

**BLACK AND LATINO/A ECOSYSTEM AND  
SUPPORT TRANSITION (BLEST) HUB**

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**STATE OF  
THE  
ECOSYSTEM**

**PREPARED BY**

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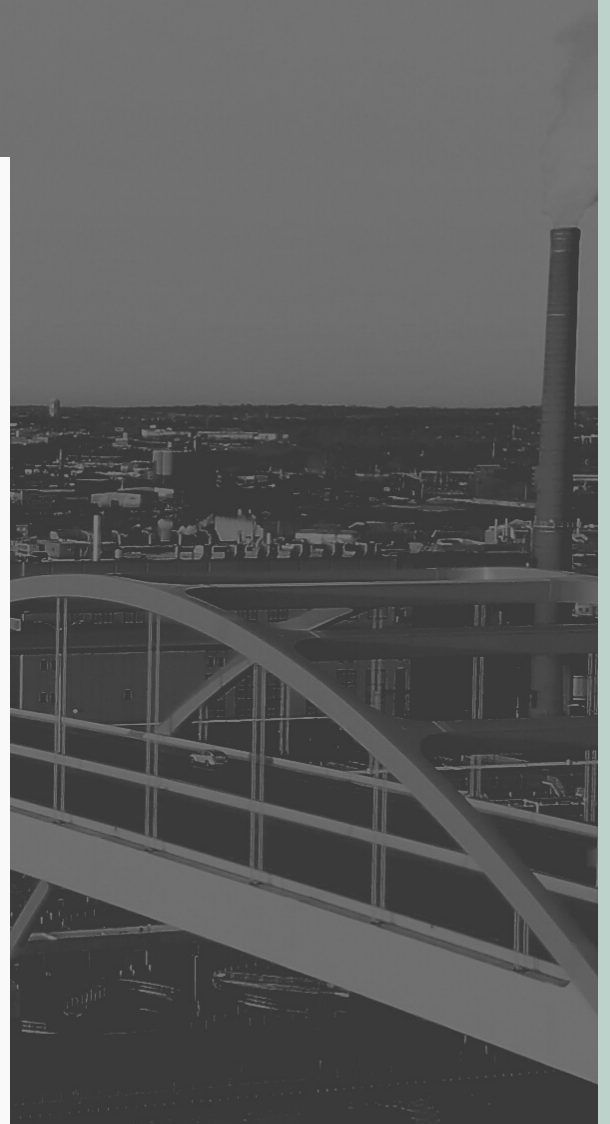
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**CURTO  
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY  
AUGUST 2021**

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# INTRODUCTION

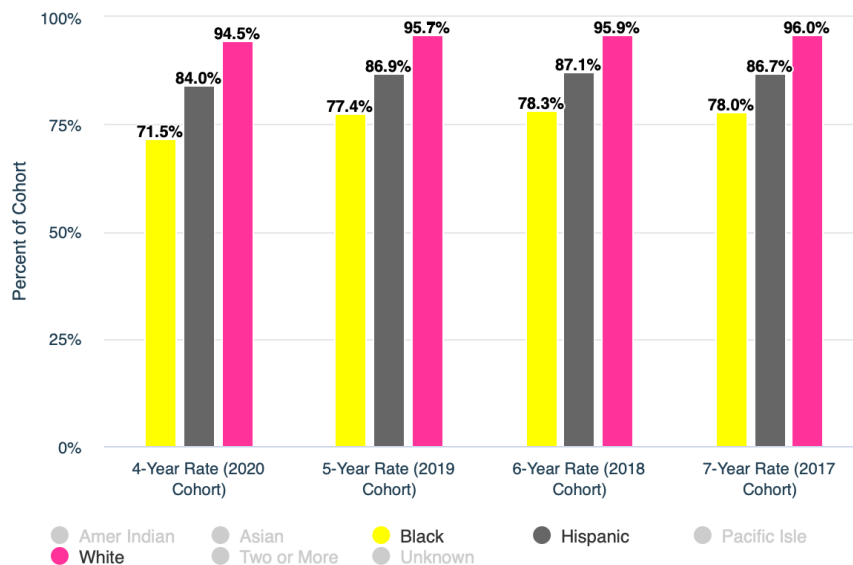
Over the past year, we have laid the ground for the Black and Latino/a Ecosystem and Support Transition (BLEST) Hub, a collaborative effort spearheaded by Marquette University’s Center for Urban Research, Teaching, and Outreach (CURTO) and Milwaukee Area Technical Colleges (MATC) to amplify the work being done to support Black and Latino/a students in the greater Milwaukee area.

The project is fundamentally concerned with challenges related to enrollment and retention of Milwaukee-area Black and Latino/a students in post-secondary education and the job market. Statewide, Wisconsin has one of the worst educational achievement gaps in the nation. These gaps only widen when students enter higher education.

We were motivated in launching this project by the need to analyze and foster a better educational environment for our students of color. It is a project that is anchored in a city that throughout its history has struggled with problems of segregation, socioeconomic inequity and lack of resources. But despite these problems, the city of Milwaukee and its citizens also hold much potential that needs to be analyzed from the perspective of the student and the organizations dedicated to helping them. Understanding the relationships between the city, Black and Latino/a students, and the organizations within an ecosystem provides a rich foundation from which to foster collaborative synergy.

In this first State of the Ecosystem Report, we aim to introduce our work and orientation to contributing to the ecosystem through mapping, network building, identifying best practices, coordination, catalytic targeted efforts, research, and small-scale programming. We present this report as a humble attempt to share and engage with the broader community, rather than offer definitive analysis and solutions. With this in mind, we invite feedback, engagement, and critique as we move forward with our efforts.

**Wisconsin HS Completion Rates by Race/Ethnicity (2019-20)**



# Key Terms

## **Ecosystem**

The experiences of Black and Latino/a students involve multiple layers across time, and we conceptualize their development as students as occurring within interconnections, spaces, organizations, and daily life. Our efforts to map this space involves looking at the actors within it (e.g., institutions, non-profit organizations), as well as the challenges and supports that they themselves experience.

## **Students**

We focus specifically on students to center our work around those engaged in the transitions to and from different institutions. We recognize that this leaves out the experience of some Black and Latino/a young people who are not engaged with these spaces. Additionally, as our focus is transitions from middle school through secure, fulfilling employment, our efforts span early adolescence through mid-20s, but our focus is not limited by a specific age range..

## **Transition**

Our work centers on the transition points from middle school through to stable, fulfilling employment. Still, we recognize that transition times are not simply a static event, but rather a process that emerges from previous experiences and unfurls over time. Because transitions involve a shift from the predictable and familiar, they can be opportunities filled with new beginnings and possibilities that promise better outcomes for our young people. Transitions can also be a time where the accumulated impact of disadvantages inherent within unjust systems disrupt the wellbeing of youth and negatively impact their developmental trajectories. With this in mind, our conceptualization of transitions involves the overlap of middle school, high school, post-secondary education, and employment as fluid and interconnected.

## **Hub**

We have named our project a “Hub” because we envision it as a central resource to help ground and bridge projects, ideas, best practices, and discussions across the ecosystem. Our aim is not to be another player in this area, but rather to connect, amplify, and extend the work of others. Although a “hub” often connotes a center, we are envisioning it as the physical and virtual space where organizations, actors, and young people themselves can connect with and find resources and support.

## **Partnership**

Our use of “partnerships” is intentionally flexible to allow organizations and actors in the ecosystem define what partnerships mean to them. We have generally been guided by thinking about partnerships relationships of coordination, cooperation, and/or collaboration. Some organization leaders we have spoken with also describe partnerships as mutually beneficial and enhancing sustainability.

# Vision, Mission, & Aims

## Vision Statement

Our vision with the BLEST Hub is to contribute to improving life outcomes for Black and Latino/a students in the Milwaukee area by strengthening spaces and connections that support our youth during periods of transition from middle school through post-secondary completion and/or fulfilling and stable employment.

This broad vision encompasses:

1. Supporting the synergy across organizations, institutions, and government efforts
2. Understanding and identifying gaps in services offered to our young people
3. Working towards amplifying and supplementing what is available

## BLEST HUB MISSION

Our mission with the BLEST Hub is to concretely build a map of the ecosystem of supports for Black and Latino/a students in Milwaukee from middle school through post-secondary completion and/or fulfilling and stable employment, as well as to lay the foundation for providing logistical, informational and catalytic support to these students and the organizations and institutions serving them.

Underlying this mission and the connected actions is a commitment to be attentive to our positionality as adults embedded within a private, Jesuit, Predominantly White Institution of higher education. Our efforts seek to be open to the needs, voices, and perspectives of young people themselves and those whose work is committed to serving them. Concretely, this entails striving to center and amplify students (including giving them space to share in the process), as well as to not replicate or complicate the efforts of others by being attentive to organizations resources and the time and humanity of employees, advocates, and activists.

# Vision, Mission, & Aims

## Aims

It is our aim to understand the strengths and needs of Black and Latino/a students as well as the supports present at points of transition in their lives. During our work with students in and out of the school settings—and as educators, researchers, parents, and community members—we have experienced a lack of communication, coordination, and collaboration among organizations and institutions that seek to serve young people of color. This may be one reason for the short lifespan of many initiatives that seek to improve the life outcomes of Black and Latino/a students within Milwaukee.

### *What we can offer Milwaukee*

We can and want to offer Milwaukee up-to-date information regarding the state of the services that as a city we offer our students. We are calling this process the mapping of our ecosystem because collectively, our programs, services, and outreach efforts create a web that has the potential to sustain and support the flourishing of our youth through mutually beneficial relationships. This process of mapping our ecosystem allows us to design a trusting space for communication, collaboration and coordination among organizers, activists, educators, government officials and academics.

### *What we can offer organizations*

What we can and want to offer organizations is a safe space that is independent of city politics and funding sources. Such a space can sustain conversations across sectors and organizations in order to collectively build our capacity as a city with the aim of better supporting the development of our youth. It is within this space that we can offer and want to offer an intellectual hub where best practices, key metrics, and research can be identified and shared with all.

### *What we can offer our Black and Latino/a students*

We can and want to offer our Black and Latino/a students in Milwaukee practical and effective programming that supports their development where there are gaps in such services. We can offer and want to offer our students timely information about available resources, opportunities, and organizations as they navigate key transition points. We cannot do any of this without the active engagement of our youth and their voices across all sectors and throughout the process necessary to develop our understanding of Milwaukee as an ecosystem. Therefore, our most important contribution and desire is to make visible the voices of our youth and to be influenced by their lived experiences.

# ACTIVITIES TO FULFILL MISSION

Our development of the BLEST Hub is still very much in an early and formational. To this end, our activities to date are mainly exploratory and laying a groundwork for better understanding the ecosystem, best practices, the needs of organizations and students, and opportunities for amplifying the work being done.

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## CURRENTLY, WE ARE ENGAGED IN FIVE EFFORTS:

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### 1. Dialoguing with organizations, activists, and institutional offices and actors

Meeting with different organizations and actors whose work involves supporting Black and Latino/a students in high school, and specifically thinking about the transitions to post-secondary education and employment

### 2. Mapping the ecosystem of supports

Developing a visualization that shows the variety of organizations, their missions, and their partnerships

### 3. Engaging in targeted research projects

Gathering student perspectives and experiences in relation to Milwaukee, their institution of higher education, and their career thinking

### 4. Interpreting/Analyzing/Understanding metrics and measurements used in this area by diverse actors

Collecting and systematizing the ways that success in this area is defined and measured, by organizations, collaboratives, institutions, and students themselves

### 5. Running programming

Building on initiatives already housed at CURTO to harness the potential of Marquette University and its resources to create new support opportunities for Black and Latino/a students in Milwaukee



# HISTORY OF BLEST HUB



The BLEST Hub has emerged from years of work and the vision of two members of our leadership team: Dr. Robert Smith, Director of CURTO, and Walter Lanier, Director of the student resource center at MATC and community activist and organizer. Their personal experience and interaction with various Milwaukee organizations and institutions across sectors (e.g., education, employment, health, mental health) brought to light the need for collaboration, synergy, and amplification to address the deep needs of Black and Latino/a students as they transition from high school to post-secondary education and beyond.

For far too long Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has occupied the dubious and infamous position as one of the worst places in the United States to raise black and brown children and families. This includes some of the worst educational gaps in the nation. Although education is no silver bullet to Milwaukee's complex challenges, education has nonetheless always been understood as a critical component to closing equity gaps. In Milwaukee, significant institutions have developed programs with the stated goal of closing equity gaps for Black and Latino/a students. However, in this highly segregated city, few programs have seldom been catalogued or coordinated, and the challenges on a city-level remain.



### *Initial Funding*

In 2019, with initial funding received from The City of Milwaukee Community Block Grant Association, the BLEST Hub began as a collaboration with major educational institutions in Milwaukee, including Marquette, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), MATC, and Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The beginning stages involved multiple meetings with these partners, as well as representatives from Employ Milwaukee and the Black and Latino Male Achievement Department of MPS.

### *Roots of Current Work*

A first project in early 2020 involved collaboration with graduate students in Marquette's College of Education to begin cataloging programs that currently exist in Milwaukee. Over the Winter and Spring of 2020, a team of graduate students attended meetings with community leaders to start building relationships, reached out to organizations in multiple ways in order to gather information, created and disseminated a survey to give to leaders of organizations, gathered information from online platforms: websites, social media, news articles, and compiled a limited annotated bibliography of relevant research and policy. Their work produced an hour-long presentation and 30-page report, including a database of existing local programming with available information about the organizations, goals, best practices, and other performance data that is currently being used.



# THE ADVISORY BOARD

From the inception of the BLEST Hub as a concept, a community advisory board has helped us by generating ideas, guiding plans for action and dissemination, and offering valuable insight. The role of the advisory board is strengthening and guiding the community-driven approach to this project, informing the development of the visual asset map, and guiding the strategic plan and priorities of the BLEST Hub. Regular meetings with this group have served to identify organizations in the ecosystem, provide feedback on initiatives and the asset map, and brainstorm connections across multiple sectors. The input has guided the individual meetings with Milwaukee-area groups, collaboratives, and organizations working with Black and Latino/a students or issues related to their success.

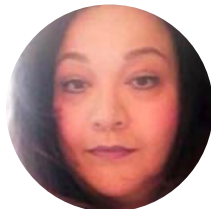
The advisory board is comprised of the individuals that work in public schools, charter schools, and institutions of higher education. Below are some representatives that sit on the Advisory Board.

## SELECT MEMBERS OF ADVISORY BOARD



Alberto Maldonado  
**Higher Education**

Alberto Maldonado serves as director for UWM's Roberto Hernandez Center. The Roberto Hernández Center is dedicated to serving Latinx students at UWM as well as the Latinx population of southeastern Wisconsin.



Bevin Christie  
**Charter Schools**

Bevin Christie is an educator who believes in educating the whole child and closing the achievement gap. She has worked in education and workforce development for over 20 years.



Paul Moga  
**Public Schools**

Paul Moga serves as coordinator for MPS's Black and Latino Male Achievement (BLMA). BLMA works to improve the outcomes of Black and Latino male students within Milwaukee Public.



Equan Burrows  
**Higher Education**

Equan Burrows serves as the Dean of Student Experience at MATC, where his work focuses on student retention and success and fostering a culture of equity and inclusion.



Carl Morency  
**Higher Education**

Carl Morency serves as MATC's Director of Instructional Resources & Student Support. He has been with MATC for 20 years and has experience with athletics, student services, and academics with focus on Black male achievement.



Romell Greer  
**Employment**

Romell Greer is a program specialist on work-based learning at Employ Milwaukee. His work focuses on paid work experience through the institutions various programs.

# THIS YEAR'S REPORT

We want this year's report to serve as an introduction to the work being done with the BLEST Hub and progress that we have made in the past year. Our aim is to discuss how we have built out a visual representation of the ecosystem, the people we have met with, and the early dissemination and research efforts. In this report we present how we have built out a visual representation of our ecosystem, the people we have met, dissemination and research efforts, and the lessons learned thus far. We are laying the foundational bedrock needed for future projects to emerge from the tools at hand, including research, targeted programming, capacity building and networking across the city. The explorative nature of this project allows us to experiment with different aspects of the map and data with hopes of creating a truly dynamic and didactic experience for community members.

## **Support and Services Ecosystem Map for Milwaukee Black and Latino/a Students**

One of the most important tools is the ecosystem map using KUMU software. KUMU allows us to visually represent the actors and partnerships that exist between the number of non-profits, government entities, for-profit organizations, grassroots organizations, and coalitions that exist in Milwaukee. Our objective is to create a usable tool to understand the resources for Black and Latino/a students, and to highlight the nature of connections that unite the number of organizations in the city. We believe that this visual representation of quantitative and qualitative data we have been collecting will help us better understand MKE as an ecosystem and serve as a community resource once it is publicly disseminated.

Important actions we have taken with this project include:

- Identifying organizations, initiatives, and resources
- Providing descriptions of each organization's mission and areas of work.
- Categorizing them by type of organization and activity
- Connecting organizations with their self-identified partners

The map has emerged from an iterative process of meeting with organizations and actors, showing them what we have, and then growing it based on their input. Still, KUMU requires further development and increased community feedback. To this end, we are gathering information to continue to build it out, and then eventually launch it as a publicly available tool. We invite all organizations and actors in this space to reach out to our team.

## Meetings and Network Building

Over the last year we have been meeting with representatives from several local non-profits. In these meetings we have discussed the partnerships their organization. Our BLEST Hub team initiated contact via email and met via video chat. We have kept record of representatives and their respective organization with whom we have met with this past year, as well as detailed notes.

### NON-PROFIT REPRESENTATIVES WE HAVE CONNECTED WITH

- Alverno College
- Black Educator Caucus
- Graduation Plus, Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee
- Escuela Verde
- Hispanic Professionals of Milwaukee (HPGM)
- Marquette University
- MENTOR Greater Milwaukee
- MPS Black and Latino Male Achievement Department
- Southside Organizing Center
- TransCenter for Youth
- True Skool
- UBUNTU Research
- Urban Underground
- YES, Voces de la Frontera
- University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM)
- Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC)
- Employ Milwaukee
- Higher Education Regional Alliance (HERA)
- M-Cubed
- Wisconsin Policy Forum
- Milwaukee Succeeds

A constant theme in their responses has been that the ecosystem map is a much-needed resource for identifying gaps and as a foundation for collaborative projects and grant applications. Soon, we expect to continue meeting with organizations with the hope of further developing the visualization.

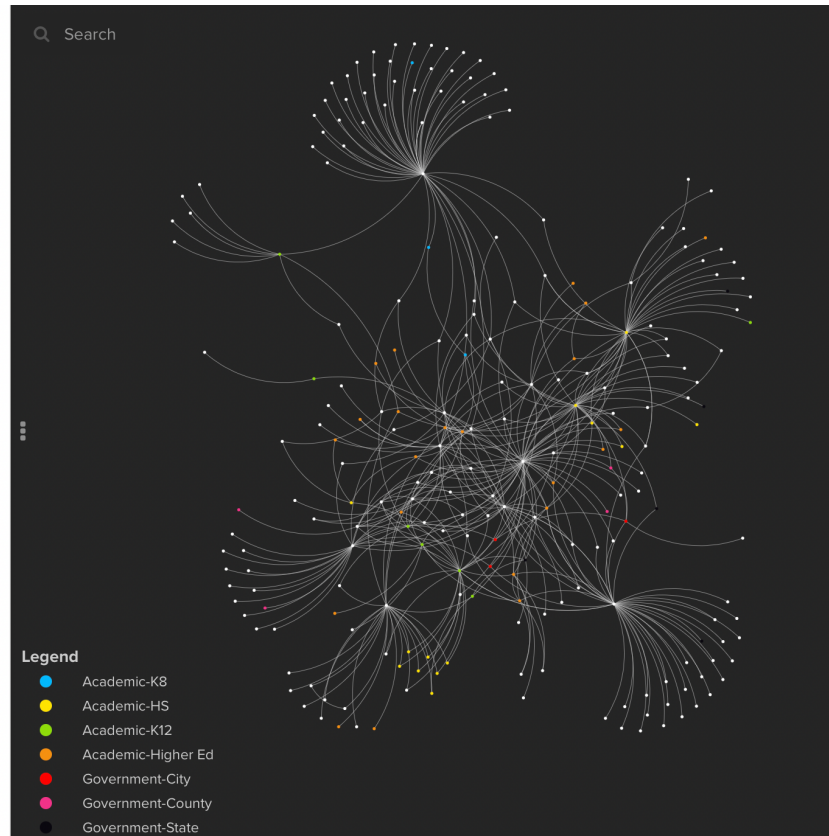
# SUPPORT & SERVICES ECOSYSTEM MAP FOR MILWAUKEE BLACK AND LATINO/A STUDENTS

## Milwaukee Black and Latino/a Youth Ecosystem Map

BLEST - CURTO

This map hopes to represent the actors and partnerships that serve Black and Latino/a youth in Milwaukee. Our objective, here at BLEST, is to create a usable tool to understand the various resources available to Black and Latino/a students, and to highlight the nature of connections that bring together a number of organizations within our city. We believe that this visual representation of quantitative and qualitative data will help us better understand Milwaukee as an ecosystem within which our youth develop and will also serve as a community resource.

[#organizations-stakeholders](#) | [permalink](#)



SCAN QR CODE TO ACCESS

KUMU MAP



USE LINK BELOW TO ACCESS MAP

PRESENTATION

The link below goes to an online orientation presentation that walks through the map, explaining the different elements and providing greater detail.

[Orientation Presentation Link](#)



Our aim with this project is to provide the city of Milwaukee with an accessible and comprehensive resource with which various actors can easily view and understand the non-profit ecosystem in the city of Milwaukee. Our dissemination efforts to date have focused on drawing attention to the challenges and need for collaboration, while creating spaces for organizations and advocates of the ecosystem to come together and share their experiences.

Our dissemination plan involves two strategies: using the network we have built to engage key stakeholders and drawing on the connections of CURTO and our partners to communicate this work, as well as utilizing the CURTO's existing social media presence. At the core of our project are the relationships that we built with community organizations and institutions connected to college and career readiness.

We also draw on CURTO's media and social media presence, as well as other local opportunities. For the current work, we have created a section of the CURTO webpage devoted to explaining our project, discussed it on CURTO's podcast, engaged with local journalists, and presented with community organizations.

### *Presentations*

Our BLEST Hub team organized a forum in the most recent, HSI-NOW Virtual Summit: "Advancing Racial Equity In Our Colleges and Community." There, the CURTO team held a concurrent session titled, "Perspectives from the Field: Challenges and Opportunities to College Readiness for Black and Brown Youth." The concurrent session brought together actors with longstanding roots in the city of Milwaukee to discuss challenges to non-profit collaboration and supporting college and career readiness.

We have also submitted applications to various regional conferences and meetings to engage our work with broad audiences during the 2021-2022 academic year.

### *Grants*

Along with the initial grant from The City of Milwaukee Community Block Grant Association, the BLEST Hub is actively applying to grants in efforts of continuing this work. Most recently, the BLEST Hub received Marquette's Advancing Social Equity grant to conduct focus groups with students at Marquette, UWM, and MATC in order to understand their shared and varied experiences of Milwaukee as informing their time on campus. These focus groups were held at each individual institution, and then brought together students across institutions for shared conversation.

### *Research*

The BLEST Hub has also commenced targeted research efforts to address specific research questions. One of the projects has been funded by the Advancing Social Equity Research Grant from Marquette University and seeks to better understand experiences of campus and the city of Milwaukee that inform success of Black and Brown students across multiple campuses. The work has involved focus groups held with students from UWM and MATC. In these focus groups, we have been asking underrepresented students about the barriers to success they have encountered in their own respective institution. The focus group data will be of use not only to the BLEST Hub team when creating programming and organizing workshop, but it will also help administrators, staff, and faculty at each institution better understand the challenges our students of color face when navigating their post-secondary experience.



There are a few things that we have learned from our one-on-one meeting with administrative leadership, as well as youth workers from non-profits and grassroots coalitions. More than answers, these takeaways have often focused on challenges and uncertainties actors in this space face. On the whole, the common themes and questions that were raised throughout the interviews bring into focus the strengths and needs of our ecosystem.

#### **Ecosystem Visualization**

- The visualization of the relationships among organizations through KUMU is very helpful and needed to all who hope to serve better Black and Latino/a students.

#### **Persons of Color in Leadership**

- Why is there a high burn out rate among persons of color in leadership, which in turn causes a high turn around in leadership of initiatives that serve Black and Brown students?

#### **Measurement and Success**

- What does success look like for these organizations and even for the students themselves?
- How do grassroots and non-profits measure their success? How does that differ from what grants require as measurement? What is obscured or lost by accommodating what is an important outcome for students and their communities to what is required by a grant?

#### **Milwaukee, Segregation, and Geography**

- How does geographical location—and specifically its connection to segregation, inequality, and different experiences for Black and Latino/a students—impact services offered and received by youth? How does geographical location act as a gatekeeper for opportunities for Black and Latino/a youth?

#### **Trust and Leadership**

- How does trust (or lack thereof) among Black, Brown and White leaders offers possibilities as well as limits the services (and quality) that youth receive?





This first State of the Ecosystem report is an effort to publicize the steps taken thus far toward making the work of the BLEST Hub a catalytic bridge builder in the Milwaukee ecosystem of supports during moments of transition for Black and Latino/a students. By focusing our work on transitions, we are hoping to maximize the resources that Milwaukee offers. However, this work cannot be done in isolation because transitions are intersecting spaces. Therefore, in order to understand the opportunities and the struggles that our youth encounter; in order to serve them better, we need to continually work towards strengthening collaboration efforts among organizations.

Our collective commitment to the flourishing of Black and Latino/a youth and our willingness to engage with each other as organizations that care about them, will not only increase opportunities and improve the life outcomes of our youth, but will also systematically and drastically change the narrative surrounding our city.

Our work with the BLEST Hub is still in development and emerging. With this in mind, our success in our efforts depends on building trust, authentically listening, and fostering relationships with those who work in the ecosystem. The BLEST Hub is meant to be a resource center—not repeating the valuable work of others or inserting ourselves in the ecosystem, but rather amplifying, energizing, and furthering the work of others.

We end this report with an open invitation to engage with us and our work, to use our resources and developing visualization and metric to further your own efforts, and to be connected with us and the networks we are trying to foster.

# NEXT STEPS FOR BLEST HUB

Recognizing the still nascent nature of our work and need to focus on sustainability, our action items and goals in the academic year 2021-2022 will be:

1. Continuing to meet with organizations and actors in the ecosystem to build the network and understanding of connections and gaps
2. Make the visualization a public resource with systematized process for its continued development
3. Engage student voice and experience through research, programming, and development of youth fellowship opportunity
4. Engage in 2021 LAB: Leadership and Brotherhood Summit for Young Men of Color to provide programming for youth participants
5. Collect and organize metrics used for measuring success across the ecosystem
6. Explore collaborative grant opportunities to extend work
7. Publish and disseminate findings from focus group work with Marquette, UWM, and MATC students

# ABOUT US

## PEOPLE BEHIND THE BLEST HUB



DR. ROB SMITH



DR. GABRIEL  
VELEZ



WALTER LANIER



VERÓNICA  
MENCHERO



SAÚL LÓPEZ

# STATE OF THE ECOSYSTEM

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**BLACK AND LATINO/A  
ECOSYSTEM AND SUPPORT  
TRANSITION HUB**

# CONTACT

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**AUGUST 2021**

