

COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE



By the time he entered high school, ALEXIS could name the colleges he had already considered attending, the campuses he had visited and what he planned to study.

“Our teachers always talk about climbing the mountain to and through college,” said the Achievement First University Prep High School student. “They taught me that it would be possible for me to attend a prestigious university.”

Admission to a four-year college is a graduation requirement at AF high schools

Each year, 100% of our graduating seniors gain admission to four-year colleges or universities



For Alexis—an AF student since sixth grade—and his classmates, this “college-going culture” infuses every aspect of the school day and year. It’s an ethos that takes shape in the earliest days of kindergarten as students stream into banner-covered classrooms, shout cheers from their teachers’ alma maters and develop the earliest skills as effective, self-motivated learners—an attitude that finds full expression in the halls of AF’s high-performing high schools. When students begin the high school leg of their Achievement First journey, this college focus shifts from underlying ethos to unrelenting refrain. From the moment they walk through our doors, every student is given the tools and motivation to summit the climb to college. Here, in defiance of the deep injustice of our nation’s low expectations, the work of our high school team begins.

To help students understand the high-stakes nature of their secondary school years, Achievement First takes a multi-faceted approach to building its comprehensive college-going culture. Beyond the rhetoric of rigor and high expectations shared across teachers, leaders and staff, the pennants and posters lining our physical space stand as a steady reminder of the common goal behind the day-to-day hard work. Walking the hallways, Alexis and his classmates find

the alma maters of great public figures, peruse the respective GPAs and SAT scores required for admission to various colleges and universities, stroll past a map that shows where AF alumni are attending college, and glance at individual teacher bios detailing where they went to school, how they got there and how their experiences shaped their futures.

“No matter where you turn, you’re constantly reminded that you will be going to college,” explained Achievement First Hartford High School student Teleyah. “There’s always something that shows you where you’re headed.”

AF students visit an average of twelve colleges during their high school years

Meanwhile, school calendars jam-packed with special events, trips and recognition ceremonies keep Teleyah and her classmates motivated and focused on the goal ahead. On trips to colleges throughout their four years, students not only take the usual admissions tour, but also visit dorms, eat meals in the dining hall and sit in on lectures—all to help them gain a clear picture of the excitement and independence of college life. As freshmen and sophomores, our students participate in large groups geared to increase college knowledge and build enthusiasm. By junior year, students visit colleges in smaller, differentiated groups based on their academic performance. For Teleyah, a series of visits throughout her high school experience helped her link her aspirations for a career in science and medicine to her prospective college list. “I have been to so many colleges including Yale, University of Connecticut, Brown and Colgate,” she said. “Those visits helped me understand which college programs would best fit my interests.”

As college acceptance letters roll in, school leaders share admissions



news at the daily culture breakfast to the sounds of student snaps and shout outs. Through these individual successes, the community’s shared commitment to excellence deepens.

As a member of AF University Prep High’s first graduating class, Alexis looks forward to both leaving and coming back. “It feels good to be a leader and to know we’re going to be the first class from our school to go on to college. I know I can go to Stanford or UCLA and one day become a doctor. I am excited about where my hard work will take me.” 🐾

“In middle school, we knew college was important, but it felt far away. Then it was a dream, but now it is a goal that I am about to achieve.”

Teleyah, AF Hartford High School Student

COLLEGE *READINESS SEMINAR*



At Achievement First, the expectation of college graduation is just the first step.

Beyond instilling students with a sense of what is possible through our powerful, college-going culture, our teaching staff and college counselors work to equip each and every student with the skills, self-knowledge and extensive preparation required to bridge the gap between the expectation of college and what it takes to make it a reality. Given that 85 percent of our students will be the first in their families to attend college, we have the

profound responsibility to prepare them to understand and meet admissions requirements and to learn the skills required to navigate the complex application and enrollment process.

To meet this pressing need, Achievement First requires four years of completed coursework in our College Readiness Seminar—the class in which students acquire the tools and information to take control of their academic futures. By incorporating college readiness into the daily schedule, our high schools amplify their college-going cultures and unwavering commitment to 100 percent college acceptance and enrollment.

Closely aligned with the college application process, course curriculum for the College Readiness Seminar progresses through a sequence that develops along with our students as they move through their high school careers.

In 9th and 10th grades, the class meets two days per week with a focus on academic performance and academic awareness. During these early years of high school, the College Readiness Seminar supports students through the pivotal transition from middle school to high school. The explicit instruction provided in the College Readiness Seminar helps our students understand the relationship between



a rigorous high school experience and college persistence. It also helps them take ownership of their academic futures and learn to communicate professionally with teachers and other adults with whom they are trying to develop relationships—from emails and phone calls to interviews and impromptu encounters. In 11th grade, the focus shifts to time management, building preliminary college lists and extensive SAT preparation. By 12th grade, the class meets four times per week and guides students through every academic and financial step of the application process, including writing personal statements, requesting recommendations, compiling supplemental materials and comparing financial aid packages. In the spring semester, once students have selected the colleges they will attend, college readiness shifts to a transitions class to ensure that students are academically, financially and socially prepared for what they will encounter on campus. 🚗

OVERVIEW OF COLLEGE READINESS SEMINAR

QUARTER	9 TH GRADE (≥100 m/week)	10 TH GRADE (≥100 m/week)	11 TH GRADE (≥100 m/week)	12 TH GRADE (≥200 m/week)
	<i>Navigate High School to College</i>	<i>Connect College to Career</i>	<i>College Choices</i>	<i>Apply & Matriculate</i>
I	High school map Intro to grades & GPA Admissions criteria for success Professional email	High school résumé Career paths	Junior year academic map & reflection High school résumé	High school résumé College lists: research & selection Personal statement Teacher recommendation requests State applications submission College visits
II	Dream résumé Backwards-planning for summer applications Professional emails and communication	Backwards-planning for summer applications Personal narrative	Backwards-planning for summer applications Personal narrative	Supplemental essays Common Application submission FAFSA cycle #1
III	Submitting a summer application Financial aid acumen College visits	Submitting a summer application Financial aid acumen College visits	Submitting a summer application Financial aid acumen College research College visits	FAFSA cycle #2 Financial aid acumen Advocacy Research of college options
IV	College admissions research presentation	Lower school capstone project	College research protocol & list Interviewing	Analysis & college decisions Matriculation passport Senior Signing Day speech



SUMMER PROGRAMS

When **RAYCHEL** spent part of her summer at Brown University, she lived in a dorm, took classes in biology and nurtured her interest in medicine. But Raychel isn't a college student. Her time on campus came before she even started her junior year at Achievement First Hartford High School.



100%
of Achievement First's
high school students
participate in summer
programs

Raychel took part in a **pre-college program**, one of three summer program pathways that allow AF high school students enriching, low-stakes learning experiences beyond the classroom. Our broad array of summer opportunities are crucial to our mission: they foster college persistence by pushing students beyond their comfort zones as they explore future opportunities. These experiences also make them more competitive applicants for prized college seats and scholarships. All AF high school students are required to complete summer programs after 9th, 10th and 11th grades.

These programs also serve as a dry run for the college application process. While in pursuit of summer opportunities, our students practice résumé writing, interviewing and writing personal statements, and, through this process, they also gather information they will later need to make informed choices about colleges and majors. The impact of these programs on our students' development is monumental; almost all of our students write about their summer program experiences on their college essays,

30% of Achievement
First high school students
participate in pre-college
programs on college
campuses

highlighting growth and enrichment opportunities historically afforded only to their more affluent peers.

45% of Achievement First high school students participate in internship opportunities

Summer programs greatly enhance our college-going culture since students don't have to wait until the college application season in their senior year to learn how their grades and character records impact admissions decisions. For students like Raychel, who maintain a GPA above 3.0 and have strong character records at their schools, a summer program includes a several-week stay on a college campus. Every summer, AF students receive more than \$500,000 in financial aid to attend programs at Yale, Skidmore and a variety of other prestigious institutions. The summer before she studied at Brown, Raychel attended a writing program at Choate Rosemary Hall that gave her a first-hand look at life away from home: she managed her money, did laundry, studied in the library and met students from countries like Venezuela.

"Studying at Brown and Choate Rosemary Hall gave me eye-opening experiences," she said. "It was really good to see a lot of diversity from all over the world and to learn from top professors. It exposed me to life outside of Hartford. I definitely learned to be more independent."

"My summer program taught me discipline. Sometimes you want to give up, but you have to stay strong with the commitment to move forward. Now, when it comes to schoolwork that is really hard, I stick to it."

AF Brooklyn High Student, Camp Fowler Summer Program Participant

AF aims to provide each student with the opportunity to complete at least one pre-college program, during which they learn many valuable skills.

Students in good academic and character standing—like AF Brooklyn High School student Sean—earn internships at organizations including McKinsey & Company and the American Civil Liberties Union. Sean interned for Wooster Capital Management, learning about hedge fund investing, attending project meetings and conducting a small research project. The preceding summer, he studied at Syracuse University.

Meanwhile, other students who meet basic academic and character goals take part in enrichment programs ranging from salsa to advanced visual art. For these students, the programs offer life-changing character development opportunities. A hiking trip during a one-week enrichment program at Camp Fowler taught Nya to work hard and gave her an uncommon experience.

"How many African-American kids from Brooklyn can say they went canoeing and slept under the stars for a week?" she said.

AF Brooklyn High School teacher Taylor Delhagen said his students often return from their summer programs with improved attitudes and focus.

"After one of my 11th graders participated in a summer program, she stood tall with that sense of confidence we know students need in order to be successful. She used to want to do her

work alone, now she engages with the group," he said.

What our high school students learn in summer programs, they carry with them far into the future.

"My daughter loved participating in Explo at Yale," said one parent. "Instead of being bored during the summer, she had that great experience of actually living in a dorm and taking college classes."



Achievement First seeks to partner with multiple colleges, businesses and organizations to increase the range of opportunities available to our students

PRE-COLLEGE SUMMER PARTNERS INCLUDE:

Brown University, Choate Rosemary Hall, Emory University, Franklin & Marshall College, Kenyon Young Writer's Workshop, Marist College, Marlboro College, Rose Hulman Catapult Program, Skidmore College, Youth About Business, George Washington University

PARTNERING INTERNSHIP SITES INCLUDE:

ACLU, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn Supreme Court, Catalyst Network Foundation, The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, Delta Airlines, JP Morgan, Office of the State Attorney General (Conn.), McKinsey & Company, Metropolitan Opera Guild, READ Alliance, Robin Hood Foundation, New Haven Symphony, TED-Ed, Updike, Kelly and Spellacy, Wooster Capital Management, Yale

PRE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

Three- to five-week programs on college or boarding school campuses

Students earn scholarships to attend; they may also receive college-level credit for completed courses

INTERNSHIPS

One- to four-week unpaid work experiences with local organizations and companies

Students are exposed to various careers and organizations (corporate, non-profit, etc.), work with professional mentors and complete special projects to build résumés

ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Non-residential programs ranging in duration from one week to one month

On-site academic and extracurricular programs such as drama, dance and sign language

Off-site team-building and community service programs

COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS



“By embedding rigorous reading and writing into every unit and helping students develop the skills of precise, versatile, mathematical thinkers, our teachers adopt SAT- and A.P.-readiness in a school-wide effort. Paired with explicit SAT-prep instruction in the junior curriculum, this integrated approach ensures that, when test day comes, students are well-equipped to demonstrate their academic abilities.”

*Jeff Sudmyer,
Regional Superintendent, Connecticut*



100% of our students will take the official SAT an average of three times during their high school careers

When our students take College Board tests, such as A.P. exams and SATs, we know how much their answers matter. Although these tests are just one indicator of an individual student’s overall college readiness, they stand as critical gatekeepers to college acceptance and are an important reflection of overall preparation. That is why Achievement First approaches the SAT as the single most important test students take. With the stakes so high, our high schools employ a three-pronged, comprehensive approach designed to close a critical gap between the preparation available to our students and that provided to their more affluent peers.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

By embedding SAT and A.P. skills and content into every course, AF teachers ensure that students develop strong vocabularies, learn to read and analyze rigorous texts, and feel comfortable attacking complex word problems long before testing dates approach. This whole-school integration is embodied by colorful SAT vocabulary magnets adorning rows of lockers and school-wide events designed to pump up students before their exams.



PRACTICE EXAMS & PREP

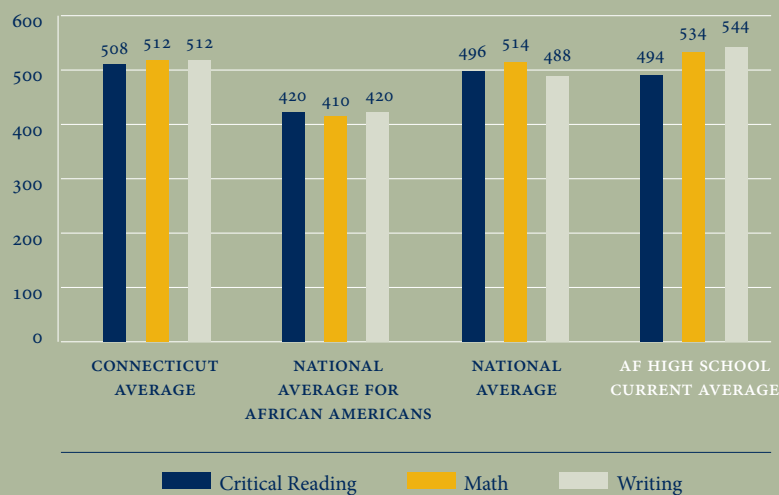
Achievement First students take a practice PSAT in 9th grade, actual PSATs in 10th and 11th grades, SAT and SAT IIs beginning in 11th grade, and A.P. exams in 10th to 12th grades. To prepare for high-stakes, 11th-grade testing, all juniors receive two days per week of differentiated SAT prep taught by talented, committed English and math teachers. 🦋

**Over the course of
their high school
careers at Achievement
First, students receive
100 hours
of SAT instruction**

SAT Growth & Results

AF GRADUATING CLASS	% SCORING ABOVE 1,000	% ABOVE 1,100	% ABOVE 1,200	% ABOVE 1,300	% ABOVE 1,400
2010	24%	8%	4%	0%	0%
2011	16%	0%	11%	0%	0%
2012	43%	13%	10%	3%	0%
2013	42%	5%	10%	5%	0%
2014	35%	7%	5%	4%	1%

* Combined Critical Reading and Mathematics: 1,600-point scale



COLLEGE PROCESS

By his senior year, Achievement First Brooklyn High School student LAKENZWA knew he wanted to select a college where he could pursue his passion: mechanical engineering. He initially considered 15 colleges and then narrowed his list down to two final choices.



14% of Achievement First alumni have taken remedial college classes, compared to 63% of low-income college students across the country

He spent a weekend at Lafayette College where he took an up-close look at the mechanical engineering program, met with professors and realized that Lafayette was the right school for him.

As he reflected on his senior year, Lakenzwa said: “My college counselor helped me understand the college process and led sessions where students and parents talked about the college experience. Choosing a college could have been intimidating, but instead it was fun. I felt empowered to make the right decision for me.”

“The college process gave me a starting point. It helped me consider more than just grades and programs but also experiences,” he said. “My teachers shared their reasons for attending the colleges they chose, and it helped me feel more confident about applying early decision. I was able to explore many different college options and choose a college that I could actually see myself attending.”

Our college process builds off the solid foundation of understanding tied to academic performance, financial need and self-advocacy students learn through their required College Readiness Seminar. For seniors, this process serves as a guide by giving students and their families the tools and support to select colleges that best fit their goals and needs. Counselors help students like Lakenzwa through every step of their college decision-making process: from college list creation to financial aid research to matriculation decisions. By the time they leave their senior-level College Readiness Seminar, students have a complete binder of tools they will need to navigate college—including a map highlighting on-campus resources and a checklist of time-management strategies and helpful hints.



“I wouldn’t have been able to find my dream school if not for the support AF gave me throughout the entire process. I wouldn’t have chosen Susquehanna, a school that will continue to challenge me academically as I pursue my passions in chemistry, law and literature.”

Aminah, AF Amistad High School Student

At AF, guidance through the college process is in-depth and deliberate; we understand that students who select colleges that best fit their needs are more likely to succeed and persist toward graduation. That’s why we provide the highest degree of individualized attention, meeting with students and their families to ensure they are well-informed about each college of interest and supporting students in putting forth the strongest possible applications. In addition to considering key information about the school’s setting, financial fit and academic rigor, we want to make sure students are matriculating to the school on their list that has the greatest track record of supporting AF alumni.

We only recommend schools that offer significant financial aid and provide robust support for first-generation, low-income students. We suggest schools with high graduation rates for students of color and strong retention rates for underclassmen.

On average, Achievement First high school graduates apply to at least nine colleges and earn acceptance to five

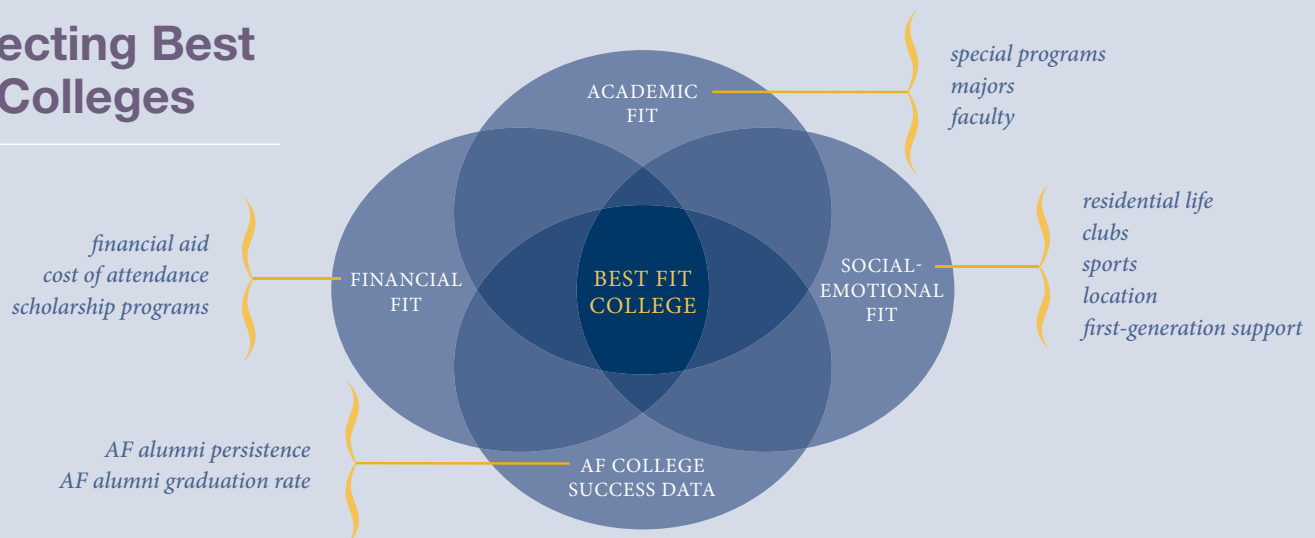
In helping students and their families create best-fit lists, we carefully consider GPA, SAT scores and character record. A student’s preference survey is used to determine whether the school makes a good social fit, weighing factors including distance from home and the size of the campus. The result takes the guesswork out of college list creation. Once the list is developed, we walk students and families through the complex application process.

“We work closely with students and families to ensure the timely submission of high-quality, complete college and financial aid applications,” said Emery Sykes, AF Amistad High’s founding dean of college.

For AF Amistad High student Aminah, the college process was invaluable in her decision making.

“I would never have decided on Susquehanna University if Ms. Sykes didn’t strongly encourage me to go to the overnight program,” she said. “Visiting the school was the deciding factor. Without the overnight program, I would never have known that Susquehanna was the school for me.”

Selecting Best Fit Colleges



ALUMNI *Program*

“Our commitment to our students doesn’t stop at high school graduation; that’s not the mission. The mission is college graduation.”

*Paul Adler,
Founding Principal, AF Brooklyn
High School*



AF’s goal is that at least 75% of our alumni will graduate from a four-year college within six years

Jahki graduated from Achievement First Amistad High School in 2012 determined to become the first member of his family to earn a college degree. Now, as he continues to work toward the true summit—college graduation—the AF “Team & Family” that helped him climb the mountain to college remains by his side.

At Achievement First, we celebrate the tremendous accomplishments of our high school graduates, but we recognize that the journey for these students is just beginning. Nationally, only 8.3 percent of low-income students graduate from college within six years. This is the reason that our work extends far beyond the intensive programming provided at the high school level to targeted alumni support designed to foster persistence and help students reach their college goals.

“Academically, financially and socio-emotionally, college is a massive adjustment, especially for first-generation students,” said Megan Fraker, network director of alumni programs and partnerships. “There are many obstacles and academic landmines our kids could step on, and our support is critical in navigating them.”

85% of Achievement First’s high school graduates are the first in their families to attend college

AF's alumni counselors provide this critical support while working in partnership with college officials, alumni and families to ensure college success and degree attainment for all of our college students. Our counselors maintain a vital connection with our alumni through emails, phone calls and on-campus meetings, and by helping to connect them with campus resources. An alumni counselor helps Jahki and other alums break down obstacles into manageable, bite-sized pieces.

84% of Achievement First's alumni are currently enrolled in college or have graduated from college

A justice, law and administration major at Western Connecticut State University, Jahki said AF's alumni program "makes a huge difference" in his college experience. During his freshman year, Jahki struggled in his classes. Without the help of his alumni counselor, Jahki would not have connected with a campus champion who helped him create his class schedule, learn more about his professors and find summer jobs. This help enabled Jahki to significantly boost his GPA during his freshman spring semester. His alumni counselor also helped him work through financial aid issues so that he could return to college for his sophomore year.

Sheridan, an AF Brooklyn High alumna and civil engineering major at Howard University, said frequent contact with her alumni counselor helps her to stay on track.



"The Alumni Program keeps me focused and it makes me feel so supported," Sheridan said. "Most people are on their own in college. With the Alumni Program, I always feel like I have a lot of people behind me."

Through our Alumni Program, students like Jahki and Sheridan receive small scholarships each semester in exchange for sharing their academic performance, course schedule and other information. This not only allows us to maintain a vital link with our alumni and identify areas where they may need outreach, it also provides us with data we can use

to help our current students improve. For example, when counselors saw some of our alumni struggling in psychology and physics, we began a process to modify the high school science curriculum to help future alumni succeed. In order to help our students feel more comfortable meeting with their professors, we instituted teacher office hours for high school juniors and seniors.

"It motivates me and gives me confidence to know that someone else cares," Jahki said. "All of AF is thinking of me and encouraging me to go on."

We organize our graduating students into TIERS, which helps our alumni counselors prioritize outreach and coaching.

TIER 1	Receives less frequent outreach	Defined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong academic skills/performance• GPA 2.7 or higher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial aid package with few gaps• Strong self-advocacy skills• Consistent communication with AF• Receives monthly outreach and has strong on-campus support in multiple areas identified by student and/or alumni office
TIER 2	Needs support beyond monthly outreach	Defined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mid-level academic skills/performance• GPA 2.0–2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some financial aid gaps, some on-campus support, and room for growth in communication and self-advocacy• Receives monthly outreach and, for some, campus visits
TIER 3	Needs most support from college, alumni counselor	Defined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low academic skills/performance• GPA 2.0 and lower	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Usually has large gaps in financial aid, attends school without many on-campus support mechanisms, lacks self-advocacy skills and family involvement• Receives outreach at least 2x/month but is less proactive about outreach to Alumni Program