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About Heights

Heights Philadelphia (“Heights”) is a new kind of organization – **an economic mobility catalyst** – creating pathways to educational and workforce success for more than 3,000 students in Philadelphia.

Focused on supporting low-income, Black and Brown, and first-generation-to-college students, Heights pathways are the foundation of a more equitable and prosperous Philadelphia.

Beginning in middle school, students receive access to academic, workforce, and college support through one-on-one advising, academic enrichment, internship opportunities, and financial support. These pathways and investment in Philadelphia youth help build a future that everyone can see, and the opportunity to make it real.

Heights.org

Heights Philadelphia

123 South Broad Street, Suite 850

Philadelphia, PA 19109

215-790-1666

Follow Heights on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Linkedin](#), [X](#), and [Tik Tok](#).

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Media Contacts:

Bonnie Dugan Ung

Director of Communications

Heights Philadelphia

bduganung@heights.org

Kaitlyn Haney for Heights Philadelphia

Khaney@signature57.com

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Overview: Heights Pathways

Middle School: Heights is embedded in four School District of Philadelphia Middle Schools, offering a comprehensive, sequenced pathway for students starting early in their educational journey. The Middle School programming serves students city-wide with high school selection advising and workshops, as well as a robust six-week summer academic enrichment program for rising 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. Additionally, Heights' Steppingstone Academy works with students starting in 4th grade and supports them throughout their academic journeys in independent schools until college graduation.

High School: Focusing on college and career advising and enrichment opportunities, Heights is embedded in 19 School District of Philadelphia high schools and offers comprehensive services year-round. From college tours and FAFSA support to college credit and internships, Heights guides high school students on the path to economic mobility and successful careers.

College: College pathways provide students with the support they need to graduate from college. Currently, Heights has 530 collegians attending 73 universities and colleges. From sequenced check-ins and summer institute programming to internships and financial support, Heights is dedicated to making sure students succeed in, and graduate, college.

Career: Heights offers pathways in five key industries based on the growing needs and trends in Philadelphia. They are: **Biomedical/Life Sciences, Healthcare, Financial Services & Business, Computer Science & Technology, and Human Services.** The Career Pathway guides students in five key components: curriculum, career advising, experiential programming, internships, and partnerships.

Alumni: Heights alumni are part of an invaluable network of professionals who offer career opportunities and continued support for current students. Years after graduation, they are living proof of what success can look like.

Community Access Pathways: City-Wide Impact: From community site locations at Temple University and Drexel University to the *Step Up to College Guide* and a virtual helpline, Heights is available far beyond the classroom for every Philadelphian in need of college and career resources.

What is Economic Mobility?

For the last half century, Philadelphia has widely been known as America's poorest big city with a poverty rate of over 20 percent. At Heights, we believe we must think bigger and aim higher for each other, and that starts with investing in our young people. We know that a city that creates opportunity for young people will be a city that creates opportunity for all.

Heights' work reflects a deep and abiding commitment to break the cycle of generational poverty, which has long challenged the City of Philadelphia, connecting students – especially Black, Brown, and first-generation-to-college scholars – with a network of people who believe, and invest in, their talents.

While there are many factors that are a part of economic mobility, Heights is rooted in the bold vision that “all Philadelphia students graduate high school and achieve economic mobility through college and workforce success.” Investing in young people's path and realization of that educational and career success is the foundation of the prosperity and wellbeing of all Philadelphians .

Heights propels students to economic mobility through...

- **Advising:** Heights provides college and career advising and financial support to students in communities across Philadelphia beginning in middle school and continuing through career.
- **Pathways to Careers:** Heights creates defined pathways to key industries, including **Biomedical/Life Sciences, Health Services, Financial Services and Business, Computer Science and Technology, and Human Services**, that provide family sustaining pay and career opportunities in the Philadelphia region.
- **Partnerships:** Heights builds transformative partnerships to make educational systems and the workforce better for Philadelphia youth.
- **Community:** Heights connects students to a community of support and a network of people who invest in their success.

The result...

- **A path of their choice:** Students graduate college with an associate degree within three years or a bachelor's degree within six years, with minimal debt.
- **More diplomas and degrees:** Students secure full-time, skilled employment with benefits and a living wage.
- **Careers that pay:** Philadelphia's high school and college graduation rates increase.
- **A prosperous city:** Philadelphia is a city where young people thrive.

Here's how we know...

- **Career growth potential:** Heights' focus is on providing employment opportunities in Philadelphia that not only offer competitive salaries but also include paid benefits, opportunities for salary growth, and avenues for professional development over time.
- **125% of the living wage:** Heights works to ensure young people earn at least 125% of Philadelphia's living wage, currently \$57,954, allowing them to meet their basic needs comfortably while also enabling savings, repayment of educational debt, and maintaining a reasonable standard of living.
- **Limited educational debt:** Heights is committed to minimizing educational debt for students by capping borrowing at \$27,000 for bachelor's degrees and \$12,000 for degrees completed in two years or less, ensuring that graduates can pursue their careers without the burden of excessive loans.



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Reaching New Heights by the Numbers

- **\$12.5M operating budget**
 - Serving **3,000+ students** in Philadelphia with a goal to reach 5,000 students by 2029
 - Heights staff embedded into **23 schools** including 19 high schools and 4 middle schools across the School District of Philadelphia
 - **13 formal partnerships with colleges and universities** in Philadelphia and beyond
 - **50+ internship sites** across the Greater Philadelphia area
 - **100 percent success rate** of cohorted students graduating from high school (2022-2023)
 - **81 percent+** college matriculation rate
 - **\$2.36M stipends and scholarships** awarded to Heights' students
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A New Way of Leadership

About Co-President & CEOs: Sean E. Vereen, Ed.D. & Sara L. Woods, Esq.

Sean E. Vereen, Ed.D., co-president & CEO of Heights Philadelphia, oversees student outcomes and experience at Heights and co-leads the organization with Sara L. Woods, Esq. Formerly president of Steppingstone Scholars, Vereen led the launch of several programs and strategic partnerships increasing the organization's impact and scope. A noted thought leader in educational pedagogy and racial, social, and economic inequities within the educational system, Vereen is a member of Johns Hopkins Access Advisory Board, which works with Hopkins' undergraduate admissions office to realize the goals of Michael Bloomberg's \$1.8 billion gift for increasing the low-income and first-generation student population. He is also a member of City of Philadelphia Mayor Cherrille L. Parker's Transition Committee as an Education Committee member.

Before joining Steppingstone, Vereen spent ten years at the University of Pennsylvania in various roles, including the Associate Dean for Opportunity and Access and Office of Undergraduate Admissions. He previously served as vice chair of the mayor's education nominating board for the School District of Philadelphia's Board of Education. He is a board member of Elevate 215 and The Philadelphia School, and he is also a lecturer in the higher education division at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Vereen holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Rochester and an Ed.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.



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Sara L. Woods, Esq., co-president & CEO of Heights Philadelphia, oversees operations and innovation at Heights and co-leads the organization with Sean E. Vereen, Ed.D. Woods leads through a relationship-centered, strengths-based lens. Formerly president and CEO of Philadelphia Futures, Woods increased fundraising by 50%, doubled the number of college partnerships, and launched an organization-wide anti-racist transformation. In addition to creating the Public Interest Lawyering course as an adjunct professor at Villanova University School of Law, she served as president of the board of directors at Access Matters, an organization equalizing access to sexual and reproductive health care, and on the advisory board of the Crime Victims Law Project.

Prior to working at Philadelphia Futures, Woods served as executive director of Philadelphia VIP, and as director of public interest careers and pro bono programs at Villanova University School of Law. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Penn State University and a Juris Doctor and Masters of Public Administration.

History & Timeline

A legacy of empowering students

- **1800** – The Magdalen Society of Philadelphia was founded.
- **1918** – The Magdalen Society of Philadelphia became the White-Williams Foundation.
- **1989** – Philadelphia Futures and its Sponsor-A-Scholars program was founded.
- **1999** – Steppingstone Scholars and its Steppingstone Academy were founded.
- **2011** – Philadelphia Futures merged with White-Williams Scholars.
- **2022**
 - May – Philadelphia Futures and Steppingstone Scholars vote to merge.
 - September – Philadelphia Futures and Steppingstone Scholars begin program operations under PFSS: A Union of Philadelphia Futures and Steppingstone Scholars.
 - November – PFSS receives approval from Orphans Court for the merger.
 - December 2022 – Heights Philadelphia is announced as the new name and organization with the help of students from George Washington High School and Jason Kelce.
- **2023**
 - June – Heights celebrates its inaugural class of students with its first Graduation Celebration.