

Connecting More Students with Breakthrough New York



Breakthrough NY's (BTNY) free college access program is designed to offer students from low-income backgrounds the resources, guidance, and support they need to succeed. However, BTNY found that boys, and especially boys of color, are underrepresented in the program relative to the demographics of the city's public school population. BTNY partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center to understand the barriers families face in applying for the program. We worked with BTNY to remove barriers in the nomination and application process for all families and particularly for families of boys of color; develop design recommendations for recruitment materials; and provide recommendations for how to reduce bias in their nomination and application process.

Background

Breakthrough NY (BTNY) is a free college access program that prepares students from low-income backgrounds to succeed in school and their careers. The program begins in the summer before 7th grade and ends when participants graduate from college. Students in the program participate in afterschool programming throughout middle and high school, and receive guidance in applying to high school and college. They receive mentorship from high school and college students as well as professional mentors and coaches, and also have access to BTNY's network of internship, study abroad programs, and work opportunities.

To be eligible, students must meet a variety of school, income, and health requirements. Students must (1) be in sixth grade at a NYC public, charter, or parochial school, and (2) have an 83% or higher grade in each of several classes. The student's family must also (3) earn less than the income ceiling. And, since the pandemic, students and one of their guardians must also (4) be fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

Most students who participate in the program are nominated by their schools. BTNY has relationships with schools across the five boroughs and asks them to nominate students who fit the first two criteria. Once these students are nominated, BTNY reaches out to them and their families using contact information provided by the schools, encouraging them to apply. School staff often speak to families before nominating the student, to ensure that they're comfortable with the school sharing their contact information with BTNY.

Whether they are nominated by the school or apply directly, students and their families must complete a three-part application. Part 1 asks for information about the student's grades and family income, to confirm

Highlights

- ▶ While only 33% of students from low-income backgrounds graduate from college within 6 years, 97% of BTNY students are on track to graduate in 4-6 years.
- ▶ Although Black and Latino boys are admitted to BTNY's program at similar or higher rates than other eligible applicants, they remain underrepresented in the program.
- ▶ Redesigning recruitment materials and supporting schools can help overcome barriers when students apply and reduce biases affecting student nominations.

eligibility for the program. In Part 2, students and their guardians respond to short-answer questions, and the students' teachers submit recommendation letters. In Part 3, students and one of their guardians are invited to interview, after which some students will be accepted into the program.

BTNY staff regularly review their data and consider how they can increase the diversity of students they serve. They have found that boys, and especially boys of color, are underrepresented in the program relative to the city's public school demographics. In response to this finding, BTNY has made changes to their application process to increase the number of boys of color making it through, which resulted in Black and Latino boys now being admitted at similar or higher rates than other eligible applicants. Yet they remain under-represented in the program, suggesting that the barriers lie earlier in the process, when families are nominated for and applying to the program.

BTNY partnered with the NYC Behavioral Design Center to find ways to reduce bias in its recruitment and admissions process. In our work together, we explored the barriers that may be keeping families from completing Part 1 of BTNY's application, and recommended messaging and process changes to address them.

Understanding families' and students' experience

To understand families' and students' experiences, we spoke both with families of students who were nominated but chose not to complete Part 1 of the application, and with families that did apply. Because there was a cohort of families going through the application process at the time of our project, we also surveyed 125 families as they completed Part 2 of the application. We surveyed a diverse array of families to understand which experiences were common regardless of gender or race and which were unique to families of boys of color. This work revealed four insights.

- ▶ **School staff play a central role in introducing families to BTNY's program.** Before being nominated, most families were unfamiliar with BTNY. Most interviewees and survey respondents learned about the program from their student's school and from an email they received from BTNY.
- ▶ **BTNY's information session and website are also important sources of information** for families. Interviewees described looking up the program online after hearing about it. Although most survey respondents didn't have concerns about the program, those that did shared that these resources helped resolve their concerns and encouraged them to apply.
- ▶ **The intensity of the program was a common reason eligible families shared for not applying.** Families were especially concerned about summer programming, because they worried about their kids not having opportunities for fun or a break from academics. We heard these concerns from all the families we interviewed. Families were also concerned with having to plan around the program and deal with its logistics, a concern BTNY's team has heard from other families.

- ▶ **Families did not know much about the benefits of participating in BTNY.** Most could only describe it in vague terms. While some families were comfortable filling out Part 1 of the application without more information, the families who chose not to apply based this decision on a limited, at times incorrect understanding of the program. For example, one family shared that the program did not seem worth applying to because their son was already doing well academically. They didn't see why he needed a program to help him in school, not realizing that BTNY is designed for high achieving students. One family did not apply because they did not understand the application process.

Redesigning recruitment materials

To encourage more families of boys of color to complete Part 1, we focused on redesigning BTNY's recruitment materials. Most of the concerns and experiences we heard did not differ based on students' gender, race, or ethnicity. As a result, many of our design recommendations for recruitment materials are aimed at reducing barriers all families face.

We provided BTNY with recommended design principles that could be applied to any recruitment materials, and we redesigned [BTNY's admissions page](#) on its website using those principles. We tested the redesigned page with families that were currently involved in the BTNY admissions process and families that were unfamiliar with the program. This user testing also allowed us to refine the design principles, which include:

- ▶ **Focus on the concrete benefits of the program—in the immediate and long term—and reduce its perceived complexity and intensity.** We are all prone to present bias, the tendency to overweight costs or hassles in the present (like the intensity of a program and its logistics) over benefits in the future (like better education and higher lifetime income). This design principle aims to clarify and concretize the immediate and future benefits of the program, and to reduce the likelihood that concerns about complexity or intensity will keep families from applying.
- ▶ **Reduce or eliminate abstract terms and explain the program in more concrete terms.** For example, one family made the following request: "I'd like more specifics about how it will help the student (...) something more specific than 'help advance education' and 'reach potential.'" These are common terms among educators but don't provide the kind of information families are looking for about what participating in the program involves and how it will affect their daily lives and future opportunities for students.
- ▶ **Clarify and simplify action steps.** Information alone does not motivate action, and the harder it is for a family to figure out what they need to do next, the less likely they are to move forward in the process. Similarly, the easier a next step feels, the more likely individuals are to take that step. In our survey, we learned that many families who attended the information session found it helpful. To encourage families to join the information session as their first step in the process, materials should focus on that as the primary action step.

- ▶ **Give families and students a glimpse into students' experiences in BTNY.** Participants in BTNY love the program and the community they build through it. Highlighting this in recruitment will help families see the benefits of the program from the student perspective and alleviate concerns about wanting their children to have fun and friendships, even while they're working toward their academic goals. This can be accomplished through recruitment materials by incorporating quotes from students about what they appreciated about the program and photos of a variety of activities students enjoy.

Recommendations to support school staff

School staff play an important role in introducing students to the program. Consequently, we also suggested ways BTNY can support school staff in nominating students and encouraging families to apply. Providing resources like template emails, text messages, and talking points can make it easier for school staff to reach out to families about the program and describe its benefits. For example, talking points that highlight how the program aligns with a range of student interests and family values, such as wanting their student to master quantitative skills or creative thinking, can help teachers provide families with compelling, personalized explanations of the program's benefits that encourage them to apply.

We also provided suggestions for supporting families of boys of color. We recommended that BTNY set and share recruitment goals with schools and teachers, highlighting the importance of ensuring boys of color are fully represented among BTNY's participants. It's possible that many school staff are not actively considering the demographic breakdown of who they are nominating or supporting, and explicit communication from BTNY about their goals can help school staff focus on recruiting and supporting families of boys of color.

Evidence shows that teachers assess girls more favorably than boys, especially boys of color. It is likely that these biases are an important contributor to the underrepresentation of boys of color in BTNY's program. Currently, BTNY does not collect demographic information on students throughout the nomination process. This makes it harder to determine what barriers prevent boys of color from applying for the program and how to effectively support school staff in mitigating those barriers.

Therefore, we recommended that BTNY regularly collect demographic information from schools about the students they nominate, students who were eligible but not nominated, and about any students they considered nominating but didn't nominate. This information, paired with the demographic information BTNY already has about who completes Part 1, will allow BTNY to generate additional strategies for increasing the number of boys of color being nominated and applying. For example, if BTNY finds that boys of color are being nominated in reasonable proportions to their numbers but few follow through on filling out Part 1, staff could encourage schools to help these families apply. If schools are unable to provide that support, BTNY could do so directly. Alternatively, if boys of color are underrepresented among a school's nominees, BTNY may want to consider changing how eligibility criteria are framed or enforced, changing the criteria themselves, or reimagining the nomination process to ensure that biases are not influencing which students are nominated.

Where it's not possible to collect all of this data, BTNY can still offer tailored encouragement and support based on how many boys of color from each school complete Part 1. For schools where relatively few boys of color end up filling out Part 1, this support would involve helping schools identify ways to ensure that these families understand the program, and to address their concerns.

Next steps

Based on our findings and recommendations, BTNY has revised their admissions website and admissions flyer to incorporate our design principles. They also created an engagement guide for school staff that provides talking points and guidance on how to highlight the benefits of the program that are most relevant to individual students and families. They will collect feedback from schools about their experiences using this resource in order to refine it. Additionally, BTNY will begin collecting demographic information about nominees in the 2023 admissions cycle, which will allow them to understand where biases might be affecting the representation of boys of color among nominees, applicants, and admitted students.

Getting into and graduating from a competitive high school and college can broaden future educational and career opportunities for students, [increasing their wages and employment rate](#). Yet students from families with low incomes, as well as young men of color, are the least likely to reap these benefits, an inequity often due to structural barriers, [not their own ability](#) or [interest in doing so](#). Programs like Breakthrough NY create [plausible paths](#) for students from low-income backgrounds to get into and graduate from competitive schools, by connecting them with peers and alumni who are pursuing these goals, and supporting their success in doing so. Incorporating insights from behavioral science can help expand the number of families that take advantage of these valuable programs.

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