

[BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS]

Designing a High-Impact College for Returning Adult Students

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High-impact educational practices (such as learning communities, community-based learning, and capstone projects) are often found at the innovative margins of colleges and universities. Even when these practices are an institutional priority, they often do not reach the

students whom they most benefit: low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students (Kuh 2008). Many of these students are adult learners who are returning to college after having started their degrees years earlier. In the United States, thirty-seven million

adults ages twenty-five to sixty-four have attended a college without ever earning a degree or credential (Merisotis 2013). These students need access to educational programs that have been intentionally designed to support their success.

What would it mean to create a college that was deliberately designed for minoritized, underserved, and underrepresented students, and that offered a curriculum consisting *only* of high-impact practices? What would be possible if we combined these practices with key innovations—competency-based education, credit hours that are separate from seat time, prior learning assessments, high-touch student-faculty interactions supported by technology, and pedagogies that prepare students for careers and nurture their civic agency—to create integrative programs designed with returning adult students in mind?

The Student at the Center

■ **LAUREN ROY**, College Unbound Student

Higher education and I have a contentious relationship. I have associated higher education with both opportunity that I have embraced and elitism that I have resisted. When I was younger, I struggled with the idea that to be successful and valued, a person had to follow what I saw as the conveyor belt—the plan created long ago to categorize individuals and uphold power imbalances. To me, education felt political, and that feeling enhanced the tension I was experiencing.

When I first enrolled in college, I took several general education classes. I tried to be engaged in the material, but none of it felt particularly relevant to the work I was doing or wanted to do.

During the day, I worked; in the evening, I learned. It felt as though higher education required me to check the rest of my life at the door. I memorized material, took exams, and wrote papers, and I ended my first year with As and Bs. But I didn't continue in college, because my disconnected life left me feeling quite empty.

During my break from higher education, I discovered College Unbound. Crucially, nothing in College Unbound feels disjointed: all of my courses are connected through a project, generated entirely by me, that guides my learning. My project (essentially, my passion) is a lens through which to see course content and a way of meeting

degree requirements. The degree itself is highly customizable to accommodate my schedule, my career, and my other commitments while supporting my well-being. At College Unbound, I can't simply memorize content and pass tests. My courses require continuous reflection on how my studies connect to my work outside the classroom, giving me a real stake in each course. The program structure encourages personal growth through thoughtful participation and sharing among students and faculty. Sharing requires vulnerability, building trust among individuals while inspiring investment in one another's successes.

Currently, I am a law enforcement advocate employed by Day One, a sexual assault/domestic violence agency. In collaboration with detectives in the local police department, I serve as a liaison for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child molestation, and human

The result would be a new kind of college. This is what exists at College Unbound, Rhode Island's newest postsecondary institution. Founded in 2009 and approved by the state in 2015, College Unbound has been recognized for its innovative approaches (Kamenetz 2010; 2015). The institution seeks to reframe higher education around a commitment to social justice in a diverse democracy: its mission is "to reinvent higher education for underrepresented returning adult learners, using a model that is individualized, interest-based, project-driven, workplace-enhanced, cohort-supportive, flexible, supportive, and affordable" (College Unbound 2017). Traditional models of higher education are failing many students, and College Unbound recognizes that making meaningful strides toward inclusive excellence requires significant—and unbound—change.

A Responsive Curriculum

College Unbound offers a single, but highly adaptable, degree program: a bachelor of arts in organizational leadership and change. Students develop strong intellectual and practical skills along with a sense of civic professionalism and social responsibility in a diverse democracy.

Students navigate College Unbound within cohorts—learning communities of ten to fifteen peers. The degree program is organized into semesters, each comprising six courses divided into two eight-week terms. Students enter College Unbound with different numbers of previously earned credits, but all take part in a shared first-semester experience consisting of Workplace and World Lab, Introduction to Organizational Leadership and Change, Writing for Change, Reframing Failure, and Contextualizing Work. Each student works with an advisor to create an

individualized learning plan that aligns with the student's goals and life experiences. Following the first term, students may complete their degrees while working full or part time, in accordance with their learning plans.

College Unbound treats the workplace as a learning asset, and Workplace and World Lab is a critical component of the curriculum. Students enroll in this course every term throughout their time in the program. The course prompts students to make connections between their curricular and workplace experiences through multi-semester projects that feed into their interests and goals while also benefiting the organizations in which they work or intern. The opportunity to integrate their coursework through a project they have designed empowers and challenges students, allowing them to identify and validate their strengths while developing their academic skills. (See Lauren Roy's essay

trafficking. I guide these individuals through the criminal justice system by providing crisis intervention, legal advocacy, court accompaniment, and appropriate referrals for community support. This work connects directly to my College Unbound project, Aporia Collective. I am working with three other women to create a zine (alternative magazine) for teenage girls who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence. Much of the zine consists of narratives and artworks submitted by women survivors and victims. The primary goal is to provide language for young people to discuss the structures of violence and their consequences for identity. Experiences of violence are personal, but they are also political; refocusing the conversation from the self to the larger structures can provide a language for survivors and victims to describe what happened to them while

also seeing their experiences objectively. We hope to distribute the zine at children's advocacy centers throughout Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

As part of my curriculum, I recently co-designed an independent study called Dance as a Practice of Freedom. The course included a physical dance class where I received private lessons from a professional dancer. It also involved a dance theory course where students explored the relationship between identity and dance history, as well as the meaning of specific bodies in motion. Through this course, I realized how dance heals and repairs the connection between body and mind, giving individuals ownership of and presence within their own bodies—a crucial outcome for survivors of sexual violence. I now plan to integrate dance into my future professional practice. After graduating from College Unbound, I plan to earn

a master of fine arts degree in dance, something I had never viewed as a possibility. My goal is to become a dance therapist who teaches trauma-informed dance lessons to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

College Unbound allows the most marginalized individuals to have a shot at earning an education. Within my cohort, students often say that we are literally living our projects and our courses. The return is real. Three-quarters of us have changed careers and found new jobs more aligned with our goals and our passions. I feel as though I have been able to uncover who I really am—but I had to learn how to see myself differently before that could happen. At College Unbound, students are made to feel that we are valuable and that our richly complex lives can be part of what we study in the curriculum. I can't imagine a higher impact. 📍



College Unbound faculty and students celebrate following student project presentations. (Photo courtesy of College Unbound)

on pages 4–5 for a student’s perspective on the College Unbound experience.)

Pedagogy as Participatory Epistemology

College Unbound embraces the idea that high-impact learning happens in many spaces, and that faculty are not the only holders and creators of knowledge. Students are true partners in their learning: they engage in coassessment of their work, and their stories and histories actively shape the curriculum. For students, this model results in a learning environment where they can all be successful and where inclusive excellence is expected and realized. For faculty, the model offers an entry point to an exciting, collaborative endeavor that highlights the impact of student-centered teaching.

In spring 2016, several of this article’s authors—Liya, Stephanie, Ebru, Jennifer (all doctoral students in the higher education program at the University of Massachusetts Boston) and John (a faculty member in the program)—cotaught a College Unbound course, *Contextualizing Work*. As described on the syllabus, the course “requires students to step out of their current role

in their workplace, or in the development of their project, and apply research strategies using their immediate environment.” The course’s primary goal is to put qualitative research methods into practice by engaging students in integrated reflection on and exploration of the intersections among their identities, their projects, their places of work, and their social justice commitments.

From the beginning of the course, the faculty team engaged in a cyclical process of continuous reflection on our teaching and our students’ experiences. In collaboration with other College Unbound faculty, we met with students each Monday, debriefed as a faculty group each Wednesday, held virtual office hours each Thursday, collaborated over long conference calls each Sunday, and interacted with students using their online portfolios throughout the week. In short, by teaching students to “contextualize their work,” we were also contextualizing our own work—putting into practice an intentional, social justice-oriented teaching agenda in an environment that was at once more rigorous, flexible, focused, creative, and fulfilling than we had encountered in our previous teaching experiences.

Key Learning Outcomes

The College Unbound model focuses on generating ten learning outcomes, which we call “the Big Ten”: (1) advocacy for self and others, (2) accountability, (3) collaboration, (4) communication, (5) creativity, (6) critical thinking, (7) intercultural engagement, (8) problem solving, (9) reflection, and (10) resiliency. As students achieve these outcomes, they become empowered leaders who are able to deal with diversity, complexity, and change. Because their lives are integrated into their coursework, students continuously develop lifelong learning competencies, both inside and outside of the classroom.

As civic actors in a democracy, students need an education that is not merely economically instrumental, but that also supports their civic agency. Such an education requires integrated experiences that allow students to flourish in their coursework and in their lives. College Unbound offers this type of education to returning adult students, with the goal of instilling greater justice and equity in the world. ☐

For more information about College Unbound, visit www.collegeunbound.org.

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