

# Charter Schools Go to College

*Networks follow graduates to campuses with support to promote success*

**L**OURDES REA WANTED TO TRANSFER from community college to a four-year university but worried about the \$70,000 she'd have to borrow to cover the costs. Plus, she would need a strong essay to get in, but as the first in her family to pursue a college education, she didn't know how to write one.

The problem wasn't that she lacked an appetite for hard work or vision for the future. At 20, Rea was already financially independent from her parents and worked 30 hours a week at a Trader Joe's grocery store, along with other odd jobs, to pay her bills. But, like many students, she found it hard to balance those demands with her full-time course load. Meanwhile, she was trying to find an internship in marketing, her intended career.

She sought out advice on her community-college campus, but it wasn't easy to get the information she needed. "I would literally sometimes ask five, six, seven different people before I got to the place where they could help me," she said. Even then, she often felt uncomfortable and unsure of what to say. "I was very shy to ask. I just felt so lost."

So she turned to an unlikely source of support: an advisor from the charter high school she'd attended.

An "alumni college success" coach from Bright Star Schools, which runs three charter high schools in Los Angeles, helped Rea put together an admissions essay to transfer to the University of Southern California, get financial aid to avoid the debt she feared, and win a coveted digital-media

internship at a major entertainment company—all while cheering her on along the way.

That high-school coach "has been the most important person in my educational journey," said Rea, now 22 and a junior at USC majoring in business administration with an internship at the Walt Disney Company on her resume. "She would always check in with me, and we would go back and forth with different situations that I had. Her support is not just school; it's being there for me when things get really hard."

## **Bridging a "Vast Divide"**

Charter high schools largely serving low-income, first-generation, Black and Hispanic students have long boasted of the comparatively high proportions of their students who graduate and go to college. But as these schools and their alumni grow older, charters also are looking at their rates of degree attainment, which remain lower than they'd like. In response, several leading charter networks, including Achievement First, Bright Star Schools, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Summit Public Schools, and Uncommon Schools, have been expanding two key aspects of their high-school programs to promote alumni success on campus: detailed data tracking and analysis, and hands-on counseling and support.

First, a relatively new source of data is showing high schools how well their graduates do after they leave. The National Student Clearinghouse's Student Tracker reports whether and

**BY JON MARCUS**



*Kipper, KIPP's chatbot, sends texts to recent KIPP graduates about topics ranging from registering for college orientation to filling out financial-aid forms, all to prevent summer melt.*

where graduates enroll, attend, and complete college. This information is helping charters find and address shortcomings in the way they prepare high-school students for postsecondary success. Many public high schools have started using data in this way, too.

The charters also have begun to leverage the insights from that data, and the rising numbers of entering college students they collectively produce, to demand better outcomes from the universities and colleges where those students end up. Already, some are steering their graduates away from institutions where the data show they don't do well—advice that is bound to get the attention of institutions already struggling to fill seats and meet diversity goals.

Second, charter schools have expanded their alumni-support services to address low rates of completion, including by following their graduates to college campuses and providing advisors, mentors, and ongoing advocacy to raise the odds that students will make it to the finish line. College-access counseling is growing to become college-completion counseling, too.

These initiatives are too new for long-term impacts to be measured decisively, especially considering that postsecondary success rates are computed over six or eight years. But they apply tools that have been separately shown to increase completion among students who are low-income, first-generation, and ethnic and racial minorities, such as encouraging them to attend more selective institutions with greater resources and supports. Funding for this work is covered largely by private philanthropy, though there are ongoing discussions with partner universities to share the costs, since they also share the benefits of improved success rates.

These kinds of interactions between high schools and colleges largely haven't existed before. K-12 and higher-education

institutions generally exist separated from one another across a vast divide, seldom talking to each other, never mind collaborating in the interests of students. This has created a confounding non-system of college preparation and postsecondary education, with large numbers of students falling off track in the transition.

"Everyone just passes the buck from one to another, and I can say that as someone who was at the intersection of those two sectors," said Liane Hypolite, assistant professor of educational leadership at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and a former charter-high-school college counselor.

"We continue to have these arbitrary divides between K-12 and higher education," she said. "If we saw them as connected, maybe we could really strengthen the learning that our students experience."

### Higher Education's Failings

The proportion of high-school graduates going on to college has been rising overall, and has reached 70 percent. But colleges and universities have generally failed to improve retention or fully close gaps in degree attainment between first-generation, low-income, Black and Hispanic students and higher-income whites.

Sixty-four percent of white students enrolling in a four-year institution earn a bachelor's degree within six years compared to 54 percent of Hispanic students and 40 percent of Black students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, students from higher-income homes are substantially more likely to earn a degree. By age 24, an estimated 62 percent of students whose household income is in the top 25 percent have earned a bachelor's degree. That number falls sharply for students from poorer households, to 44 percent, 21 percent, and 16 percent for the second, third, and bottom quartiles of household income, according to an analysis by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

Narrowing these divides is especially important to the nation's leading charter networks, which enroll large numbers of low-income Black and Hispanic students. KIPP, the biggest, serves about 113,000 students in 21 states. Nearly all are low income, measured by whether they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Fifty-five percent are Black and 40 percent are Hispanic.

KIPP students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, often arrive on campus with more challenges than are faced by many of their classmates, said Ajuah Helton, the national director of KIPP Through College, the network's college-advising arm. "There is potentially a financial gap, a sense of belonging on campuses, and a third piece around what it looks like to be able to compete academically in



When it comes to first-generation college students, "everyone just passes the buck from one to another," says Liane Hypolite, a former charter high-school counselor.



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Higher education is not doing enough to address this “triple threat” to student success, said Helton. “It’s frustrating that high schools have to really carry the burden of strong transitions to help students get to and through” college, she said.

As much as institutions say they’re student facing, “sometimes they really aren’t,” said Onjheney Warren, a college transition specialist at KIPP Generations Collegiate High School in Houston. “That just goes back to how higher education is not accessible unless . . . unless you’re white, honestly. We are filling that void, because our students deserve college counselors. They deserve choice.”

These efforts by charter operators come at a moment of change and vulnerability in higher education. The potential pool of applicants coming out of charter schools is especially attractive to colleges and universities amid enrollment declines and new calls for diversity and inclusion.

Enrollment in higher education in the United States has been falling steadily for a decade and took a sharp dive during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the number of applicants to college in the fall of 2020 in every other category rose, the number of first-generation applicants declined, according to the Common App. And about half of college students already enrolled said Covid-19 disruptions will make it harder for them to finish their degrees, according to a poll by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation. That included 56 percent of Black and Hispanic students, compared to 44 percent of whites.

Even if enrollment rebounds, declines in the country’s birth-rates that began during the economic crisis of 2008 point to even steeper dropoffs in the numbers of incoming freshmen starting after 2025, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education estimates. After the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and widespread calls for racial justice, many schools have also made a broad commitment to attracting a more racially and economically diverse student body to their campuses.

Charter schools already use the intelligence they’ve been collecting to steer their students away from institutions where they

don’t do well. For example, Bright Star recommends its families not send graduates to certain community colleges in southern California with very low completion rates.

“You could imagine a situation in which K–12 would start to use those data to advise their students differently, as in, “These institutions are doing a terrible job with Black students, with Latinx students, with low-income students—don’t go there,”



*Mandy Savitz-Romer says that, as more data on student success is gathered, charter high schools will advise graduates against attending certain institutions.*

said Mandy Savitz-Romer, director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s master’s program in prevention science and practice and a former urban high school counselor.

Now several charters are banding together to remind enrollment managers of the diversity and growing number of their graduates, forcing colleges and universities to do a better job if they want these students on their campuses.

There’s self-interest involved on the part of charter schools as well. KIPP, for example, has publicly committed to “preparing students for economically self-sufficient, choice-filled lives,” which typically involves more education than a high-school diploma. Charters including KIPP are judged by families and donors not only on how many of their students graduate high school and go to college, but on how many earn a degree.

“These are charter schools that rely on private philanthropy,” said Savitz-Romer, “and they would like to say that they’re successful.”

### Power in Numbers

Bringing their emerging clout to bear on improving campus support for students is “the next frontier” for charter high schools, said Amy Christie, senior director of college access and success at the Achievement First network of charter schools in New York, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

“We’ve been trying to do that in isolation, leveraging our own political capital,” she said. Now, charter schools seeking to change colleges’ and universities’ behavior are teaming up to share information and broadcast a common message to admissions officers across the country: do better by our students.

“We’re saying, ‘Listen, we’re sending you 100 kids every year,’” she said. And they are keeping track of how those students do once on campus.

“I know my equivalents at every charter system in the country, and we’re swapping information about what’s going on with XYZ College,” Christie said. “Inevitably that school will come

down by students’ gender, race, ethnic background, and other characteristics. And schools can compare how their graduates in each of these categories perform against national averages. The price: \$595 per year, per high school.

With this expanded transparency, a growing number of institutions are beginning to cooperate and form explicit partnerships with charter schools and networks. KIPP has agreements with 97 institutions to recruit, support, and share data about its students. The network sends one quarter of its graduates to these schools, which include Brown, Duke, and Vanderbilt universities, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At least one partner institution, Colorado State University in Fort Collins, has agreed to split the cost of a full-time advisor for KIPP students on its campus.

Other charter schools have similar deals with higher-education institutions. Achievement First has partnered with Lafayette College and to date, 30 of its graduates have enrolled at the school.

“We feel like they’re an extension of our admissions office,” said Gregory MacDonald, vice president for enrollment management at Lafayette in Easton, Pennsylvania. “Their

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up on some kid’s list, and we’re going to say to families, ‘Here’s the track record. This ultimately is your decision, but I wouldn’t recommend it.’”

Not all colleges and universities have welcomed questions from their students’ high schools. Many resist sharing the kind of detailed records high schools need to keep track of their alumni, such as the academic progress of individual students or groups of students—with or without their names attached. “Colleges are very, like, ‘We don’t want to give you our data,’” KIPP’s Warren said. Some are unwelcoming of the charter-school coaches who materialize on campus with their students looking for help. “I’ve had people in offices say, ‘What is your job? Why are you here with them?’” she said. “As if we’re going to be judging them or telling them they’re doing their job wrong.”

But charters already have access to detailed information about student trends on campus through other sources. StudentTracker provides information that high schools generally haven’t ever had, at least in the surprising amount of detail they can now get. In the past, high schools had known only whether or not their students, as they were handed their diplomas, said they planned to go to college. StudentTracker can report back about which graduates enrolled at which institutions, in close to real time, and where they end up each semester after that. It can break this

success is our success, and our success is their success. It’s completely intertwined.”

Although the small liberal-arts college has a low student-faculty ratio of fewer than 11 to 1 and provides its own mentors, tutors, and advisors, first-generation students like the ones who come from Achievement First schools “might not know that there are services available, and they might not even know what help they need and what to ask for,” MacDonald said. “There’s a lot of pressure on these kids, and, culturally, asking for help might be seen as a weakness, and that’s what we have to overcome.”

Having advisors from Achievement First working with them even after they’ve shown up on campus, he said, is “another safety net.”

Still, these sorts of active partnerships are the exception, not the rule.

“I would not say that higher-education institutions are typically reaching out to us,” said Helton of KIPP. “They do want to reach out and recruit. But in terms of deep partnerships, I would like to see more. It could and should be so much more.”

### Filling a Need

Much of what college-success advisors do for charter-school alumni is provide the help they need to clear the many

obstacles that can derail them: finding housing, registering for classes, picking majors, budgeting money, keeping financial aid flowing, and managing time. They also connect students with “campus champions” known to be accessible and in touch with a range of student needs.

“Sometimes as we get to know these campuses, our alumni will say, ‘Everyone needs to go see Joe,’” said Christie. “Once you know Joe, you’re made.’ Our success team is aggressively finding out who those people are.”

A significant amount of the advising consists of helping students cut through red tape, said Patrick Rametti, director of college completion at Uncommon Schools, a charter school network that operates in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts.

“College can be a very bureaucratic, difficult place to navigate,” Rametti said. “That’s often what our support ends up being: answering questions that the student doesn’t know who to turn to [for assistance] on the college campus.”

The early days of college can be particularly challenging for any young person learning to manage unstructured time, meet increased academic expectations, and adjust to campus life. Then there are the financial stresses, homesickness, imposter syndrome, family responsibilities, and other hurdles many low-income, first-generation, Black, and Hispanic students in particular often must surmount. These students also tend to lack the networking savvy of classmates whose parents went to college.

A survey of KIPP alumni in college found that one in four was financially supporting family members, more than 40 percent had missed meals, and more than half worked at least one job. Fewer than one third had internships connected with their career plans.

The support these students need is often straightforward, such as reminders to register for classes on time or visit professors during office hours. Advisors also remain on call to step in when something unexpected happens.

“I don’t have to be their therapist. I don’t have to be their mom. I don’t have to be their best friend. But I want them to be able to text us when they need some help,” said Warren.

### Familiar Faces

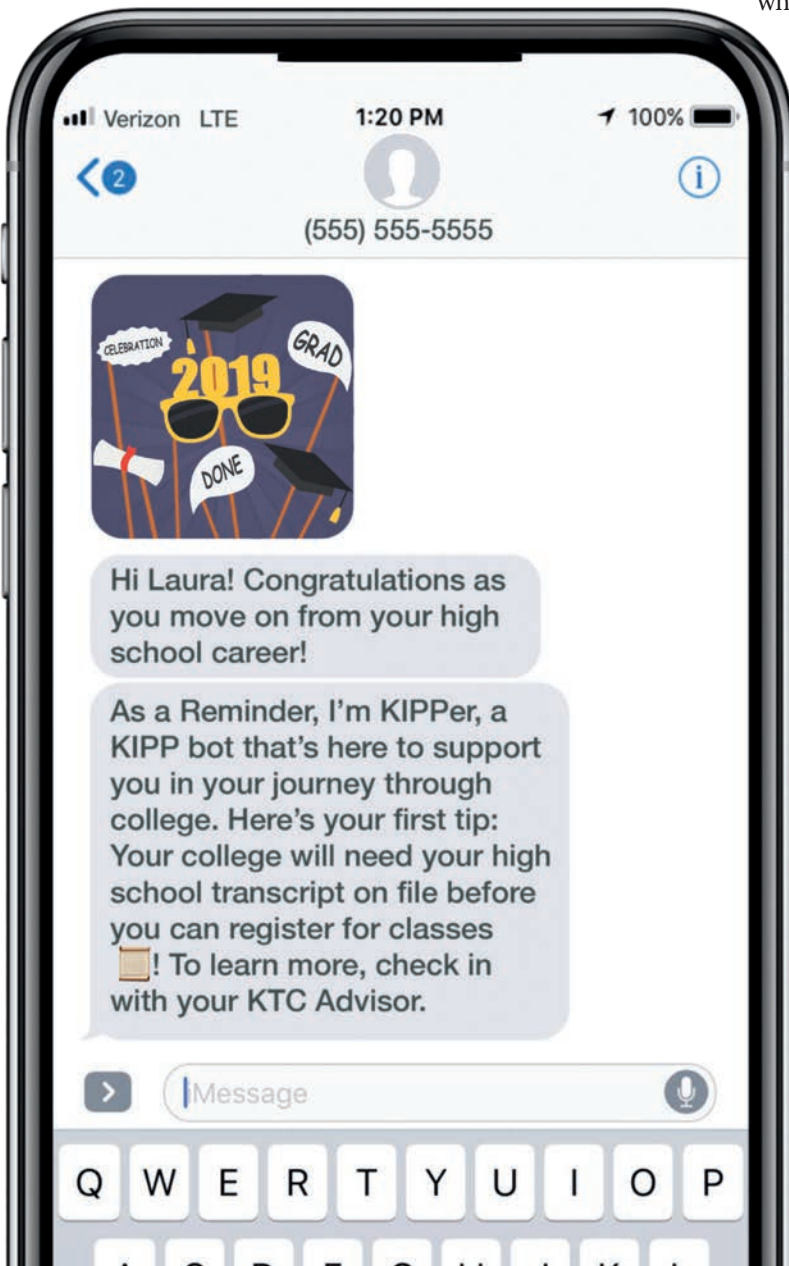
These relationships begin in high school. The Bright Star Schools network has a coordinator of its alumni support and college success program (ASCS, pronounced “ask-us”) at each of its three high schools. These counselors help seniors with financial-aid applications and teach skills including time management. Students are required to get to know their ASCS counselors before they can receive their diplomas.

“If our students don’t know us and trust us, they’re not going to willingly let us track and support their progress,” said Genoveva Cortes, the program’s director.

At Achievement First, students work with college and career counselors throughout high school, with the goal of getting into the “best-fit four-year college or university.” Once that’s happened, they’re paired with alumni-success counselors who will support them during and after graduation, in what Christie called “a warm handoff.”

“We’re trying to get our students to meet the success team in trust-building ways,” she said.

At Uncommon Schools, alumni-success coaches interview students before they finish high school to learn their goals, where they plan to go to college, and what they want to study, said Rametti. And at KIPP, college-transition specialists start their work during the final semester of high school, teaching seniors about such subjects as financial aid and credit hours. Students aren’t allowed to have their high school transcripts until they meet with a college coach and





complete a 35-point college checklist covering everything from financial aid to health insurance.

After graduation, the focus moves to avoiding “summer melt”—that is, when students who initially enroll and intend to go to college fail to show up on campus in the fall. Summer melt sidetracks between 10 and 40 percent of high-school graduates, according to the most comprehensive study of the problem, by the Harvard Strategic Data Project. Low- and moderate-income students, those with low academic confidence, and students headed for community colleges are all at the high end of that range.

KIPP has started using a chatbot called Kipper to stay connected to its college-going graduates in the summers and help reduce summer melt. Kipper regularly sends students text messages like “Did you know that you have to register for orientation? Check your school’s calendar” and “I think you’re amazing. Just popping in to tell you that you’ve got this.” The chatbot also uses artificial intelligence to answer commonly texted questions.

The charters’ most intensive efforts happen once these students finally arrive on campus and have to navigate the often-baffling complexity of college. KIPP counselors check in to make sure they have, in fact, shown up, see how they’re doing, and find out whether they have housing, went to orientation, are attending classes, and bought the textbooks and supplies they’ll need. KIPP keeps track of its growing caseload in college with check-ins each semester and a color-coded system based on how well students seem to be doing on their own. “I can just pull out every color from the benchmarks and that’s my

students are plugged in, whether it’s an office or a program or a mentor who can help them navigate that campus,” echoed Christie.

### Helping or Handholding?

Charter networks often boast that their graduates finish high school “college ready.” But some charters provide so much personalized attention in the lower grades that graduates who are prepared academically still can find the largely self-directed world of college singularly challenging. The intensive supports that help many charter-school students persist through high school, which some critics disparage as handholding, may leave students unprepared for the realities of college life.

“The charter schools do a great deal of regulating students—and then students transition to college where they have to become self-regulated,” Savitz-Romer said.

For example, at Codman Academy Charter School in Boston, students were allowed to resubmit assignments to earn higher grades. The practice was intended to provide more opportunities to learn the subjects. But a study of alumni found it worked against them when they got to college, where no such second chances were allowed. In response, the school changed its revision process.

The Summit Public Schools charter network in California and Washington State made a similar discovery. While an impressive 98 percent of its graduates are accepted to four-year colleges and universities, just 49.9 percent earn a degree within six years of high-school graduation. That’s still considerably higher than national averages for low-income students

## The potential pool of applicants coming out of charter schools is especially attractive to colleges and universities amid enrollment declines and new calls for diversity and inclusion.

20 students who need more help this semester—let me call them,” Warren said.

Advisors also help their students pick classes strategically—not just electives that sound fun, but core requirements for majors that connect with their career aspirations. They comfort them through homesickness and connect them with resources on campus that they might not otherwise easily find or are reluctant to use.

High-school college-success advisors “are constantly encouraging students through our support to be better self-advocates,” Rametti said. “We’re not going to just call the financial aid office and yell at them. We’re going to talk to the student to make sure they understand what the problem is and only intervene as needed.”

“We think of ourselves as successful once we can say our

of color, but not high enough.

Summit determined that its alumni had become accustomed to intensive support, such as one-to-one mentors, which suddenly fell away after high-school graduation. So the network introduced self-directed learning cycles, which require high-school students to set goals, reflect on their progress, and learn time-management skills. The goal is to empower students to become self-directed learners with “habits of success” and a greater sense of purpose. A Summit spokeswoman said that, because college completion rates are calculated over six years, it won’t know the results of this until mid-2022.

Advisors from charter schools say their support is far from coddling; rather, they are simply providing what first-generation and low-income students need to persevere. Students who lack middle-class resources or family knowledge about



PETER VANDERMARKER

*Codman Academy Charter School changed its practice of allowing students to resubmit assignments for better grades, as this amount of flexibility worked against alumni as soon as they got to college.*

how universities work can easily be knocked off course by a minor financial mishap or missed administrative deadline. And it's hard to catch up.

Depending on their financial-aid packages, for example, students might not have access to money for textbooks until several weeks into the semester, noted Christie of Achievement First. Many charter-school graduates, unlike higher-income college classmates, don't have the cash to spare while waiting for grants and loans to come through, Christie said.

"That's a very micro example, but the macro of college is that you need a lot of money during the transition that people assume everybody has," she said. In addition, costs for transportation and supplies also tend to not be factored in to financial-aid awards. When the pandemic forced universities to close, many lower-income students were stranded on campus. In response, KIPP created an emergency fund to help its students travel home.

"The seemingly small barrier of those sorts of small purchases also impacts other things, like your connection to campus," said Christie. Instead of enjoying "what the movies tell us college is supposed to be," she said, many of her students spend the start of freshman year waiting for help at the bursar's office.

Rametti told the story of an Uncommon Schools alumna who landed at a top liberal-arts college but couldn't decide on a major. Instead of starting her studies with general coursework and deciding on a major later, she decided to take a semester off—which research shows is often a first step to dropping out. "She had no one advising her" until her high-school coach stepped in, he said. "You can only imagine how our students are making it at larger public institutions, where they're really just a grain of sand on the beach."

Warren recalled one of her KIPP Through College advisees at just that sort of institution. After one semester, the student was intimidated, overwhelmed, and ready to drop out. "She was just, 'I can't do this. There are 200 people in this class, the professors don't even know my name. I'm just so used to smaller classes. I'm going to leave.'"

Warren convinced the student to persist and helped her find and register for smaller classes.

"I really have to emphasize to students that the college offices are frightening and the people there may not be the nicest, but you need to go and talk to them," she said. "Sometimes it's really hard to go to an office on your own. In the past, we've walked students to mental-health services. We've walked students to financial aid."

These supports are most broadly provided for freshmen but can last throughout a student's college years. Uncommon Schools provides at least a year of intensive support to its



graduates and extended counseling to its most vulnerable alumni. KIPP, Bright Star, and Achievement First offer counseling supports for as many as six years after graduation.

### The Results

Because many of these efforts are new or evolving, their impact is not yet clear.

One of the earliest wins for charter schools that keep supporting students after high school appears to be in slowing summer melt. At KIPP, the combination of text nudging, artificial intelligence, and human interaction has cut summer melt among New York students to 2 percent from 35 percent.

Measuring summer melt, however, only takes a summer. Tracking completion rates takes six years or more, and some of

is often better connected to students' career plans than off-campus employment and reduces commuting time. While research has found that work-study participation slightly decreases first-year grades, it also slightly increases the number of credits students earn in their first year of college.

Other programs comparable to what the charter schools are doing have also had positive outcomes. The Carolina Covenant, for instance, at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, gives low-income students not only significant financial aid, but also work-study jobs, mentoring by faculty, staff, or older Covenant scholars, and workshops about such things as time management and study techniques. Started in 2003, it's increased graduation rates for this category of students by 8 percentage points.

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the charter networks haven't been providing intensive support to their alumni on campuses long enough for it to show up significantly yet in the statistics.

Eight in 10 KIPP students now enroll in college after graduating high school. The proportion who earn bachelor's degrees within six years has been rising steadily to reach 43 percent, according Helton, head of KIPP Through College. Another 6 percent earn associate degrees. At Uncommon Schools, 58 percent of high-school graduates earn a bachelor's degree within six years. The figure at Achievement First is 53 percent and at Bright Star, 37 percent. Another 8 percent of former Bright Star students complete associate degrees.

Research into what boosts graduation rates more broadly suggests the charters are aiming at the right targets.

Charters typically push students to apply to and enroll at more academically demanding colleges than they might ordinarily consider. Low-income students in particular tend to "undermatch" with less-selective institutions that have poor graduation rates. Pushing them toward more elite institutions, as the charter-school programs relentlessly do in the first step of their alumni-success work, improves their outcomes, according to research by the UChicago Consortium on School Research, which is based at the University of Chicago.

Charters are also helping students find resources they might not have known existed. One of particular importance to low-income students is work-study, which the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment finds

Those types of supports have helped Allison Gonzalez-Castro stay the course in higher education. The first in her family to go to college, she got cold feet at the threshold of her freshman year, until her KIPP Through College counselor talked her out of putting off her education. People who postpone college, regardless of their intentions, are much less likely ever to go, according to research by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Once on campus, homesick and struggling to manage her own schedule, Gonzalez-Castro ended up on academic probation and fell back on her KIPP Through College coach to help her through.

"I probably texted her hundreds of times," she said. "She was my person to go to when I needed help. If I was crying because I was stressed, she was the person I would text. They already know what I've been through. They know my story, my background. So I feel more comfortable talking about personal problems and stuff that would eventually affect my education."

Now a junior at Colorado State University majoring in human development and family studies, Gonzalez-Castro, 20, is on track to graduate on time.

"I really, really, really appreciate them," she said of her KIPP college success advisors. "If they hadn't opened my eyes and gotten me on the right path, I wouldn't be where I am right now."

*Jon Marcus is higher education editor at the Hechinger Report. He writes about higher education for the New York Times, Washington Post, NPR, and others.*