

# “Strive” for College Access and Success

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## **Abstract**

*Under the leadership of the University of Cincinnati, a unique, systemic collaboration of educational, business, nonprofit, civic and philanthropic organizations from Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky is addressing the challenges facing urban children and youth. Called Strive, it seeks to create a seamless educational pipeline beginning at birth, through K-12, postsecondary education or training, and into career success. Strive is outcome-focused and targets partner intervention activities at key transitions from pre-natal care through early college.*

The twenty-first century has brought a dramatic shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, and today’s jobs reflect this tectonic shift. In Ohio, the once dependable manufacturing sector is shrinking rapidly—nearly 190,000 jobs that once required only a high school diploma have been lost over the past five years. Today’s employers are putting a premium on brains over brawn, making the need for a high-quality high school education essential and some form of postsecondary education or training a near necessity. In order to be successful, today’s educational initiatives must engage students, preparing them to squarely meet these economic realities (Blakeley 1997; Walshok 1999).

Still, too many children in America’s—and Ohio’s—urban centers get lost somewhere along the educational pipeline. Compared to forty-nine other states, Ohio ranks forty-second in the attainment of bachelor’s degrees (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2005). This ranking does not bode well for the state, especially when 60 percent of America’s fastest-growing jobs require an associate’s or bachelor’s degree (Carnavale and Desrochers 2004; U.S. Department of Labor 2006-2007). Clearly, if Ohio’s economic future is to remain vital—and if its families are to thrive—improved education, especially for students in its urban centers, is critical.

## **Why Strive, Why Now?**

Recognizing the urgent challenges facing Cincinnati’s urban core, a group of community leaders from across the greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky region came together to create a unique collaborative that is designed to focus on the success of the region’s children from birth through career entry. Initially convened by the president of the University of Cincinnati (UC) and other leaders from education, the business, nonprofit, civic, and philanthropic sectors united with them to take a holistic view of the learning continuum. The result is Strive, a systemic partnership that

engages a broad spectrum of existing resources and initiatives to create a seamless education “pipeline” beginning at birth and continuing through postsecondary education or training until the individual enters a career.

The following five goals guide the efforts of this collaborative:

1. Be **Prepared** for school.
2. Be **Supported** inside and outside of school.
3. **Succeed** academically.
4. **Enroll** in college.
5. **Graduate** and **Enter a Career**.

More than 2,100 Cincinnati-area support services focus on education, children or families; the trick is getting these services to coordinate efforts in a way that is responsive to complex community needs. Strive’s mission is to coordinate the existing resources in the region to meet its five crucial goals, *not* to create new programs. Strive is working with community leaders and organizations to specifically address those periods when students more often fall through the cracks.

## **The Creation of Strive**

Strive grew out of three separate initiatives with synergistic goals. The first was a growing partnership between the University of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Public Schools to collaboratively address pre-K-16 initiatives. In addition to the university-school district partnership, three area universities—UC, Xavier University and Northern Kentucky University—came together to focus on improving the quality of life in the greater Cincinnati area. As these partnerships were expanding, one of the largest educational foundations in the nation, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, was exploring ways to increase educational access and opportunities for Cincinnati-area underserved youth. Conversations soon included leaders from other institutions, business, social agencies and foundations and the discussions generated a systemic commitment to a birth-to-career initiative in the service of regional youth and families.

## **Structure and Operation of Strive**

As outlined in the accompanying chart, Strive is composed of a representative, consultative Steering Committee, a decision-making Executive Committee, and an action-focused Operations Committee. Strive has several unique features which facilitate collaboration, systemic interventions, and data-driven, reflective practices. The *Roadmap to Success* is a research-based visual model guiding a systemic approach to supporting students and families. It outlines the important developmental steps from birth to career entry and identifies milestones for success along the way ([www.strivetgether.org](http://www.strivetgether.org)). In support of the Roadmap, Strive has created a series of *Student Success Networks*, which are collaborative partnerships of service providers working toward one or more of Strive’s five goals.

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Composition</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Steering Committee	56 members from civic, business, educational, social service, and philanthropic communities	Meet quarterly to provide counsel and evaluate progress
Executive Committee	20 members from the Steering Committee, chaired by the UC President	Meet monthly to review Student Success Networks, monitor progress data, and oversee Strive staff
Operations Committee	Representatives from each of the twenty Steering Committee organizations, headed by UC Education dean	Meet monthly before Executive Committee, work closely with Strive staff

These networks help to guide interventions along the Roadmap to Success. In addition, all of Strive’s Student Success Networks voluntarily participate in the *Strive Endorsement Process* focused on data-driven continuous improvement. Strive produces an annual report card using community-level outcome indicators and is currently exploring the feasibility of a scholarship promise for local students. Data from this annual report card include kindergarten readiness, academic progress assessment, and high school and college graduation rates.

***The Roadmap to Success*** is a foundational document for Strive, outlining the critical transitions a successful student must navigate along the educational pipeline. Strive uses the Roadmap to target its partners’ interventions. The Roadmap begins with prenatal development and the birth of a child, runs through early childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood before concluding with the transition from school or postsecondary training into a career. Key transition points include the beginning of kindergarten, the transition from middle school to high school, and the freshman and sophomore years of college. The Roadmap also details critical developmental stages and indicators that provide evidence of student progress at each stage. Above the timeline are expected academic outcomes for each benchmark; below are the anticipated results of student and family support. Using the Roadmap to Success, Strive is better able to implement interventions to ensure that students and families are supported throughout the most crucial years of a young person’s development.

***Student Success Networks*** are groups of service providers who have committed to collaborative work, coordinating their efforts around one or more of Strive’s five primary goals. The idea is that providers working together are better able to support students and families than those working in isolation. Student Success Networks enable Strive to align providers and resources in order to develop responsive strategies to improve student success.

Student Success Networks define problems and interventions while enhancing or creating measurement systems to track their progress. They create specific action plans, implement them, and periodically review an ongoing data-collection process. To address Strive's first goal, "Be Prepared for School," for example, four Student Success Networks provide early-childhood education in three area counties and work with parents to build stronger relationships with their children.

To be accepted as a Strive Student Success Network, a collaborative must:

- align efforts with Strive's Roadmap to Success;
- be willing to expand as other community partners emerge;
- maintain wide support among community members and the stakeholders of Strive;
- commit to being data-driven with clear outcomes designed to improve service delivery;
- report progress regularly to the Strive Operations Committee and have a Strive Executive Committee sponsor for their work; and
- publish progress and share data for Strive's annual Community Report Card.

*The Strive Endorsement Process* was created to share the progress being made by the Student Success Networks. To achieve Stage I Endorsement, network partners must provide evidence that they are focusing on a common problem, agree on common solutions, and demonstrate a commitment to gather data documenting whether and how the solutions are having a favorable impact on students. To achieve Stage II Endorsement, network partners must demonstrate that they are drawing on evidence from prior studies to guide their plan of action. With the assistance of business leaders from General Electric, Strive has adapted the process improvement model known as Six Sigma into an effective, easy-to-use method used to assess the network's status.

Strive is also exploring a "college promise" that would provide a minimum of \$4,000 in annual college scholarships for students living within the region's urban school districts and attending one of the nine Strive postsecondary institutions.

## **What We've Learned**

Thanks to UC's leadership and the convening power of its president, Strive has been successful in bringing to the table a broad collection of partners from throughout the Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area. An important feature of its organizational structure is the requirement that business and organizational leaders must personally participate in the work of the Executive Committee. While time consuming, this broad involvement by key community leaders is a critical strength of Strive and is central to an initiative whose goal is systemic change. In addition, the operational leadership by UC's School of Education dean helps to keep the collaboration focused on results, including impact studies of Student Success Network activities.

Involving such a broad coalition challenges Strive partners to stay focused. Systemic interventions engage diverse partners throughout the pipeline, and this challenges Strive partners and administration to communicate effectively and efficiently in order

to remain organized around central priorities and goals.

Cost is another challenge. If Strive is to achieve the necessary financial support of its systemic interventions, political will must be aligned with Strive's mission and goals. Strive estimates it will require an investment of between \$200-500 million in order to meet the Strive College Promise, and it is currently studying the feasibility of a public campaign to raise these funds.

Finally, Strive is challenging its partners to think of new and better ways to collaborate and come together, leaving traditional "turf" issues aside in the spirit of collective support of students and families.

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## Author Information

Dean of the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services at the University of Cincinnati since 1999, Lawrence Johnson has published extensively completing eleven books, twenty-seven chapters in books, and sixty-seven refereed journal articles. In addition to his publications, he served as the principal investigator or primary author of two hundred grant proposals that were funded for a combined budget exceeding \$100 million. The focus of his work has been on how to support children and families that are challenged by the system.

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