

Success Academy Charter Schools

TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Success Academy opened its first school in Harlem in 2006, with 165 kindergarteners and first graders. Today, it is the fifth-largest school district in New York State, with 20,000 students, primarily children of color from low-income neighborhoods who will be the first in their families to attend college.



Barbara Gao Shapiro

Assoc. Director of College Access and Persistence

When Barbara Gao Shapiro joined Success Academy Charter Schools in 2018 as associate director of college access and persistence, the organization had ambitious goals to scale its program. As Barbara mapped out a strategy to support a growing number of students in planning for college, she realized that her team had a gap in financial aid knowledge.

“Many of our counselors had had some experience with financial aid—maybe just their memories of filling out the FAFSA form when they applied to college,” says Barbara, “but few had gone through a training program.” Barbara sought out uAspire to hold a series of financial aid training for her team of five counselors.

Empowering Students

Barbara approached the uAspire training with the expectation that her team would learn all the complexities of the financial aid process. “Instead, what I learned is that our team does not need to know every single detail of the process, but should have a good understanding of the process, broadly, and how to find information when we have questions,” says Barbara.

“We shifted our mindset from serving as concierges for students to empowering them to understand financial aid and seek out answers on their own.”

“This approach has made a big difference for our team and students, building confidence across the board,” says Barbara. uAspire’s trainers are “outstanding at outlining the financial aid process and timeline, as well as the most common errors,” and her team has repackaged this information for students. “I have always appreciated our partnership with uAspire because they approach the work as we do—with a goal of enabling students to manage their own journey,” says Barbara.

She believes that this student-centered approach is important from a philosophical perspective—“the students can do this!”—and from a practical standpoint because students should be prepared to work with financial administrators while at college.

Strengthening the Toolkit

Each year, Success Academy subscribes to uAspire’s Partner Portal, a rich online database of information about financial aid, supported by a team at uAspire. Barbara says,

“The Portal is like an insurance policy for our entire team. We all sleep better knowing we can just log on and ask a question about a particular situation a student is facing.”

Barbara explains that uAspire’s Portal responses are typically shared among the counselors because “these cases are a learning opportunity for the entire team, extending the education that we received in the training sessions.”

The Success Academy team has also adopted uAspire's College Cost Calculator to help students understand the financial aid offers from different colleges. "Having a framework for thinking about how to compare apples and oranges in award letters is really helpful," says Barbara. Success Academy students also use uAspire's checklist for reviewing the Student Aid Report to ensure that their information is accurate.

"uAspire does a great job of covering the nuts and bolts of the financial aid process: 'How do I, as a student, fill out the forms? How do I, as a student, fill them out correctly, this year, and every year?' We really count on uAspire for this kind of support."

Building Confidence

Barbara believes that uAspire's training, which has strongly influenced Success Academy's counseling, is building student leaders. "Our students are coming to us and saying: 'Can you believe that my friend, who does not attend Success Academy, doesn't have a counselor to help her with the financial aid process?—so I am helping her.' We are instilling confidence in these students, and they are becoming community ambassadors."

"The training is not all about financial aid. It is part of a much bigger picture of helping students realize their potential."

Since undertaking the training, Barbara and her team have noticed fewer students asking "what do I do?" and more students asking for specific help, such as how to analyze a form or write an email to get an answer to a question.

"We are seeing, day by day, our student-centered approach paying off and are grateful to our partners at uAspire who have modeled this culture of empowerment."

Ready for a student-centered approach to financial aid training for your team?
Contact Michelle Murphy at michellem@uaspire.org