

# Narratives

## Executive Summary

20 AmeriCorps members will prepare low-income students in the Omaha, NE metro area for success in post-secondary education through academic and college preparation programming. At the end of each year of this project, students will demonstrate improved academic performance in literacy and math, and will demonstrate increased preparation for higher education and careers through college admission and persistence. This project will focus on the CNCS focus area of Education, specifically, improving preparation for and prospects of success in post-secondary education institutions for economically disadvantaged students. The CNCS investment of \$240,000 will be matched with \$1,000,000 in private contributions.

## Rationale and Approach

### a. Need

Nationwide, only 8% of people from low-income backgrounds earn a college degree by age 24. In fact, students from upper-income families are ten times more likely to earn a college degree than those from low-income backgrounds (Postsecondary Education Opportunity). This disparity in college access and success has a powerful impact on both individual students' lives and their community's economic future, highlighting the need for solutions to prepare low-income students for success in post-secondary education.

The impact of post-secondary education on individual prosperity is striking. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, a college graduate will earn approximately \$1 million more over his/her lifetime than a high school graduate and will experience unemployment rates 30 percent lower than high school graduates. Among adult wage earners in Nebraska in 2010, workers with bachelor's degrees had median earnings of \$39,935 compared with \$26,666 for high school graduates.

Post-secondary success is not only crucial for low-income students -- our state's future prosperity depends on our ability to raise, attract, and retain college graduates. By 2018, 1.9 million Nebraska jobs -- 66% of all jobs in the state -- will require some post-secondary training beyond high school (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce 2010). Degree attainment rates are not rising quickly enough to meet this projected need -- it is critical that all Nebraska students with the potential to succeed in college actually have the opportunity to attend and earn degrees.

While other factors certainly contribute to low-income students' low rates of college admission and graduation, lack of academic preparation for college can disadvantage students before their pursuit of higher education even begins. Students served by College Possible demonstrate significantly lower

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scores on the ACT, an exam commonly used to gauge academic preparation for college level coursework. The average ACT score for the state of Nebraska is a 22; for Omaha Public Schools, that average is a 19.1. The average score for a student entering the College Possible Omaha program is a 15.8, placing students at a disadvantage in the increasingly competitive college admissions process and indicating that they are not adequately prepared for academic success in college.

College access and success are not only crucial for low-income students, but our state's future depends on our ability to raise, attract, educate and retain college graduates. Degree attainment rates are not rising quickly enough to meet the projected needs of employers. According to the Lumina Foundation, the current projected college attainment rate by 2025 in Nebraska is only 57% (A Stronger Nation through Higher Education, 2012). Additionally, in Nebraska, 21.7% more non-low-income high school graduates go to college than their low-income high school graduate peers. It is crucial that all Nebraska students with the potential for college actually go to college and earn a degree.

College Possible has chosen to address the need for college education as a pathway out of poverty and a catalyst for economic growth, targeting low-income students from the Omaha metro area. As of 2011, only 35.9% of Omaha residents 25 years of age or older across all income levels attain a Bachelor's degree or higher (Omaha Chamber of Commerce). This project, then, will fit in the CNCS priority focus area of education, more specifically, it will focus on the identified corporation goal of improving the preparation for and prospects of success in post-secondary education institutions for economically disadvantaged students.

Students in the Omaha metro area are at a disadvantage in accessing postsecondary education compared to their peers across Nebraska. Many of these students are in the demographic groups least likely to attend college--namely, minority, first-generation and low-income students. 66.4% of all Omaha Public Schools students are minority and of that number in 2011-2012, 71.5% are receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL). In Ralston Public School District, 36.1% of students are minorities. Ralston's district has also seen a dramatic rise in low-income student populations -- in 2001-2002, 23.8% of Ralston's students qualified for FRL compared to 46.5% in 2011-2012 representing a 22.7% increase. Papillion-LaVista School (PLV) District has similar numbers in that 16.3% of PLV students are minorities and 21.6% qualify for FRL. Westside Community Schools are at 21.4% minorities and 26.1% FRL.

By addressing the need for college access and success service in the Omaha metro area, and targeting low-income students, AmeriCorps members serving with College Possible are able to have a profound

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impact on some of our State's most pressing education and economic issues. Given this need, College Possible provides free services that improve academic outcomes for low-income Omaha students, specifically around preparation for success in post-secondary education. We do this through programming that combines academic readiness instruction with mentorship and guidance through college completion.

### b. AmeriCorps Members as Highly Effective Means to Solve Community Problems

College Possible's mission is to make college admission and success possible for low-income students through an intensive curriculum of consulting and support. The 20 full-time AmeriCorps members we are requesting are the heart and soul of that mission, serving low-income high school students, and following them through college.

Corps members lead in the delivery of College Possible's three main program functions -- our high school program, our college program, and early preparation workshops for 9th and 10th graders. Each of these programs and member activities are described in more detail below. All AmeriCorps members have full-time (1,700 hours) service terms, ensuring that they deliver the high level of service needed to successfully support our students.

1. High School Program: AmeriCorps members ("Coaches") work with students over the course of their junior and senior years in high school in a series of activities using our copyrighted curriculum. Coaches lead after-school sessions at our partner high schools for groups of 10-15 low-income students, preparing them for college admission, meeting twice a week for two hours each session over the course of those two years. Coaches are available in the schools during the school day to work with students individually (during lunch hours and study periods), and use this time to build relationships and align program activities with school staff and other after-school program providers. Our intensive, 320-hour program is aimed at improving students' preparation for college and prospects for success, as described below:

\*Understanding opportunities: Coaches introduce students to the advantages of college, provide resources for students to explore, and lead students on campus visits.

\*Academic support and test preparation: We work to ensure that students are academically prepared for college and careers. Coaches deliver academic readiness programming that focuses on the topics covered on the ACT exam, a tool used to gauge both academic progress and readiness for college-level coursework. College Possible's curriculum reviews and reinforces the academic content found in the exam, especially on math and reading comprehension, and teaches test-taking strategies that help students best demonstrate their knowledge. Students receive one-on-one support as needed and take

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four full-length practice exams to prepare them for the real test.

\*Application preparation: Coaches help students complete their college applications, provide intensive coaching on essays, and provide support in identifying and working with teachers to write recommendation letters.

\*Financial aid consulting: Coaches give students intensive support identifying, pursuing, and applying for a wide range of financial aid, including state and federal aid and local and national scholarships.

2. College Program: We also provide services to students who have completed our high school program who are either in college or hoping to enroll. College coaches develop strategies to reach students and help them find the resources they need to be successful in college, following a detailed curriculum.

\*Summer bridge programming supports students from high school graduation through their fall enrollment. These activities ensure that students complete all the steps it takes to actually enroll and arrive on campus, and that they do not lose courage to take this big step.

\*Coaches use a variety of technology platforms--everything from Facebook to text messages--to reach students on campus or wherever they are. These contacts are guided by a structured curriculum covering topics such as:

- Academics: building good study skills; finding a tutor; choosing a major

- Finances: finding a work-study position; reading a tuition statement; FAFSA

- Social/cultural: connecting on campus; dealing with family demands

\*The "CP 2.0" initiative follows students who dropped out of college or never enrolled, working to identify and support students who are done with high school and want to be enrolled in college.

\*Internship, job, scholarship, or other leadership opportunities are regularly shared with students to help strengthen their resumes and prepare for life after college.

3. College Readiness Workshops: AmeriCorps members lead a series of workshops that high school seniors in our program deliver to 9th and 10th grade students. These workshops help underclassmen understand the importance of preparing for college early in their high school career. The 9th and 10th grade students who attend the workshops see other students who attend their schools, live in their neighborhoods, and share their experiences. Junior and senior role models tell them, "I am going to college, and you can, too."

AmeriCorps members are a unique, highly effective means to solve the community problem that Omaha's low-income students face: lack of access and unpreparedness for educational opportunities. College Possible serves students who have the potential to go to college, but are not likely to get there

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without additional support. These students need a caring adult who can help them navigate the complicated application process, and a mentor who will encourage them to believe that they can in fact make it to and through college--an ideal role for AmeriCorps members.

Members are themselves recent college graduates; many of them are people of color and/or first generation college graduates, so are especially relatable mentors for our students. Furthermore, the structure of AmeriCorps attracts idealistic, energetic, and talented people who are fully committed to serving the community. The constant, unwavering support of a coach telling them "you can do it" is a vital resource that students need. As one student said, "College Possible completely changed my views about college and helped me to understand that it's an actual option for someone like me and to keep hope. I love College Possible and my coach for everything we stand for and the stereotypes we're breaking. I aspire to give back to College Possible once I graduate from college."

As the first program in the country to apply AmeriCorps members to the issue of college access, we have seen nation-leading results for students while running a cost-effective program that highly leverages federal funding to achieve broad community support. The structure and brand of AmeriCorps allows us to attract talented people whose costs are funded in part through the grant. The federal funding itself provides a powerful lever to seek support from private donors to match those funds. Our strategic use of volunteers through AmeriCorps increases our capacity to serve students and grow to scale more quickly, creating a much larger impact on the community's education needs than we otherwise could.

A June 2011 Harvard study confirms the effectiveness of AmeriCorps members in this role: College Possible students in the founding Twin Cities site were more than twice as likely to enroll in college as a similar set of peers who lacked a College Possible coach to guide them.

### c. Evidence-Based/Evidence-Informed and Measurable Community Impact

AmeriCorps members serving with College Possible carry out interventions that are evidence-based, supported by research-based findings and practices in three key areas:

1. Academic/standardized test preparation: Perna (2000) finds that in addition to scores on standardized tests, test preparation itself is strongly predictive of four-year college enrollment. Buchmann et al. (2006) find that college admission test score increases are associated with a higher probability of enrollment in any four-year college or university, with a 99% confidence interval. ACT's own research of scores matched against actual grades earned by students later in college, suggests standardized test score increases directly relate to a student's readiness to succeed academically in specific first-year college courses (English composition, college algebra, introductory social science and

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biology).

2. College application assistance: Roderick et al. (2008) highlight the anxiety students have about college application essays, highlighting the need to move beyond an 'information-only' model and provide more intensive support. Furthermore, Perna (2000) finds that, although getting help on college admission requirements does not significantly predict college enrollment, not receiving assistance with those requirements is a significant pitfall to enrolling in college.

3. Financial aid and FAFSA assistance: Bettinger et al. (2009) present the most conclusive evidence to date that simplifying the financial aid process increases college enrollment. Dynarski (1999) estimates that each \$1000 of grant aid received by a student increases their probability of college enrollment by 7%.

Independent evaluations of College Possible's results in the founding Twin Cities site reinforce academic research and demonstrate the measurable community impact of our program:

ICF INTERNATIONAL, 2009: A validation study of student outcomes confirmed that the students served during the 2008-09 academic year saw: 1) growth in ACT test scores from pre- to post-test periods of 22% per student on average; and 2) a 98% college acceptance rate for the class of 2009.

AVERY, 2011: Harvard Kennedy School professor Dr. Christopher Avery conducted a historical analysis of College Possible, examining college enrollment data for more than 3,000 program applicants over three years and comparing college enrollment rates for students who were admitted to the program to those for a similar group of students who did not participate in the program. Dr. Avery found that College Possible students were more than 30 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than their peers, and more than twice as likely to be admitted to a four-year college. The results of this analysis strongly suggest positive program effects; a randomized controlled trial is now underway with the class of 2013.

Through interventions that are both evidence-based and evidence-informed, we expect to see measureable change in the community by the end of the three-year grant cycle with far more low-income students being academically prepared for college, earning college admission, and graduating from college. This proposal seeks funding to support continued growth of our high school and college programs, allowing us to serve 750 high school students, 1,000 high school students through workshops and 500 college students by the third year of the grant.

Performance measure targets were determined with the intention of maintaining or improving on our top-of-field results. We plan to maintain or improve our results while significantly expanding to meet the needs of even more low-income Omaha Metro Area students. We will report on these measures

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through internal data collection and analysis, and through external data analysis and program evaluation when available.

Our past success gives us confidence that we can continue to significantly impact students' chances of earning admission, enrolling, and being successful in college. Results to date in Omaha are trending favorably along the same lines as we have seen historically in other locations. In 2011-12, our first year of operations, College Possible Omaha recruited 74 students and helped them improve their academic performance in math and literacy, as demonstrated by ACT scores that increased an average of 13% after receiving College Possible services.

These results are in line with what we have seen in other cities through the services of our national model, giving us confidence that College Possible Omaha can repeat the nation-leading results achieved by College Possible. Historically, College Possible students have increased their ACT scores by more than 20%; 98% have been admitted to college and over 90% have enrolled in post-secondary education.

### d. Member Recruitment

We have great success with member recruitment, generating five or more applicants for each available AmeriCorps position. We strive to recruit members from traditionally underrepresented populations, reflecting the demographics of the students we serve: people who are low-income, of color, and/or who are among the first in their families to attend college. Our retention rate as well as the results they are able to achieve speaks to our success in working with these populations. Nearly 30% of our members this year are people of color and 25% are first-generation college graduates; we are working to build on this diversity among Corps in the coming years. Many grew up in or attended college in the local community, giving them firsthand experience with community issues. We work to ensure that the opportunity to serve is open to all people, including those with disabilities. We also hope to intentionally recruit College Possible program alumni once they graduate from college; their experience as program participants could make them highly effective Corps members.

In order to maximize the number of people who hear about AmeriCorps opportunities with College Possible, we take the following approach to recruitment:

\*Raising awareness: When spreading the word about our AmeriCorps positions, we use many different tactics: flyers posted around the Omaha Metro Area; information sessions at local colleges and job fairs; emails and print newsletter announcements to our database of more than 6,000 people, as well as to college list-servs; newspaper advertisements; postings on the AmeriCorps website; and job descriptions posted on websites such as Idealist.org.

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\*Recruitment partners: Public and private colleges and universities both locally and across the country remain key recruitment partners. In addition, we work through different local community organizations; through national entities such as African American fraternal and sorority groups; and with national service organizations like Teach for America.

\*Participation from program participants: We have students on college campuses throughout the country, and they are wonderful recruiters for our program--they know the value of our services and have a great understanding of what makes an effective AmeriCorps member.

### e. Member Training

We are committed to training our Corps members in the specific skills required to deliver college preparation services, as well as providing personal development training that will help our Corps members prepare for future professional opportunities and become better overall citizens. Our leadership team is dedicated to overseeing the Corps member experience, including member development, training, and supervision.

Orientation: Corps members will participate in at least 10 days of orientation, including a retreat that helps build the esprit de corps that is a key sustaining factor throughout the year. Topics covered during this orientation include:

\*What is AmeriCorps?; What is Service?; College Possible organizational history

\*AmeriCorps civic engagement activities, prohibited activities & compliance

\*Demographics of Omaha Metro Area/Nebraska; No Child Left Behind; Educational Achievement Gap; introductions to key communities we serve (e.g., Latino culture)

\*College Admissions 101; Financial Aid 101; lesson planning; setting the tone in the classroom

\*Team-building activities; social activities led by returning Corps members; leadership opportunities

Ongoing Training: In addition to this extensive orientation, all Corps members will come together at our Omaha headquarters every Friday. Corps members will participate in trainings that are specific to the mission of the organization, relevant to their positions, or focused on developing the members as citizens. As we intensify the focus on academic readiness in our high school program, we are adding additional training for Corps members on this topic. These training sessions will prepare them to deliver our enhanced academic curriculum effectively, along with the college preparation curriculum.

A general timeline for training is as follows:

Fall-- Teaching/leading a classroom; college admissions; visiting colleges and attending college fairs; preparing letters of recommendation; working in schools

Winter--Academic readiness and ACT preparation; financial aid and scholarships; citizenship and

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government; teaching/leading a classroom

Spring--Preparing resumes; transitioning from high school to college; citizenship; life after AmeriCorps

Corps members are also trained and regularly review the prohibited activities for AmeriCorps participants. We hold a session in orientation focused on this topic; as a wrap-up to orientation, members prepare presentations for each other on all AmeriCorps rights and responsibilities including a review of prohibited activities.

### f. Member Supervision

In order to achieve excellent results for students and run a strong AmeriCorps program, we are very attentive to member supervision. College Possible hires Program Coordinators who each directly supervise 6-8 Corps members, meet with them individually on a bi-weekly basis to observe their work with students and provide feedback and support, conduct member evaluation and trainings, and help lead member recruitment and orientation. They assist in preparing training sessions, service projects, recognition activities, and other events, as well as preparing reports and other paperwork required to maintain our AmeriCorps grant. This intensive management structure allows us to ensure that our Corps members have a fulfilling experience and achieve outstanding results--as evidenced by our student success rates and our ability to retain Corps members through their term and, in many cases, for a second year.

We seek Program Coordinators who have had significant work experience prior to joining our team; ideally, who have experience with AmeriCorps and have previously supervised teams. All new program staff complete an orientation and training process that introduces them to the organization; covers supervisory and project management topics; and reviews our performance goals. They also attend separate trainings that review AmeriCorps program management requirements, and shadow experienced program staff in observing sessions, checking in with AmeriCorps members, and leading Friday meetings and trainings.

Our Program Manager provides oversight related to Corps member management, supported by our national office. This includes training, support, and accountability in managing member files, ensuring compliance with AmeriCorps regulations including prohibited activities, and providing a positive experience for our members. The Program Manager's job is to ensure the integrity of the program, including delivery of outstanding results for our students; provide an excellent service experience for Corps members and ensure that their service activities are allowable and do not fall into the areas defined as the Corporation's prohibited activities; and certify that AmeriCorps rules are being

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followed in terms of management of member files, timesheets, training, etc.

### g. Member Experience

We are committed to ensuring that all AmeriCorps members who serve with us have a powerful experience that produces measurable community impact, builds organizational capacity, and leads to continued civic participation and a life-long spirit of service. This commitment aligns with ServeNebraska's commitment to enhancing AmeriCorps member experience, with the ultimate goal of creating a sustainable service solution for our community around education.

College Possible provides a powerful member experience through:

a. Empowerment to solve community problems: AmeriCorps members are ideally suited to address a key community need, and are uniquely effective in doing so, which in itself creates a powerful experience for members. When members are able to dedicate themselves for a year to a problem where they can see a direct impact on the results, it creates a sense of power and efficacy that is energizing, and carries through to their future career plans.

b. Significant responsibility and autonomy: College Possible AmeriCorps members are immediately vested with significant responsibility for helping a group of students prepare for college or continue through to graduation. They take the lead in planning events, connecting with high school and college admissions staff, and serving as community spokespersons for the organization and for their students.

c. Member recognition: We have a number of one-time and ongoing activities to recognize our Corps members' achievements.

\*An end-of-term celebration recognizes the accomplishments of the team and individual members, and thanks and honors members for their commitment to service.

\*An "AmeriCorps Member of the Year" award is given each year to the one or two most outstanding Corps member(s). This award is based on the nominations of other Corps members and is usually in conjunction with public recognition such as a mayoral proclamation.

\*Frequently, we offer rewards or incentives for our Corps members. Examples of this include appreciation breakfasts and an ice cream social to recognize team success in meeting new goals.

\*Each week, Corps members can recognize each other for an "Idealistic Leader" award. These nominations are read aloud in front of the entire team, publicly recognizing the ways in which Corps members exemplified College Possible's Idealistic Leader traits and the spirit of service.

\*Whenever possible, Corps members are featured in our media coverage.

We provide multiple structured opportunities for members to reflect throughout their term of service. The service year is book-ended with overarching conversations about service; during orientation,

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members talk about their decision to dedicate a year of their life to service. At our mid-year retreat, members reflect on their service experience to date and set personal goals for the remainder of their term of service. At the end of the year, members are asked to write about their service year and what they have learned from it; they share these reflections with each other at our year-end celebration. College Possible Omaha hosts both AmeriCorps and VISTA members, and is proud to collaborate with other national and community service programs supported by the Corporation. We have hosted and attended joint trainings with other youth-serving AmeriCorps members, and we participate in statewide efforts with other AmeriCorps/VISTA programs whenever possible. As a program, we regularly participate in National AmeriCorps Week activities. Members of our Corps plan and participate in multiple organization-wide service projects during the course of the year, reinforcing the connection to national service and lifelong civic engagement. College Possible Omaha, working in collaboration with four other AmeriCorps agencies, has developed and implemented joint monthly training sessions that allow AmeriCorps members from across the Omaha Metro Area to learn together and from each other as well.

Our training and preparation efforts are built to foster a connection and identity as AmeriCorps members. Orientation and training for members is divided into four main strands (see Section 1 E); one strand of training is focused on AmeriCorps. From a session on the first day of orientation called "What is Service?" to regular updates throughout the year about policy related to CNCS programs, members are highly attuned to their relationship with AmeriCorps and gain a sense of pride in "getting things done for America."

### h. Volunteer Generation

College Possible strategically leverages volunteers to increase our organizational capacity to meet our mission, greatly expanding the impact of our work. The first source of volunteers who help to expand our reach in the community is our local board of directors. In addition, we also have many people who volunteer their time to help increase our staff knowledge and capacity. These volunteers are recruited through personal networks of our Corps and staff members and through our growing network of community partners. College personnel, career advisors, school counselors and staff, and cultural experts offer their time and expertise to help our Corps members prepare for and understand the responsibilities they will undertake throughout the course of the year. Our cross-sector collaboration with these volunteers builds relationships in the community and increases our ability to achieve program objectives.

We use volunteers in many ways, but are most proud of our efforts to engage students themselves in

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volunteerism. We do this for two main reasons. First, we want students to recognize their own power to serve others, not just to be recipients of service. Second, we hope students will see service to the community as an opportunity to give back to a community that has supported them. Through this process, we hope to help students develop an ethic of service that will carry throughout their lifetimes. Every year, we conduct two major community service efforts with our students--one effort works with other local non-profit agencies in the Omaha Metro Area, and one doing various improvement projects at each of the high schools we serve. These efforts are built into the College Possible curriculum and reflect the importance we place on volunteer generation.

Another volunteer recruitment effort involving students is the presentation of college readiness workshops, delivered by College Possible seniors to 9th and 10th graders within the high schools we serve. These workshops not only help our students learn to become engaged citizens, they also advance our organization's mission: to help low-income students prepare for and earn admission to college. College readiness workshops engage seniors in more than five hours of service.

### Organizational Capability

#### a. Organizational Background and Staffing

College Possible's mission is to make college admission and success possible for low-income students through an intensive curriculum of coaching and support. The organization was founded in Minnesota in 2000; our third site, Omaha, opened in the fall of 2011. We began to serve students in the Omaha area in January 2012. Since January, College Possible Omaha's core high school programming has grown from serving 74 students at two local schools to serving more than 300 students in high school and another 350 through college planning workshops. In this time we have worked to ensure that our programmatic growth has been matched by growing management expertise, community support, and financial investment in our work.

Our management structure includes outstanding, experienced management staff overseeing our program in Omaha. They include:

Bryan Seck, Program Manager. Bryan grew up in Wichita, Kansas and graduated from the University of Kansas with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science, international relations and Spanish. After college, he served as an English teacher for the Peace Corps in Kazakhstan from 2004-2006. Bryan received his Master's in Public Administration from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service in 2009. While at NYU, he studied non-profit management and program measurement and evaluation, taught English as a Second Language, interned at the US State Department and led alumni activities. For three years prior to arriving at College Possible, he worked

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as a Senior Associate at ICF International, a research and consulting firm. Bryan's role with the program is to ensure that program management, record-keeping, and activities are in compliance with all federal and state requirements; supervise and provide support for program staff; oversee member recruitment and orientation, training sessions, service projects, recognition activities, and other events; and develop program objectives and evaluate the AmeriCorps program.

Lorena Zamarripa-Lovo, High School Program Coordinator. Lorena was born in Paramount, California, but spent her childhood in Guadalajara, Mexico. Her family moved from Mexico to Omaha about twelve years ago; so in many ways, Lorena considers herself an Omaha native. She graduated from Ralston High School and received her BA in Business Administration and Human Resources management from Creighton University. She recently completed her Master's in Educational Administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). As a first-generation college student, she has a passion for education and college access to help youth reach their full potential. Lorena is able to direct the replication of the College Possible culture, work ethic, and standard of success for current Corps members. Lorena is responsible for supervising 6-8 Corps members and supporting them in their service experience as described in the "Member Supervision" section of the Rationale and Approach component of this grant request.

Laura Schabloske, Executive Director. An Omaha native, Laura received her Bachelor's degree from the University of Nebraska -- Lincoln (UNL) and her Master's degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). She sits on the executive committee of Cather Circle, the distinguished female alumnae program at UNL, and is a member of Omaha Network and Millard Rotary. Laura served as the Chief Development Officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Midlands and as Foundation Director for the Nebraska Children's Home Society Foundation after spending over a decade serving in several executive positions in both the healthcare and Internet space. As executive director, Laura is responsible for the overall operations of the organization in Omaha, including program management and compliance, fundraising, and collaboration and relationship-building with partners and supporters.

In addition to these Omaha-based staff, the program is supported by key staff in our national office who are experts in AmeriCorps grant administration and member recruitment. This includes:

Jim McCorkell, Chief Executive Officer and College Possible Founder. Jim has a master's degree in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School, where he studied nonprofit management and strategic organizational development. Prior to founding College Possible, Jim worked with City Year in Boston, directing their expansion strategy.

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Traci Kirtley, Director of Programming & Evaluation. Traci has a master's degree in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School, where she studied education policy and organizational management. She has worked for a government contracting firm and has extensive experience managing government contracts, and has overseen College Possible's AmeriCorps grant management, record-keeping, and compliance efforts since 2004.

Our organization is led by a diverse, talented Board of Directors who provide overall leadership and oversight for our efforts. Two of our board members are former participants in our program who ground our program in the realities and needs of the students we serve. College Possible Omaha also has a local board of business and community members who help to identify funding sources, build relationships, and increase community awareness of College Possible.

College Possible has 11 years of prior experience administering AmeriCorps grants at both the national and state level. In 2012-13, we received a state grant from ServeNebraska; 9 members are currently serving with us in Omaha under this grant. The AmeriCorps program is the foundation of our operations at College Possible; we do not run any other programs beyond our AmeriCorps college access and success efforts. Because of the importance of AmeriCorps to our organization, proper management of our AmeriCorps program is a top organizational priority. College Possible has received high marks for our AmeriCorps program performance and management, and we work continuously to ensure compliance and responsiveness to recommended changes.

### b. Sustainability

To ensure that our program has maximum impact in the community and is around as long as our services are needed, we take a number of steps to be sustainable.

Our first step toward sustainability is ensuring that we have diverse funding sources. College Possible is able to leverage four private sector dollars for every dollar of government support we receive. Since our launch in Omaha in 2011, we have identified funding partnerships that have provided adequate revenue to cover our growing budgets each year as we grew student services. Our mission is one that resonates strongly with a broad audience of constituents: from corporate partners dedicated to workforce development to individuals compelled by issues of equality in education. Investment in College Possible has remained strong even as charitable giving has become increasingly unpredictable in the current economy. Our revenue plan includes continuing to build a diversified portfolio of support from private foundations, corporations and individuals.

College Possible is committed to raising private dollars to support the service activities and initiatives

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that make our programming so effective. College Possible was founded entirely on private-sector support and has built a strong support base over a number of years, demonstrating the long-term financial sustainability of its model. College Possible Omaha has secured organizational funding from numerous funders, including the Holland Foundation, Mutual of Omaha Foundation, Midlands Community Foundation, Peter Kiewit Foundation, Weitz Family Foundation, William and Ruth Scott along with numerous other donors, some of whom wish to remain anonymous. Given these varied funding streams, our proposed AmeriCorps project represents roughly 19% of our 2013-14 organizational budget.

Our relationships in the community also contribute to our sustainability. Community stakeholders and partners include:

**Local Partner High Schools:** College Possible has established crucial partnerships with the six high schools we currently serve and the four additional targeted to begin in the fall of 2013. Our partner schools--whether they are located in the Omaha Public Schools, Papillion-LaVista School District, Ralston Public Schools or Westside Community schools-- do not have the capacity to provide intensive college preparatory programming to all students on their own; College Possible brings expertise, curriculum and dedicated staff into school buildings to help greater numbers of students access college. Schools help our organization recruit eligible students for the program and provide office space for coaches working in the school, as well as classroom space for after school sessions. We have established strong partnerships with school administration, counselors and staff that enable us to work within these schools to provide services to our students.

**Local Colleges & Universities:** College Possible prepares diverse students for college, creating a competitive applicant pool for colleges to review, and helps colleges understand what students need to be successful once enrolled, thus helping colleges shape policies that support low-income and first generation student success. More than 10 Nebraska colleges and universities have hosted campus visits and student panels for our Omaha Metro Area high school students. These visits have enabled our students to find colleges and programs that best fit their career goals and to make connections with college representatives.

**Community-based organizations:** College Possible often partners with local youth-serving organizations by presenting college preparation workshops to their participants. We are becoming well integrated into the nonprofit sector, working with a variety of organizations, including other college access programs, in schools and in communities to reduce duplication of services and maximize overall impact for students. Through these relationships, College Possible Omaha has become part of a

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pipeline of support to students starting from early childhood through college completion.

Low-income students: College Possible's students and their families are crucial stakeholders in our programming, so we take multiple steps to ensure that they are involved in planning and implementing our programming. We solicit student feedback via suggestion/evaluation forms at the beginning and end of every school year. We review these forms carefully, and we often incorporate our students' thoughtful ideas into our planning to improve the effectiveness of our program.

### c. Compliance and Accountability

College Possible takes compliance with AmeriCorps regulations very seriously and holds all members of our team accountable for knowing and abiding by these regulations. To prepare supervisors for their monitoring role and to ensure compliance, we take the following steps:

\*College Possible holds training sessions for all new program staff to cover all AmeriCorps regulations and review organizational policies and procedures related to program management. They also receive training and hard copy summaries of prohibited activities within AmeriCorps, as well as file checklists to ensure that we are collecting and holding all required member management documents.

\*College Possible has a member management manual, available electronically and in hard copy to all program staff responsible for member management. We conduct regular member file audits and internal time sheet audits to ensure that we are able to detect, address, and prevent compliance issues. If noncompliance or risk factors are found, we have an escalating disciplinary system that ultimately would result in removal from a program management position should these issues not be resolved.

\*While members may serve at sites around the city, program staff regularly visit members in those sites to observe their service activities and check in with members. During these visits program staff are able to observe member compliance with their position descriptions as well as with AmeriCorps regulations.

Enrollment: In 2011-12, our first year of operations in Omaha, we achieved 100% enrollment. In fact, College Possible received AmeriCorps support across all our sites and over the past 11 years, we have always achieved 100% enrollment of our AmeriCorps slots.

Retention: College Possible's member retention is also notable. We have hosted nearly 450 full- and part-time AmeriCorps members throughout our time as a grantee. During this period of time, our retention rate has been 96%. College Possible Omaha's retention rate for the 2011-12 year was 100%.

### **Budget/Cost Effectiveness**

The attached budget and related materials demonstrate that we are committed to providing a budget

## Narratives

to fully support the proposed program design at a cost per MSY of \$12,000. Knowing the importance of leveraging scarce AmeriCorps resources, we are requesting less than the full funding amount allowed and committing ourselves to increasing our share of costs from private funders. And yet, we will expand our reach even with this lower level of federal funding support: we will more than triple the number of students we serve, growing from serving 600 students in 2012-13 to serving nearly 2,000 high school and college students by the third year of this grant (2015-16). Our organization has a diverse base of non-federal support, with both cash and in-kind contributions coming from a variety of private, non-profit, and public sector sources.

Our total budget for our AmeriCorps program in 2013-14 will be roughly \$1,260,000. Our request for this AmeriCorps proposal totals \$240,000 (about 19% of the program cost); this amount was determined by reviewing our private sector funding potential. Recognizing the need to carefully steward AmeriCorps resources, we felt we could push ourselves to cover more of our program's costs, including the cost of criminal history checks and FBI checks, through private sector fundraising.

Non-federal sources of support that we have been able to secure include:

\*Private foundations: College Possible Omaha has raised nearly \$817,000 from private foundations.

\*Individual donors: To date, we have raised more than \$60,000 from individual donors and are working to increase this base of support.

\*Corporations and Corporate foundations: Corporate foundations have donated \$12,000 to College Possible Omaha).

\*In-kind donations: Local businesses have donated office supplies, furniture, food, beverages, and resources to support program efforts.

We plan to secure additional funding commitments from each of these sources to support our program as it grows to scale. We believe that we are a model AmeriCorps program in terms of the results we obtain and the resources we secure to meet the costs of achieving this level of quality.

We will raise the additional funding required through fundraising strategies including:

\*Increased funding requests from existing supporters based on the aggressive growth plan outlined that will serve more students.

\*Development of a prospective funder list that will be systematically pursued to identify new institutional donors.

\*Securing challenge grants to encourage new and increased donations.

\*Holding a series of "friendraisers" and fundraiser events hosted by local board members and other

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key supporters that will help increase our individual donor pool.

Our program is a cost-effective approach for addressing the community need for college access and success services for low-income students. Staffing makes up the majority of program costs; the availability of AmeriCorps members to support the program and directly serve students makes this expense more cost effective. Other program costs are minimal or are offset by in-kind contributions (teaching materials, etc.). Many of the overhead costs associated with this program are eliminated or minimized through our partnerships with local high schools: they allow us to work within their infrastructure (use space in schools for programming, etc.). Our program is also cost effective through our structure as a national organization, with headquarters in Minnesota's Twin Cities and a growing network of local site programming, including in Omaha. This structure allows us to share management expenses, such as accounting and auditing, communication services, and information technology, across the organization, making these services more cost effective for our site.

This grant will also help us grow to scale and sustain the program as described above with the budget levels provided here. In the current 2012-13 fiscal year, our cost per student is roughly \$2,800/student. By the third year of this grant cycle the cost per student will be approaching our organization's cost at scale, with a cost per student of roughly \$1,800/year. This budget will cover the shared management expenses described above as well as supporting appropriate management levels; training and support of members; transportation and supplies needed to support students; and the cost of criminal history and FBI background checks to ensure member eligibility.

Other organizations also work to address gaps in college access for low-income students, including federal TRIO programs, state-run GEAR UP programs, and nonprofit organizations. While these programs have shown some success, they either do not offer the intensity necessary to achieve success for students or cannot offer the cost-efficiency to do so at scale. College Possible can provide this programming at one-seventh the cost of similar federally-funded programs. By strategically leveraging AmeriCorps members, College Possible outperforms similar organizations in results and cost-effectiveness, and, as a result, is able to have a powerful impact on the community. This makes our program a sound investment for the Corporation and a cost-effective way to provide Omaha Metro Area students with the educational supports that will help them succeed.

### **Evaluation Summary or Plan**

NA

### **Amendment Justification**

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NA

### Clarification Summary

NA

### Continuation Changes

NA