The College Affordability Crisis

Every young person deserves the opportunity to get a college degree and the economic opportunities it brings.

Yet only 1 in 10 students from low-income families earn a bachelor’s degree by age 25.

We are on a MISSION to change that.

Aspire is a nonprofit organization ensuring that all young people have the financial information and resources to find an affordable path to and through college.

Through student advising, counselor training, and policy and systems change, we work to remove the financial barriers to higher education.
"Going to college means getting a chance to better my life and taking care of family with a great job. I'm thinking about majoring in nursing, then getting my master's as a nurse practitioner so I can care for people's health, constantly meet new people, and stay active."

- Dianne Rose M.

In 2018-19, uAspire programs & policy projects impacted over 690,000 students nationwide.

1,506 counselors & college access providers trained who serve 278,610 students each year.

393,769 students impacted through policy & systems change.
Friends,

I’m so grateful for the support you’ve shown uAspire, enabling us to reach more young people in 2018-19 than ever before.

uAspire is making a meaningful impact on the college affordability crisis - in ways we never imagined when I arrived 15 years ago.

While we have a ways to go to ensure every young person in America has the financial information and resources they need to find an affordable path to and through college, we have a vision and a suite of impact models to make that day a viable reality.

I’m so excited for what lies ahead for uAspire and the young people, families, and professionals who count on our work. Thank you for helping uAspire thrive!

Bob Giannino
CEO, uAspire

“I want to further my education and pursue a career I want. I would like to beat the odds and prove that Latina women can obtain degrees and inspire my younger family members to attend college.”

- Dulce B.
Advising

17,629 STUDENTS ADVISED

HIGH SCHOOL ADVISING
From the fall of their senior year through the summer after graduation, students work with their advisor in their school or over text to obtain financial aid, find an affordable college option, and successfully enroll.

JUNIOR YEAR PILOT
Could we have an even greater impact if we got students thinking about financing college earlier? In spring 2019, we held college affordability workshops for 2,866 11th graders at our Massachusetts and Bay Area high schools to let them know what to expect during the financial aid process and that we’re here to help. After an overview of college costs (it’s not just tuition!), financial aid types and offer letters, students are given some steps they can take over the summer to get started.

TEXT ADVISING STRATEGY
We use texting because it’s efficient and effective, providing students with substantial, individualized assistance when they need it, from someone they trust. Here’s how we do it:

Partner Locally. Because our direct service is deeply rooted within our local communities, students know that we’re invested in them and knowledgeable about their given local context.

Emphasize Personalization. Our program and caseloads prioritize advisors’ ability to build relationships with their students and preserve the nuanced, empathetic nature of counseling.

Build Trust. We lay the groundwork so students view their uAspire advisor as a trustworthy, expert source of information on college affordability who cares about them and will help them.

Invest in Data. By accessing student-level data, we customize messages to a student’s personal situation and avoid losing their attention with irrelevant messages.

Offer Comprehensive Help. Advisors help students with whatever questions and problems they find most pressing, pivoting between texting and use of video conferencing, email, phone, and in-person meetings.
COLLEGE ADVISING
During the first two years of college, students are supported primarily through text advising to continue to access financial aid and manage college costs to persist and ultimately complete their degree with a manageable amount of debt.

SUCCEED 3RD YEAR PILOT
In 2018-19, we launched a pilot project to evaluate expanding the program to the third year out of high school. Advising is focused on supporting approximately 100 Massachusetts students who are enrolling in college for the first time, recently transferred colleges or are planning to transfer, and/or are attending a community college.

MR
Hi! I have a question. So my brother is applying for college this year and I was filling out FAFSA for 2019-2020 and one of the questions was asking how many of my moms kids will be in college starting July 2019. Would my brother applying to college have a positive or negative effect on my financial aid for 2019-2020?

MR
Okay thank you!

MR
No problem! Were you able to finish your FAFSA?

MR
Not yet. I need to add my moms 2017 tax return. I’m doing that this weekend since I’ll be going home.

MR
Awesome. Well let me know if any other questions come up about it :) How has school been going so far?

MR
It’s good so far, October is a busy month for me. I have like 7 exams

MR
Wow, that’s a lot of exams ha ha. Do you feel good about them and your classes?

MR
For the most part, yes. There’s a lot of resources with the classes this semester so I’m not feeling as stressed as last semester

MR
Good. I’m glad you’re feeling less stressed!

MR
I’ll be texting you every few weeks, but if you have any questions let me know. I’m here to help via text, phone call, or in person.

MR
Okay thank you!

MR
You’re welcome, good luck with all your exams! You’ll do great :)
When it comes to college access and success, we don’t just focus on how many students we serve, but also on how effectively we serve them. That’s why, from 2014 to 2018, we participated in a randomized control trial at our Bay Area site to evaluate the implementation and impact of our Afford advising.

During the 2017-18 school year, WestEd randomly assigned 1,091 seniors in five San Francisco Unified School District high schools to treatment (714) and control (377) groups. A further analysis of the treatment group compared students who completed all three core activities (331) to a matched control group sample.

IMPLEMENTATION
WestEd found that the Afford program was implemented with fidelity, according to its intended model, in all five high schools. Treatment students opted into offered services and completed the core activities at significant rates:
- 95% completed the Planning Session
- 82% completed FAFSA/CA Dream Act Certification
- 47% completed Financial Aid Offer Review

School staff reported appreciation for Afford advisors’ financial aid expertise and confirmed that uAspire fills a gap in services that would otherwise not be provided.

IMPACT
WestEd found that the Afford program was effective in increasing student understanding of the financial aid process, helping students complete the steps for financial aid submission, and assisting students to leverage financial aid. Treatment students were offered an average of $23,828 for their first year of college.

Treatment students were statistically more likely than control group students to:
- Submit the FAFSA/CA Dream Act application with greater accuracy
- Report beliefs that college can be affordable
- Report that they received the information and support needed to complete the financial aid process and were clear on the steps to get financial aid for college

We had the greatest impact on treatment students who complete all three core activities.

THE FUTURE OF AFFORD
The findings from this study have shaped our programmatic strategy. We’re refining the Afford program to maximize the number of students who complete the three core activities, helping us have an even greater impact in each community that we serve.
Our Impact

“My hope is to be a computer engineer working in cyber security. I’ll be a first-generation college student, exposing myself to a completely foreign experience that is sure to influence my future.”
- Peace I.

Our Students

- 81% from low-income backgrounds
- 78% First-generation college students

Enrollment

- 70% uAspire students
- 54% National average for students from low-income high schools*

Persistence

- 82% uAspire students
- 73% National average for all students*

I always knew that I wanted to go to college, even at a really young age, but I didn’t start thinking about it seriously until around sophomore year. Of course I was concerned about things like being rejected, SAT scores, but the biggest thing was affordability. I knew that if I was going to college it would be a big responsibility for me. My mom is a single parent, we don’t have a lot of money, so I knew that I’d have to pay everything out of my pocket and if I took out a loan the responsibility for that loan would be on me.

It was definitely scary. I was a little reluctant at first applying to colleges. I was saying to myself, “Ok I’ve applied, but if I’m accepted how am I going to pay for it?” The financial aid process was a lot more challenging than I expected it to be. I thought it was like, fill out a form and you’re done! But when they write me back saying we need verification or a non-custodial waiver from your parent that you don’t have access to, that was challenging.

The support from my school and counselors and Jasmine, my uAspire advisor, helped. Jasmine really explained the process and made it seem not as scary. She helped me find scholarships, get the forms I needed and get references from the people I needed, like my school college counselor. Even if I didn’t see Jasmine one week while she was at my school, she would still text me to make sure I got the forms I was waiting for, make sure I submitted them, and that everything was going ok. She was always checking up on me, even if I wasn’t directly in face-to-face contact, which was really helpful.

I applied to 14 schools. I got accepted into 11, and the total amount of financial aid and scholarships came to a total of $700,000. I was definitely shocked because I didn’t realize how much I was getting until I sat there and calculated all of it. It’s pretty amazing considering that a couple of months ago that was one of my fears—that I wouldn’t even be able to pay for college.

In the end, I chose Tufts University. I have pretty much a full ride but there was a small fee that I had to take out in loans, but I’m a part of a scholarship program that will repay my loans at the end of four years. That means I won’t have to graduate with any debt. It’s a huge weight off of my shoulders. Besides the financial aspect, Tufts was a top choice because they have an early childhood development program and I plan to be a teacher or maybe something in the education field. I want [kids] to know that anything is possible and they can achieve anything that they put their mind to. Just instilling that type of mindset in them will take them a long way.
Training

uAspire trains school counselors and college access providers to support students through the complex financial aid process. These professionals play a pivotal role in helping students access higher education. By sharing the expertise and tools we’ve honed over decades of student advising with them, we’re able to impact countless students year after year.

2018-19 TRAINING PARTNERS
Together, we’re dramatically expanding opportunity, achievement, and success for students.

Achieve Atlanta
America Achieves
Aspire Public Schools
College Possible
College Track
CollegeBound Initiative

Collegiate Academies
Commit Dallas
Connecticut RISE
EdNavigator
EMERGE Fellowship
KIPP Foundation
Michigan College Access Network
Success Academy
Success Boston
Texas College Access Network
Tulane University
YES Prep Public Schools
YouthBuild LA
Charter Schools

COURSE TOPICS
Financial Aid and College Affordability Planning
FAFSA Completion
Student Aid Report Review and Verification
Award Letter Review
Summer Transition and College Success

“I want to get a college degree because it means that I would be able to lift my family out of poverty.”
- Bergeline H.
Decoding the Cost of College, our 2018 research report with New America, offers practical solutions to make financial aid offers transparent, such as listing gift aid and loans separately and calculating the student’s net direct cost or “estimated bill.” By standardizing the communication of financial aid and providing critical consumer information, students can make informed college decisions, ultimately leading to more degrees with less debt.

The impact has been widespread. Thirty-seven colleges confirmed they revised their aid offers to be more transparent. Federal Student Aid issued student-friendly financial aid terminology guidance to all colleges. And, two bipartisan, bicameral legislative bills were introduced, Understanding the True Cost of College and the Financial Aid Communication Transparency Act, that directly align with uAspire’s recommendations.

STUDENT ADVOCATES
uAspire students, Junie Arcene and My Pham, met with members of Congress to advocate for financial aid policy reforms on Capitol Hill in March 2019. “The issue of financial aid letters is very important and oftentimes overlooked,” said Junie.

POLICY AGENDA
We’re excited to share uAspire’s policy priorities. By simplifying the pathways to federal aid, making college costs transparent to students, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources, uAspire seeks to create more degrees with less debt.

SIMPLIFICATION
Shorten the FAFSA
Streamline verification
Increase access to public benefits

TRANSPARENCY
Standardize financial aid terms
Require aid offer formatting
Mandate better loan counseling

EQUITY
Restore and strengthen the Pell Grant
Create equitable access to Work-Study
Expand aid to cover indirect expenses
Massachusetts Est. 1985
Boston / Cambridge / Fall River / Malden / Lawrence / Somerville

9,136 TOTAL STUDENTS ADVISED
4,427 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  4,709 COLLEGE STUDENTS

We established our policy and systems change work in Massachusetts, hiring our first MA policy director. The MA site also gave a record-breaking $622,000 in scholarships to 84 students through the Greater Boston Real Estate Board (GBREB) Foundation and uAspire’s Last Dollar Scholarship.

San Francisco Bay Area Est. 2014
Hayward / Oakland / San Francisco / 9 University of California surrounding communities

3,779 TOTAL STUDENTS ADVISED
3,031 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  748 COLLEGE STUDENTS

The Bay Area launched our Succeed advising program for college students, who were highly engaged with 85% responding to their advisor over text. The Bay site also completed the implementation of a multi-year randomized control trial study in San Francisco Unified School District high schools (details at end of Advising section).

New York Est. 2018
New York City

4,714 TOTAL STUDENTS ADVISED
2,751 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  1,963 COLLEGE STUDENTS
28 COUNSELORS TRAINED

Our uAspire 360 model came to New York City through a collaboration with the College Bound Initiative (CBI), a best-in-class college access and success program serving New York City Public Schools. uAspire supported over 4,700 CBI students through text-advising to access financial aid and trained CBI counselors to do the same.
In our ninth year hosting the First Ones in Boston and first year in New York, we honored business and community leaders, as well as our students, who are the first in their family to graduate from college. In both communities, the First Ones was an unforgettable evening of inspiration and gratitude to those who believe in the potential of young people and support their dreams.

At the NYC First Ones, longtime supporters Jeannie and Jonathan Lavine launched a matching gift campaign with their donation of $7.5 million. We’re profoundly grateful to the Lavine Family for their commitment to uAspire and passion for solving the issue of college affordability for our nation’s young people.
Education was always important in my family. My parents didn’t go to college, so it was very important for them that my siblings and I do well in school and find a path to get to college. Although apart at the time, my parents always reminded us that there was a future beyond what we were exposed to in our neighborhoods, and even in our schools, and that our future could be much brighter than their own.

Applying to colleges and financial aid was a nightmare. I was terribly nervous because I knew that somehow, someway I needed to make it to college. I just didn’t know how. I was in a maze and didn’t know where to start. I started poking around online, but it was never really clear how to apply for college and I certainly didn’t have the resources at home. It was three boys, we lived with my mom. Neither of my parents speak English so that was certainly a barrier. My school didn’t really have the resources to help students with just two counselors for a large student body. It wasn’t until I found uAspire that I got support.

I remember our first meeting, it was in the computer classroom on the first floor where I met Elsa, my uAspire advisor. She basically laid it out from start to end: this is a college application, the process of applying for financial aid, what it meant, explaining costs, the differences between going to a state university versus going to community college, and all of the requirements of the FAFSA, which I had never heard of. I couldn’t do it on my own, that’s for sure. All I knew was that Elsa was going to help me get that done, and she did.

I applied to quite a few schools. I didn’t know what I was going to be able to afford. I didn’t know where I was going to get in and Elsa was adamant about my applying to multiple places to see what I could get for financial aid and then go off of that. Elsa was there to go over every financial aid package and explain what each meant. To avoid large amounts of debt, I chose to attend a community college first, then proceeded to complete my college career at a four-year school.

All throughout college, Elsa was there to help and advise me. I knew the time would come when I would have to pay all the money back, so I began to save for it. I worked while attending school full time. As difficult as it was, it didn’t compare to the struggle I saw my parents go through to give us the best that they could. It was one of the many perspectives that always kept me motivated. I am now in the financial services industry and I do private wealth management. Without Elsa’s support, I strongly believe that my chances of going to college after high school were slim. Elsa was not only my financial aid advisor; she took a sincere interest in my life, where I came from, and my dreams for who I wanted to be. The great thing is that she was also able to help my brother in the same way.

My college degree represents the struggles my parents endured to give my siblings and me hope for our future. It represents the mutual love, support, and motivation of my siblings. It represents the prayers from my wife before big exams during my last few years of college. It represents individuals like Elsa whose determination to help me is a gift that I can never repay. It represents students from all backgrounds who find themselves in similar circumstances.

There are countless students experiencing similar challenges. The paths may be different, but the toilsome process is the same. To them, my advice is to seek help, don’t be shy about it. Don’t feel as though you’re not worthy enough to attend or even attempt to go to college, and seek advice. When Elsa gave a presentation at my school about what she does, it was like, “this is what I’ve been looking for.” It was certainly a godsend, but it definitely took my initiative to seek it out and figure out how to do it. If you know a teacher, a counselor, a nonprofit where they help students get to college, ask them. Get their name, email, number. Call that person and see what they can do to help you. I know that for myself, that journey began when I made the decision to meet Elsa at the computer lab to simply ask, “how do I start?” It is a decision that changed my life completely.
2018-19 was the most impactful year we’ve ever had. We raised more money and changed the lives of more young people than ever before.

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*Please note that the negative FY18 budget variance was driven by a funding delay to the first half of FY19.*
Our Supporters

Thank you.
Our work would not be possible without your astounding generosity.
Why do you support uAspire?

Jen: When I learned about college affordability and what this generation is up against—the increasing student debt and how it can keep them from entering the economy and having a life, getting married—that really made me want to do something to help. With uAspire you can affect young lives just as they’re entering the workforce, just as they’re making choices about what they want to be in this world. They have such challenges ahead and they’re working hard to overcome them. To be a part of that, it’s where I want to be.

John: It’s becoming more and more difficult for students to get out of college without large debt. It’s important to help students find a path through college and close the opportunity divide across the country.

Can you share a reflection about your experience working alongside students and advisors, something that made an impression on you?

Jen: A financial form like the FAFSA actually requires a ton of vulnerability. I admire that courage to sit down with someone they may have just met and answer all those questions. I think the most important thing is showing students that there are caring adults in their life, that we’re here and they’re not alone. It eases some of the anxiety. Also, the beautiful thing I found is that I really enjoy being with teenagers, it really energizes me. They’re so full of life, so present and working so hard.

John: I’ve been most impressed by students’ determination. When they come in, they’re so determined to figure out how they’re going to make this work, to apply and pursue a degree. I’ve helped to read through students’ essays and it’s really inspiring to discover where a person is at, what’s going on in their lives, or what issues they want to solve, and what’s driving their desire to get a college degree.

Marianne: Seeing the affordability advisors in action and what they’re able to do over the course of a day is just so impressive. I was in one school, every 15 minutes or so another student comes in with a completely different question or problem and the advisor is able to help every single student no matter where they are in the process. A big surprise was the obtuseness and complexity of the award letters. Students get this letter and it’s gobbledygook and no one can make sense of it. The whole financial aid process is very complicated, it’s not straightforward.

Jeri: I’ve learned that students have incredible energy and drive. I remember a student came in with six aid offers, she’d been accepted to all these wonderful schools, and she was trying to figure out which one was giving her the best financial aid package. She was just ready to go, so mature and hopeful.

What makes uAspire stand out as an organization?

Jen: uAspire’s mission is so clear and focused. It’s very easy to see the effects, it’s very tangible. I can attend a session and help students directly. The impact is clear and measurable. And the advisors are just amazing.

Marianne: I just can’t get over the work ethic here, and the excitement and enthusiasm every single person has for what they do. Everyone is so committed to the mission and to doing an excellent job.
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Laurie Thomsen  
Director, The Travelers Companies, MFS Mutual Funds and Dycom Industries
“Going to college means more opportunities. I want to be in the corporate giving world because I want to be able to invest in non profit organizations.”

- Ny H.
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Acknowledgments
Design and photography by Ryan Stranz