

# A Model to Help Underserved Students Secure Strong First Jobs

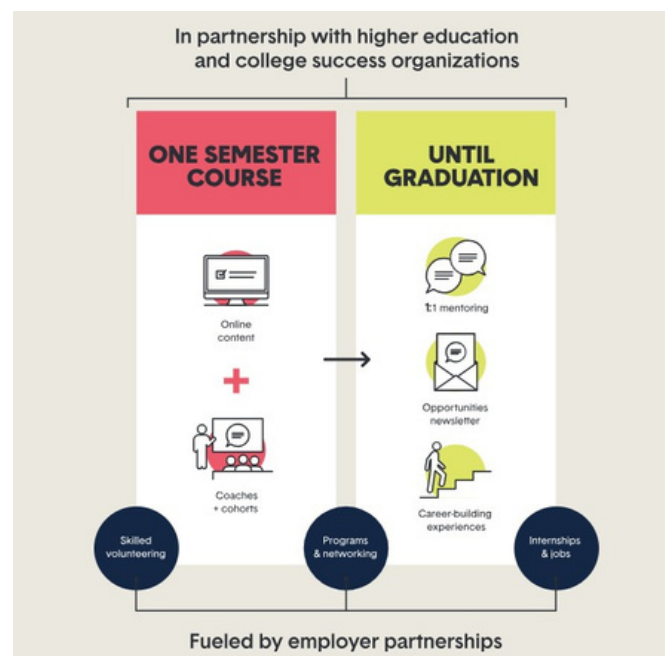
While a bachelor's degree is still a reliable path to economic mobility, it does not necessarily lead to fair outcomes. Only about 30% of our country's 1.4 million first-generation or low-income college enrollees are predicted to land a strong job or enroll in graduate school after graduation.<sup>1</sup> ECMC Foundation has provided support to several organizations that provide underserved postsecondary students with the experiences needed to succeed in college and to transition into strong careers. This case study focuses on one of those organizations, Braven. We describe Braven's model and some key learnings with the goal of supporting the field to better prepare today's postsecondary students for successful careers.

## Braven's Model

Founded in 2013, **Braven** empowers first-generation college students, students of color, and those from low-income backgrounds by equipping them with skills, networks, experiences and confidence to secure strong first jobs or enroll in graduate school. Braven offers a semester-long course to help students discover their career path and develop professional competencies such as project planning, writing, working in teams, presenting and sharing feedback. Following this semester-long course, students can participate in a 12-week one-on-one mentoring program that matches students with a professional who ideally works in the student's desired field and geography. In addition, Braven provides industry-aligned career communities, regular job and internship blasts and professional development and networking events.

One novel aspect of Braven's program is that, when offered in collaboration with a college or university, the semester-long course is credit-bearing. In 2013, Braven partnered with San José State University, their first site. Today, Braven partners with seven [LP1] [SR2] postsecondary institutions across the United States, numerous college success organizations and over 100 employer partners. Braven served 2,705 students during the 2023-24 academic year—bringing the total number of students served to date to more than 10,000. Most students Braven serves are students of color, Pell eligible and/or first-generation college students. (See Figure 2 below.) Regarding race and

Figure 1. Braven's Program Model



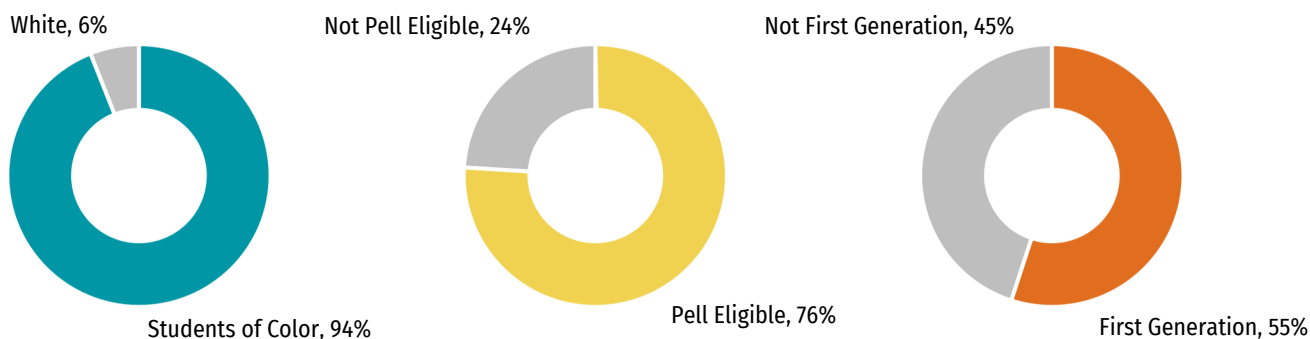
Source: Braven's Website

<sup>1</sup>National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). First Destinations for the College Class of 2022: Findings and Analysis. Retrieved from <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/class-of-2022/>.

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ethnicity, 33% of Braven students are Black or African American, 28% are Latinx, 14% are Asian, 6% are White, 1% are Middle Eastern/North African and 18% are multi-ethnic/multi-racial. At 94%, Braven serves a more significant proportion of students of color compared to the national undergraduate student population at 53%.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2. Demographic Characteristics of 2023-24 Braven Students (n=2,705)



## Braven's Impact

Braven's top-line goal is to help students land a good first job within six months of graduation. In addition, they have identified two critical leading indicators: (1) whether students have an internship as part of their college experience and (2) whether students complete their bachelor's degree within six years. Work-based learning, or opportunities that integrate academic and occupational training, has been found to increase students' educational outcomes (e.g., persistence, graduation) and post completion employment outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Here, we report on the impacts that Braven has found to date.

### Leading Indicator: Percentage of Students Completing an Internship

There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the value of effective internship experiences. Braven's predictive modeling and regression analysis showed that every additional internship experience boosted the student's chance of landing a good job or graduate school enrollment after graduation by twelve percentage points.

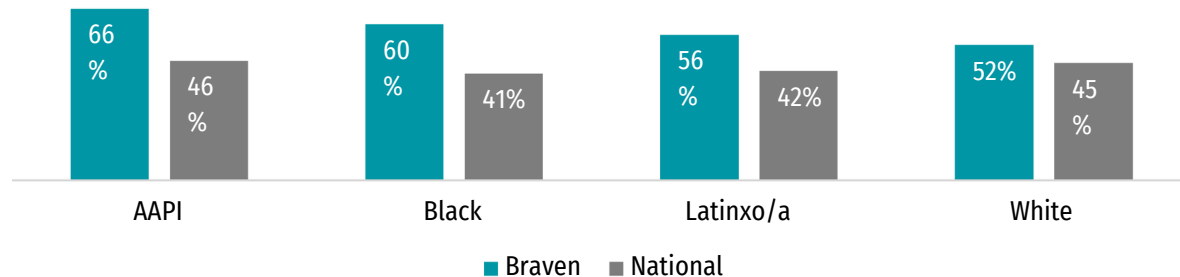
Braven students surpass national rates in completing internships. Disaggregated data showed that a larger percentage of Braven students are completing internships compared to national data across all racial and ethnic groups. (See Figure 3.)

<sup>2</sup> IPEDS Data Center, The most recent comparative data for the seven partnering institutions and nationally was available for the 2021-22 academic year, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/InstitutionList.aspx?goToReportId=6&sid=0e7db39f-086e-4d69-8412-4442ad708845&rtid=6>.

<sup>3</sup> Rodriguez, Jacqueline; Fox, Heather, McCambly, Heather. Work-based Learning as a Pathway to Postsecondary and Career Success. Office of Community College Research and Leadership, October 2016.

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Figure 3. Larger Proportions of Braven Students Complete Internships Compared to National Data



Source: Braven’s 2023-24 Impact Report National Data Source: Analysis of 2022 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Career and Workforce Preparation Topical Module reported in Strada Education Foundation, From College to Career: Students’ Internship Expectations and Experiences, May 23, 2023

## Leading Indicator: Graduation within Six Years

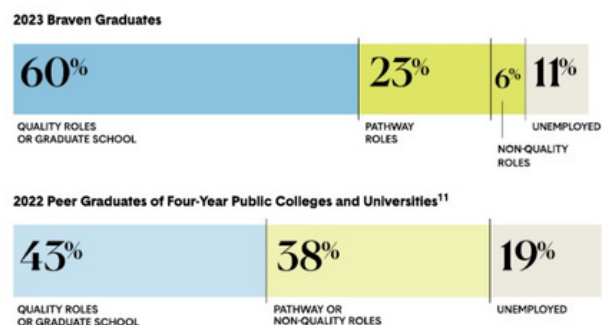
Ninety-one percent of Braven students had a six-year on-time college graduation rate compared to approximately 80% of students at public universities.<sup>4</sup>

## Braven’s North Star Outcome: Strong Career Placement

Braven believes that a high quality career start is a critical step toward long-term social and economic mobility. As a result, they focus on tracking the employment and continuing education outcomes for their students. Their most recent analysis of their 2023 graduating class found that 60% of Braven graduates secured quality opportunities within six months of graduation. (See Figure 4.) Braven defines quality opportunities as full-time jobs that require a bachelor’s degree and include some combination of promotion pathways, employee benefits, and a market-competitive starting salary or graduate school enrollment. Sixty-nine percent of recent Braven graduates are in roles aligned with their long-term career interests and 83% have a job with employer-provided benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 4. Larger Proportions of Braven Students Secure Quality First Jobs

In 2023, 777 Braven Fellows graduated from our partner schools. 89% are employed or enrolled in graduate school, and 83% secured quality or pathway roles or enrolled in graduate school.



Source: Braven 2024 Jobs Report

<sup>4</sup> Implied 6-year graduation rate for Black and Latinx students who persisted from freshman to sophomore year and sophomore to junior year at four-year public institutions. Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2021 release of Tables 326.10, 326.30, and 306.50 as reported in Braven’s 2022-2023 Impact Report.

<sup>5</sup> Braven 2024 Jobs Report. Recent graduates defined as the graduating classes of 2020-2023.

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While nationally representative data on the career placement of college graduates is not currently available, based on data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Braven estimates that 43% of peer graduates of color from four-year public colleges and universities had quality jobs or enrolled in graduate school within six months of graduation, 17 percentage points lower than the rate of Braven graduates.<sup>6</sup>

## Key Lessons Learned

We describe three key lessons from Braven's experience that may shed insights into the field.

- **Structuring partnerships with colleges and universities.** Braven shared that a significant learning on their pathway to scale has been the need to address the structural constraints that force potential students to choose between fulfilling major requirements and critical career preparation. As a result, they now work with higher education partners to mitigate potential structural barriers and maximize students' ability to access the course. For example, at some of their institutional partners like Spelman College, the institution requires the course for all sophomores as the Sophomore Year Experience. With two of their institutional partners, they are experimenting with a pre-enrollment or "shopping cart" method, where the Braven course opts into the course schedule for all sophomores and junior transfers. Therefore, students can opt out of the course, but the default will be opt-in. At other institutions, the course is embedded within academic programs or scholarships that reach underrepresented students. Their hybrid program model expands the organization's reach by enabling Braven to partner with institutions located outside of urban centers.
- **Re-examining incentives and the power of partnerships with academic credit.** Braven continues to see the power of academic credit in this model. One of the challenges Braven experienced with their BravenX innovation model is that the retention rates were lower than when the course was offered in partnership with institutional partners for credit. Because course credit is not available through college success organizations, BravenX participants receive a \$500 stipend at the end of the course. They found that this monetary incentive leads to a retention rate of around 70% compared to their credit-bearing model, typically around 90%. Taking the BravenX course is challenging for students who are juggling the demands of school along with other responsibilities. Braven conducted a few experiments to address this retention issue, such as increasing the stipend amount and giving students portions of the stipend throughout the course. However, both strategies did not change retention rates among BravenX participants. This finding runs counter to existing studies and shows that for Braven, offering academic credit is a stronger incentive for program retention than stipends.
- **Building upon their analytic and data capacity.** Braven has built a robust data system to track students' experiences. In addition to the data from their institutional partners, Braven administers a survey at the beginning and end of their course with students' self-reported information on various topics, including

<sup>6</sup> Braven 2024 Jobs Report.

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their academic profile, beliefs and mindsets, and the number of internship experiences they have had. This information is used to measure growth among students. Braven continues to connect with students following the course by offering services such as career mentoring, as well as highlighting critical resources from their institutional partners' career offices. They collect information about post-graduation employment experiences primarily through student surveys and LinkedIn and regularly share their findings with their partners. Braven continues to build on their current analytic and data capacity and is working on collecting data on a longer timeline post-graduation to gather and share better information about the career trajectories of their students.

During their short 10-year history, Braven has experienced steady growth and today is one of the leading non-profit organizations supporting the college-to-career transition. Braven continually evaluates their efforts, refines their services where needed and disseminates their findings to partners and the field more broadly. Through this case study, ECMC Foundation aims to share what Braven has learned so that the field can better support the needs of today's postsecondary students.