

VIEWPOINT

Anchoring Higher Education in the Community

At College Unbound, we aim to empower adult learners to transform their families, communities, and workplaces. We also aspire to transform higher education.

BY DENNIS LITTKY & MICHAEL K. ALLIO

The higher-education system is failing its students. It continues to drift further and further away from its cultural, moral, and practical mission of helping individuals acquire knowledge and skills, realize their potential, and engage with and enhance their communities.

The national average for college completion for students overall is just 62.3 percent, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The system has proven especially ineffective for adult learners: 39 million Americans have attended some college but have obtained no degree or credential—up from 36 million in 2019. Their college completion rate—its own low bar for judging effectiveness—is just 51.1 percent.

Could we change higher ed to make it more meaningful and relevant for adult learners? What would a reimagined college look like? And how could such a model promote systemic change in higher ed on a national scale?

These questions have propelled our team over the past decade to design, build, iterate, and grow College Unbound (CU), an accredited nonprofit college focused on adult learners who have faced significant barriers to attending and completing college. CU's student-driven curriculum builds job readiness and leadership skills. Students design projects and receive credit for learning in career-focus areas, with assignments anchored in the community and workplace. They tackle practical, real-world challenges that hone their skills and help them navigate complexity. Because CU grants credits for both prior learning and life experience, the path to a BA is typically shorter.

Our philosophy and mission aim not only to serve our students and their communities, but also to transform higher education and the systems in which it is embedded, so that graduates, their communities, their employers, and the broader public benefit. But we need further support from allies, funders, and policy makers to succeed.

A Path to Scale and Systems Change

We currently serve more than 250 students in Greater Providence, Rhode Island; Chicago; and Philadelphia. CU's adult learners unerringly bring with them profound connections and commitments to the community—and with their cohorts typically design projects that center the community. One student, for example, recently designed a nonprofit to

address gun violence in Philadelphia; another developed and launched a lead-abatement program for underserved communities. Our student-support team includes social workers who themselves have come from the same communities, and so they are especially fluent in navigating barriers. We believe this community engagement is the ballast that supports CU's students and a core component of our model.

Success for students is transformation—of themselves, their families, their communities, and their workplaces. Transformation often starts through community-based projects that challenge students to create meaningful change on the ground. As one CU student, a 38-year-old mother in her final year, put it this summer, “Success is creating a sense of hope for my community, a sense of purpose and belonging, and a path forward for my children.”

Our rigorous, individualized learning approach is delivering powerful outcomes. Our six-year graduation rate is substantially higher than those of other postsecondary institutions: 94 percent of 2016 starters secured their degree, 75 percent of them within 3.5 years. Alumni typically report greater financial security (76 percent), professional advancement (65 percent), and taking

leadership roles in the community (60 percent). A full 100 percent report that their experience at CU changes how they viewed the world.

The standard innovation trope asserts that change initiatives are most effective when they come from *outside* the system to *disrupt* entrenched bureaucracies. Teach For America, for example, exerted pressure on the system by introducing new talent from outside the traditional education schools.

According to an equally compelling counterargument, substantive change can only happen from *inside* a



DENNIS LITTKY is the cofounder and president of College Unbound and the cofounder of the MET Schools/Big Picture Learning, an innovative network of 80 high schools in the United States and hundreds more worldwide.

MICHAEL K. ALLIO is a strategy and innovation specialist. He formerly served as deputy director, education, at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. He consults with philanthropic and private-sector organizations.

system. By leveraging existing infrastructure, systems, and distribution channels, you save time and can thus reach scale and impact far more quickly. Such incremental innovation within the system can allow programs like Arizona State University and Southern New Hampshire University to gain traction: They take advantage of traditional framing, models, and funding but seize market share by tinkering with the formula, bending the system to get to a better place.

At CU, we've been taking a middle path—operating both inside and outside the education system. We operate inside higher ed by, for example, plugging into the federal system as an accredited institution, enabling our students to tap Federal Pell Grants that cover as much as 68 percent of their tuition. And we grant students a BA, which is a traditional credential that delivers a conventional marker of academic and intellectual success that the market values.

But CU challenges the higher-ed model, operating from the outside as well. In addition to rigorous learning opportunities through community-based projects, we provide students credit for their life experiences that translate into college-equivalent learning—often dramatically reducing the amount of credits they need to complete their BA and compressing the time to completion. This approach also underscores the value and legitimacy of their life experiences, reinforcing their confidence and contributions to the communities they live in. Finally, we remove barriers to completion by lowering the cost of tuition (to just \$10,000/year) and by providing evening and weekend classes, childcare and social-support services, and even regular dinners—all in a deeply personal cohort experience that aims to transform students and deliver them a BA.

Partners in Community Transformation

Our original ambition was that by demonstrating success with adult learners, we'd influence and ideally transform higher ed. We anticipated that other leaders in higher education would see the value in our

student- and community-centered philosophy and pedagogy and adopt some of our tool kit and model to better serve both adult learners and traditional-aged students. We also believed they would partner with us to focus on talented adult learners, opening up both new revenue streams and new pathways to community impact. But our experience has shown us that higher ed is reluctant to change, daunted by partnering, and unlikely to stretch and innovate as it grapples with efficiencies.

As we've expanded, we've surfaced another system that CU can—and must—influence: the workforce development/employment system, spanning private, public, and nonprofit employers. We believe that CU can create meaningful systemic change by influencing the way employers recruit, hire, develop, and promote talent by steering them toward high-potential adult learners.

Our exciting “TA:BA” program, now active in Providence and Philadelphia, is a case in point. Teaching assistants are a robust source of talent, bringing innate capabilities to the fore with the advantage of deep experience with the students, the classroom, other teachers, the culture, and the community. Many lack a BA, a credential that is required for teacher certification. The outcomes from this program are not just transformed individuals: These agents of change are creating positive ripple effects within their families, their communities, and the schools in which they work.

Our scaling logic is not complicated: Recruit high-potential adult learners. Lower the barriers to deep learning and a BA degree. Create the conditions for a robust, student-directed educational experience. Encourage employers and philanthropic sponsors to support, and benefit from, this investment in community and catalyze systems change regionally. Replicate, expand, sustain.

What do innovative models like ours need to succeed? Partners who will support expansion to prove efficacy, as an intermediate step toward broader systems change. More specifically, we offer three recommendations.

First, forward-thinking corporate/institutional employers should take a different approach to professional development and hiring, deliberately focusing on adult learners. As examples, Philadelphia's Housing Authority is providing scholarships to both residents and staff to complete their BA at CU, improve their workplaces, and enrich their communities. The Philadelphia school district and Federation of Teachers are likewise providing scholarships to teaching assistants to enhance their teacher pipeline. Across sectors, this kind of proactive investment will unblock bottlenecks for talent and help corporations and institutions improve the lives of stakeholders, not just shareholders, fulfilling their social responsibilities.

Second, regional and national philanthropy should fuel innovative higher-education models, at scale, across the country. We need an expanded appetite for risk, patient capital that enables experimentation and ignites new collaborations, and investment in the infrastructure required to scale. Philanthropy should continue to support the gathering and dissemination of evidence of efficacy and also use its convening power to spur collaborations, bringing diverse stakeholders to the table to create winning community-embedded programs.

Third, we need clear-eyed, constructive policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels to make it easier for adult learners to access and pay for programs like CU's. Specific mechanisms could include permanent scholarships for qualified adult learners (e.g., through Promise Programs, which are place-based scholarships that ensure free tuition for at least one local college), cheaper lending and loan forgiveness programs, incentives for employers to invest in professional development and hiring, and broader adoption of certifications for prior learning in public universities.

We can see the pathway for unlocking the potential of millions of adult learners. With humility, we can also see the beginning of change. This is innovation with impact, with community at the center. We welcome allies. ■