



LifeLink: Student-Driven College Access and Success (April 2017)

LifeLink is Good Shepherd Services' college access and success program. Operating in Brooklyn and the Bronx, the program serves high-poverty students ages 17-24 with histories of academic challenge and disengagement. LifeLink implements Good Shepherd's overarching strength-based and evidence-informed Youth and Family Development approach. This approach builds on participants' existing competencies while helping young people to gain the developmental skills they need to succeed in and graduate from college. In addition to fostering academic skills among young people, the program provides students with the peer and adult support systems that have been associated in research with improved academic performance. Designed in three phases that promote engagement and achievement of key milestones from pre-enrollment through college graduation, LifeLink:



Recruits and prepares potential high school graduates, many of whom are about to graduate from Good Shepherd's YABC, transfer school and in-school support programs.

Mobilizes students to be ready for college through a **Bridge** program. The program provides participants with an intensive curriculum that equips them with the skills they need to pass the City University of New York (CUNY) entrance exams. Students build college readiness through intensive skill-building in math, reading and writing so as to reduce or eliminate the need for remedial classes once enrolled at CUNY.

Supports young people in CUNY along their path to graduation through a **Retention** program. With a strong partnership in place between Good Shepherd staff and CUNY, LifeLink offers both on-campus and off-campus services including workshops and tutoring sessions, college and career advisement, counseling, employment assistance, financial aid assistance, social networking and referrals within the college and within Good Shepherd.

Making a Difference: Our Results in 2016



Research-Informed Strategy

Both the Bridge and Retention elements of the LifeLink program are delivered in accordance with the following six research-informed strategies:

Student-Driven: Participants are supported and coached through the program largely by student leaders, who have similar backgrounds and serve as "credible messengers." Older students help to orient younger students to the student-driven culture of the program and motivate them to become active learners, emphasizing personal responsibility, self-motivation, community and participation.

Peer Support Systems: The program connects students with strong systems of peer support. Older students and recent program graduates act as mentors for newer students. Peer mentoring in a post-secondary setting is supported in research as having long-term impacts on retention and graduation rates, via increases in academic self-efficacy, program satisfaction and perseverance in student educational goals.¹



Personal Supports: Through individual and group counseling, the program develops among its participants the social and emotional competencies associated in research with academic success and employability in the present and future.² In accordance with the evidence-informed primary person approach, students work with a primary staff member who helps them to overcome barriers, have high expectations, understand requirements and set goals.³



Academic Bolstering: The program prepares students for the academic rigors of college through a blend of teacher- or peer-led instruction, one-on-one tutoring and online learning. Each student works with staff to develop an individualized program of study designed around his or her own abilities, needs and desired results.

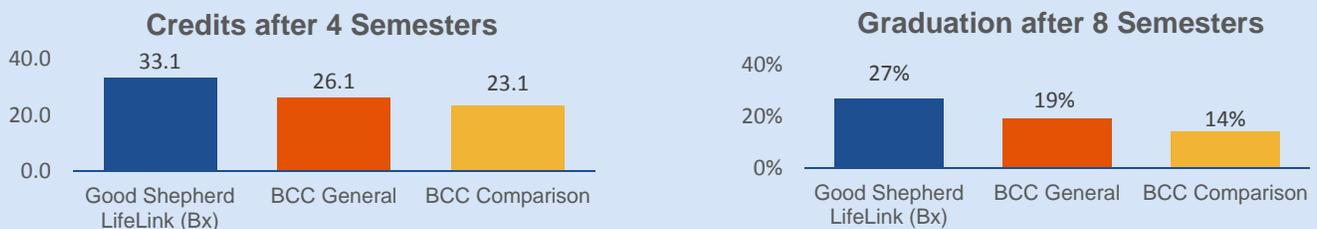


Strategically Disbursed Incentives: LifeLink uses modest financial stipends to incentivize students' efforts in the program. This practice is supported by a study which found that offering modest financial incentives to students who achieved tangible tasks led to significant improvement in test scores in the longer term.⁴



Inviting and Professional Physical Space: LifeLink centers are welcoming environments that offer a comfortable atmosphere for students to work, meet, actively learn and celebrate successes together.

LifeLink participants consistently outperform matched comparison group: Data provided by the Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment at BCC has shown that Bronx LifeLink students outperformed BCC students and a comparison group of students matching the profile of the cohort entering LifeLink in fall 2011 – those coming from high-poverty backgrounds with academic skill deficits.



Next Steps – Focus On:

Evaluation: Good Shepherd considers itself to be a learning organization with a deep commitment to continuously strengthening its services. We engage staff at all levels - as well as participants - in conversations to learn from internal data and, in consultation with empirical evidence, inform program modifications. A major focus of data-driven conversations is connecting participant outcomes to evidence-based practices. For example, we administer a pre-post survey to measure change in growth mindset and other social-emotional measures that have been associated in research with student success.

Advocacy and Program Expansion: Good Shepherd is deeply committed to increasing supports for students with significant academic risk. In 2008, Good Shepherd partnered with six other Bronx community-based organizations working with disconnected or off-track young adults - BronxWorks, CUNY Prep, East Side House, Grace Outreach, New Settlement Apartments and The Door/Bronx Youth Center – to replicate the Good Shepherd LifeLink Bridge model and develop the Bronx Opportunity Network (BON). BON collaborates with colleges to provide better and quicker pathways to credit attainment. Good Shepherd is part of two workgroups of BON members and key college administrators from BCC and Hostos Community College developing plans to expand efforts to orient and prepare incoming students for CUNY placement tests.

BON's work has gained significant recognition. The Aspen Institute recently acknowledged BON's peer-focused approach as a "promising practice" and selected BON as one of only 19 innovative community collaborative initiatives nationwide to be awarded the Aspen Institute's three-year youth opportunity grant. A 2016 JobsFirstNYC report found that BON has demonstrated strong outcomes, mirroring graduation and persistence rates of CUNY overall, despite working with students who have socioeconomic and academic disadvantages.

In 2015, LifeLink expanded its services by incorporating a new internship component targeted to former Good Shepherd high school program graduates who had become disconnected since leaving school. The idea is to reengage students who weren't initially interested in college. Participants, all who are neither employed nor in school upon starting the program, complete a 12-week internship and interact with LifeLink staff via participation in Bridge or with an aim toward enrolling in the future.

“At times, I found myself lost and wondering where I was going. But after meeting up with my counselor, I found where I was going and what more I need to do. It made me feel like I could see my future.”

-Participant, Brooklyn LifeLink

Footnotes:

- 1 Budge, S. Peer Mentoring in Post-Secondary Education: Implications for Research and Practice. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 37(1), Fall 2006.
- 2 Farrington et al. (2012). Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review.
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, What Works Clearinghouse Intervention Report – ALAS, October 2006.
- 4 Fryer, Roland. Financial Incentives and Student Achievement: Evidence from Randomized Trials, Harvard University, April 2010.

Good Shepherd Services is a leading multi-service organization in New York City that operates over 80 programs in neighborhoods where children, youth and families face the greatest challenges to provide the support they need to succeed. To learn more about Good Shepherd Services, please visit www.goodshepherds.org. This report was written by the Program Evaluation and Planning Department at Good Shepherd Services. LifeLink is currently funded entirely through private grants. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Robin Hood Foundation, the Pinkerton Foundation, the Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation, the Aspen Institute and Jobs First.