

Future Now: A Process and Outcomes Evaluation of a New York City GED Preparatory Program

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VERA'S NYC-BASED WORK

In 1961, Vera embarked on its first project: reforming the bail system in New York City, which at the time granted liberty pretrial based only on income. Evidence from this project of a viable alternative to bail helped change how judges make release decisions in criminal courts around the world. Today, Vera is a national organization, leading dozens of projects across the country. However, with our headquarters just across the street from City Hall in Manhattan, much of our work remains closely linked to the heart of New York City's criminal justice system.

Vera's work in New York City spans across our centers and programs. What these projects have in common is close collaboration with our partners, data and evidence-driven approaches, and recommendations that seek to improve the systems that New Yorkers rely on for public safety, justice, and human services. Although these projects take place in the unique context of New York City, they all bear important implications and lessons for jurisdictions across the country.

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Introduction

Each year in the United States, economic opportunity becomes increasingly more dependent on total years of schooling.¹ However, close to 40 million adults have no high school diploma or high school equivalency (HSE) diploma such as the General Education Development® (GED) certificate.² This number is particularly alarming given predictions that by 2018, 63 percent of all U.S. job openings will require some type of college degree.³ Nearly 25 percent of New York City high school freshmen drop out before receiving a diploma, thus significantly decreasing their likelihood of obtaining postsecondary degrees, such as an associate's or bachelor's degree.⁴ For individuals who do not complete high school, the path to a postsecondary degree includes many challenges, and this population often faces significantly fewer employment opportunities and lower earnings than their counterparts.⁵

Students who drop out of high school and later decide to pursue postsecondary education are often left to navigate this path with little guidance and support. The first step in the process typically entails passing the GED, a battery test that spans reading, writing, social studies, science, and math.⁶

For most individuals, enrollment in some type of GED preparatory course is all but essential for passing the exam, but attrition rates for such programs are generally high, leaving many intended recipients without certificates.⁷ Most GED classes offer a set curriculum aligned directly to the content of the exam, leaving little room for teachers to provide students with additional academic guidance, such as college preparatory instruction or one-on-one assistance.⁸

Future Now, however, is a GED preparatory program housed at Bronx Community College (BCC) that offers tailored, "student-centered" programs to meet each student's personal and educational needs, prepare him or her for college, and support him or her through the first year of enrollment. As such, not all students are exposed to the same program elements. Future Now's individualized approach and commitment to building resilience in each student are core principles that guide this continuously evolving program as it seeks out new ways of increasing program retention, success, and college enrollment.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) was contracted by the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) at the New York City Mayor's Office to conduct an evaluation of Future Now and to identify the core program components necessary for successful replication. During the academic year 2013-2014, Vera conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews with Future Now students and staff and

analyzed program data from Future Now and the City University of New York (CUNY). This research summary reports on the main findings of this study.

Future Now

Operating since 1998, Future Now offers free GED prep classes to students ages 17 to 20 through the New York City Department of Education’s GED Plus program, and to 21- to 24-year-olds from five zip codes in the Bronx through funding from the Department of Youth and Community Development. Most students live in west central Bronx and, Future Now reports, more than 50 percent of its students are justice-involved. Future Now offers morning and afternoon sessions to the approximately 500 students it serves annually. Before being accepted into the program, students must demonstrate an 8th grade level of reading and math—through the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)—and be interviewed to assess their level of motivation and their suitability for the program.⁹ Students scoring between the 6th and 8th grade reading level can be placed in Future Now’s pre-GED prep classes that aim to increase their literacy to a level that allows them to prepare for and pass the GED exam.

Future Now offers many services and courses in addition to GED prep classes, including:

- > administering a Myers-Briggs personality test to help newly enrolled students and the staff understand students’ strengths and to think critically about their working style;
- > regular testing to track students’ progress and to identify the earliest appropriate time for them to take the GED;
- > tutoring for students struggling in specific subject areas;
- > access to peer mentors, successful Future Now graduates who provide academic and social support—including college prep courses—to current students in one-on-one and group settings;¹⁰
- > career planning meetings where students discuss their skills, career aspirations, and college plans;
- > application assistance for students pursuing a postsecondary education at any CUNY two-year college;
- > and automatic enrollment in Club IMPACT (Improving My Progress at College Today) for Future Now graduates who choose to enter BCC. Club IMPACT is a student-led mentoring program that provides peer-to-peer support in a group setting.

Future Now is committed to supporting GED graduates through their first year of college, though in reality, staff report that this support continues well beyond this time frame. Future Now partners with outside organizations to widen the opportunities available to its students, including internships, job training, and career placement assistance.

In addition to the formal program elements listed above, Future Now has developed an ethos and approach to the program’s work that is centered on developing student resilience. Future Now staff and mentors seek to promote students’ competence (through academic development), confidence (through

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Vera conducted a process and intermediate-outcomes study of Future Now. In doing so, Vera employed a number of research activities to:

- > understand how students are selected for Future Now and to describe enrollees in terms of demographics and academic ability;
- > measure program outcomes (in terms of GED completion rates);
- > measure college outcomes (in terms of GPA, retention, and graduation) and see how these compare to other BCC students;
- > identify core program characteristics and service gaps; and
- > describe how the program is experienced by students and staff.

To achieve these objectives, Vera staff conducted analyses of administrative data provided by Future Now and CUNY, administered a survey to 52 current Future Now GED and pre-GED students, and conducted focus groups and interviews with 17 GED and pre-GED students, six Future Now graduates enrolled at BCC, six mentors, three early-leavers, and six teachers.

While Vera was able to achieve the main objectives of the evaluation, two challenges should first be noted in order to contextualize the results presented below. First, graduation rates from BCC are typically low and it can take much longer than two years for students to achieve their associate's degrees. (Of all students enrolling in BCC in fall 2008, 18.3 percent graduated with an associate's degree within five years.)^a Assessing the outcomes of students who enrolled with BCC therefore requires a substantial timeframe—at least six years following enrollment at BCC. However, because the Future Now program is continually evolving and has changed significantly since its inception, this historical cohort might not be representative of the current program. The services provided to Future Now graduates who enrolled at BCC six years ago were significantly different from those provided to current participants. More changes are being planned to the Future Now program in response to New York State's decision to replace the GED with another high school equivalency test, the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC™). The new test is considered more demanding and requires a higher level of preparation and discipline. Despite Future Now's relative longevity, it is doubtful that a full impact evaluation is feasible at this point given the recent changes to the core program design.

Second, the program has made recent and significant improvements to its data collection systems and policies, and staff is continuing to learn how to use these systems to better serve the program. However, the program is only now achieving the data capacity needed to conduct a rigorous process and outcomes evaluation. For previous cohorts of students, the ability to connect demographic, enrollment, and GED and college performance information was particularly problematic, which limited the analysis that Vera was able to conduct.

This report presents the main findings of Vera's analysis of program data, surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

^a CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, "System Retention and Graduation Rates of Full-time First-time Freshmen in Associate Programs by Year of Entry: Bronx," www.cuny.edu/irdata/book/rpts2_AY_current/RTGS_0001_FT_FTFR_ASSOC_COMM-BX.pdf.

development of soft—or workplace readiness—skills), and connectedness (through peer interaction and support) among their students. By promoting these characteristics, the program helps students overcome setbacks and challenges that might otherwise derail academic achievement and future success. This theory of change is articulated explicitly to new students and is used to guide a professional culture that views students holistically, beyond their educational needs.

Findings

FUTURE NOW STUDENT ENROLLMENT

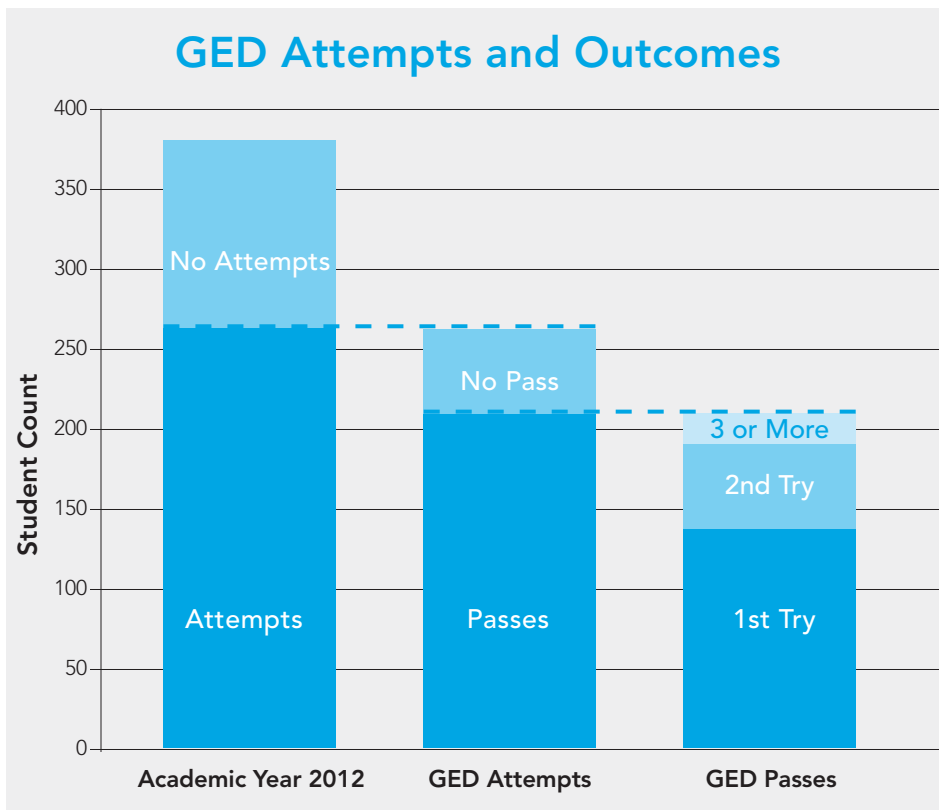
Vera examined data from Future Now’s database to describe the students who came into contact with the program in the 2012-2013 academic year and those who eventually enrolled in GED prep classes. Here we define “contacts” as those who went through the intake process and completed the intake form, which asks about applicants’ personal information, employment history, justice involvement, and education goals. However, some contacts were not qualified to enroll in GED prep and others were qualified but did not ultimately enroll. We define students as enrolled if they attended at least one day of GED prep classes.

The 2012-2013 cohort consisted of 1,386 contacts, of which 376 (27 percent) enrolled in GED prep classes. Not all contacts are applicants to the GED prep program; some may have come only for the GED exam. The data do not differentiate between the motives of contacts so we are only able to include counts of contacts and those who begin classes.

- > Of the 376 enrollments, about 63 percent self-identified as Hispanic; 15 percent as Black/Non-Hispanic; 13 percent as another race/ethnicity; and nine percent did not respond to this question.
- > Of the 1,386 contacts, 348 reported having previously been incarcerated at Rikers Island, of which only 17 enrolled in the program.¹¹
- > The average age of enrollees was 19 years, and 57 percent were male.
- > The 1,010 contacts that did not participate in Future Now never enrolled for several reasons, including missing or failing TABE scores, being too old to enroll, choosing not to attend class, or residing outside of eligible ZIP codes. Others, who were already well prepared to take the GED (or to retake one part of the GED), may have attended Future Now to take the GED predictor (a practice test designed to evaluate GED readiness) and then the exam. They may have also come for tutoring prior to retaking the one part of the GED that they did not pass in a previous attempt.

GED TESTING AND OUTCOMES

Vera reviewed the success rates of Future Now students who attempted the GED and found that of the 376 students who enrolled from 2012 to 2013, 259 (69 percent) attempted the GED at least once and 209 (80 percent) passed. One hundred and forty-nine students passed on the first attempt; 46 passed on the second attempt; and 14 passed on the third, fourth, or fifth attempt. (See Figure 1.)



HOW FUTURE NOW STUDENTS COMPARE TO OTHER STUDENTS ENROLLED AT BCC

In a separate analysis, Vera compared academic outcomes of a cohort of Future Now students who went on to enroll at BCC between Fall 2008 and Fall 2013 to those of two matched groups who enrolled during the same time period: BCC students who attended other GED programs and BCC students with high school diplomas. At the time of this analysis, there were 578 Future Now graduates in CUNY’s BCC data for classes enrolled between 2008 and 2013.

To ensure an apples-to-apples comparison between these three groups, Vera used a statistical technique called propensity score matching, a method that controls for multiple factors. For this analysis, Vera controlled for age, enrollment year, birth country, neighborhood (ZIP code), ethnicity, gender, and income (using enrollment in tuition assistance programs as a proxy for low income). Due to the earlier dates of their GED completion and college matriculation, the students in this sample should be considered representative of the implementation phase of Future Now and not representative of students currently enrolled in the program. More time is needed before the performance of recent cohorts can be meaningfully evaluated.

- > Future Now students and students from other GED programs had lower graduation rates (about nine percent as of June 2013 for the 257 Future Now students who enrolled in 2008 to 2010) than BCC students with high school diplomas (about 16 percent).¹²
- > BCC students with high school diplomas achieve higher GPAs than Future Now or other GED graduates at the outset of college, but this trend reverses for students who have stayed longer (enrolled in more terms). Future Now and GED students who have enrolled in more

terms have higher GPAs than high school graduates, although GED and Future Now students are less likely to complete three or more terms at BCC when compared to their BCC peers with high school diplomas.

- > Future Now staff reported that, due to new regulations in 2011 that increased enforcement of the requirement that students maintain a GPA of 2.0 or above in order to remain on financial aid, many students lost their aid and dropped out of BCC before Future Now staff could intervene on the students' behalves.

STUDENT, MENTOR, AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF FUTURE NOW

In addition to the analysis of program and college data, Vera conducted a survey of 52 Future Now students (GED and pre-GED) and held focus groups and interviews with 17 students (GED and pre-GED), six mentors, three early leavers, six Future Now college students, and six Future Now teachers. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with the program, what they valued about it, and what they felt could be improved. Here are several key findings from this analysis:

- > ***Students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of the program.*** Students felt that they received effective encouragement in obtaining their GED and also felt supported, confident, and highly motivated in continuing their education through college.
- > ***The program prioritizes development of competence, confidence, and connectedness.*** This approach had been internalized by teaching and program staff and, importantly, peer mentors, who articulated practical ways in which they applied these goals to their work.
- > ***Students felt valued.*** Students reported that they had lacked encouragement and support during high school. The individualized approach of Future Now instilled a (sometimes new) sense of being valued on a personal level. Reasons students cited for liking Future Now included "...knowing that someone actually cares about you, your education, and who you are."
- > ***Students were competent and confident in their schoolwork, but were reluctant to connect with other students.*** Citing negative experiences with peers in high school and a desire to focus on their education, students were initially reluctant to form connections with their peers. Some students reported that this changed during the program. Peer mentors are a positive addition to the program in this respect, modeling positive interactions and gaining the students' trust.
- > ***Staff encouraged students to plan ahead.*** While students admitted to having previously been focused on the present, some reported: "I was planning for the now, not the future"; "I used to not worry about the future; I used to just worry about how I was going to get by that day"; and "[The staff] care about your future the same amount that you do, maybe even more."
- > ***Suggested improvements were universally resource-related.*** Students and teachers cited a need for better equipment, digital Smart Boards, access to PowerPoint, wireless Internet, more teachers, and more students.

The survey and focus groups also revealed four core program elements that are integral to its success:

1. **Peer mentors** provide increased capacity for formal and informal assessment, student support, and service delivery. The mentors motivate the students by acting as positive role models and “credible messengers.” Furthermore, working as a mentor afforded many opportunities for personal and professional growth for those individuals.
2. **Small class sizes** allowed staff members to gain a deep knowledge of their students’ abilities and needs. Smaller classes mean that students can obtain the attention they need from teachers and can develop the confidence to contribute to class discussions or to ask questions.
3. Future Now invests in **understanding each student**. The academic, social, and personal problems that Future Now students face—and the unique strengths that they bring with them, sometimes without realizing it—make it crucial that staff understand each student’s situation. This was reinforced through program design elements, such as enrollment interviews and personality testing. This individualized approach, however, poses challenges to monitoring and evaluating program performance, as not all students are exposed to the same program components, and the intermediate objectives of the program vary on a case-by-case basis.
4. Future Now fostered a **committed staff** at all levels; program staff, teachers, and mentors provide persistent and intense support to those students who need it most, and are invested in their work. This is not simply a function of judicious hiring; through the program components described above, combined with an explicit theory of change (rooted here in concepts of positive youth development) and strong leadership, a positive staff culture has developed. However, losing any one staff member could threaten a core program component, and the replicability of the program is questionable without formalizing and documenting in detail the core activities of each staff person.

Next steps and recommendations

One of Future Now’s greatest strengths is its ability to evolve in response to the needs of its students and the academic demands placed upon them by universities, the job market, and the state. At the time of writing, multiple programmatic changes were being planned in response to New York State’s decision to replace the GED with the TASC, as well as other changes, including the possible integration of college prep courses throughout the semester; the addition of a college-level class so students can gain a college credit before completing the TASC; and a new environmental literacy course that incorporates elements of science, math, and technology.

Additional changes are being planned, including a 10-day enrollment workshop designed to allow for more assessment of student motivation and commitment, and to prepare students for returning to formal education. As previously stated, however, this continuous evolution challenges our ability to

evaluate the program—student outcomes from recent cohorts may not reflect the performance of current or future students.

If there are to be further evaluations of Future Now, Vera recommends addressing two issues, in particular:

- > **Rikers Recruitment** – Young people incarcerated at Rikers Island have some of the highest levels of need in New York City, and perhaps the fewest opportunities, so engaging this population is an important program goal closely aligned with its mission of serving disenfranchised young adults. In the past, Future Now students from Rikers experienced limited success in the program, although 17 students from Rikers eventually enrolled and one successfully completed his GED. Future Now should consider strategies for recruiting and retaining students from Rikers Island; further research should be conducted to determine the specific strengths, challenges, and needs that these students bring with them, and to identify additional programmatic elements that would best support them. Such targeted interventions may, however, place a strain on Future Now’s already limited resources.
- > **Data Management** – Future Now has been steadily improving its capacity to track data electronically. In 2012, Future Now implemented a new student tracking system, but did not convert data on students from earlier years, thus limiting the possibilities for analyses of earlier years and the ability to track trends across multiple years. Future Now should continue to build its expertise in the tracking system, Salesforce, by training staff on its use and adding data not currently tracked.

Conclusion

Vera’s analysis shows that Future Now has successfully prepared students for the GED exam. It was difficult to discern through this evaluation, however, the extent to which the program is equally successful in its other goals of encouraging and assisting students to enroll and stay in college. The analysis of administrative data suggests that Future Now college graduation rates are similar to other GED students. However, as stated earlier, Future Now only recently achieved the data capacity required for a full impact evaluation, and the lack of historical data collected by the program limited the depth of analysis that could be conducted.

The program continues to evolve in response to changing student and academic needs. Future Now recently underwent a substantial overhaul of its program-delivery model to prepare students for the new TASC exam that has replaced the GED. The experiences of students included in this evaluation may have been significantly different from those of current students.

Future Now students and teachers overwhelmingly praised the program’s impact. Staff had clearly devised and implemented a program that engaged students in their education, instilled a sense of hope and competence that may not have been there before, and encouraged the development of interpersonal and professional skills that would likely serve students well in life beyond for-

mal education. For a student body previously challenged by formal education to the point that they were compelled to leave high school, these are significant accomplishments.

The impact of a program such as Future Now may not be entirely amenable to quantification and analysis in a short evaluation such as this. The teachers and staff that Vera interviewed for this study understood that they were doing more than just providing their students with the knowledge and ability to pass the GED and enroll in college. The program aims to equip students with a range of practical, social, and emotional skills that will support them in all domains of their lives, not just their education. Furthermore, these diverse, less tangible outcomes are not limited to individuals. Future Now students are children, parents, cousins, brothers, sisters, and friends to people in their communities facing the same struggles and obstacles to education as they did. The students we spoke to reported that they were now able to be positive role models for their families and neighbors; actively encouraged them to enroll with Future Now when eligible; and were (or soon would be) better positioned to provide for their loved ones financially. Based on students' and teachers' impressions of the program, Future Now may be having a significant positive impact on families and communities beyond the campus gates.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, Mykhaylo Trubsky, and Sheila Palma, *The labor force behaviors, labor market experiences, and labor market outcomes of the nation's adults with no post-secondary education, 2000-2010: differences in outcomes between high school dropouts, GED holders, and high school graduates* (Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, 2012).
- 2 The General Education Development (GED) certificate refers to one of the two high school equivalency (HSE) diplomas historically and currently offered in New York State. In 2014, New York replaced the GED with the Test Assessing Secondary Completion. For the time frame of this evaluation, Future Now was offering preparatory classes for the GED. Much of the literature cited in this report also specifically reported on GED findings. Throughout this report, we use the term GED to refer to both the specific certificate and to the more general HSE. We may also use the term GED to interchangeably refer to both the GED test and the GED certificate.
- 3 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Help wanted: Projections of job and education requirements through 2018* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010).
- 4 Robert Stillwell and Jennifer Sable, *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009-10* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2013).
- 5 Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011).
- 6 GED Testing Service (2011).
- 7 Vanessa Martin and Joseph Broadus, *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers: Early Success in LaGuardia Community College's Bridge to Health and Business Program* (New York, NY: MDRC, 2013).
- 8 Hal Beder and Patsy Medina, *Classroom Dynamics In Adult Literacy Education* (Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001).
- 9 The program uses discretion in accepting students whose TABE scores fall below the 8/8 cut-off, especially with regards to math.
- 10 To qualify as a peer mentor, the student must have graduated from Future Now with a GED and have completed at least one semester of college with a 2.5 GPA or higher.
- 11 Future Now is planning to change the enrollment process so that this information is gained during an interview, rather than through a self-completed form, in order to explain the questions and increase disclosure.
- 12 From the data provided, we were unable to identify those students who transferred to four-year schools before completing their associate's degrees. These will be incorrectly included in our numbers as non-completers.



NYC Center for Economic Opportunity's response to Vera's evaluation of Future Now program

The NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) is committed to building evidence for programs that address the issue of poverty and have the capacity to reduce inequality. As part of this commitment, CEO occasionally commissions evaluations of programs and initiatives that it does not fund but that have the potential to offer insight or lessons learned for effective anti-poverty practices. The evaluation of the Future Now program is one such example of these efforts.

The Future Now program at the City University of New York's Bronx Community College is a high school equivalency (HSE) test preparation program serving students ages 17 to 24, offering academic instruction, tutoring, career planning, postsecondary enrollment assistance, and peer mentorship. The Future Now program is funded by the city's Department of Education's GED Plus program and Department of Youth and Community Development. This evaluation was conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research center for justice policy and practice, with offices in New York City, Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

The Vera Institute of Justice was commissioned by the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) to assess Future Now participant and staff experiences in-program, and to identify the program's impact on participant college attainment. CEO commissioned the evaluation to build evidence for effective practices in both HSE programming and peer-mentoring intervention models, which have yet to undergo extensive research. Although CEO does not provide funding to Future Now, it funds similar programs that focus on increasing educational attainment for young adults.

This report identifies high levels of participant satisfaction with the program, which are credited to several key programmatic components. Principally, peer mentorship is highlighted as increasing student motivation, facilitating constructive bonding among HSE students, and otherwise expanding programmatic capacity to deliver support services. This report also highlights the program's individualized approach, small class sizes, and committed staff, which allow for tailored and targeted service delivery and help develop a positive organizational culture that views students holistically and focuses on building student resiliency. However, the evaluation was unable to identify positive impacts on participant college attainment.

The evaluation finds that Future Now students perform similarly to students from other HSE programs and worse than students with high school diplomas in regard to both postsecondary grade point average and college graduation rates. CEO believes that these findings are in part attributable to data limitations. Given ongoing program model modifications, the data available for this evaluation represents an early iteration of the program model, the outcomes of which may not be reflective of subsequent enhancements to the model. Future Now staff report that the program has developed considerably since the cohorts examined in this evaluation, and they are confident that student performance has improved in recent years.

CEO supports this report's recommendation that Future Now continue to enhance its data collection and analysis capabilities to establish a consistent data tracking system and enable further evaluation of the model. However, ongoing program modifications will pose a continuing challenge to evaluating performance.

Evaluation limitations notwithstanding, CEO is committed to careful consideration of the findings and recommendations detailed in this report, which will inform CEO's refinement of existing HSE and mentoring programming, and the development of new education initiatives.

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For More Information

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This publication can be accessed online at www.vera.org/nyc-GED-eval.

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