far capital campaign has been 100% privately-funded with local contributions. The campaign currently guarantees scholarships to Lynchburg City students for the next five years. Beacon of Hope staff are currently working to grow an endowment to ensure long-term funding of scholarships and perpetual funding of future center director positions.

Analysis and Discussion

Lynchburg Beacon of Hope offers evidence of the strength of grass roots advocacy through the creation of an organization with an ability to address broad community challenges through innovation and strategic partnership. Cultivating an adaptive mindset on behalf of leadership and staff has created a flexible organization that is responsive to its environment. Along with flexibility, this example also illustrates the importance of timing in leadership decision-making. The intentional choice made by the Board of Directors to launch future centers before beginning the capital campaign, allowed the organization and its vision to establish presence and purpose as a local movement. The frontline student-centered perspective gained through the future centers was harnessed to create a “voice” for advocacy. The ability to articulate a story with supportive evidence proved critical for successful fundraising efforts later in development. The close connection to students through the future centers also helped the organization identify other areas of opportunity for impact such as the expansion of programming to middle and elementary schools. The creation of a future center at Central Virginia Community College was an adaptive structural change to continue to grow collaboration and provide wrap-around services to students with the most barriers to postsecondary success. The future center concept has been so integral to the success of Beacon of Hope that they have been awarded a state grant to develop a playbook for other localities to begin future centers in their areas. Other local Promise programs may find value in assessing if the development of future centers could be a benefit to the success of their Promise program. Lynchburg Beacon of Hope’s ability to make significant strides towards fulfilling its vision of “access, awareness, affordability, and achievement,” underscores the importance of strong leadership with vision and the power of collaboration.

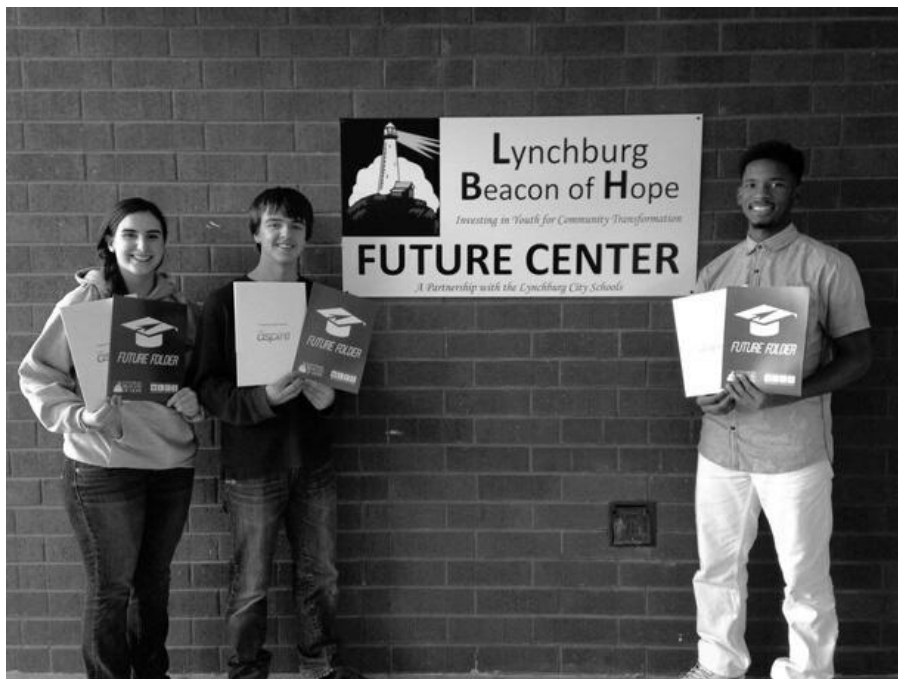


Photo courtesy of Lynchburg Beacon of Hope.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

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References

1. Glover, C. (2020). Lynchburg Beacon of Hope Evaluation Report. Lynchburg Beacon of Hope.



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Elizabeth Narehood is currently a doctoral student at James Madison University's School of Strategic Leadership Studies. Her current research interests include: exploring the relationship between of leadership and postsecondary student success; analyzing education trends and the economic impacts on communities; and investigating the dynamics of collaborations between non-profits, education, and government organizations. Elizabeth believes it is important to connect research, practice, and policy to support meaningful impact on society.

Narehood also currently serves as Title III Project Director for Central Virginia Community College located in Lynchburg, Virginia. In this role, she supports strengthening the institution to better serve low-income and minority students. Previously, Narehood held roles in workforce development, technology-focused economic development, and university extension.

Narehood holds a Master of Science in Career and Technical Education from Virginia Tech and a Credential of Readiness from Harvard Business School. Narehood has both a personal and professional dedication to public service and a passion for strengthening community viability through education and economic development.