EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF REALITY CHANGERS

Final Report

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Reality Changers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reality Changers is a San Diego-based nonprofit with a mission to transform lives by providing youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the academic support, financial assistance, and leadership training to become college graduates and leaders for positive change in their schools, communities, and families. Reality Changers pursues this mission through three core programs:

- **College Town**, which provides mentoring, tutoring, and leadership opportunities for students in grades 8-11.
- **College Apps Academy**, which offers 12th grade students intensive guidance and support in choosing and applying for college and scholarships.
- **The Alumni Network**, which offers resources and support for College Town and College Apps Academy graduates as they move through college and beyond.

Reality Changers hired ICF, an independent research firm, to carry out an external evaluation of their programming. ICF used a mixed-methods approach to examine the education outcomes of its participants and assess how they compared to national and state data, and to identify program areas where Reality Changers has made the most and the least progress toward achieving its goals. ICF used administrative data collected by Reality Changers from the 2014-15 to 2017-18 school years to measure outcomes including student grades, standardized test scores, and college admissions and scholarships. ICF also collected qualitative data through focus groups and interviews with current and former students and Reality Changers Staff.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide additional training and support for staff who serve as achievement coaches.
- Provide more guidance to students on the transition between College Town and College Apps Academy.
- Offer more structured opportunities for interaction between alumni and students.
- Provide guidance and support for alumni about choosing a major and finding internships.
- Establish consistent procedures for data collection and management.

KEY FINDINGS

- Most Reality Changers participants maintain at least a 3.0 GPA, and on average, students who stay in the program multiple years improve their GPA each year.

- Reality Changers participants scored higher on the SAT and ACT tests than the national or California averages.

- Almost all Reality Changers participants are accepted to college, and on average, receive more in scholarships than the national average.

- College Town participants credit the program with changing their attitudes toward school and aspirations for their future.

- College Apps Academy participants perceive their participation in the program as instrumental in understanding how to apply to college and for scholarships.

- Alumni maintain a feeling of connection to their fellow students and some Reality Changers staff, but desire more support with choosing a major and finding internships or career connections.

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

Reality Changers is a non-profit headquartered in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego. The mission of Reality Changers is to transform lives by providing youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the academic support, financial assistance, and leadership training to become college graduates and leaders for positive change in their schools, communities, and families. Reality Changers' theory of change is that if low-income, high-potential students are given the tools and support to envision a better future for themselves, then they will become more confident, capable, and motivated to apply, enroll, and succeed in college. Ultimately, Reality Changers posits that their alumni will become leaders and role models who transform their communities.

In 2018, Reality Changers engaged ICF, a research and consulting firm, to conduct an independent evaluation of their program. The purpose of engaging an external research firm was to provide Reality Changers an outside perspective on the effects of its programming. Specifically, this evaluation sought to answer three main research questions:

1. To what extent do Reality Changers' three core programs (College Town, College Apps Academy, and the Alumni Network) improve education outcomes for low-income participants?
2. How do program outcomes for Reality Changers program participants compare to state and/or national trends?
3. What are the program areas where Reality Changers has made the most progress toward achieving its goals and what are the areas where the least progress has been made?

ICF began the evaluation process by facilitating a discussion with Reality Changers staff to develop a program logic model. During this meeting, Reality Changers staff described the key program inputs and activities and articulated their intended short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. Based on this discussion, ICF created a draft logic model, which was reviewed and revised by Reality Changers staff **(APPENDIX 1)**.

Using the logic model as a framework, ICF implemented a mixed-methods research design. ICF did not collect any original quantitative data, but used administrative data already collected by Reality Changers. Reality Changers provided ICF with data from 2011-2018, including student demographic information, high school grades, ACT/SAT test scores, and college application and acceptance data. However, these data

were not collected consistently over time, and had substantial missing data or undefined collection procedures, especially between 2011 and 2014. Therefore, after reviewing the universe of data and in consultation with Reality Changers, ICF focused the evaluation on College Town data from four years (2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18) and College Apps Academy data for three years (2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18). For both programs, ICF included data only on students who completed the entire program, as identified by Reality Changers. ICF also analyzed data on college enrollment, persistence, and graduation collected by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) for students who participated in Reality Changers from 2004-2017. These data were gathered by Reality Changers through their NSC subscription and provided to ICF. ICF did not have access to any data from non-participants, except for national or state averages. Therefore, the findings from this evaluation should be considered descriptive, and no causal inferences should be drawn.

To obtain a richer, nuanced understanding of the program and its effects on participants, ICF collected qualitative data from current and former participants and staff. Specifically, ICF conducted two in-person focus groups with current students— one with College Town students and one with College Apps Academy students. The focus groups were semi-structured based on protocols **(APPENDIX 2)** developed in consultation with Reality Changers staff. Additionally, ICF conducted one-on-one phone interviews with four Reality Changers alumni **(APPENDIX 3)**. The purpose of the alumni interviews was to gather their feedback on the Alumni Network, and also to learn about their perspective on Reality Changers looking back as former students. Finally, ICF interviewed five Reality Changers staff members.

EXHIBIT 1. Summary of Outcomes, Indicators, and Data Sources.

Quantitative Outcomes		Qualitative Outcomes	
Indicators	**Data Sources**	**Indicators**	**Data Sources**
Student demographics	Administrative Data	Self-efficacy and confidence	Focus Group/Interviews
Grade point average	Administrative Data	Motivation in school	Focus Group/Interviews
SAT scores	Administrative Data	Desire to attend college	Focus Group/Interviews
ACT scores	Administrative Data	Knowledge of college app. process	Focus Group/Interviews
# of college applications	Administrative Data	Commitment to community	Focus Group/Interviews
# of college acceptances	Administrative Data		
Value of gift aid	Administrative Data		
College enrollment	National Student Clearinghouse		
College graduation	National Student Clearinghouse		

REALITY CHANGERS OUTCOME EVALUATION (Research Questions 1 and 3)

■ COLLEGE TOWN: Program Description

College Town provides afterschool and summer programming focused on academic performance, leadership, and soft skills for students in grades 8-11. College Town is intended to reach students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not been provided or taken advantage of available resources and support to realize their potential. Students who join College Town during their 8th grade year usually have a grade point average (GPA) below 2.0, and join the program after attending a Challenge Assembly, during which Reality Changers staff invite students to envision a better future for themselves, and explain how College Town can help them achieve this vision. These students are then invited to join the program by completing an application in which they describe their background, aspirations, and how they believe attending college can help achieve their goals. Students who do not attend a Challenge Assembly may also apply to join College Town as 8th graders through the beginning of 11th grade by submitting an application and completing an interview; this is a competitive process, and there was about a 300 student waiting list during the 2017-18 school year.

College Town participants are assigned to a group that meets from 6:00-9:00 PM on the same night each week. Weeknight groups consist of about 40-45 students from across grades 8-11. The same cohort of students stays in the same weeknight group as they progress through school, although Reality Changers staff

observed that students sometime switch weeknights if their schedule changes. Weeknight sessions are led by Achievement Coaches, with support from other Reality Changers staff, guest speakers, and tutors. The structure and content of weeknight sessions consists of the following main segments: *Pre-program, Hot Words, Lesson,* and *Mentoring and Tutoring.* **(SEE PAGE 6)**

In addition to weekly afterschool activities, College Town students attend summer leadership camp, participate in community service activities, and shadow community members in their jobs during school breaks, and may attend extra sessions focused on SAT or ACT test preparation.

College Town students who achieve a 3.5 grade point average during the school year receive a scholarship to attend Academic Connections, a three-week summer residential program operated by the University of California, San Diego. Students who participate in Academic Connections live on campus and attend classes taught by UCSD faculty and doctoral students, and also participate in enrichment activities such as arts and crafts, dance, or sports. Most College Town students who attend Academic Connections participate at the UCSD main campus, but students have also attended satellite programs in Arizona, New Mexico, Washington, DC, and Hawaii.

■ COLLEGE TOWN: Weeknight Program Schedule

PRE-PROGRAM 5:30 - 6:00 PM	HOT WORDS 6:00 - 6:30 PM	FAMILY DINNER 6:30 - 7:00 PM
Students gather and socialize informally before group activities begin.	A whole-group activity led by a staff member, usually focused on strengthening students' vocabulary.	The entire group eats a home-cooked meal prepared by a parent.

LESSON 7:00 - 7:30 PM	MENTORING & TUTORING 7:30 - 9:00 PM
A guest speaker or Reality Changers staff speaks to the whole group. The content of lessons varies from week to week, but is intended to inspire students and improve their confidence.	After lesson time, students break into smaller groups of about 10 students, each led by an Achievement Coach. This segment usually begins with an activity called congress, during which students and their Achievement Coach discuss how their week is progressing, including their high points and low points. After congress, students work with subject-matter tutors, achievement coaches, or independently on homework, SAT/ACT preparation, or to research colleges and careers.

■ COLLEGE TOWN: Quantitative Findings

Reality Changers serves its intended population. The number of participating students each year was stable, with between 196 and 217 students in each program year. Among these students:

- More than three-quarters of participants each year were Hispanic/Latino students, with African-American students the next most common racial/ethnic background;
- There were more male than female students each year except 2017-18, when the gender split was equal;
- More than three-quarters of students participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program each year;
- The median annual income was approximately $30,000 each year.

These data suggest that Reality Changers is serving its intended population of low-income students. **(SEE EXHIBIT 2)**

On average, the GPA of College Town students was above 3.0 during three of the four program years included in the study. Reality Changers' goal is for participating students to maintain a GPA[1] equal or above 3.0. The program year with the highest average GPA was 2015-16, when the mean GPA was 3.24, but there was no clear pattern by program year. Excluding the small number of students in grades 8 or below, students in the 11th grade had the highest GPA each year of the study. **(SEE EXHIBIT 3)**

[1] College Town students come from multiple grade levels and schools with different weighting systems. ICF used weighted GPA when available because it had the least missing data. However, in cases where a student had an unweighted GPA but no weighted GPA, ICF used the unweighted GPA.

EXHIBIT 2. Demographics of College Town Students.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
N	210	213	196	213
Gender				
Female	37%	42%	49%	49%
Male	63%	56%	51%	49%
Unknown	0%	1%	0%	1%
Race/Ethnicity				
Asian/Pacific Islander	5%	3%	2%	2%
Black/African American	13%	14%	13%	11%
Hispanic/Latino	81%	78%	83%	86%
White	<1%	0%	<1%	0%
Two or more races	<1%	<1%	<1%	0%
Unknown	0%	5%	0%	<1%
Free/Reduce Lunch Eligible				
Yes	77%	92%	79%	83%
No	6%	6%	5%	4%
Unknown	17%	2%	16%	13%
Grade Level				
8th Grade or Below	5%	4%	4%	3%
9th Grade	24%	21%	26%	29%
10th Grade	31%	30%	32%	30%
11th grade	40%	45%	38%	38%
Median Income	$29,828	$31,000	$30,701	$28,893

EXHIBIT 3. Average GPA Among College Town Students, by Program Year.

	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18	
	All students	Mean GPA	All students	Mean GPA	All students	Mean GPA	All students	Mean GPA
All Students	**210**	**3.13 (n=165)**	**213**	**3.24 (n=142)**	**196**	**3.12 (n=159)**	**213**	**2.89 (n=156)**
8th Grade Students	9	2.90 (n=6)	9	3.56 (n=3)	6	3.29 (n=5)	5	3.61 (n=1)
9th Grade Students	53	3.17 (n=41)	45	3.04 (n=29)	51	2.82 (n=40)	61	2.47 (n=46)
10th Grade Students	68	3.0 (n=53)	64	3.38 (n=48)	65	2.97 (n=52)	65	2.97 (n=43)
11th Grade Students	86	3.24 (n=65)	95	3.22 (n=62)	73	3.41 (n=63)	82	3.11 (n=65)

A majority of students in each year reported a GPA above 3.0. In each program year, a majority of students for whom GPA data was available recorded a GPA above 3.0. Further, the proportion of students who achieved a 3.0 or above GPA increased each year from 2014-15 to 2016-17, although the mean GPA was lower in 2017-18. In 2014-15, 64% of Reality Changers participants achieved at least a 3.0 GPA, which increased to 69% in 2015-16 and to 81% in 2016-17. **(SEE EXHIBIT 4)**

EXHIBIT 4. Proportion of Students with at Least a 3.0 GPA, by Grade Level.

	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18	
	All students	% with 3.0+ GPA	All students	% with 3.0+ GPA	All students	% with 3.0+ GPA	All students	% with 3.0+ GPA
All Students	**210**	**64% (n=165)**	**213**	**69% (n=142)**	**196**	**81% (n=159)**	**213**	**60% (n=156)**
8th Grade Students	9	33% (n=6)	9	100% (n=3)	6	80% (n=5)	5	100% (n=1)
9th Grade Students	53	68% (n=41)	45	55% (n=29)	51	51% (n=40)	61	46% (n=46)
10th Grade Students	68	57% (n=53)	64	81% (n=48)	65	60% (n=52)	65	63% (n=43)
11th Grade Students	86	69% (n=65)	95	69% (n=62)	73	86% (n=63)	82	68% (n=65)

There was no pattern in GPAs across weeknight sessions. Compared with students who attend College Town at its headquarters branch, students who participate in the Solana Beach location demonstrated a higher average GPA than students participating at headquarters. However, there was no statistically significant difference between students who attend at Solana Beach or on different weeknights during any year included in the study. **(SEE EXHIBIT 5)**

EXHIBIT 5. College Town Mean GPA by Weeknight.

	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18	
	Students	GPA	Students	GPA	Students	GPA	Students	GPA
Solana Beach	31	3.34 (n=21)	35	3.53 (n=15)	32	3.32 (n=23)	30	3.04 (n=15)
Thursday	44	3.20 (n=38)	43	3.33 (n=31)	25	3.26 (n=22)	47	2.58 (n=34)
Monday	36	3.15 (n=28)	41	3.12 (n=27)	31	3.16 (n=27)	40	2.75 (n=31)
Tuesday	54	2.99 (n=42)	53	3.30 (n=35)	32	3.14 (n=31)	50	3.02 (n=38)
Wednesday	44	3.8 (n=1)	41	3.09 (n=34)	33	3.06 (n=28)	45	3.08 (n=37)
Not indicated	1	3.24 (n=65)	N/A	N/A	43	2.81 (n=27)	1	3.69 (n=1)
Total	**210**	**3.13 (n=165)**	**213**	**3.24 (n=142)**	**196**	**3.12 (n=159)**	**213**	**2.89 (n=156)**
Significance (ANOVA)		P=.479		P=.209		P=.736		P=.233

Students who attend Academic Connections had higher GPAs than students who do not attend Academic Connections. In each year of the study except 2017-18, more than half of College Town students participated in Academic Connections. In 2015-16, 62% of College Town students attended Academic Connections, which was the highest proportion of any year in the study. Unsurprisingly, students who participated in Academic Connections recorded a higher GPA on average than students who did not participate in Academic Connections because the criterion for participation is maintaining at least a 3.50 GPA. **(SEE EXHIBIT 6)**

EXHIBIT 6. Academic Connections Participation and GPA.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
% participating in AC	**59%**	**62%**	**56%**	**34%**
Mean GPA, AC Students	3.60 (n=98)	3.58 (n=88)	3.59 (n=89)	3.64 (n=66)
Mean GPA, non-AC Students	2.45 (n=67)	2.70 (n=54)	2.51 (n=70)	2.35 (n=90)

In 2014-15, 64% of Reality Changers participants achieved at least a 3.0 GPA, which increased to 69% in 2015-16 and to 81% in 2016-17.

On average, students who participated in College Town improved their GPA year over year. In order to track students GPA as they move through high school, ICF created cohorts of students who appeared on the College Town roster in multiple years. Specifically, there were two graduating classes for whom ICF was able to analyze student GPA for at least three years in high school. In both years, students improved their GPA each year, such that the average GPA for students in their last year was higher than their average GPA in their first year. For the class of 2017, among all students with GPA data, the average GPA increased each year, from 3.0 when the class was in 10th grade to 3.34 when the class was in 12th grade. Among the 33 students in the class of 2017 with GPA data each year, the average GPA increased every year, from 3.07 to 3.30 as the cohort moved from 10th through 12th grade. For the class of 2018 (Exhibit 7), the average GPA for the class increased from 3.17 when students were in 9th grade to 3.41 when students were in 11th grade. Among the 40 students for whom there was GPA data for all three years, students maintained a relatively stable GPA, although it did increase from 3.32 during 9th grade to 3.37 in 11th grade, on average. **(SEE EXHIBIT 7 & 8)**

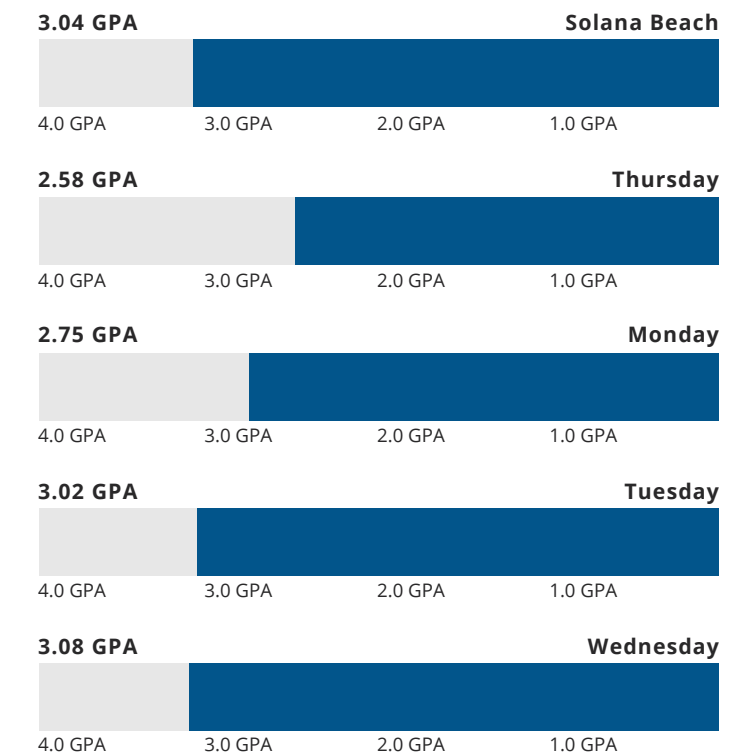2017-2018 SCHOOL YEAR
College Town Mean GPA by weeknight.

3.04 GPA — Solana Beach
2.58 GPA — Thursday
2.75 GPA — Monday
3.02 GPA — Tuesday
3.08 GPA — Wednesday

EXHIBIT 7. Cohort Analysis, Class of 2017.

	10th Grade (2014-15)	11th Grade (2015-16)	12th Grade (2016-17)
Students on Roster	68	95	90
Students w/ GPA Data	53	62	75
Avg. GPA (Students w/ data)	3.0	3.22	3.34
Students w/ GPA Data All Years (n=33)	3.07	3.25	3.30

EXHIBIT 8. Cohort Analysis, Class of 2018.

	9th Grade (2014-15)	10th Grade (2015-16)	11th Grade (2016-17)
Students on Roster	52	64	83
Students w/ GPA Data	41	48	63
Avg. GPA (Students w/ data)	3.17	3.38	3.41
Students w/ GPA Data All Years (n=40)	3.32	3.31	3.37

■ COLLEGE TOWN: Qualitative Findings

Students credited the application process with helping them re-orient their life stories toward academic success. Several students reported feeling alienated from school before they entered Reality Changers, citing a lack of peer, parental, and teacher support for making them feel disconnected from school. For example, one student recalled feeling like school did not matter to whether he would succeed in life, which diminished his motivation to even try to learn during class. Another student remembered thinking "What did I do this time?" when he was invited to a Challenge Assembly, and perceived that school was not a place where he would succeed. Students credited the College Town application process, especially the personal essay component, with helping them reinterpret their backgrounds and previous struggles in school. Specifically, students recalled that the prompt on the application essay encouraged them to view their previous struggles as challenges they could surmount, and in the process become stronger individuals. For example, one student characterized the essay as an opportunity to "write my own story," which was the first step in a longer process of feeling more empowered and motivated to succeed academically. Although this sentiment was voiced by students who joined College Town at different stages, it was especially pronounced among those who joined in 8th grade after attending a Challenge Assembly. These students remembered feeling inspired by current or former College Town students who described how they benefitted from Reality Changers; according to these students, they identified with these students, and felt motivated after they learned about challenges they had overcome.

College Town helps students expand their aspirations and set long-term goals. During the focus group, several students observed that they did not have clear goals before joining College Town. For example, one student stated that his main goal before joining Reality Changers was to "keep my mom from taking away my PlayStation," but that he did not think much about his long-term future. Other students described having vague ambitions such as making their parents proud, but said they did not have clear ideas about how to achieve them. Students said that Reality Changers helped them formulate more specific goals for themselves and develop a roadmap toward achieving them. In particular, students cited Academic Connections as pivotal in motivating them to improve their grades, as well as helping them clarify their college and career goals. In interviews with alumni, several reflected back on their experience in College Town as pivotal to helping them attend college and pursue careers. For example, one College Town alumni observed that growing up as the daughter of immigrants from El Salvador, attending college "was never part of my life plan (but) College Town made me realize (college) was an option." Now, she is a college senior pursuing a career as a school psychologist.

Students who participated in Academic Connections said the prospect of living on a college campus during the summer motivated them to keep up their grades to qualify for the scholarships, while also helping attendees clarify their long-term aspirations. Several students described hearing positive things about Academic Connections from older students, which made them want to improve their grades so they could attend. For example, one student recalled that "Academic Connections was a big thing for me (because) it gave me a goal to get a good GPA" to qualify for a scholarship. Besides giving students a short-term goal for raising their GPA, students who attended Academic Connections described the experience as instrumental in shaping their aspirations and helping them realize the college environment was a place where they could succeed. For example, one student observed that he was not sure what he wanted to do with his life before attending Academic Connections, but after taking classes through the program, he has decided he wanted to pursue a career in neuroscience.

College Town fosters a sense of community and solidarity, which encourages students to encourage one another in their academic pursuits. Throughout the focus group, several students likened the Reality Changers community to a family, and credited this solidarity with improving their motivation to succeed in school. Students frequently referred to one another as "brothers and sisters," and characterized their relationships as honest and open. Some students remembered feeling skeptical of others in their group when they first joined College Town, but cited three program components as most important to establishing and strengthening their peer relationships. First, students mentioned the leadership camp as instrumental in building trust between students by providing opportunities to get to know each other in a fun environment without the distractions they experience at home. Second, students cited congress time during their first year in the program, which they said helped them understand each other's backgrounds, and to see both what they had in common as well as the unique circumstances that shape each person. Third, students credited informal interactions, which often occur during the pre-program time each week, with strengthening their relationships over time. Taken together, these inter-peer dynamics contribute to a virtuous cycle, in which students push each other to succeed. For example, one student observed that her relationships with fellow students helped her become willing to admit when she needed support in school, and stated that "I think because I'm surrounded by peers who have the same goals...(I) know I'm not alone, so I feel comfortable asking for help." Other students echoed this sentiment, and credited their peers with building up their confidence and motivation at school.

In the words of one student, ==*"Reality Changers helped me find my voice,"*== *by encouraging him to speak up about his experiences and aspirations. When asked how this affected their academic performance, some students reported that learning how to speak in front of a group, especially about their experiences and ambitions, helped them respect themselves more, resulting in more productive relationships with teachers.*

College Town helps students feel confident and respected, which helps them interact with teachers. Several students attributed their improved academic performance to greater confidence and self-respect that they developed through their time in College Town. Some students specifically mentioned public speaking as instrumental in growing their confidence. For example, one student stated that "The public speaking part really helped me express myself. My inclination was to keep everything to myself, and Reality Changers has helped me open up." Other students echoed these comments, and credited public speaking activities with helping them become more confident and comfortable being themselves. In the words of one student, "Reality Changers helped me find my voice," by encouraging him to speak up about his experiences and aspirations. When asked how this affected their academic performance, some students reported that learning how to speak in front of a group, especially about their experiences and ambitions, helped them respect themselves more, resulting in more productive relationships with teachers. For example, one student recalled that "I used to think teachers didn't like me, so I didn't care about school and just wanted to mess around." After learning how to speak in front of a group about himself and his goals, he perceives that he can relate better to teachers "not just as a student" but as a person. Consequently, he is more comfortable asking for help and motivated to show that he can get good grades. Other students expressed similar sentiments, observing that as they become more confident in themselves, they learn how to interact in more productive ways with teachers.

College Town's mixed-grade approach facilitates inter-age relationships and support. Although students described forming stronger bonds with students in their own cohort, several students also mentioned benefits from interacting with students in different grade levels. Younger students described feeling inspired by older students from their weekday groups, especially after they matriculate from College Town and start getting accepted to colleges. For example, one student pointed out that

"You have older students you can look up to (in College Town)... When you see them in their college sweatshirts, you want to be like them." Older students also described benefits from having younger students in their weekday sessions. For example, several students described feeling a sense of responsibility as role models, which they said helped them stay motivated to achieve their goals.

Participating in College Town changes how students interact with their peers and siblings. As described earlier, students said they form strong friendships with their fellow College Town students. Several students also described how College Town influenced the way they related to other peers outside the program, such as others at their high schools and/or their siblings. Several students described feeling like other students look up to them as almost parental figures, including multiple students in both focus groups who said their friends think of them as the "mom" or "dad" of their social circle and with their siblings. For example, one student mentioned that "Some of my friends from school think I'm "The mom" figure because I'm always talking about college, but at Reality Changers I don't feel like the mom figure because we're all trying to go to college." Another student described how College Town inculcated a sense of responsibility for other students at her school who struggle with gangs and substance abuse. This student described feeling angry when people stereotype students from her neighborhood, but credits her experience in College Town with inspiring her to translate her frustration into change: "I hate it when people say 'Oh, that's just City Heights' (when talking about drugs and violence)...Reality Changers helped me realize I could be angry, but that I could do something about it. This is where I grew up, and I want to improve it."

Students perceive achievement coaches as dependable sources of support and accountability. When asked what components of College Town most directly helped them in school, almost all students mentioned their achievement coach, and cited two main reasons why these individuals are important to them. First, students referred to their achievement coaches as dependable. Some students observed that they are more comfortable challenging themselves in school, such as by taking more difficult classes, because they can count on their achievement coaches for support. For example, one student reported that "I know I can depend on my achievement coach. Even if it's late at night, I can wake him up and he will help me." Second, students observed that achievement coaches provide accountability, which motivates them to try harder in school. For example, one student said "my achievement coach would be disappointed if I had a bad grade, and I want to make him proud" which caused him to study more for tests. Another student observed that "There are some things I can't tell my parents, but my achievement coach is closer to my age (so I can tell her)." This response suggests that achievement coaches fill a niche in students' support systems, which empowers them to grow as students and individuals.

Students benefit from tutoring and having time set aside to study and do homework. Several students credited their weekly College Town schedule with teaching them how to manage their time better. Every student in the focus group acknowledged that they struggle with procrastination, but several said College Town's evening programming helped them manage their responsibilities by ensuring they set aside time to study or work on assignments, even when they are not due the next day. For example, one student said that having a weekly time to study gave her an "extra push" to complete her work each week, which helped her learn more deeply than if she just crammed for a test last minute.

Job shadowing and community service opportunities were less important to students than other program components. When asked to describe the components of College Town that were most valuable to their growth, students cited relationships with their achievement coaches and their peers, or the tutoring and study time, but no students volunteered job shadowing or community service opportunities as significant. When probed about the importance of these components, most students said they were less important than other aspects of the program.

■ COLLEGE APPS ACADEMY: Program Description

College Apps Academy supports 12th grade students throughout the college decision, application, and financial aid process. College Apps Academy consists of small group, instructor-led sessions for 2.5 hours per week (not including dinner) throughout the school year, during which instructors teach a curriculum on choosing, applying, and paying for college. In addition to the weekly classes, instructors provide one-on-one, tailored assistance to students during instructor office hours. Students also receive ACT/SAT preparation support, hear guest speakers, and participate in afterschool and evening activity nights. Students who matriculate from College Town join College Apps Academy when they reach 12th grade, and participate in the Headquarters or Solana Beach locations. College Apps Academy is also present on site at 16 high schools and 6 community based organizations in San Diego and Orange counties for 12th grade students who did not participate in College Town, but applied to join College Apps Academy for their senior year of high school.

A majority of students who appear on the College Town roster as 11th graders matriculated to College Apps Academy in 12th grade, although the proportion was much higher for the class of 2017 than the class of 2016. In 2014-15, there were 86 11th graders, of whom 60 joined College Apps as seniors in 2015-16. Of this group, 85% attended College Apps Academy at Headquarters, while the rest attended at Solana Beach. Among the 95 College Town students in 11th grade in 2015-16, 86 joined College Apps Academy in 2016-17. Of these students, 81% attended College Apps at Headquarters and 19% attended at Solana Beach. Among the class of 2018, 86% joined College Apps, with 70% attending at headquarters and the rest at Solana Beach. **(SEE EXHIBIT 9)**

■ COLLEGE APPS ACADEMY: Quantitative Findings

College Apps Academy serves a student population that is mostly low-income students who would be the first in their family to attend college. The majority of students in both years were Hispanic, especially at the Solana Beach Reality Changers (SBRC) and Headquarters locations. A majority of students across all locations were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and would be the first in their family to attend college, with a greater proportion of students in these categories at the Headquarters and SBRC locations compared to the school-based locations. In contrast to College Town, female students constituted the majority of participants in College Apps Academy, especially at school-based locations. **(SEE EXHIBIT 10)**

There were no statistically significant differences on SAT scores across locations in either year. On average, College Apps Academy participants from across all locations reported similar scores on SAT tests, although school-based participants scored slightly higher on average. In 2015-16, the mean SAT score for school-based College Apps Academy students was 1541, which is 77 points higher than students who attend at Headquarters, although this difference was not statistically significant. In 2016-17, the SAT scoring systems changed from a 2400 point scale to a 1600 point scale, which is why the scores appear lower in 2016-17 and 2017-18. As with 2015-16 scores, there were no statistically significant differences between students at Headquarters, SBRC, or school-based locations. Results from the ACT test show a similar pattern. There were also no statistically significant differences in ACT scores across locations in either year, but students at school-based locations performed slightly higher than students at headquarters or SBRC, except in 2017-18. **(SEE EXHIBIT 11)**

EXHIBIT 9. Matriculated College Students.

	Joined College Apps	Headquarters	Solana Beach
Class of 2016 (n=86)	70%	85%	15%
Class of 2017 (n=95)	94%	81%	19%
Class of 2018 (n=73)	86%	70%	30%

EXHIBIT 10. Demographic Summary of College Apps Academy Students from 2015-16 through 2017-18.

	2015 - 2016				2016 - 2017				2017- 2018			
N	HQ	SBRC	School-based	Total	HQ	SBRC	School-based	Total	HQ	SBRC	School-based	Total
Total	81	13	207	**301**	85	19	220	**324**	73	14	299	**386**
Completed Program	98%	93%	93%	**94%**	86%	82%	85%	**85%**	100%	88%	79%	**81%**
Gender												
Male	45%	69%	40%	**42%**	51%	58%	36%	**41%**	41%	31%	33%	**36%**
Female	55%	31%	60%	**58%**	49%	42%	64%	**59%**	59%	69%	66%	**64%**
Race Ethnicity												
Hispanic	72%	100%	55%	**62%**	68%	100%	65%	**68%**	67%	94%	63%	**65%**
Asian	10%	0%	19%	**16%**	9%	0%	19%	**15%**	8%	0%	17%	**15%**
Black/African American	16%	0%	8%	**10%**	19%	0%	5%	**8%**	24%	0%	9%	**11%**
White	3%	0%	13%	**10%**	2%	0%	10%	**7%**	0%	6%	6%	**5%**
Other	0%	0%	3%	**2%**	0%	0%	1%	**1%**	0%	0%	2%	**2%**
F/R Price Lunch												
Participate	90%	76%	85%	**86%**	91%	73%	86%	**86%**	97%	87%	86%	**88%**
Not Participate	4%	8%	11%	**9%**	8%	21%	13%	**12%**	3%	13%	8%	**7%**
Unknown	6%	15%	4%	**6%**	1%	5%	1%	**2%**	0%	0%	6%	**5%**
First Generation College Student	89%	92%	73%	**78%**	89%	84%	76%	**80%**	99%	94%	77%	**82%**
Median Income	$28,040	$25,504	$28,870	**$28,870**	$31,000	$27,708	No Data	**$30,000**	$24,674	$30,467	$30,188	**$29,589**

EXHIBIT 11. SAT and ACT Scores.

	Class of 2016		Class of 2017		Class of 2018	
	Mean SAT	Mean ACT	Mean SAT	Mean ACT	Mean SAT	Mean ACT
All Students with data	**1521 (n=260)**	**23 (n=192)**	**1066 (n=242)**	**22 (n=178)**	**1080 (n=314)**	**21 (n=189)**
HQ	1464 (n=70)	22 (n=50)	1050 (n=70)	21 (n=64)	1083 (n=63)	21 (n=47)
SBRC	1550 (n=5)	19 (n=4)	1024 (n=16)	20 (n=13)	1201 (n=7)	23 (n=11)
School-based locations	1541 (n=185)	23 (n=138)	1078 (n=156)	22 (n=101)	1076 (n=244)	21 (n=131)
Significance (ANOVA)	P=.665	P=.066	P=.114	P=.250	P=.132	P=.280

Almost all students who complete College Apps Academy are accepted to college. In all three study years, virtually all students reported submitting at least one college application, and more than 90% of students were accepted to college each year. The average number of college applications submitted per student was between eight and ten, and each year students were accepted to four colleges, on average. **(SEE EXHIBIT 12)**

EXHIBIT 12. College Applications and Acceptances.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of students with application data	300	319	384
Applied to college	99%	99%	98%
Accepted to college	97%	94%	91%
Not accepted to college	>1%	1%	9%
Missing Data	3%	5%	1%
Mean number of college applications	10	8	9
Mean number of college acceptances	4	4	4

Almost all College Apps Academy participants received gift aid in 2016-17 and 2017-18. In both years, 90% of students reported receiving a scholarship or grant for college. Among these students, the mean value of gift aid was about $16,000 per year. Due to missing data, it was not possible to accurately estimate the scholarship value for previous years. **(SEE EXHIBIT 13)**

EXHIBIT 13. Gift Aid.

	2016-17	2017-18
Proportion reporting gift aid	90%	90%
Mean value of one year gift aid	$15,996	$16,060
Max value of one year gift aid	$64,026	$73,714

Some students observed that College Town contributed to their personal growth and helped them set higher ambitions for themselves, while College Apps Academy provided the blueprint for achieving these ambitions.

■ COLLEGE APPS ACADEMY: Qualitative Findings

Students perceive College Apps Academy to be more challenging than College Town. Several students who participated in College Town before College Apps Academy described feeling initially overwhelmed and surprised by the rigor of College Apps Academy, especially during the first few weeks. These students characterized College Town as more fun and engaging, with fewer formal expectations. Some students said they knew College Apps Academy would be different from College Town, but were not totally prepared for the amount of writing expected of them during the program. For example, one student noted that "College Apps is more serious and you have more responsibilities (than College Town), where you have someone holding your hand." In particular, students reported feeling stress about the number of scholarship applications they were expected to complete, and some described feeling unprepared to meet College Apps Academy's standards. Reflecting back from later in the year, students emphasized that they understood why the fall is such a busy time, but wished they could have started earlier in the summer, or else spread out some of the expectations.

Students see College Apps Academy as a practical complement to College Town. When speaking about College Apps Academy, students focused more on the hands-on elements of the curriculum. Some students observed that College Town contributed to their personal growth and helped them set higher ambitions for themselves, while College Apps Academy provided the blueprint for achieving these ambitions. For example, one student observed that by the time she entered College Town, "I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn't know how." Other students made similar remarks, and characterized College Apps Academy as an opportunity to demystify a process that had seemed out of reach. For example, one student with immigrant parents observed that her parents came to the United States so that she could have a better future, but that she "didn't know where to begin." According to her, the concrete steps in College Apps Academy helped translate college from an abstract dream into an attainable goal. Interviews with alumni reinforced the practical importance of College Apps Academy from a longer-term perspective, with several describing their experience in College Apps Academy as important to their decision to apply and stick with college. For example, one alumni of both College Town and College Apps Academy, observed that she always wanted to go to college, but "it seemed like something that would never be possible (because) I had no understanding or knowledge how to get there. College Apps Academy provided the practical guidance about how to actually get into college."

College Apps Academy helps students feel comfortable asking questions about college that they would otherwise be reluctant to pose. Several students remembered feeling intimidated by the college application process when they started College Apps Academy, but credited the program's supportive culture with helping them learn how to ask for assistance and help. For example, one student observed that she "hates to ask for support (because) I want to figure everything out on my own (but) Reality Changers is like a second family to me, and I realized I don't have to figure everything out on my own." Other students echoed these sentiments, and pointed to the support from their peers and instructors as instrumental in helping them persevere through the demanding first semester of College Apps Academy.

Students share what they learn during College Apps Academy with their peers. Several students said they appreciated the practical aspects of College Apps Academy because it makes it easier to share what they learn with their peers. For example, one student reported that she "used what I learned in College Apps to help my other friends from high school who want to go to college but don't know how." Another student agreed, and observed that "We become a resource for our friends, and that feels good." However, these students pointed out that they are not always sure how to translate their knowledge in ways that their friends will understand. For example, one student stated that "We're not really taught by our instructors to share what we learn, but we want to (help our friends)."

College Apps Academy's guidance on financial aid and scholarships helps students make more informed decisions about where to apply to college. Several students cited College Apps Academy's content on scholarships and financial aid as one of the most important components of the program. For example, one student observed that he did not previously know there was a difference between a scholarship and financial aid, and explained how learning about this distinction helped him weigh his college options. Several students also remarked on how many scholarship opportunities they learned about through College Apps Academy. For example, one student mentioned that she thought she would have to live at home during college, but because of College Apps Academy, she believes she will be able to pursue her ambition of living independently in college. In particular, students described College Apps Academy's "28 for 28" challenge, through which students receive an incentive if they apply for 28 scholarships in a month, as a motivation for pursuing scholarship opportunities. Looking back as a current college student, one alumni stated that "what helped me the most (about College Apps Academy) was finding and applying for scholarships."

[An alumni said], College Apps Academy "helped with little things, like how to start conversations with your roommate before we moved in, such as ground rules, how to live well together."

Students appreciate the individual support they receive from instructors during office hours. When asked what they found to be most helpful about College Apps Academy, most students said that one-on-one support from instructors during office hours was the most valuable component of the program. Students described office hours as opportunities for both practical and moral support. On the practical side, students said feedback on essays for college applications and scholarships was the most valuable. One program alumni also mentioned the support she received on her college application essay with helping her become a more successful writer in college. In addition to this practical assistance, several students described their instructors as pillars of moral support through a stressful process. For example, one student said the most valuable part of College Apps Academy is "the relationship you build with your instructor. They care about their students, they open up to us." Another student described feeling inspired by her instructor's own story of returning to finish his degree after initially dropping out of college. According to this student, her instructor's willingness to share his story "helped me understand that we can overcome challenges, and that tough times don't last, but tough people do."

Program alumni perceive the content on soft skills to be more valuable in hindsight than they felt at the time they were in College Apps Academy. Looking back, several alumni remembered thinking that the spring semester of College Apps Academy seemed less important than the content in the fall, which focused on applying to college. This attitude was also reflected in the focus group with current College Apps Academy students, who identified the college essay and financial aid content as the most valuable components of the program. However, as alumni entered college, several stated that they came to appreciate the value of the spring curriculum, especially on topics such as time management and living with roommates. For example, one alumni observed that "When I was a senior I sort of overlooked some of the lessons on transition to college, but having lived it, I see how important it was." Another alumni remembered drawing on what he learned to help with the transition to living away from home. According to this person, College Apps Academy "helped with little things, like how to start conversations with your roommate before we moved in, such as ground rules, how to live well together."

■ ALUMNI NETWORK:
Program Description

The Alumni Network is the component of Reality Changers specifically dedicated to maintaining relationships with students through and after college. Although Reality Changers had an Alumni Network for several years, in July 2017, it hired a new Alumni Network Director to build systems and processes for connecting with and supporting former students of both College Town and College Apps Academy. These systems include social media presence, email listservs, alumni reunions events, and workshops and one-on-one support on topics such as financial aid and scholarships, credit transfers and graduate school admissions support, and resume writing and career opportunities.

[2] The college enrollment data in Exhibit 14 is different than the college acceptance data described in Exhibit 12, and suggests that a higher proportion of alumni enroll in college than report college acceptance. The reason for this discrepancy is likely that enrollment data comes from NSC, whereas college application and acceptance data described in Exhibit 12 are self-reported data.

■ ALUMNI NETWORK: Quantitative Findings

A majority of Reality Changers alumni enroll in college, and a majority of these students maintained enrollment throughout their first year. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is a nonprofit research organization that manages data collection, reporting, and protection on behalf of colleges and universities across the country. With over 3,600 participating colleges and universities in the public and private spheres, NSC has data on 98% of students enrolled in higher education. As an NSC subscriber, Reality Changers is able to track college enrollment, persistence, and graduation of its alumni. NSC data contains enrollment records for about 60% of Reality Changers alumni from 2004-2013, but that figure increases to 92% for graduates from 2014-2016.[2] Among students with enrollment records, a majority (80%) completed their first year. Historically, 39% of alumni who finished Reality Changers between 2004-2013 had graduated from college by 2018. However, 36% of these students were still enrolled in 2018, which suggests they continued to persist in college on a part time basis. Further, enrollment and persistence trends from 2014-2016 suggest the proportion who graduate may increase in the coming years, and Reality Changers will continue to monitor graduation rates as its more recent alumni progress through college.

EXHIBIT 14. Alumni Enrollment, Persistence, and Graduation.

	Alumni	Enrolled in college		Persisted 2 Semesters		Graduated by 2018		Still Enrolled in 2018	
2004-2013	517	311	60%	234	75%	121	39%	113	36%
2014-2016	862	791	92%	651	82%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	**1711**	**1255**	**73%**	**885**	**80%**	**121**	**39%**	**113**	**36%**

■ ALUMNI NETWORK: Qualitative Findings

Alumni appreciate having a network of support, especially achievement coaches and fellow alumni, as they transition from high school to college. Several alumni described feeling stress during their first year of college, which they attributed to changes in the social and academic expectations of college. For example, one alumni observed that "The independence of college was surprising…It was challenging to be away from home and stay motivated to study." Another student observed that the college classroom was intimidating, especially in lecture courses, and noted that "I like to ask a lot of questions and talk to the teacher, and it's harder to make that connection" in college classes. When describing these challenges, alumni pointed to the support they received from their fellow Reality Changers alumni, as well as their achievement coaches and College Apps Academy instructors. For example, one alumni emphasized that the Reality Changers community means "You always have someone to talk to if you need advice." Another alumni made a similar point when she observed that her Reality Changers connections "were there for me, and it really helped" when she was struggling to adjust to her first year of college.

Alumni wished there was more information about majors and careers. Some alumni said they wished College Apps Academy helped them better understand the advantages and disadvantages of different majors. For example, one alumni felt like he could have benefitted from understanding more about what type of classes were required for different majors, whether some colleges were strong in certain fields, and how choosing a major could affect his career.

Alumni appreciate the Alumni Network, but would like more events and resources focused on networking and life after college. Alumni said they value the opportunities offered through the Alumni Network, and specifically pointed to office hours and financial aid workshops as valuable resources. Alumni also said they perceive the Alumni Network to be offering more opportunities and events than it did in the past. Several alumni expressed hope that the Alumni Network would continue to expand its offerings, and specifically raised interest in resources or events for life after college. For example, two alumni observed that Reality Changers alumni usually lack connections with employers, which makes it difficult to find internships or entry-level jobs. One alumni suggested that Reality Changers organize events or start a job listserv where older alumni could help more recent alumni find internships or jobs. In addition to career-related events, one alumni also suggested more resources on soft skills for life after college, such as financial literacy.

> **"** *Alumni like hearing updates about successful Reality Changers alumni. Alumni said they are inspired when they hear about other Reality Changers who graduate from college or have successful careers. For example, one alumni stated that "Seeing other people from the same circumstances as me who have gone to college...showed that I could do it, too." Another alumni echoed this observation and pointed out that hearing success stories "serves as a reminder of how far we've all come. We all relate because we have come from a struggling background," and learning about fellow students inspires them to continue striving in college.*

Alumni credit Reality Changers with helping them form long-lasting friendships. Several alumni reported that they stay in touch with their fellow students, including some who they consider their closest friends. For example, one alumni observed that "We've gone on to many different places, but we talk about what it's like to be in college coming from a different culture (than many other college students)." In addition to close friendships, alumni described staying connected more generally with their class, mostly through social media. For example, one alumni stated that "We follow each other on social media, we'll message each other from time to time or comment on each other's Instagram or Facebook posts."

Alumni use the Facebook group, but suggested it could facilitate more interactive discussions. All four alumni were aware of the Alumni Network Facebook page, which some perceived to be more status updates in recent months than in the past. Alumni described learning about events and resources such as office hours from the Facebook page. One alumni said she sees updates on the Facebook page, but thinks the Alumni Network could improve the Facebook page by making it more interactive. She suggested that Reality Changers post discussion prompts to the Facebook page, which she believed would spark good discussion among community members.

Alumni like attending reunions, but want more events during winter and summer break. Among alumni who had attended a reunion, all found them fun and valuable opportunities to strengthen their relationships with Reality Changers staff and their fellow alumni. For example, one alumni described reunions as a great opportunity to reconnect with friends and hear about their lives. However, two of the alumni wished there were more regular events, even if they were less formal. For example, one alumni observed that "I feel like we only have a big (reunion) like once a year, (but) we'd like to see each other more often (and) these events help us to reconnect."

One alumni member suggested setting up Reality Changers chapters at campuses with a lot of alumni. One alumni suggested that Reality Changers should establish more formal structures at college campuses to encourage alumni to stay in touch. According to this person, there was a chapter of Reality Changers alumni at University of California at San Diego who would meet a couple times per month, where they would study together and offer each other support. However, he was not sure whether the chapter still exists. "I'm not sure if they still have this resource, but it was really great. It connected all the Reality Changers alumni at UCSD, helped us stay in touch and make friends."

REALITY CHANGERS IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT (Research Question 2)

■ FINDINGS

Students in Reality Changers scored higher on the SAT and ACT than the national or state averages, especially when comparing students of similar backgrounds. Among Reality Changers participants with an SAT score, the mean SAT combined score was 1066, which was slightly higher than the national or California state average score. The difference between Reality Changers students and state and national averages was higher among almost all sub-groups, including first-generation college students and students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

EXHIBIT 15. Mean SAT Scores-Sub-populations, 2017.

	Reality Changers[3]	California (Net Difference)[4]	National (Net Difference)[5]
All Students	1066 (n=242)	1055 (+11)	1060 (+6)
First Generation College Students	1064 (n=179)	1001 (+63)	997 (+67)
Free-reduced price lunch*	1061 (n=187)	997* (+64)	978 (+83)
Hispanic	1041 (n=171)	992 (+49)	990 (+51)
African American	1019 (n=20)	961 (+58)	941 (+78)
Asian	1180 (n=25)	1145 (+35)	1181 (-1)
White	1169 (n=17)	1153 (+16)	1118 (+51)
Two or more races	1160 (n=1)	1139 (+21)	1103 (+57)

*California and National averages reflects students who received a fee-waiver for their SAT. Eligibility for free or reduced price lunch is one criteria for a fee waiver, but there are other income-related criteria for students to receive a fee waiver.

ACT Data show a similar pattern as the SAT. Reality Changers participants reported higher composite ACT scores, on average, than students nationwide or in California. The ACT does not provide data on population subgroups at the state level, but compared to national data, Reality Changers of all racial/ethnic backgrounds reported higher average composite ACT scores than the national average, except Asian students, for whom the difference was very small. The sub-group with the greatest difference between Reality Changers and national averages was African-American students, among whom the average score among Reality Changers participants was 5 points higher than the national average for African American students.

EXHIBIT 16. ACT Scores, 2016.

	Reality Changers[6]	California (Net Difference)	National (Net Difference)[7]
All Students	23 (n=192)	22.8 (+0.2)	20.8 (+2.2)
Hispanic	21.6 (n=119)	N/A	18.7 (+2.9)
African American	22 (n=10)	N/A	17 (+5)
Asian	23.9 (n=35)	N/A	24 (-0.1)
White	26 (n=17)	N/A	22.2 (+3.8)

[3] Data from 2016 could not be compared to state of national averages because the College Board reports average scores on the three sub-tests in 2016, but does not provide an average total score, while Reality Changers provides only average total score, but not sub-test scores.
[4] https://reports.collegeboard.org/pdf/2017-california-sat-suite-assessments-annual-report.pdf
[5] https://reports.collegeboard.org/pdf/2017-total-group-sat-suite-assessments-annual-report.pdf
[6] For the ACT, 2016 is the latest year with available scores, which is why ACT is 2016 scores and SAT is 2017 scores.
[7] http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr2017/P_99_999999_N_S_N00_ACT-GCPR_National.pdf

Reality Changers alumni enroll in college at a higher rate than the national average, and those who enroll in college stay enrolled or graduate at a higher rate than the national average. Nationally, 58% of the children of parents who did not go to college enroll in postsecondary education within three months after graduating high school. Since 2004, almost three-quarters (73%) of Reality Changers alumni have enrolled in a two- or four-year college. This proportion is even higher during the years 2014-2016, when 92% of Reality Changers alumni enrolled in college. Among those who enrolled in a four-year college between 2004-2011, 75% of Reality Changers alumni had graduated or were still enrolled after 6 years, compared to 65% nationally of children of parents who did not attend college.

EXHIBIT 17. College Enrollment and Persistence.[8]

	National Average[9]		Reality Changers
	Parents with Bachelors	Parents with No College	All Alumni
Enrolled in postsecondary education within 3 months after high school graduations	78%	58%	73% (2004-present)
Attained a 4-year degree from public/private institution (or were still enrolled) 6 years after enrollment	83%	65%	75%*

*Students who enrolled in college after 2011 were not included in the calculation because it has not been 6 years since enrollment.

Reality Changers students received more than twice as much in gift aid compared to national averages. In 2017, 90% of Reality Changers' students who completed the program reported receiving some amount of gift aid, with an average value of $15,996 per year, which was more than twice the national average for all undergraduates. Although the proportion of students who reported obtaining scholarships or aid was lower than the national average in 2016, this may be a function of data availability, as the data does not distinguish between students who received no aid and students who did not report aid. Among students who did report on scholarships or aid, the mean value of the gift aid was $13,195.

EXHIBIT 18. Financial Aid in 2015-16.[10]

	All undergraduates	Reality Changers[11]	
		Class of 2017	Class of 2018
Percent of undergraduates receiving scholarships, tuition waivers, or grants from public, institutional, or private sources	63%	90%	90%
Average value of scholarships, tuition waivers, or grant (excluding student loans) per year	$7,400	$15,996	$16,060

[8] Cataldi, Emily Forrest, Christopher T. Bennett, and Xianglei Chen. "First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes. Stats in Brief. NCES 2018-421." National Center for Education Statistics (2018).

[9] National average refers to students who began postsecondary education during the 2003-2004 school year.

[10] Radwin, David, Johnathan G. Conzelmann, Annaliza Nunnery, T. Austin Lacy, Joanna Wu, Stephen Lew, Jennifer Wine, and Peter Siegel. "2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 16): Student Financial Aid Estimates for 2015-16. First Look. NCES 2018-466." National Center for Education Statistics (2018).

[11] Reality Changers' administrative data prior to class of 2017 did not consistently distinguish source of aid and was not included in this table to ensure appropriate comparison.

■ **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings described above, ICF offers the following recommendations for program improvement:

Provide additional training and support for achievement coaches. Achievement coaches play a critical role in Reality Changers' theory of change, and bear substantial responsibility in their role as mentors. Students frequently described confiding in their achievement coaches, especially during times of crisis, such as when family or friends are experiencing a health crisis. However, during staff interviews, achievement coaches stated that they did not receive substantial formal training, but learned informally from peers and experience. Reality Changers should consider professional development and/or standardized training for achievement coaches to help them build and maintain productive relationships with students.
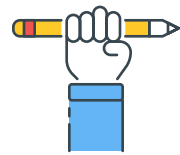
Provide more guidance on transition between College Town and College Apps Academy. Students described a challenging transition between College Town and College Apps Academy, which caused some students stress. Reality Changers should consider adding additional guidance and support for College Town students in 11th grade to prepare them for College Apps Academy. For example, Reality Changers may consider offering more opportunities for current College Apps Academy students to speak with 11th graders to tell them what to expect. Reality Changers should also consider beginning College Apps Academy activities earlier in students' careers.

Offer more structured opportunities for interaction between alumni and students, especially focused on perseverance and overcoming obstacles. Throughout the focus groups, students described feeling inspired by others who came from similar backgrounds and succeeded in college. In particular, several students said they were inspired by older students and achievement coaches who had overcome obstacles to attend and finish college, and said hearing about these experiences helped them see their own challenges in a different light. Similarly, students appreciated opportunities to share their own stories of perseverance and achievement. Reality Changers should continue searching for opportunities for students to describe their background, their journey, and their goals. For example, Reality Changers could consider producing a newsletter featuring notable students or alumni or offer opportunities for guest posts on its Facebook or webpage.

Provide guidance and support for alumni about choosing a major and finding internships. Several alumni described feeling unsure about how to choose a major after they enrolled in college, and said they wished the Alumni Network had more resources they could consult to help them decide what to study, including the career outlooks for various majors. Several alumni also said they would appreciate more information about internship or job opportunities.

Establish regular channels for feedback from students and alumni. At times throughout the focus groups and interviews, students seemed wary of sharing critical comments on Reality Changers. Students needed substantial probing to describe areas for improvement or offer recommendations. While it is natural for students to be reticent to share criticisms with external evaluators, Reality Changers should consider establishing deliberate mechanisms for students to voice concerns or offer constructive feedback on the program. These mechanisms could include anonymous surveys, suggestion boxes, or assurances from achievement coaches or other Reality Changers staff that students should feel comfortable offering constructive feedback.

Establish consistent procedures for data collection and management. Although Reality Changers provided ICF a wealth of data collected across several program years, the data were not clearly or consistently defined or collected from year to year or program night to program night. For example, student GPA was missing for between 24% and 34% of students each year. Additionally, there were multiple spreadsheets with different architectures or variable names within years and across years, which makes it difficult to analyze data consistently. For example, in some years student financial aid is distinguished between federal and state grants, scholarships, institutional grants, private grants, loans, and work study, whereas in other years financial aid data are combined in one column. Additionally, students did not consistently have unique identifiers, which made it challenging to track student-level changes over time. Reality Changers should consider creating a uniform data system with clearly defined and consistent indicators from year to year and location to location. To assist with this process, ICF created a template that Reality Changers could use as a starting point for a consistent data management system in the future. Reality Changers may also consider using the datasets created for this evaluation to inform the development of future data management practices or systems.

■ CONCLUSION

This evaluation suggests that Reality Changers creates a positive culture for students, which manifests in positive academic outcomes during their experience in College Town and/or College Apps Academy, and continues as program alumni. Specifically, the quantitative assessment demonstrates that students who participate in Reality Changers on average achieve grade point averages above 3.0 and improve their grades over time; score higher on the ACT and SAT tests than national and state averages, especially among certain sub-groups; and apply, enroll, and persist in college at rates that surpass national averages for students of similar backgrounds.

The qualitative findings offer potential reasons underlying these positive outcomes. During the focus groups and interviews, students credited Reality Changers with helping them set ambitious goals and understand how to achieve them. In particular, College Town participants described feeling supported and accountable to their peers and Reality Changers staff, which in turn improved their relationships with parents and teachers, and motivated them to study harder and take advantage of opportunities. This was especially true of students who attended Academic Connections, who characterized their experiences on a college campus as instrumental in finding their passion and understanding how college will help them pursue it. Feedback from College Apps Academy students also offered insight into the reasons behind the positive quantitative findings. Students who matriculated from College Town to College Apps Academy reported that the transition was a bit challenging at first because of the volume of details and applied knowledge they were expected to learn in a short period of time. However, most students said they came to appreciate the practical elements of the program, especially the advice they received on how to fill out their applications and apply for financial aid and scholarships. Although current students reported less interest in the second semester focus on transitioning to college, such as how to live with a roommate or stay on budget, alumni said their appreciation for this content grew after they started college. Alumni also credited Reality Changers with giving them the tools, both academic and psychological, to succeed in college, especially during their first year on campus. However, alumni expressed a desire for more resources from Reality Changers about choosing a major and finding internships.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that Reality Changers succeeds in transforming participants' lives. However, there were some limitations to the study that future research could address. The greatest limitation to the study was its reliance on extant administrative data. Because data were collected through the course of program administration prior to the study, the research team could not control the instruments used to collect data or the systems used to manage and store it. Consequently, there was substantial missing data on certain outcomes of interest, such as grade point averages, especially during earlier years. Additionally, there was some variation in the way data were defined and stored. For example, in some years, students' gift aid was defined in more granular terms than others. As described in the recommendations, Reality Changers could consider establishing consistent procedures and definitions for data collection and management.

APPENDIX 1. Logic Model.
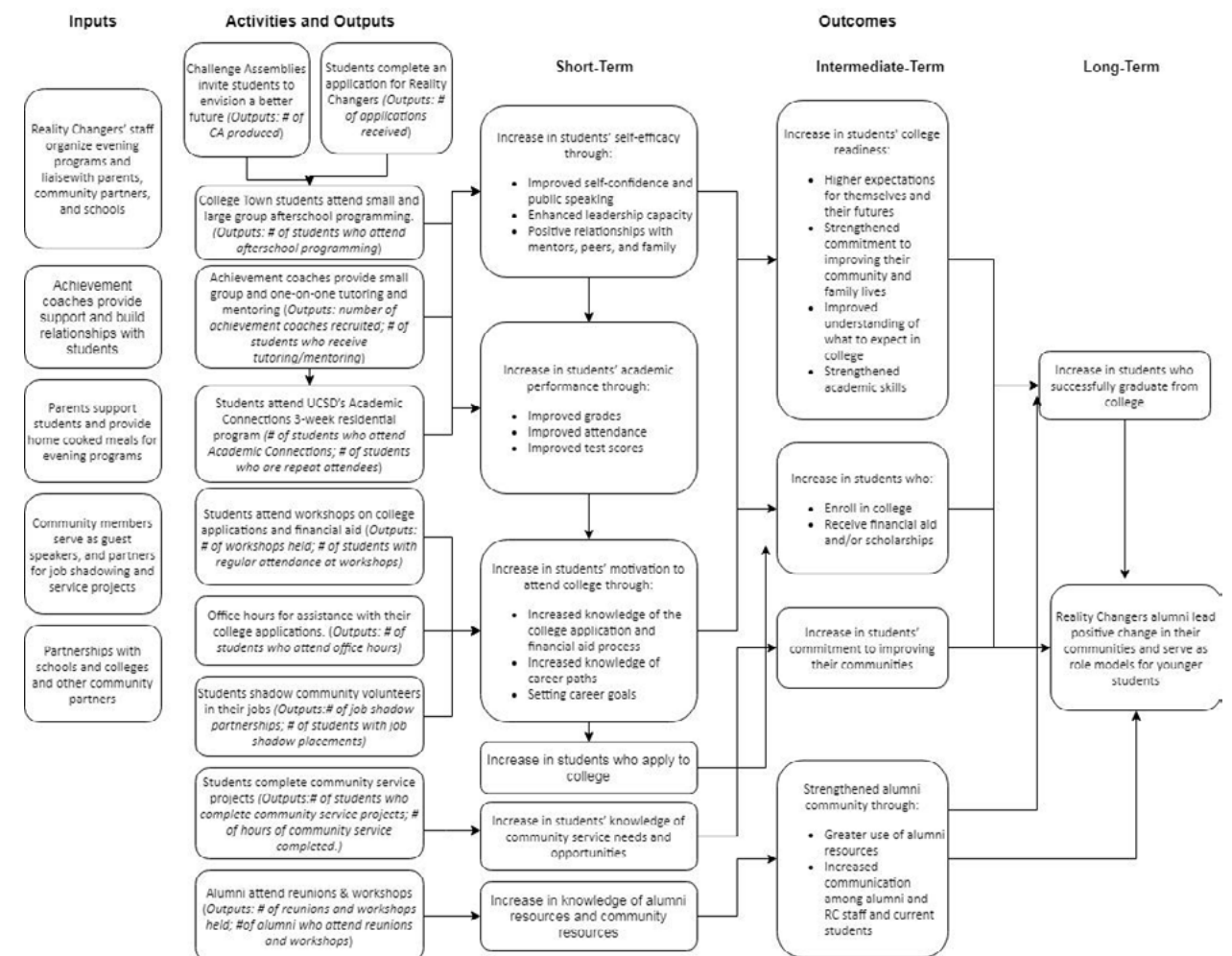
APPENDIX 2A: Focus Group Protocol.
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL - COLLEGE TOWN (GRADES 8-11)

<u>Introduction</u>
Thank you all for joining us for this focus group today. My name is __, and I work for a research team that Reality Changers has hired to help better understand how College Town is affecting the lives of students like you. We thought the best way to do so is to ask you, which is why we've brought you here today for this focus group. Over the course of the next 60-90 minutes, I'd like to hear your thoughts on a number of topics, including:
•   Why you decided to apply to College Town and what that process was like;
•   How your experience in College Town has affected your schoolwork,
•   How your time in College Town has influenced the way you think about your school, your community, and your future
Your participation in today's focus group is completely voluntary. If you ever want to leave the room, please feel free to do so. My goal for this conversation is to hear from everybody, so please be respectful of your peers as they speak, and I may call on you if you've been quiet. However, if you'd rather not answer a question, that is okay too. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

<u>Background and Recruitment</u>
1.   First, I'd like to get to know you each a little more, so let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. As we go around the table, please say your name, your grade, where you go to school, and how long you've been a part of College Town.
2.   How did you hear about College Town?
3.   ((If they mention the Challenge Assemblies) What did you like about the Challenge Assembly?
     • Was there anything you think should change about the Challenge Assembly?
4.   Why did you decide to apply to College Town?
5.   Please tell me about the application process. What did you like, or not like, about it?

<u>Effects on confidence and attitudes toward school, families, and community</u>
1.   Has your participation in College Town changed your attitudes toward school? How? Probe for:
     • Changes in self-confidence
     • Higher expectations
     • Enthusiasm for school
2.   Why do you think your participation College Town has led to these changes?
3.   Are there particular components of College Town that contributed to these changes? Probe for:
     • Weekly meetings
     • Guest speakers
     • Public speaking support
     • Achievement coaches
     • Community service events
     • Job shadowing
     • Academic Connections
4.   What about these activities do you think changed the way you think about school?
5.   Has your participation in College Town changed the way you interact with your teachers? How so?
     • How about with your fellow students?
     • How about with your families?
6.   Why do you think your participation in College Town affected these relationships

<u>Effects on academic performance</u>
1.   Have your grades changed since you joined College Town?
     • Why do you think that is?
       i. Probe for confidence, expectations, direct tutoring support.
2.   Have you changed your study habits since joining College Town? How so?
     • Why do you think that is?
       i. Probe for specific components of College Town.

<u>Effects on knowledge and attitudes toward college, careers, and community service</u>
1.   Before you joined College Town, how many of you planned to go to college?
2.   Now, how many of you plan to go to college?
3.   Has your participation in College Town changed the way you think about college? Why? Probe for:
     • Self- confidence and expectations
     • Knowledge of what to expect in college
     • Understanding of college application and financial aid process

4.   How many of you have career plans? Can you share them?
     • Has your participation in College Town changed your long-term career plans? How?
       i. Probe for specific components of College Town, including job shadowing, mentorship, and after school programming.
5.   How many of you are active in your community? In what ways?
     • Do you think College Town has affected your attitudes toward serving in your community? How so?

<u>Recommendations for improvement</u>
1.   Are there any parts of College Town that are less important to you than others? Why?
2.   If you could change one thing about College Town, what would it be?
     • Probe for recruitment, structure, or specific activities
3.   What recommendations would you make to improve College Town in the future?

APPENDIX 2B: College Apps Protocol.
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL – COLLEGE APPS ACADEMY (12TH GRADE)

<u>Introduction</u>
Thank you all for joining us for this focus group today. My name is __, and I work for a research team that Reality Changers has hired to help better understand how College Apps Academy is affecting the lives of students like you. We thought the best way to do so is to ask you, which is why we've brought you here today for this focus group. Over the course of the next 60-90 minutes, I'd like to hear your thoughts on a number of topics, including:
•   Why you decided to join College Apps Academy and what that process was like;
•   How your experience in College Apps Academy has affected your plans for college;
•   How your participation in College Apps Academy has influenced the way you think about your school, your community, and your future
Your participation in today's focus group is completely voluntary. If you ever want to leave the room, please feel free to do so. My goal for this conversation is to hear from everybody, so please be respectful of your peers as they speak, and I may call on you if you've been quiet. However, if you'd rather not answer a question, that is okay too. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

<u>Background and Recruitment</u>
1.   First, I'd like to get to know you each a little more, so let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. As we go around the table, please say your name, where you go to school, and how long you've been a part of the Reality Changers community.
     Note-taker should identify participants who participated in College Town and those who joined College Apps Academy without previous College Town experience]
2.   How did you all hear about College Apps Academy?
3.   For those of you who moved on from College Town, how would you describe the transition from College Town to College Apps Academy?
4.   For those of you who did not participate in College Town, why did you decide to apply to College Apps Academy?
     • Please tell me about the application process. What did you like, or not like, about it?

<u>Effects on confidence and attitudes toward attending college</u>
1.   Before you joined College Apps Academy, how many of you planned to apply to college? Why or why not?
2.   How have your plans changed over the course of your time in College Apps Academy? Probe for:
     • Intent to apply to college
     • Where to apply to college
     • What financial aid to apply for
3.   Why do you think your plans have changed? Probe for:
     • Knowledge of college application and/or financial aid process
     • Self-confidence and expectations
     • Knowledge and excitement about career plans
     • Support from Reality Changers community
4.   Why do you think your participation College Apps Academy has led to these changes? Probe for:
     • UCSC Academic Connections
     • Course on college applications and financial aid
     • Office hours
     • Job shadowing
     • Community service projects
5.   Has your participation in College Apps Academy changed the way you interact with your teachers? How?
     • How about with your fellow students?
     • How about with your families?
6.   Why do you think your participation in College Apps Academy affected these relationships?

Effects on academic performance
1. Have your grades changed since you joined College Apps Academy?
   • Why do you think that is?
      i. Probe for confidence, expectations, direct tutoring support.
2. Have you changed your study habits since joining College Apps Academy? How so?
   • Why do you think that is?
      i. Probe for specific components of College Town.

Effects on knowledge and attitudes toward careers and community service
1. How many of you have career plans? Can you share them?
   • Has your participation in College Apps Academy changed your long-term career plans? How?
      i. Probe for specific components of College Apps Academy, including job shadowing, mentorship, and after school programming.
2. How many of you are active in your community? In what ways?
   • Do you think College Apps Academy has affected your attitudes toward serving in your community? How so?

Recommendations for improvement
1. Are there any parts of College Apps Academy that are less important to you than others? Why
2. If you could change one thing about College Apps Academy, what would it be?
   • Probe for recruitment, structure, or specific activities
3. What recommendations would you make to improve College Apps Academy in the future?

APPENDIX 3: Alumni Protocol.
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – REALITY CHANGERS ALUMNI

Introduction
Thank you all for joining us for this focus group today. My name is __, and I work for a research team that Reality Changers has hired to help better understand how Reality Changers is affecting the lives of students like you. We thought the best way to do so is to ask you, which is why I'm happy to be able to speak with you today. Over the course of the next hour or so, I'd like to hear your thoughts on a number of topics, including:
•   Your reflections on your experience in College Town and/or College Apps Academy;
•   How your experience in Reality Changers affected your life after high school;
•   How the Reality Changers Alumni Network supports you, and how it could be strengthened
Does anyone have any questions before we begin?
[Prior to interview, we will gather background information including where the participant went to high school, graduation year, and where he/she is enrolled in college]

Effects of Reality Changers on college experience
1. To what extent did your participation in Reality Changers affect your decision to apply to college? Probe for:
   • Changes in self-confidence and expectations
   • Changes in knowledge about what the college application process is like
   • Changes in knowledge about what to expect in college
   • Changes in academic performance
   • Financial aid
2. Next, I'd like to talk about your transition from high school to college. Did it go as expected?
   • What was the most challenging part about starting college?
   • What was the best part about starting college?
3. To what extent did your participation in Reality Changers help prepare you for college? Probe for:
   • Changes in self-confidence and expectations
   • Changes in knowledge about what to expect in college
   • Changes in academic performance
   • Any other ways?

4. What components of Reality Changers do you think most prepared you for college? Probe for:
   • After school programming
   • Achievement coaches
   • UCSD Academic Connections
   • Course on college applications and financial aid
   • Office hours
   • Job shadowing
   • Community service projects
5. Has there been anything about your college experience that surprised you? How so? Probe for:
   • Academics
   • Relationships with students
   • Relationships with family
   • Finances
   • Any other surprises?

Knowledge and use of alumni resources
1. To what extent do you use Reality Changers alumni resources? Probe for:
   • Financial aid support
   • Credit transfer
   • Ongoing workshops
   • Other resources
2. What do you like about these resources? Why?
   • Is there anything you don't like about these resources? Why?
3. Can you think of any additional resources you wish Reality Changers provided to alumni?
4. How often do you attend reunions?
   • What do you like about these reunions? Why?
   • Is there anything you don't like about reunions? Why"
   • To what extent are reunions valuable to you?
5. To what extent do you keep in touch with your fellow Reality Changers alumni? How do you do so?
   • How about the staff and/or volunteers from Reality Changers?
   • Are these relationships valuable to you? How so?
   • Is there anything Reality Changers could do to make it easier to stay in touch with your fellow alumni?

Plans for the future
1. What are your plans for after college?
   • Has your participation in Reality Changers changed your long-term career plans? How?
      i. Probe for specific program components, including job shadowing, mentorship, and after school programming.
2. Are you active in your community? In what ways?
   • Do you think your participation in Reality Changers has affected your attitudes toward serving in your community? How so?