



CLOSING THE GAP.

CHANGING THE STORY.



PERSIST

**2025-2026
ANNUAL REPORT**



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LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JENNIFER HILL

Organizational Vision / Strategic Direction



As I reflect on my first year as Executive Director, I am proud to share how our organization matured in both structure and strategy—building on a foundation of trusted relationships to deliver deeper, more scalable impact for the students we serve. This year, we advanced our technology infrastructure, streamlined our coaching systems, and extended our reach beyond Nashville by advising peer organizations across the country in designing effective persistence programs rooted in equity and care.

We did this at a time when higher education is being questioned, and opportunities for historically marginalized students are being increasingly restricted. In the face of these challenges, Persist doubled down on its mission: to ensure that more MNPS graduates—particularly first-generation students and students of color—not only access college, but complete it.

THE RESULTS SPEAK VOLUMES.

- Over 1,250 students received individualized coaching through key milestones like FAFSA completion and course registration.
- We celebrated with 258 students as they crossed the finish line to earn their degrees or certificates.
- Our coaching model informed persistence strategies in other communities, expanding our influence beyond Nashville.

Our work is grounded in the belief that every student deserves the support and guidance to achieve their postsecondary goals. That belief, combined with your ongoing support, made this year possible.

We are growing with clarity and conviction—because our students' futures demand nothing less.

With deep appreciation,
Jennifer Hill



Across the country, too many students begin their postsecondary journey without the support they need to finish. In Nashville, that gap has been especially clear for students who are first-generation, low-income, or navigating systems that were not designed with them in mind.

Persist Coaching was founded in 2019 to help close that gap and change the story for Nashville students. From the beginning, our work has been rooted in a simple but powerful belief: talent is everywhere, but opportunity and support are not always equally accessible.

Persist combines high-quality college success coaching with technology-driven support to help students move from enrollment to completion. Our coaches walk alongside students as they navigate financial barriers, academic challenges, personal responsibilities, campus systems, and the many

moments when encouragement, guidance, and timely intervention can make the difference between dropping out and staying the course.

Our vision has always been bold: to double the number of Nashville graduates earning a college degree or credential. But this work is about more than numbers. It is about changing what is possible for students, families, and communities. It is about ensuring that more young people can see themselves not only getting to college but graduating from college and stepping into the futures they have worked hard to build.

Since 2019, Persist has grown from an innovative idea into a proven student success model. We have served 4550 students across 406 postsecondary institutions and celebrated 637 graduates and counting. Each graduate represents a changed story: a student who persisted, a family celebrating a milestone, and



a community strengthened by what becomes possible when students are supported all the way through.

“
...this work
is about more
than numbers.”

Today, Persist continues to provide consistent coaching, timely interventions, and trusted relationships that help students keep moving forward. Whether through one-on-one coaching meetings, academic support, emergency assistance, or thousands of text messages exchanged throughout the year, Persist remains present in the moments that matter most.

Closing the gap requires more than access to college. It requires sustained investment in the supports that help students complete what they started. Continued investment in Persist allows us to reach more students, respond when challenges arise, and expand the coaching model that is already changing outcomes for Nashville's next generation of graduates.

Together, we are not only helping students persist through college. We are changing the story of what college success can look like in Nashville.

REFERENCES:

FirstGen Forward. (n.d.). Home. FirstGen Forward. www.firstgenforward.org

Whitley, S.E., Benson, G., & Wetsaw, A. (2018). First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions. Washington, DC: Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions.

PERSIST BY THE NUMBERS

WHO WE SERVE



1170
Students Served in 2025-26

65% First-Generation
College Students



29.6%
Black or African American



28.5%
Hispanic or Latino/Latina

95.5%
Metro
Nashville
Public
School
Graduates



100K
Text
Messages
Exchanged



75.2%
Enrollment
Rate for
Class of 2025



331
Academic
Interventions Resolved



600
In-Person
Meetings



OUR RESULTS



82.1% Persistence
Rate for Class of 2024



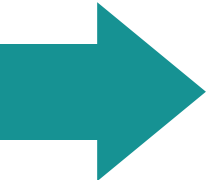
637 Student
Graduates Since 2020



69% Six-Year
College Completion Rate

HOW WE SERVE

WHAT COACHING LOOKS LIKE



When asked how Persist helps our students, the first answer is coaching.

Our coaching model includes:



Proactive text check-ins before problems become crises



Emergency aid for food, transportation, and basic needs



Registration reminders and FAFSA follow-up



Campus navigation and resource referrals



Academic, financial, and emotional support



Consistent encouragement from a trusted adult

**WE DO NOT WAIT FOR
STUDENTS TO FALL BEHIND.**

WE REACH OUT FIRST.





THE STUDENT JOURNEY

(Student Voice)

Every Persist student has a different story, but each journey is shaped by moments of transition, uncertainty, growth, and persistence. From the first steps after high school to the final push toward graduation, students are navigating new campuses, new responsibilities, financial decisions, academic expectations, career goals, and the pressure of becoming who they are working so hard to be.

Coaches walk alongside students throughout that journey. We check in during the quiet moments when students may not know who to ask for help. We celebrate wins, troubleshoot challenges, connect students to resources, and offer steady encouragement when the path feels overwhelming. For many students, that

consistent support becomes a reminder that they do not have to navigate college alone.

The voices below reflect what persistence looks like in real life: a student finding confidence during the transition to college, a graduate feeling supported from the first day on campus to the moment they walk across the stage, a future doctoral student learning to ask for help, and a young professional remembering the community that helped them keep going.

Their stories remind us that student success is not only measured in degrees and credentials. It is also found in confidence gained, barriers to overcome, relationships built, and futures made possible.

“

Their support reminded me that I did not have to navigate college alone and encouraged me to continue pushing toward my goals even when things felt overwhelming.”

—Charisma, B, Tennessee State University,
Masters of Social Work



“

Persist helped me transition from high school into college, especially during the beginning, when colleges were operating under COVID.”

—Solomon B,
Middle Tennessee State
University, BA, History



“

The Persist Team was extremely helpful with checking in on how I was doing academically, socially, and professionally during my journey at TSU.”

—Faith M, Tennessee State University, BA,
Mass Communication
Integrated Marketing



BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: LAURIE BROWN,

DOING GOOD PODCAST INTERVIEW

Showing Up with Purpose:
Laurie Brown's Commitment to Service



As board chair, Laurie Brown supports Persist Nashville by serving as a thought partner to the executive director, helping strengthen board leadership, and ensuring the organization remains focused on student success. She also brings a deep appreciation for data and strategy, recognizing that the right information can help improve programs and outcomes for students. Her leadership reflects a balance of heart and structure: she cares deeply about the mission, but she also understands that strong systems are necessary to sustain impact.

For Lori Brown, service is not simply an activity added to an already full schedule. It is a continuation of the support, advocacy, and encouragement she has received throughout her own life. As the CEO of Intrepid College Prep and board chair of Persist Nashville, Brown brings both professional expertise and personal conviction to her work. Her commitment to community service is rooted in a desire to “pay it forward” by helping others access the same kind of champions who helped shape her own journey.

Brown's connection to Persist Nashville feels especially personal because of her long-standing passion for college access and persistence. After spending much of her career supporting students and families through the college-going process, she understands that getting accepted into college is only one part of the journey. Students also need guidance,

resources, encouragement, and trusted relationships to help them persist through challenges and ultimately graduate. Through Persist Nashville, Brown remains connected to that crucial work, even as her current role focuses more broadly on school leadership.

One of Brown's most powerful reflections is that volunteerism does not always have to be large or overwhelming. Sometimes, service begins in small moments: a 20-minute conversation, a helpful introduction, a thoughtful donation, or simply showing up when someone needs support. For her, volunteering is not a one-way act of giving. It is also a way to feel connected, fulfilled, and invested in the well-being of the community.

Brown's story reminds us that meaningful service begins with identifying what fills our cup and finding ways to share that with others. Whether through education, student advocacy, animal shelters, or future work supporting children and families, her volunteer journey continues to evolve. What remains constant is her belief that people deserve advocates, resources, and someone in their corner. Through her leadership and service, Laurie Brown demonstrates that lasting impact often begins when we choose to show up with purpose.

Hear Laurie's full conversation on the Doing Good podcast at XXXXXXXX.



EVENT REWIND



- ▶ Spring Employment and Internship Fair
MARCH 2025
- ▶ 2nd Annual College Con College Preparation Event
JULY 2025
- ▶ 2nd Annual Sunrise to Success
AUGUST 2025
- ▶ National College Attainment Network (NCAN)
SEPTEMBER 2025
- ▶ Fall Employment & Internship Fair
OCTOBER 2025
- ▶ TSU HPSS Inaugural Career Fair
NOVEMBER 2025
- ▶ Seamless Advising Summit
with MTSU Office of Student Success
DECEMBER 2025
- ▶ Stand-up for Students
APRIL 2026





COMMUNITY PARTNER

by Emma Volpe Sherrick

Collaboration is at the heart of Persist's mission, and the Volunteer State continues to provide extraordinary community partners. From nonprofit organizations and corporate partners to donors and event attendees, student success is truly a collective effort.

One example is April, a local business owner who joined the Persist community this past year through our employment fair. As she spoke with students about their career goals and aspirations, she went beyond simply sharing opportunities within her own business. April made phone calls during the event to help connect students with potential employers and additional resources throughout the community.

Her willingness to listen, encourage, and open doors for students reflects the spirit of connection that makes Persist's work possible. This year, April sat down with us to share her own story and the impact that investing in Nashville students has had on her.

What inspired you to get involved with Persist Nashville? What inspired me most was

the mission. I know firsthand how life can change when someone simply believes in you and gives you access to opportunity. Persist is doing exactly that — removing barriers for students who are often carrying more than just coursework. They're carrying life. As someone who has built businesses, nonprofits, and community initiatives, I've always believed that real impact starts with investing in people early. Education changes everything, but support is what helps people stay in the fight.

Looking back on your own college journey, who helped you get to where you are today?

Honestly, it was a combination of grit, family, and a few key people who saw something in me before I fully saw it in myself. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents, who owned and operated a large pig farm. They taught me work ethic, humility, and how to keep moving forward when things got hard.

Along the way, there honestly weren't many mentors or leaders opening doors for me, challenging me, or reminding me that I



“

...kind
of belief
can change
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trajectory of
someone's life.

-APRIL

belonged in rooms I hadn't yet imagined for myself. I had to learn a lot of that on my own. But that's exactly why I've worked so hard to be the opposite for others — to open doors, create opportunities, and make sure the people in my life know they belong at the table. Because that kind of belief can change the entire trajectory of someone's life.

Is there a moment or a student you've met through Persist that has stayed with you?

One student who will always stay with me is Santino. Over time, we built a real bond through the work we've done together. He attended every real estate master class I offered and joined several life coaching and human design sessions with us, where we spent time digging deeper into his goals, his dreams, and the mindset it will take to build the life he wants.

What stands out most about Santino is his willingness to show up — not just physically, but emotionally and mentally. He's been open to learning, growing, and doing the deeper work that so many people avoid. Watching that

kind of commitment at such a pivotal stage in life has incredibly meaningful to me.

He'll always have a place in my heart because our connection became bigger than mentorship. It became a reminder of why this work matters — that when you invest in people, believe in them, and walk alongside them, you can help shape the direction of their future in ways that last far beyond the moment.

Why do you think partnerships between colleges and organizations like Persist matter for student success?

Because success in college isn't just about academics — it's about stability, mentorship, resources, and community. Institutions can provide education, but organizations like Persist help fill in the gaps that often determine whether a student finishes or falls through the cracks. When those worlds work together, students don't just survive — they thrive. That kind of collaboration creates stronger graduates, stronger leaders, and ultimately stronger communities. And that's the long game worth betting on.

OUR SUPPORTERS

STUDENT SUCCESS PARTNERS

Ann Richards School	City Leadership	Intrepid College Prep
Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga	Nashville Charter Incubator	RePublic Schools
Denver School of Science and Technology	Tennessee College Access and Success Network	

PERSIST LEADERS: \$5,000+

Rehnberg Family Foundation	The Carolyn Smith Foundation	Vultee Foundation
Clark Charitable Foundation	Joe C. Davis Foundation	Amazon
Susan and John Hoyle Family Foundation	Devine-Majors Foundation	Jennifer Hill and Steven Webber
Geodis Foundation	City Fund	AllianceBernstein
Marlene and Spencer Hays Foundation	Lewis and Katie Agnew	Joe C Davis Foundation
Truist Foundation	Ryan and Sarah Flury	Nashville Analytics
	Wayne and Pamela Powers	

PERSIST PARTNERS: \$1,000-\$4,999

Kevin Keeton	Shannon Martin	Joe H Wilson Testamentary Trust
Rebecca Pitts	Rob and Aggie Riley	Leslie CPA
Jason Egly	Lipscomb University	McDaniels Luxury Real Estate
John Ford (PFW Inc.)	Preds Foundation	McKinsey
Josh Ireland (Jefferson Bridge Capital)	United Way of Rutherford County	Studio Bank
Rob Elliot	Pinnacle Financial Partners	Turner Construction
Lev, Elle, and Mike Hill	Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee	Vanderbilt University
Hunter Mobley	Equitable Trust	Cara Volpe
Jonathan and Jessica Pahl		

PERSIST SUPPORTERS: \$500-\$999

Prentice Ashford	Chef Penelope Catering	Advance Financial Foundation
Bill Hirschman	Hannah Sears	Belmont University
Catherine Spencer	Laurie Brown	Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee
Vincent Volpe	Vicki Estrin	Dr. Tamika Williams
Edward Jones	Jay Lurie	LBMC Employment Partners
Corby Pons	Subira Gordon	
Patrick Brakefield	Neily Boyd	

IN KIND

Graduate Hotel	Nashville Sounds	answer.
Total Wine & More	Cheekwood	Whiskey House
Spinach AI	Every Day Aliens	PureSweat Studio
Edley's BBQ	Third Coast Comedy	Scout's Barber Shop
Outfront Media	Jackalope Brewing Co.	Music City Brew Hop



WHEN STUDENTS PERSIST, NASHVILLE CHANGES

Nashville is growing quickly. Our region is already home to more than two million people and 60,000 businesses, and projections show Middle Tennessee could add 700,000 more residents by 2050. As new companies, industries, and families continue to choose Nashville, one question becomes even more urgent: will the students who grew up here have access to the opportunities being created here?

Persist Coaching believes the answer must be yes.

Since 2019, Persist has served more than 4,550 students across 406 postsecondary institutions and celebrated 637 graduates and counting. Each touchpoint represents a moment when a student received the guidance, encouragement, or practical support needed to keep moving toward a degree or credential.

That matters because Nashville's future workforce depends on today's students completing postsecondary education. College and credential completion are directly connected to economic mobility, higher earning potential, and a stronger regional economy. Persist students are not just earning degrees. They are becoming nurses, teachers, business leaders, nonprofit professionals, entrepreneurs, technicians, and community builders.

When donors give to Persist, they are investing in more than one student's college journey. They are helping Nashville build a stronger, more prepared local workforce. When schools, employers, and community partners work with Persist, they help ensure that growth does not happen around Nashville students, but with them and through them.

Persist helps turn student potential into degrees, careers, leadership, and long-term economic impact. When students persist, Nashville does not just grow larger. Nashville grows stronger.



Volunteer



Refer a student



Become a community partner



Share Persist's story



Invest in Persist's mission

Your investment powers every text, check-in, and emergency grant, to ensure students stay on the path to graduation.



The persist team supported me with constant check-ins and emotional support. Take advantage of opportunities through Persist and don't be scared to ask for help.

-SARA M., BELMONT, BS, PSYCHOLOGY



LEARN MORE



PERSIST
GUIDANCE TO GRADUATE

www.persistcoaching.org