

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Nonprofit offering free one-on-one college advising program expands to serve Houston students

By Ashley Soebroto, Staff Writer  
Dec 30, 2025



Spring High School's graduation was held Thursday, May 26, 2022, at Planet Ford Stadium.

A national nonprofit offering free [college advising programs](#) for low-income and potential first-generation college students is expanding its services to the Houston area.

Founded in 1997, Bottom Line helps approximately 7,000 high school students from Boston, New York, Chicago, Ohio, and Detroit with the college application process, including essay writing, application fee waivers, financial aid resources, and ultimately helping them decide which college to attend. Through its expansion to Houston, the organization expects to provide one-on-one college advising to 180 students around the region in the spring.

"A college degree, manageable debt and a great first job could be the differentiator for students ... (to) being able to get a fair shot in life and being able to find social and economic mobility," said Steve Colón, CEO and founder of Bottom Line.

The expansion took 18 months of research and discussion with various Houston education nonprofits, as well as a \$1.4 million three-year grant from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. The organization also received funds from the Houston-based Jerry C. Dearing Family Foundation, according to the press release.

Research from Good Reason Houston found that [only 20% of high school graduates](#) from the area earn a living wage several years after graduation, and those who received postsecondary credentials were three to five times more likely to earn living wages than graduates without credentials.

Colón said Bottom Line's goal is to ensure students get a "quality education" by helping them one-on-one through both the college application process and beyond.

"We will continue supporting students through college to ensure that they're graduating career-ready," Colón said. "And so our program actually lasts potentially for up to seven and a half years with students to make sure those students are finding success."

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Meredith Billings, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Arlington's department of higher education, said many informational barriers exist for low-income and aspiring first-generation college students. When it comes to pursuing higher education, there are many different application processes, like applying to attend college or looking for financial aid, which makes it complicated for students. She added that public schools "have a lot on their plate," and so school counselors and advisors may not be able to give each and every student the one-on-one attention they need.

"Those different steps that students need to take can be very complicated, especially if they don't have someone at home who has been in the post-secondary system before," Billing said. "These types of nonprofits can really help narrow that gap for students and create a more structured plan to help them think."

Billings said navigating resources and application both state and federal financial aid can be particularly complicated, whether it comes to students being aware if they're eligible for certain grants and scholarships or how to even apply for those supports.

Helping students understand finances is a large part of what Bottom Line's advising programs do, Colón said. He said after students with their programs start hearing back about college acceptances, the nonprofit will help students make informed decisions about which colleges they may want enroll in based on their interests and affordability.

"We help them understand their award letters and their acceptance letters because those are usually really complicated," Colón said. "We hold ourselves accountable to ensuring that the student enrolls in a more affordable college option, some place that we know that they're not going to incur significant amount of debt upon graduation."

He said the nonprofit will begin "recruiting" and advertising their college advising services to students in February at schools and other community centers like libraries, and students can then apply to be a part of the program.

Colón said the nonprofit generally looks for students with GPAs of at least 2.5 who are eligible for the federal Pell Grant.

"The students are talented, they're smart, they have drive," Colón said. "Our program really supports those students who come from those backgrounds because we are sort of filling in critical information gaps those students have given those backgrounds."

*Read the article [here](#).*

