



A COLLEGE UNBOUND

Lessons on Innovation from a Student-Driven
College's Journey Through Regional Accreditation

By Louis Soares and Vickie Choitz

Foreword by Ted Mitchell

With contributions from Jamie Merisotis, Barbara E. Brittingham, James E. Purcell,
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FOREWORD

A defining challenge for colleges and universities today is the fundamental mismatch in higher education between the historical structures of our institutions and today's students. Our vision of most college students as 18- or 19-year-olds getting dropped off at the entrance of Leafy U. from the family minivan, completing four years of studies, and walking across the stage at graduation with an education that lasts a lifetime is no longer the norm. Sure, this is the scenario for some students from some families at some universities. But the majority of college students of today and tomorrow are older, work full time or part time, have children or are supporting other dependents, and are looking for something different than a traditional college education.

As a result of this fundamental mismatch, there is a mass of underserved adults. At the low end of the estimated range are 35 million or so who have some credit but no degree. At the high end are more than twice that who have not even attempted postsecondary education because the current offerings do not match their learning needs and life schedules. As we look at the twenty-first century when postsecondary education is important not only to individual economic success, but also for our diverse democratic society, we must change our perspective on students and re-envision our institutions. We need to explore new models, which is why ACE is excited to share this case study on College Unbound.

I have known the co-founder and president of College Unbound, Dennis Littky, for over three decades, going back to my days at Dartmouth College and his turning around Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire (documented in the made-for-TV movie *A Town Torn Apart*). He first told me about College Unbound when I was under secretary of education at the U.S. Department of Education. I was intrigued with this new approach to a degree program for underserved adult students and thought, "Here is one of the most creative minds in American education. He brings such a wealth of experience and new perspectives to higher education. If anyone can get there, he can."

But, as Dennis and Adam told me more about partnering with already-accredited institutions, I became worried that College Unbound was being nibbled to death by partners who felt they had to preserve their more traditional structures to maintain their own accreditation. Numerous little changes could add up to compromising the unique CU model. I said to them, "Look, just go it alone. Build College Unbound and dare the establishment to deny the education you are trying to provide students they have left behind. And, I will help you." (As an aside, during the writing of this case study, the authors told me that this was the message in a fortune cookie at lunch during their first site visit to CU: "A man who trims himself to suit everybody will soon whittle himself away." How apropos!)

I am so proud of what College Unbound has achieved—from building a successful model, to earning state authorization, to gaining candidacy for accreditation and the ability to participate in federal Title IV student financial aid programs. The success factors have a lot to do with the quality and commitment of the CU leadership. Some people who approach these processes do so naively, but CU's leadership has not. They have been around virtually every block there is to be around. They have tough skin and incredible resilience. This has helped them stay focused and enabled them to really listen to authorizers' concerns and address them. Most important though, is what makes CU truly unique: it is genuinely learner-centered in a way that honors and respects students' experiences and passions for what they want to do in life. This is CU's uncompromising "secret sauce."

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I also greatly credit Barbara Brittingham and NECHE for having an open mind to new models that help point the way to the future of higher education. NECHE has been tough (as they should be), and their good questions and suggestions have helped CU grow into a stronger institution.

From the beginning, College Unbound has aspired to create new models for our field. In fact, what I think College Unbound has done—along with a handful of other leading colleges such as Trinity Washington University, Southern New Hampshire University, and Bay Path University, among others—is helped to introduce a new breed of colleges. This new breed is committed to and works for a population of students not served well elsewhere, but who are vitally important to our economy and democracy.

As you read this case study, I encourage you to focus on three underlying critical themes. First, carefully study the perspective College Unbound has on underserved adult students. Understand how this perspective is built into its mission and guiding principles, and how they, in turn, shape CU's approach and practices. Look beyond the structure of CU and how different it might be from your institution and really focus on the underlying philosophy.

Second, listen to the students whose voices are shared in this case study. What do they say works for them? What motivates them and keeps them engaged? Third, understand how College Unbound stays true to its mission and students, while also fitting into the establishment as a new breed of institution responding to the adverse mismatch between a majority of today's and tomorrow's students and our higher education institutions. If we can infuse these themes into how we think about and re-imagine the future of higher education and our institutions, we will be able to redesign and build a new postsecondary education that is truly inclusive, equitable, and valuable.

All of us have an ongoing moral responsibility to people who traditionally get the short end of every stick in American society. College Unbound is committed to this work and has shown us one approach for how it can be done. For this, we are all in its debt.

Ted Mitchell
President
American Council on Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education is no stranger to changing times and the need to adapt and respond to shifting societal expectations and student demographics. Now, once again, the context of higher education is changing, ushering in an opportunity to reflect on how we structure postsecondary education learning opportunities and for whom. We are seeing significant recent and upcoming changes in student demographics: there are many more adult, independent, low-income, and students of color on our campuses today than many people assume, and it is projected that, starting around 2026, there will be a 15 percent drop in the traditional college-going population (Grawe 2018). We see increased demand for postsecondary credentials in the labor market and growing need for lifelong academic models (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish 2015; Carnevale, Smith, and Stohl 2016); declining confidence in the value of a college degree, particularly relative to the ballooning cost of higher education (Marken 2019); and pressure to do more with less.

This is a time to consider new possibilities for how to engage students, particularly adult students, who have been chronically underserved, despite their growing importance for meeting national and state credential attainment rates, workforce needs, economic growth, and a healthy civic society.

College Unbound is a new independent nonprofit institution of higher education in Providence, Rhode Island, serving low-income working adult students who are returning to earn their first degree. It was incubated in the fall of 2009 as a program of Big Picture Learning, an organization based in Providence, dedicated to student-centered, supported, real-world, equitable learning opportunities. As shared in College Unbound's self-study for regional accreditation: "The vision of the founding trustees and college leadership is to be a college that is 'unbound' from structures designed for a different population in another time, instead designed specifically to meet the needs of adult learners, many of whom are full-time workers, parents, and partners who need flexibility, support, and immediately relevant curriculum."

Four years ago, College Unbound was authorized as the 13th college in Rhode Island (the first new college in the state in two decades). Since then, it has earned candidacy for regional accreditation and qualified to participate in federal Title IV student financial aid programs. It will administer Pell Grants for its own students for this first time this fall. The story of College Unbound building a student-driven academic model and institution and navigating state authorization, regional accreditation, and federal Title IV eligibility is a good one and instructive. We share this case study in the hopes that other higher education institutions will be inspired by College Unbound's philosophy, approach, accomplishments, and lessons learned.

College Unbound offers a bachelor of arts in organizational leadership and change. This degree qualifies students for a variety of occupations in many growing industries in Rhode Island (and across the region and country), including in management, business, and social services. It is a flexible degree-completion program, enabling students to design their own programs of study to suit their particular life and career goals. College Unbound maximizes course credit transfers and prior learning assessment. Students begin the program with a healthy number of credits, and their average time to degree is about 2.5 years.

Compared with traditional higher education, the College Unbound academic model is much more interactive, integrative, and iterative. It is *student-driven*, not just *student-centered*. In a student-centered approach, the academic model is designed to meet the learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of students; however, faculty and staff are still in charge of designing the program and curricula. The college may provide systems, tools, and supports for students, but the college always remains the driver.

In contrast, in College Unbound's student-driven model, students determine their educational plans and co-create with faculty courses, projects, and other learning experiences to support those plans. Students' personal and professional lives are much more central to and integrated into the curriculum at College Unbound compared with other higher education institutions, which is much more appropriate for adult students with significant life experience. It fuels their passion, engagement, personal accountability, and motivation to excel, persist, and complete the degree program. Students are grouped into cohorts for the duration of the degree program, which creates a safe and supportive environment for student success.

College Unbound's academic model consists of:

- **The Personal Learning Plan** is the student's personalized degree map, providing a common point of connection for the other components. This is where students plan and track progress on their personal learning goals, courses, and action research projects.
- **The Action Research Project** is similar in concept to a thesis: it is designed by the student (with input from faculty and mentors in the Personal Learning Network) and focuses on real-world problems or needs. The student works on it throughout the degree program, and it is a culmination of the student's learning.
- **Leadership and Change Competencies**, or "the Big 10," are at the core of the College Unbound curriculum. They are skills essential for learning, employment, and living in a complex society, e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration. While many higher education and workforce programs profess to teaching these skills, College Unbound intentionally builds them into courses as learning outcomes, into the multi-faceted student assessment system, and in college credit (students earn one credit for each competency mastered).
- **The Workplace and World Lab and Other Courses.** All students begin the program in a cohort taking a common set of courses in the first semester. A unique and crucial component of the CU model is the anchor course, Workplace and World Lab (WWL), in which all students enroll each semester, and where Lab faculty weave together all the academic integration and personalized learning with each student. Students select CU courses and design projects that help them meet their personal learning goals and successfully complete their action research projects. Students also take courses at other colleges, online courses, and independent study.

CU STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



PRIME WORKING AGE (25-45 YEARS OLD)



STUDENTS OF COLOR



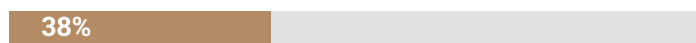
PARENTS



EARNING THEIR FIRST DEGREE



ATTENDED TWO COLLEGES BEFORE CU



PELL GRANT RECIPIENTS



EMPLOYED FULL TIME



ANNUAL INCOME BELOW \$45,000



- **The Learning in Public (LIP)** program is an experiential learning, independent study program designed to award credit for learning that is typically regarded as extracurricular, such as reflection on participation in book groups, conferences, volunteer work, workshops, certification trainings and community engagement. LIP recognizes that the classroom is only one of many sites of learning and values meaning-making that happens in all kinds of contexts that more traditional educational institutions ignore.
- **Real-World Assessment.** Unlike the traditional model of higher education, student learning is not assessed just through exams or written papers. College Unbound students are assessed in multiple ways that reflects real-world evaluation of achievement and that engages the student in holding themselves accountable, e.g., student learning exhibitions, as well as assessments by faculty, professional mentors, and students themselves.
- **The Personal Learning Network** is the student’s accountability and support network. It helps students create and complete their Personal Learning Plans, assesses the students’ progress on their learning goals and in developing the Leadership and Change competencies, and participates in the Student Learning Exhibitions to assess student learning and progress.

College Unbound’s academic model may feel foreign and complicated to outside reviewers, but the integration—curated by Lab faculty and anchored by the Personal Learning Plan, the Action Research Project, and the Workplace and World Lab—actually make more sense to the student than the traditional model of higher education. As one student put it,

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.

College Unbound’s academic model consists of 100 percent high-impact and innovative learning and student support practices. It is an integrated hybrid between high-tech and high-personalization. Students use technology constantly in a variety of ways from communicating with faculty, staff, and each other to locating research and resources to taking courses. Students also have access to key support services, including financial advising and personal supports as needed. Weekly in-person meetings include dinner and child care.

College Unbound is unique, but it is not a unicorn. It is possible for other colleges to follow this model. CU, however, does have two crucial “secret sauce” ingredients. First, all aspects of the college operate with a very different perspective on low-income working adult students. College Unbound looks at the same adults who have been on other college campuses and sees something else. They see adult learners as equal, valuable partners in their learning, bringing meaningful experiences and assets—not barriers—to the program. CU assumes intelligence in their adult learners and trusts them to be in the driver’s seat of their education. College Unbound understands that too many adults and other underserved students have not succeeded in higher education not because they are not “college material,” but because traditional colleges were never designed with them in mind. As President Dennis Littky puts it, “rather than expecting all students to be (traditional) college ready, colleges should be student-ready.”

The second truly unique aspect in the College Unbound model is that it recognizes many adult students have experienced educational trauma. It creates a culture that does not re-traumatize them and helps students develop the skills and confidence to work through past educational trauma to succeed in earning a degree. College Unbound's academic model is validated by the student outcomes:

OUT OF 133 TOTAL GRADUATES

RETENTION RATE

85%

GRADUATION RATE

83%

PELL GRANT RECIPIENT GRADUATION RATE

76%

ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS USED AFTER GRADUATION

71%

STUDENTS WHO ADVANCED TO A BETTER POSITION IN THEIR CAREER WITHIN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT CU

83%

CU ALUMNI EMPLOYED FULL TIME

87%

CU ALUMNI WHO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

20%

CU ALUMNI ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THEIR COMMUNITY

71%

REPORT SIGNIFICANT PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

80%

The flexibility of the College Unbound model means that it can be implemented in a variety of settings where returning adult students can be found. CU has implemented college cohorts with partner colleges and as a stand-alone institution during the accreditation process. It operates employer-based cohorts, including with the Ashe Arts Cultural Center in New Orleans and the United Way of Rhode Island in Providence. It also operates a prison program with cohorts of incarcerated men and women.

College Unbound's institutional and governance model is maintained by an exceptional leadership team. The college has been built and led by two accomplished and entrepreneurial individuals that embody integrity and a deep commitment to student equality and social justice. The board of trustees is strategic, committed, and engaged; it was described to us as “impressive,” “very talented,” and imbued with “significant intellectual capital.” College Unbound understands the importance of knowledgeable and well-respected board members for the college's capacity, visibility, and public trust and has grown the board to include a former Rhode Island Commissioner of Higher Education, a state congressman, a national leading community college president and other higher education leaders, and federal and former state Supreme Court justices. College Unbound has 13 active faculty, 11 Lab faculty, and 12 alumni student teaching assistants.

College Unbound's business model is driven by its mission, principles, and academic model. Its annual budget is around \$1.4 million. The majority of CU's revenue has been from grants and gifts. Like any start-up with delayed access to revenue-generation (in this case, tuition paid for with student financial aid), this innovative model has relied on capital funding in the early years, including from Lumina Foundation, Nellie Mae Foundation, ECMC Foundation, and van Beuren Charitable Foundation. College Unbound aims to contain degree program costs to the students to below \$10,000 per year. Ideally, the cost of the program to the student would be the Pell Grant (maximum award is \$6,095 for the 2018–19 award year) plus \$1,000, which is just over \$7,000. To cover the outstanding \$3,000 per student without causing students to incur debt, CU will be providing each student with a \$1,100 merit scholarship, leveraging other philanthropic and state scholarship funds, leveraging tuition assistance programs, and exploring income share agreements.

Now that student financial aid will be a regular revenue stream, CU can transition from a primarily grant-funded institution to a more sustainable financing model. It projects it will be 80 percent tuition funded by fiscal year 2022.

Like most colleges, a significant percentage of the expenses are for personnel and benefits (68 percent). Unlike most institutions of higher education, College Unbound does not have its own campus. It has built into its business model leasing administrative and classroom space from other institutions and workplaces when they are sitting idle. All faculty are part-time adjuncts, and the college incorporates most student support service functions, i.e., advising, peer support through cohorts, professional mentorships, and work experiences, directly into the degree program model. College Unbound saves money with streamlined capital, facility, and staffing costs, enabling it to invest more in small class sizes and active advising with small advisee loads.

The Journey Through the Higher Education "Quality Triad" and Lessons Learned. CU started as a curricular pathway program partnering with accredited higher education institutions. Over the years, higher education partners included Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) in Manchester, New Hampshire, Roger Williams University in Providence, Rhode Island, and Charter Oak State College, a public online college based in New Britain, Connecticut. As the program matured, CU wanted to provide its own courses that integrated tightly with the other components of the academic model. It was time to evolve from a program to a financially sustainable stand-alone institution of higher education.

To do this, CU would need to earn approval from three key bodies in the "triad" overseeing higher education quality: (1) state authorization to operate as an institution of higher education in Rhode Island; (2) accreditation from the New England regional accrediting board; and (3) approval from the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the federal Title IV student aid programs. College Unbound achieved the first milestone in May 2015, earned candidacy for accreditation in September 2018, and was approved to participate in Title IV programs in March 2019.

Throughout this journey, there were several pain points and lessons learned, including:

- Lessons Learned Across the Higher Education Quality Triad
 - The process is accumulative, strengthening the institution to succeed as it builds; however, there is little early support for innovative models and stumbling blocks remain.
 - The journey through the higher education quality triad requires perseverance, going above and beyond, and significant resources.
 - Innovative institutions must strike a balance between fitting into traditional policies, norms, and expectations and preserving their own identity.
 - Institutional leaders must understand that these processes are not just regulatory; they are relational and political, as well.

- Deeper Lessons Learned from the Regional Accreditation Process
 - The initial step of applying to be a candidate for regional accreditation, or the eligibility phase, seemed to be the most challenging.
 - The regional accreditation process benefits the accreditor, as well as the applicant institution.
 - Peer review is a critical component of the regional accreditation process; careful attention should be paid to ensure true peer review for innovative institutions and programs.
 - Accreditation can strengthen your institution, and you can stay true to your innovation.
- The Promise and Viability of Adult Student Innovations in Higher Education
 - Innovation does not always find fertile ground in the field of higher education.
 - Partnerships can be invaluable assets in innovative models, but they are dynamic and subject to change.
 - Innovative academic models require innovative business and governance models.
 - Sustaining innovative models is essential, but difficult; the field needs thoughtful ideas and experimentation on how.
 - We believe a deficit-based view rather than an asset-based view of adult students persists, particularly for underserved adults, which prevents many higher education stakeholders from effectively engaging these students.
 - Effectively engaging underserved adult students will require a full commitment to transformational change.

Considerations for the Future. Given the importance of helping institutions of higher education more effectively engage working adult students, we wanted to share a few ideas for public and private investment and policy exploration that emanated from writing this case study. Ideas include:

- Significantly more investment in knowledge development, professional development, and tools to support innovative new models for underserved and unserved adult students. Foundations and the federal government should consider investments in the following:
 - Financial and technical support for experimentation with and documentation of innovative academic-business-governance (A-B-G) models.
 - Research and thought leadership to develop a taxonomy of innovative A-B-G models.
 - Higher education adult student innovation incubators.
 - Research and thought leadership to think more expansively and creatively about what it means to scale these models and various types of scale.
 - Research and thought leadership on how to sustain innovative models.
 - More professional development on adult-student-driven academic models and institutional culture change.
 - Continued investment in development and use of tools that support innovative models, e.g., course credit transfers, Prior Learning Assessment, Learning in Public credit assessment, ACE's College Credit Recommendation Service, CAEL's Adult Learner 360 assessment.

- Regional accreditation can more proactively support innovative models.
 - Incorporate innovation into regional accreditation's roles of quality assurance and continuous improvement.
 - Explore innovative accreditation models for new institutions, such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission's (WSCUC) incubation policy.
 - Provide access to peer mentors for organizations seeking eligibility to apply for accreditation candidacy to provide advice and guidance.
- States can do more to support innovations that more effectively engage low-income working adult students.
 - Develop a deeper understanding of current and potential adult students in the state, going beyond traditional higher education indicators.
 - Explore how state authorization can more proactively support innovation for this population of students.
- Explore providing limited eligibility for federal Title IV student aid to institutions during pre-accreditation.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education leaders around the country have a lot on their minds these days: a dynamic and changing economy, new expectations and roles for higher education, changing student demographics, expectations to raise graduation rates, and pressure to do more with less. Once again, the context of higher education is changing, ushering in an opportunity to reflect on how we have been providing postsecondary education and with whom. This is a time to consider new possibilities for how to engage students, particularly adult students, who have been underserved, despite their growing importance for meeting national and state credential attainment rates, workforce needs, and economic growth.

College Unbound is a new nonprofit college in Providence, Rhode Island, designed specifically for low-income working adult students returning for their first degree. It provides an example of a new higher education model that should be of interest to other colleges, organizations, employers, policymakers, and funders who want to improve higher education for adult students who have been left behind. This case study describes College Unbound's academic, governance, and business models, as well as its journey through state authorization, regional accreditation, and federal Title IV eligibility. We also share lessons learned and considerations for future investments and policy exploration.

Methodology: The research for this case study consisted of a review of College Unbound materials including reports prepared for and by accreditation review teams, external evaluation reports, and internal College Unbound materials (student and policy handbooks, course catalog, and other copious materials on the website). We also conducted two site visits to College Unbound, in July and September 2018, and interviewed the president and vice president/provost multiple times, the executive vice president, the vice president of administration and finance, faculty, students, and a dozen external stakeholders (all interviewees are listed in the acknowledgments). We include these perspectives throughout this case study, including a few longer excerpts from select interviews to provide readers with insights from various key College Unbound partners and the challenges and opportunities facing higher education today.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Higher education is no stranger to changing times and the need to adapt and respond to shifting societal expectations and student demographics. Land-grant colleges were established by the 1862 Morrill Act and subsequent expansion legislation to provide both practical and liberal arts education to a broader population of students than traditionally served in higher education to date, in service to strengthening a growing and evolving U.S. economy. The first work college was founded just a few years earlier in 1855. The GI Bill introduced millions of returning soldiers—with very different experiences and life contexts compared with traditional students—to colleges and universities. Community colleges began emerging in the 1960s to expand access to higher education. In the 1970s, many experimental colleges were formed to provide interdisciplinary, student-driven, community-integrated education grounded in social justice. Some of these colleges still exist today, including Evergreen, Empire State College, and DePaul University's School for New Learning.

In the 1980s and 1990s, innovative access models for adult students such as the weekend college at Bay Path University emerged. For-profit colleges came to life in the late 1990s and quickly grew to dominate the adult student market; however, emerging regulation from the U.S. Department of Education in the mid-2000s spooked investors and decimated this segment. Nonprofit colleges and providers have grown to fill the gap including institutions like Western Governors University, Southern New Hampshire University, and College Unbound.

Against this backdrop, the challenges facing institutions of higher education today include significant recent and upcoming changes in student demographics; increased demand for postsecondary credentials in the labor market and

growing need for lifelong academic models; declining confidence in the value of a college degree, particularly relative to the ballooning cost of higher education; and pressure to do more with less.

Shifting Student Demographics. Over the last decade or so, several researchers and organizations, including the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, the Center for American Progress, and Lumina Foundation, have called attention to the reality that today’s students look very different from the traditional myth. For example, Lumina Foundation reports that 37 percent of college students are 25 or older, 49 percent are financially independent from their parents, 57 percent live independently—away from their parents or campus housing—24 percent have children or other dependents, and 6 percent serve or have served in the U.S. armed forces.¹

At the American Council on Education, we have written extensively on post-traditional learners including defining this large and underserved population of students and offering recommendations to institutions, researchers, and policymakers on how to better engage these students in accessing and completing degrees. Post-traditional learners are “over the age of 25, working full time, financially independent, or connected with the military,” and they made up close to 60 percent of all undergraduates in 2011–2012 (Soares and Perna 2014).

Not only are adult, working, independent, and post-traditional learners already quite common on campuses today, but given projected declines in traditional-aged students in the coming decade, their numbers will increase proportionally. In his book, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, Nathan D. Grawe from Carleton College projected that, starting around 2026, there will be a 15 percent drop in the traditional college-going population (Grawe 2018). This decline will be even greater in the Northeast and Midwest.

In response to these changing demographics, some colleges have started to recruit more underserved students, including adults, first-generation and low-income students, and students of color. The pool of potential adult students is particularly large. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 80 million people ages 25 through 65 have graduated from high school but don’t have a college degree, which is half the country’s working-age population. Forty-four million have only a high school diploma, and 35 million have some college but no degree (Blumenstyk 2018). This is compared with roughly 17 million undergraduate college students today.

Increased demand for postsecondary credentials and lifelong learning. The Center for Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University has consistently projected increased demand for postsecondary education in the labor market, particularly bachelor’s degrees. The latest projections are that 65 percent of jobs in 2020 will require at least some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2016). Additionally, almost all jobs created during and in the years following the Great Recession (September 2007 to December 2015)—92 percent—required a bachelor’s degree or higher (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish 2015).

And yet, only 34 percent of Americans over age 25 have attained a four-year college degree or higher (*Politico* 2019). We and others have written about the growing demand for consistent upskilling of workers and the need for “a more fluid form of college-going with longer, episodic participation” (Soares, Gagliardi, and Nellum 2017).

Given this increased demand for postsecondary credentials, Lumina Foundation and a majority of states have established postsecondary credential attainment goals. Lumina Foundation’s goal is that 60 percent of Americans will have a postsecondary credential by 2025, and 41 states have established similar goals tailored to their state demographics and economies.² Meeting Lumina Foundation’s goal relies on 6.1 million returning adult students earning credentials.³ In Rhode Island, former commissioner of postsecondary education Brenda Dann-Messier noted that “Governor Raimondo has set a very ambitious goal of 70 percent postsecondary attainment by 2025. We can’t reach that goal unless we have an

1 See the foundation’s infographic at <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/todays-student-infographic-2.pdf>.

2 <https://www.luminafoundation.org/lumina-goal>

3 See Lumina Foundation’s strategic plan for 2017 to 2020 at <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/strategic-plan-2017-to-2020-apr17.pdf>.

institutional focus on adults, and two-thirds of meeting the goal relies on adults. College Unbound is very much a part of this work.”⁴

Declining public confidence and pressure to do more with less. As Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, lamented in an interview for this case study, “For the first time, there is bipartisan agreement that higher education is headed in the wrong direction.”⁵ The public, policymakers, and employers are questioning institutions’ abilities to meet education and skill demands for the twenty-first century and their role and relevance in today’s economy. Prospective students and parents are weighing the risk of increasingly expensive college education against the uncertainty of the value of a degree, particularly in a dynamic and uncertain job market.⁶ Compounding all this are the financial pressures institutions face including declining public funding and rising health care, pension, IT, and other campus costs.

In the face of these realities and pressures, how are institutions responding? In some cases, brand new institutions are emerging, such as Guttman Community College in the New York CUNY system and Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts. We have seen the growth of new delivery models, particularly in online education, and, to a lesser extent, workplace education programs.

New curricular models are emerging. More colleges are experimenting with high-impact educational practices such as learning communities, project-based learning, and internships.⁷ Community colleges are experimenting with new approaches to developmental education, and some colleges are adopting competency-based education models. Many of these curricular models are not new—internships, co-ops, hands-on vocational education have been around for decades—however, they are now receiving more widespread attention and adoption.

The vast majority of colleges are tweaking the traditional academic models at the margins, but too few are truly redesigning how they engage underserved students, particularly adults, in learning and credential attainment. This is unsurprising. Innovation and change are hard, especially at historic institutions that were designed and built for different students and different times. However, when it comes to engaging or re-engaging underserved students such as low-income returning adults, redesign efforts will fail unless they recognize that these students will not enroll or succeed in programs that resemble the ones that failed them the first (or second or third or fourth) time they attempted higher education. To attract, retain, and graduate these students, programs and institutions need to make significant cultural and systemic changes. Engaging these students well calls for not only redesigning higher education, but also redefining it from the perspective of the underserved students.

Some colleges have been able to make this transformational shift. For example, Southern New Hampshire University has completely reimaged education for students in competency-based online programs. Guttman Community College was able to start from a blank slate and build its academic model incorporating many high-impact and innovative learning practices. Springfield College School of Professional and Continuing Studies has been doing this for years in its workplace-focused programming. And the University of Louisville’s bachelor of science degree program in organizational leadership succeeds with adult students because it has been built for them. College Unbound, similarly, is a new college specifically built for low-income working adult students returning to earn their first degree.

4 Interview on January 4, 2019.

5 Interview on January 4, 2019.

6 For example, see the 2016 Public Agenda research brief *What’s the Payoff? Americans Consider Problems and Promises of Higher Education*, by David Schleifer and Rebecca Silliman.

7 See the AAC&U online summary of these practices at <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>. Accessed March 4, 2019.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO, Lumina Foundation



As I think about our journey at Lumina Foundation in fundamentally rethinking higher education over the last 10 years, there has really been an evolution. At first, we were the lonely voice in the forest. Then, the Obama administration accelerated the message in a good way. Now, we are also seeing governors taking this on. Forty-one states have set credential attainment goals, and state leaders are working on this issue in many interesting ways and really changing the conversation.

Within higher education, there has been a similar discussion. Many are thinking about postsecondary education as an ecosystem with lots of different players going in one direction. One important player is the legacy model of the traditional institution, but there are also different models emerging. In the beginning, higher education institutions were saying, “We don’t train for jobs, we train for life.” Now they say, “We get it, people are coming to us for both, that’s clear.” The most interesting question now is how to do it. How do we redesign to better serve today’s students without completely blowing up the entire model? In particular, how can we do this for adults? In traditional models, adult students were always an add on, they were in continuing education or special programs. It is much more challenging to think about a College Unbound-type model as a main business line.

The College Unbound model is really interesting to me; I find it fascinating. It is serving the adult student and taking a different path than what we’ve seen before. This model is very high touch. People need to understand that there are lots of different ways to serve the adult student population. Technology is one way, but there are lots of good emerging models here. College Unbound’s high touch model is another one. Technology is not the single solution; College Unbound provides a complementary model.

As we’ve seen with College Unbound, the high-touch model works. I’m really impressed with the 80 percent+ success rate—it’s incredible. And it’s impressive that College Unbound has achieved candidacy for accreditation, which is not an easy process. As we at Lumina Foundation are focused on national impact and serving millions of students, the question we ask is, how can such a high-touch model be scaled? It can’t be scaled through technology the way others have. Can it scale through some sort of franchising model? Or some sort of multiple point delivery model? Possibly.

More and more colleges and universities realize that the demand for talent is increasing. We need to educate a growing number of adults . . . and over their lifetimes. We’ve had the temporal model of education first learn and then work. Now the model needs to be continuous—learn and work over a lifetime. College Unbound is a promising model in this conversation, and I’m glad we were able to provide some early foundational support.

Excerpt of interview conducted on December 14, 2018.

COLLEGE UNBOUND

History and Background

College Unbound is an independent nonprofit institution of higher education in Providence, Rhode Island, serving low-income working adult students who are earning their first degree. It was incubated in fall 2009 as a program of Big Picture Learning, an organization based in Providence, dedicated to student-centered, supported, real-world, equitable learning opportunities. College Unbound was first housed within a partnership with Roger Williams University's School of Continuing Studies, a private, nonprofit college. The program was initially designed to provide low-income, first-generation, traditional-aged college students with a degree program model that would fit their learning proclivity and life circumstances.

The initial cohort included 10 traditional-aged students.⁸ But adult students were quickly attracted to the program and persistently sought to enroll. Two women joined the program midway through the first year. By spring, another five adult learners signed up for the second year of the program (2010–2011). These were adults who had started a degree program elsewhere, but could not get traction or complete because there was a mismatch between the traditional degree programs and their lives. During the second year of the program, College Unbound posted a Facebook invitation to adult learners with some college credit, but no degree, to attend an information session on the program. Seventy-eight adults showed up, asking how they could enroll in College Unbound, and 25 enrolled for the fall 2011 semester.

As adult students were merging into College Unbound, staff and faculty noticed something almost magical: when you combine adult students with a program that is 100 percent high-impact learning practices and education innovations—like student-driven curriculum, learning communities, individual project-based learning, hybrid classes, flexible scheduling, among others—they bloom. According to College Unbound, “The addition of adult learners changed the culture of the program. They tapped into their diverse life experiences and increased the level of discussion for all our students. Each had a full-time job, which enriched the workplace learning opportunities and inspired authentic projects of immediate use in the world.”⁹

Additionally, the adult students had real-life experience with ill-fitting higher education programs and institutions. They knew what did not work, and they highly welcomed a new model designed specifically for them. “I just hated” community college, said Sokeo Ros, who was born in a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand and had stopped out of two colleges, switching majors several times. “I wasn’t being challenged. I made up my mind: I’m never going back to school. I have all these debts and loans, and I don’t want to waste my time” (Kamenetz 2015).

Another student interviewed for an external evaluation report by The Capacity Group in January 2016 described it well: “Having been in college many years ago—what is really different is the work that CU is doing to create a community to treat my experience holistically—they make a point of knowing what I am interested in academically and in my career and in my life with my family and what my personal aspirations are. It has been very different than anything I have experienced previously in terms of an academic environment” (The Capacity Group 2016).

The laser focus on tapping into adult students’ interests and providing a holistic learning experience is grounded in College Unbound’s mission and guiding principles. These principles have been informed by the Big Picture philosophy of student-directed, real-world learning for all students, no matter their age or stage in their educational journey. This philosophy is echoed in the scholarship of adult education experts such as Malcolm Knowles, Stephen Brookfield, and Jack Mezirow, among others. They clearly show through in CU’s model of higher education and have been validated by empirical evidence garnered from CU adult students through mindful observation, internal surveys, interviews, and

8 All graduated in 2012 with bachelor’s degrees.

9 See the College Unbound website—“History of CU.”

external evaluations on what adult students indicate what will facilitate their success—both as a population of adult students but also as individuals co-creating their own curriculum.

As the leadership of College Unbound puts it, we have been “intentional in designing, testing, and refining [our] higher education model to best meet the needs of [our] students. The vision of the founding trustees and college leadership is to be a college that is ‘unbound’ from structures designed for a different population in another time, instead designed specifically to meet the needs of adult learners, many of whom are full-time workers, parents, and partners who need flexibility, support, and immediately relevant curriculum” (College Unbound 2018). See Table 2 on page 17 for a breakdown of CU demographics.

TABLE 1: COLLEGE UNBOUND AT A GLANCE

Students served	Underserved, low-income working adults earning their first degree
Credentials offered	BA in organizational leadership and change and non-degree programs
Type of college	Degree completion
Academic model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-driven curriculum, grounded in students' passions and career goals • Asset-based perspective of students • Personal Learning Plans • Individual Action Research Projects • Courses grounded in Workplace and World Lab and on-demand courses customized for degree completion • Personal Learning Networks • Real-world assessment • Leadership and Change competencies • High-impact practices • Student supports • Cohort-based learning communities
Business Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start-up funds from venture philanthropy • Tuition revenue (the goal is Pell Grant plus \$1,000) • Low-cost delivery model (no campus, leased space, student learning and personal supports integrated into academic model) • Scalable across variety of venues through small cohorts
Governance Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial and adaptive management/leadership with a social justice orientation • Stakeholder-driven board, adaptable to mission and purpose at given points in time
Cost	\$10,000 per student
Program length	Time to degree is on average 2.5 years, given inclusive transfer and prior learning assessment policies

COLLEGE UNBOUND MISSION

College Unbound's mission is to reinvent higher education for underrepresented returning adult learners, using a model that is individualized, interest-based, project-driven, workplace-enhanced, cohort-supported, flexible, supportive, and affordable. Through rigorous and engaged scholarship, College Unbound integrates the students' own purposes for learning with the needs of their workplaces and communities, improving the lives of the students and the lives of those they touch. As a degree completion college, College Unbound provides access, support through completion, and career placement, ensuring that students get in, stay in, and move forward. This mission is reinforced with the following guiding principles that apply to all students.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

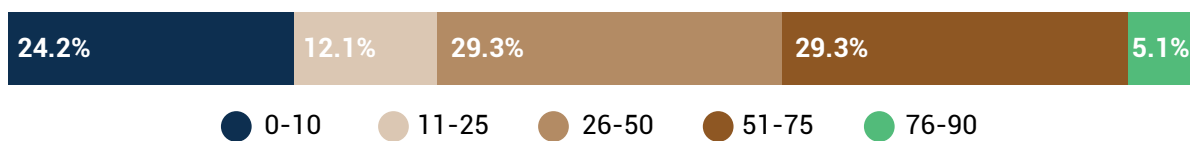
1. Learners come to CU with prior experiences, knowledge, and abilities that must be recognized, honored, used, and credited. The multiple roles of these adult learners (workers, community members, partners, parents) are used as assets, not barriers. They are supported as scholar practitioners.
2. Curriculum begins with the student and builds from there. It must be personalized around the unique skills, knowledge, and needs of individuals—acknowledging that students have different goals and are at different places in their lives.
3. Learning in the world is multi-faceted and interdisciplinary; it is not broken into compartmentalized subject-matter packages. Content of disciplines is important as a means to an end, not an end in itself.
4. Learning means paying attention to how one knows as well as what one knows; paying attention to why it matters and where it can be applied.
5. Learning is a process powered by the learner and supported and stimulated by collaboration with others; social interaction empowers making meaning.
6. Learning is not a linear process; learners choose to access content at different times for different purposes, in different contexts. Arbitrary sequencing decisions may actually impede learning.
7. Adult learners have a strong preference for learning that is real—problem-centered or task-centered (with immediate application) rather than subject-centered.
8. Expertise exists in many places and forms; expertise accessed beyond the professor is encouraged and honored.
9. The workplace provides rich opportunities for learning; it provides space in which action and reflection can take place in a continuous cycle.
10. When assessment is shared between professors, academic advisors, workplace mentors, field experts, and peers, the learning is rigorous, relevant, and ongoing. When students open their work to public analysis, the learning increases.
11. Competence is not demonstrated through a single event; rather, a range of evidence in different contexts over time must be presented before judging competence.
12. Technology must be used to do more than deliver content; it must be used by students to discover, create, use, share, assess, discuss, manipulate, and reshape content, and to connect with others.

The College Unbound Degree Program and Academic Model

Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership and Change

Today, College Unbound offers one degree: a bachelor of arts in organizational leadership and change. This degree qualifies students for a variety of occupations in many growing industries in Rhode Island (and across the region and country), including management, business, and social services. It is a flexible degree program, enabling students to design their own programs of study to suit their particular life and career goals. CU focuses on a four-year degree due to its growing importance for good employment prospects, and because it wants to provide students with a well-rounded education that includes both general education to prepare students broadly for success in work and life as well as professional work skills.¹⁰

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF CREDITS TRANSFERRED BY COLLEGE UNBOUND STUDENTS



The degree requires the standard 120 credit hours. CU is a degree-completion program; entering students must have previously earned at least nine credit hours at another institution. CU has an inclusive credit transfer policy and works closely with admitted students to transfer in as many credits from other institutions as possible, up to 90. The chart above shows the number of credits CU students transfer in, providing them significant momentum toward their degree and shortening the average time to degree to about two-and-a-half years.

CU also has a robust prior learning assessment (PLA) process to help students capture credit for life experience and training outside higher education through portfolios, interviews, program reviews (like ACE’s credit recommendation service), exams, and other assessments. All CU students take a PLA seminar course, resulting in each student earning at least three credits of prior learning.

The College Unbound Academic Model

As the College Unbound academic model is designed specifically for low-income working adult students returning to earn their first degree, it is different from traditional models in three primary ways. First, traditional models are more transactional, in which professors deliver education through classroom lectures, and students respond through exams or written papers to demonstrate their learning. The CU academic model is much more interactive, integrative, and iterative.

Second, the College Unbound academic model is *student-driven*, not just *student-centered*. In a student-centered approach, the academic model is designed to meet the learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of students; however, faculty and staff are still in charge of designing the program and curricula. The college may provide systems, tools, and supports for students, but the college always remains the driver. In contrast, in College Unbound’s student-driven model, students determine their educational plans and co-create with faculty courses, projects, and other learning experiences to support those plans. The major difference in the two approaches is who is actually driving the academic plans, not just the vantage point of the plans.

¹⁰ College Unbound also offers non-degree programs, such as for the cohort of employees at the United Way of Rhode Island (described below). These non-degree courses should be able to transfer into College Unbound’s degree program in the future.

Third, students' personal and professional lives are much more central to and integrated into the curriculum at College Unbound compared with other higher education institutions. This is evident in the Personal Learning Plans and Networks, the individual Action Research Projects, the Workplace and World Lab, and customized courses supporting degree completion and the Learning in Public Program. Integrating students' life and work into the learning program—rather than expecting students to work around them—fuels students' passion, engagement, personal accountability, and motivation to excel, persist, and complete the degree program.

Each College Unbound student designs a Personal Learning Plan that includes general education courses, degree major courses, electives, a personalized Action Research Project, competency goals, and other student-specific learning goals. Figure 2 below provides a visual summary, and each of the key components is described in more detail below.

FIGURE 2: COLLEGE UNBOUND'S ACADEMIC MODEL



Personal Learning Plan and Individual Action Research Project

The Personal Learning Plan is the student's personalized degree map, providing a common point of connection for the other components. Each student works with a Lab faculty member to design the plan, and will continue to meet weekly with the same faculty member throughout their degree program to track progress and revise the plan as necessary. The plan includes the student's personal learning goals, planned course-taking, and description of the student-driven Action Research Project. All credits transferred and earned, projects, and documentation of learning are captured in each student's ePortfolio in the online learning management system.

The Action Research Project is similar in concept to a thesis: it is designed by the student (with input from faculty and mentors in the Personal Learning Network), who works on it throughout the degree program. It is a culmination of the student's learning. These projects focus on addressing real-world problems and needs, which makes them meaningful to students and fuels their motivation to learn, engage, persist, and complete their degree program. The projects grow out of what students are passionate about, which is often very connected to a personal challenge or experience; they are never simply projects invented just to satisfy a course requirement.

“Each real-world project requires research, interviewing and building relationships with content experts and testing theories and ideas in ways that are meaningful to the student and beneficial to the community and organization.” (Money, Littky, and Bush 2015).

Action Research Projects vary widely and often focus on an issue connected to individual student's work, community, and/or personal lives. Examples have included:

- **Building more resources for survivors and victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.** As a student at College Unbound, Lauren was a law enforcement advocate at a sexual assault/domestic violence agency. She worked with detectives in the local police department and served as a liaison for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child molestation, and human trafficking. Her Action Research Project, the Aporia Collective, is directly connected to her professional work. She worked with three other women to create a zine (alternative magazine) for teenage girls who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence to help them understand the social-political underpinnings of domestic violence and process their own experiences. The goal is to distribute the zine at children's advocacy centers throughout Rhode Island and Massachusetts.
- **Elevating the Cambodian American community through programs and school policy.** Rosy is Cambodian American. She has worked on issues to help promote girls' healthy body image and self-empowerment. While working on these issues, she saw specific needs among the children of Cambodian immigrants. Rosy and her aunt started a youth empowerment program for Southeast Asian immigrants and their children. They have also worked with the state of Rhode Island to incorporate ethnic studies into high school curricula across the state.
- **Surfacing the community-building artist from within.** Anthony always wanted to be a comic book artist, but he was paying the bills working as a maintenance worker at the Community College of Rhode Island. Enrolled at College Unbound, he started to draw stories about young people of color to help them understand their own "superpowers" that they exercise in their daily lives. He soon began working as an arts instructor at a local youth arts program. For his final assignment at College Unbound, he illustrated a piece about the history of enslavement in Providence, Rhode Island, and how learning about it changed his perspective on the city of Providence. This piece was in the first public showing of his art.
- **Springboarding from personal experience to improve the health of a community.** Kofi is from Ghana. His prior attempt to earn a degree was disrupted when he was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Because he did not know anything about the disease and neither did anyone in his community, he became overwhelmed trying to manage this life-altering diagnosis with going to college. His project at College Unbound has been to create a community-based diabetes education program and workshops specifically aimed at African immigrants, who are more likely to develop diabetes than people born in the United States. The first workshop was in the late summer of 2018 and focused on the family kitchen and how culturally influenced decisions on food and cooking can promote or undermine healthy eating habits.
- **Processing and transforming deep grief to help others.** Natalia experienced the death of her 19-month-old daughter in 1999 due to multiple heart defects. Her emotional struggle with that death affected all parts of her life. Her Action Research Project was to start an organization in memory of her daughter to provide support to other grieving families. This project and the process of helping others has helped Natalia's emotional healing, which has strengthened her as a student, family, and community member, and as a professional in the workplace. Additionally, Natalia built upon her Action Research Project to provide a cohort-wide session on personal grief, loss, and aging during her final semester at College Unbound, extending her learning and development to benefit her peers in a very real way.

The individual Action Research Projects leverage students' status as working adults, and many directly connect students' programs of study to their jobs or careers, as the examples above demonstrate. The real-world nature of these projects motivates students to stay engaged, holds them accountable for quality work, and benefits their employer or community. Seventy-one percent of the Action Research Projects have been used in the students' workplaces or communities, with another 27 percent "not yet" utilized.

Leadership and Change Competencies (the Big 10)

At the core of the College Unbound curriculum are 10 Leadership and Change Competencies, or "the Big 10" (see sidebar for list and the CU for further details). College Unbound regards these skills as essential for learning, employment, and living in a complex society. These are the skills employers indicate they are looking for in employees, but many feel are increasingly lacking among job candidates.¹¹ While many higher education and job training programs profess to teach these skills, College Unbound is unique in that it intentionally builds them into courses as learning outcomes, into the multi-faceted student assessment system, and in college credit (students earn one credit for each competency mastered). Students must discuss how they are making progress toward developing these competencies every nine weeks in their student exhibitions (described below under Real-World Assessment).

"I really like the Big 10," shared Jennifer Zeisler, senior program director for career readiness at ECMC Foundation, "On a site visit, I really saw the students acknowledging, using, and internalizing these competencies. They are so important and should not be an add-on; they should be integrated directly in the curriculum, as CU has done."¹²

Workplace and World Lab and Other Courses

College Unbound's degree requires 120 credits, of which 30 must be upper division course credits, 90 must be liberal studies course credits, and 90 can be transferred in. The 120 credits are distributed as follows:

- 10 Leadership and Change Competency (Big 10) credits
- 46 general education course credits
- 36 major course credits
- 28 elective credits

THE BIG 10

- 1 INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT
- 2 CRITICAL THINKING
- 3 COMMUNICATION
- 4 PROBLEM SOLVING
- 5 ACCOUNTABILITY
- 6 COLLABORATION
- 7 CREATIVITY
- 8 REFLECTION
- 9 RESILIENCE
- 10 ADVOCACY

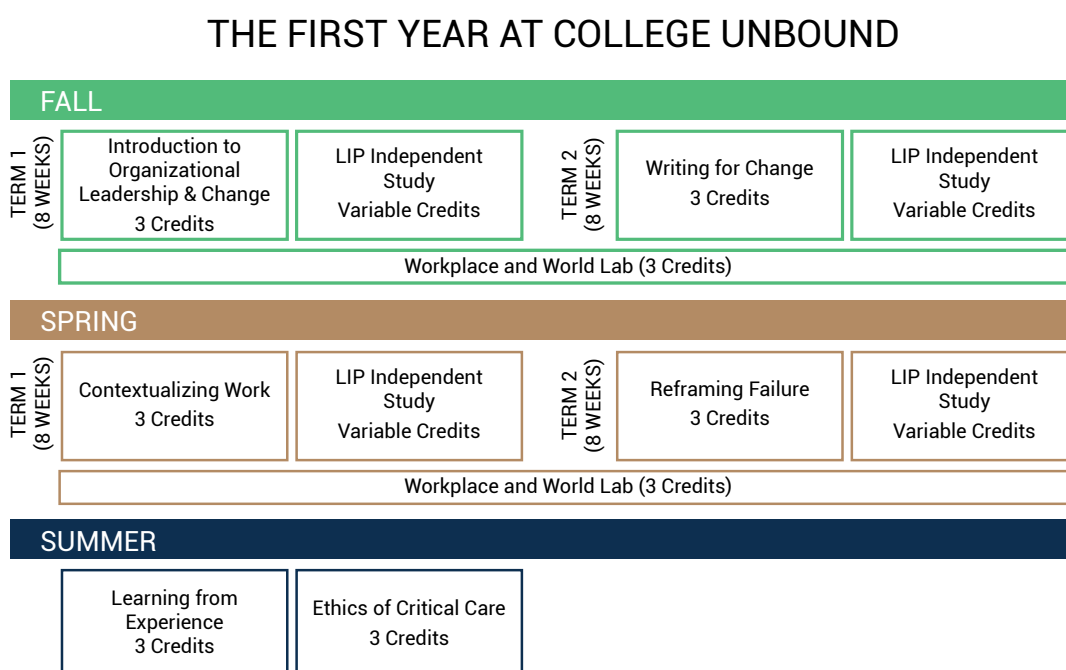
11 See, for example, the 2016 report by PayScale and Millennial Branding, *Leveling Up: How to Win in the Skills Economy*, at <https://www.prweb.com/releases/2016/05/prweb13417985.htm>.

12 Interview on November 27, 2018.

The College Unbound spring 2018 academic catalog includes over 100 courses, which are a mix of cohort-based core courses, individual offerings, and independent study. CU is a hybrid model, blending once-per-week in-person Workplace and World Lab, with other courses, learning experiences, and assessments throughout the rest of the week that may be live, online, and interactive online. College Unbound operates on a 17-week semester, composed of two eight-week terms, with the last week reserved for the Student Learning Exhibitions (described below). This allows many flexible enrollment options, and the eight-week terms help students maintain momentum toward degree completion. Some students enroll full time at 12 credits, others part time with nine credits, and some even opt for full time-plus with 15 credits. See Appendix A for a sample student transcript that includes multiple credit-bearing learning experiences.

All students start in a cohort taking a **common set of courses** in the first semester. These courses lay a solid academic and student success skills foundation for subsequent student learning, and the cohort establishes a supportive peer group. Figure 3 summarizes a sample first year of courses at College Unbound.

FIGURE 3: SAMPLE FIRST YEAR AT CU



College Unbound does not have developmental or remedial education courses. Faculty work with students to strengthen their basic academic skills in reading, writing, and math, as needed. If necessary, students enroll in Writing Labs and receive supplemental individual tutoring. This process avoids the “dev ed black hole” that traps many returning adult students and prevents them from entering into a degree program. It also eliminates the stigma of needing “remedial” education, while ensuring that each student builds the basic academic skills they need to succeed.

A unique and crucial component of the CU model is the anchor course, **Workplace and World Lab (WWL)**. This is the core course where all the integration and personalized learning in the academic model is woven together. It is a three-credit, 17-week semester long course that spans two eight-week terms and the final Student Learning Exhibition week. Students are required to enroll in it every semester from the beginning, and it meets once per week for three hours. It is led by a Lab faculty member who provides instruction and personal academic guidance to students. In this course, the student’s Personal Learning Plan is developed and monitored; ongoing action research projects are designed and

monitored; specific research skills are developed; course ideas and theories are integrated, applied, and tested; development of the Leadership and Change competencies is coached, documented, and analyzed; engagement with the student's Personal Learning Network takes place; and student learning exhibitions are planned, rehearsed, and executed.

After the first semester of common coursework, students **select courses and projects** that help them meet their personal learning goals and successfully complete their action research projects. Faculty and staff review student action research projects and work with students to determine which courses from the catalog to offer each term and whether students should design any independent learning projects to help them make progress on their projects. For example, during a site visit in fall 2018 for this case study, students were taking a statistics class and a class on dialogue; these classes were offered because a number of student projects called for these skills.

Students may also take **courses at other colleges, online courses, and independent study**. For example, one group of students had participated in a course at Brown University in which they worked with Brown students on a real-world project to map which community-based organizations in Providence were receiving federal CDBG (Community Development Block Grant, through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) funds. The purpose of the study was to help staff in the city planning department understand the flow of funds, reduce potential duplication, and ensure effective use of funds. In an interview with Chris, one of the students who had taken this class, he indicated that he enjoyed working alongside the traditional-aged Brown students, and the students learned much from each other. The traditional-aged students especially appreciated the practical, real-life perspectives and experiences the College Unbound adult students brought to the project.

College Unbound's **Learning in Public (LIP) program** is an experiential learning, independent study program designed to award credit for learning that is typically regarded as extracurricular. LIP credit may be awarded for portfolio assessment based on student reflection on participation in book groups, conferences, volunteer work, workshops, certification trainings, and community engagement. LIP recognizes that the classroom is only one of many sites of learning and values meaning-making that happens in all kinds of contexts that more traditional educational institutions ignore. This encourages autonomy and curiosity in students by opening up the processes by which credit can be granted. LIP credit is rooted in work students are already doing in their communities or to develop the reach and scope of their projects. Students are encouraged to seek out learning opportunities that expand, deepen, and apply their projects to civic and public life.

Personal Learning Network

The Personal Learning Network is the student's accountability and support network. It is made up of a professional mentor selected by students from their workplace or community, field experts (such as faculty and/or professionals outside academia), the students' Lab faculty from the Workplace and World Lab, peers, and the students. This network helps the students in planning and completing their Personal Learning Plans, assesses the students' progress on their learning goals and in developing the Leadership and Change competencies, and participates in the Student Learning Exhibitions to assess student learning and progress (described below). Students meet weekly with their Lab faculty member one-on-one and have a set schedule of meetings with the rest of the Network each semester.

STUDENT PROFILE



Belita is from Cape Verde. She graduated from College Unbound in June 2019. Before College Unbound, she had tried college, but could not get much traction. She started out at the Community College of Rhode Island in the English as a second language program. She enrolled in the nursing program, but that was not a good fit, so switched to accounting and took a couple semesters of classes before stopping out.

She has two school-aged boys and needed to work to support them, so she started cleaning houses, which many women in the Cape Verdean community in Providence do. Belita was living in public housing and depressed. She felt trapped and stuck. She had lived in public housing for two years and was afraid to move out because she was not sure how she would make ends meet. "Many people are afraid to move on . . . they feel trapped there," she told us.

After flailing in community college, she said she put going to college on hold indefinitely until she heard about College Unbound from one of her house-cleaning clients, who had read about CU in the newspaper.

Belita is a financial celebrity among her fellow students. Upon enrolling in College Unbound, she took the Financial Fitness workshop and started working with one of the financial coaches. Through careful planning and dogged persistence, she brought her debt down to zero and her credit score up in record time. After getting her own finances in shape, she started providing financial literacy and coaching to other women in the Cape Verdean community, and has been coaching 10 women (nine are single mothers).

Belita's project at College Unbound was focused on expanding financial literacy and capability in her Cape Verdean community and helping Cape Verdean house cleaners open their own house cleaning companies. She has already started her own company and has 15 clients. She has also helped a few other women open their own businesses.

Other CU classes that really helped Belita with her project and career goals included: Reframing Failure, on "how to learn from things in your life that don't go right"; a self-care class on how to care for yourself while you are helping your community; and a labor history class on labor rights (very important knowledge in the domestic work industry, where workers have little access to knowledge or resources on labor rights). She also took entrepreneurship training at the Center for Women in Enterprise.

Through College Unbound, Belita built from her previous educational and work experiences to identify a career passion that has helped her achieve economic security and career satisfaction, while at the same time, greatly contributing to her community.

Real-World Assessment

Unlike the traditional model of higher education, student learning is not assessed just through exams or written papers. College Unbound students are assessed in multiple ways that reflect real-world evaluation of achievement and that engage students in holding themselves accountable, cultivating important skills for lifelong success. Learning assessment at CU includes:

- Weekly student self-reflections of their learning posted in the online learning management system; students also provide feedback on their peers' posts.
- Student Learning Exhibitions held every nine weeks, in which students present to their Personal Learning Network panel on progress on their Action Research Project and learning goals. They receive feedback on their projects and on their ability to integrate and apply theories and ideas from courses and other research. Exhibitions develop students' skills in analysis, integration, presentation, and receiving critical and supportive feedback.
- Course and Lab faculty assess student learning relative to their personal learning goals (documented in the Personal Learning Plan), Leadership and Change competencies (see assessment rubric on the CU website), and progress on the Action Research Project.
- The student's professional mentor (one of the members of the Personal Learning Network team) does a specific assessment of the student from a professional work perspective.

The Student Learning Exhibitions are a seminal component of the assessment process and very influential for students. In a focus group, three students—Chris, Natalia, and Bill—collectively described them this way: “Many students get very anxious over this exercise because they are intimidated by public speaking, they have self-doubt about whether they have anything important to say, etc. Even though it is a nerve-racking experience, it is also a growth opportunity. Students overcome their fear of public speaking, they learn that they do have important information and insights to share, and they get the support of their peers.”¹³

College Unbound's Integrated Model and Outcomes

College Unbound recognizes that learning takes place in the classroom, online, with peers, in the workplace, and in the local community (see Appendix B for a graphic detailing the various ways CU students earn college credit). This is why learning and assessment opportunities are so varied and integrated in the model. It may feel complicated to outside reviewers, but the integration—curated by the Lab faculty and anchored by the Personal Learning Plan, the Action Research Project, the Workplace and World Lab, the Personal Learning Network, the ePortfolio, and the Leadership and Change Competencies—actually makes more sense to the student than the traditional model of higher education. Lauren Roy, a College Unbound student who graduated in August 2018, summarized it eloquently:

“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.” (Roy 2017)

13 Focus group on July 18, 2018.

Chancellor Nancy Cantor of Rutgers University–Newark described this integrative approach well: “CU is incredibly innovative in that it manages a rigorous curriculum that is very rooted in the lives of students—in the knowledge they have and bring to the program, as well as in their projects. There is no divide between college, work, and life. Rather, they are seamlessly connected and interwoven. Practically and intellectually, this is very powerful.”¹⁴

The College Unbound academic model is an integrated hybrid model between high-tech and high-personalization:

- **High-personalization:** Students meet in person every week during the semester. At the beginning of the evening, all cohorts meet together to have dinner; receive updates on various items, including College Unbound’s progress toward accreditation; participate in the Workplace and World Lab; and celebrate each other’s milestones and accomplishments. For example, during one author’s site visit in fall 2018, one student was recognized by his peers for demonstrating accountability. He has partnered with his sons to start a nonprofit organization called *Rock On Go Wild*, an organization that works with creative clients with intellectual disabilities. Through this experience, he was learning that leadership comes in all forms and there is an appropriate time to step aside and let others—like his sons—lead. It was clear that this public recognition boosted his confidence, made the other students proud of their peer, and strengthened the bonds between the students. During the second half of the evening, students meet in their courses for that term. Students may come in before the group meeting to meet with their Lab faculty about their Personal Learning Plans and Action Research Projects. Child care is available during these weekly cohort meetings.
- **High-tech:** Complementing the weekly in-person meetings, additional instruction is provided through electronic means via video conferencing meetings, phone, text, email, and communication through the online learning management system (LMS)¹⁵. Students and faculty are constantly using the LMS to communicate, post self-reflections and feedback on others’ reflections, and document learning in the ePortfolio. This model goes well beyond using technology for standard online classes to integrating it as a tool for exploration, connection, expression, and learning, which provides students with deeper learning. Students also have access to online library and information resources through the public libraries and partnership agreements with Brown University and Charter Oak State College.

Students have access to key student services, as well. College Unbound has two financial coaches who provide financial advising and help students reduce debt and improve their credit scores. Students also can take Financial Literacy and Fitness workshops. The Lab faculty help connect students to personal supports as needed, such as learning disability assessment and accommodation, mental and physical health resources, housing assistance, transportation assistance, etc.

When asked about the value of College Unbound, Rhode Island Commissioner Dann-Messier said, “Absolutely, College Unbound brings new value to today’s higher education system. The system needs new models, and CU provides a new way of looking at underserved students. It also needs to ensure that it consistently provides rigorous and quality offerings, in addition to lots of student support.” Another interviewee, AAC&U President Pasquerella, stressed how this can be and is done at other institutions: “Institutions can have both a rigorous curriculum and strong student support. In fact, prestigious institutions do this all the time, and privileged students get high support from faculty and the college (and family) every single day. Providing these supports to underserved students is simply ‘compensatory justice’ in a way.” According to CU board member and president of the Institute for Educational Leadership, Johan Uvin, the board members “have a deep commitment to ensure rigor and quality of the CU educational experience.”¹⁶

14 Interview on December 21, 2018.

15 College Unbound is using *Motivis Learning*.

16 Interview on December 27, 2018.

TABLE 2: COLLEGE UNBOUND BY THE NUMBERS

Student Demographics	Student Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 69% female; 31% male • 69% are in the prime working age range of 25–45 years old • 79% are students of color • 80% are parents • 100% earning their first degree • 38% attended two colleges before CU • 80% are employed full time • 74% received Pell Grants (through partner colleges) • Income: 23% make less than \$25,000 per year; 31% make between \$25,000 and \$34,999 per year; 31% make between \$35,000 and \$45,000 per year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 133 graduates • 85% retention rate • 83% graduation rate (76% for Pell Grant recipients) • 71% of student Action Research Projects used in workplace or community (27% “not yet” used) • In CU Solo I, 83% of the students advanced to a better position within their current place of employment or found better employment elsewhere within their first year at CU. • 87% of CU alumni are employed full time • 20% of CU alumni go on to graduate school • 71% of CU alumni are actively involved in community engagement projects • 80% report significant personal transformation

There is no question that CU has shown success. As Chancellor Cantor put it: “An 80 percent plus graduation rate with a college population that does not have a lot of resources—but that is deeply invested in college—is phenomenal. Put that up against any college in the nation!”¹⁷ And Uvin of IEL shared, “In addition to Guttman Community College in CUNY, CU is the most promising thing I’ve seen and is getting good preliminary results. The performance data is very promising. Time will tell if this is a lasting model, but it’s one of the better things out there right now.”¹⁸ See a detailed breakdown of student outcomes in Table 2 above.

College Unbound Maximizes “High-Impact” and Innovative Models Specifically for Adult Students

College Unbound is unique but is not a unicorn. It essentially has designed a degree program using nothing but proven “high-impact” and innovative learning and student support practices, specifically for low-income working adult students returning for their first degree. High-impact learning practices include active and integrative learning designs such as first-year seminars, learning communities, project-based learning, internships, and capstone projects. They “have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds . . . [but] on almost all campuses, utilization of active learning practices is unsystematic, to the detriment of student learning” (Kuh 2008).

The adoption of high-impact practices not only has been unsystematic, but it has not been for adult students. “Too often . . . adult programs fail to emphasize such [high-impact] practices as project-based learning, undergraduate research, and others considered effective by studies like the National Survey of Student Engagement and promoted by groups like the Association of American Colleges and Universities” (Blumenstyk 2018).

The College Unbound model is extremely integrative and interdisciplinary because, according to President Dennis Littky, “Life is integrated and interdisciplinary. This makes sense to adults, and is what motivates them to stay engaged and persist to completion.”¹⁹ The more all the aspects of the program are woven together, the tighter the weave and the stronger the net, making it difficult for students to fall through. The problem with traditional programs is that the components—courses, projects, assessments, peer support, mentors, connection to work and community (if any)—are disconnected, leaving gaping holes for students to fall through.

¹⁷ Interview on December 21, 2018.

¹⁸ Interview on December 27, 2018.

¹⁹ Interview on November 16, 2018.

Other innovative models for student learning and support include flexible scheduling, “intrusive advising,” and Prior Learning Assessment. At CU, these practices are the entire program—woven together into a seamless, student-driven program—not just offered on the margins. According to Jean Wyld, professor emeritus, retired provost and vice president for academic affairs of Springfield College, and chairperson of the Evaluation Team visiting College Unbound, College Unbound is “standing on the shoulders of giants and applying proven practices and innovations for a student population for whom they are a natural fit, but who have been left behind in the applications of these innovations.”²⁰

Table 3 provides a crosswalk between well-known high-impact learning practices and other innovative practices and the College Unbound model.

TABLE 3: CROSSWALK BETWEEN “HIGH-IMPACT” INNOVATIVE PRACTICES AND COLLEGE UNBOUND

“High-impact” and Other Innovative Learning and Student Support Practices	What It Looks Like at College Unbound
Guided pathways	Personal Learning Plan, common first-semester courses, students co-design their tailored degree program and courses
Learning communities	Student cohorts, one major, common first-semester curriculum, common courses
Community-based learning	Action Research Projects are chosen, designed, and driven by each student; they are grounded in each student’s work, community, and/or personal life
Capstone projects	Action Research Projects
Integrative and interdisciplinary education	Courses, projects, and assessments are interdisciplinary; programs weave together academics, work, and family into a coherent, supportive web that makes it difficult for students to fall through
Competency-based education	Leadership and Change Competencies are the ingredients in all learning activities and assessments; competency-based assessment through Student Learning Exhibitions, professional mentor assessment, etc.
Prior learning assessment	Used extensively at CU, in addition to an inclusive credit transfer program and Learning in Public program
Hybrid academic model	CU is high-tech and high-personalization
Student-centered	The CU curriculum is student-driven; students co-design Personal Learning Plans and courses based on their interests and passions, design their Action Research Projects, engage in their assessment
Accelerated learning	Hybrid model and flexible scheduling enable students to enroll full time and work full time, accelerating their time to degree completion; eight-week terms and year-round enrollment helps students maintain momentum
“Intrusive advising”	Weekly one-on-one meetings with Lab faculty, extensive interaction through online learning management system and other technology
No “dev ed black hole”	All development education for reading, writing and math skills is incorporated directly into the content courses in the common first semester curriculum and supplemented with tutoring and writing labs

²⁰ Interview on January 7, 2019.

College Unbound's "Secret Sauce"

College Unbound leverages known effective learning and student support models to better engage low-income working adult students. According to Wyld, CU's "tipping point is these two unique things: (1) they truly embrace the adult population that has not been well-served by traditional institutions; and (2) they really understand and work with the educational trauma—prior education that has not only not worked for them, but really driven them from higher education."

A Different Perspective of Adult Students

The leadership, board, staff, and faculty at College Unbound have a different perspective on adult students than most colleges, particularly traditional institutions of higher education. This distinct perspective drives the philosophical underpinnings of the College Unbound culture and institution.

Similar to the optical illusion in which viewers can see either an old woman in a scarf or a young woman with a feather in her hat, College Unbound looks at the same adults who have been on other college campuses, but with a different perspective. For starters, they see the prior learning these students have gained as valuable knowledge and experience, and so have adopted an inclusive transfer policy and robust Prior Learning Assessment to acknowledge it with college credit and help students build academic momentum. College Unbound understands that too many adults and other underserved students have not succeeded in higher education not because they are not "college material," but because traditional colleges were never designed with them in mind. Colleges cannot effectively serve students who were never intended to be there. So, the culture of College Unbound is based on President Dennis Littky's mantra that "rather than expecting all students to be (traditional) college ready, colleges should be student-ready." Following this mantra, College Unbound designed its structures, programs, instruction, scheduling, services, and faculty to optimize the adult learning experience.

CU assumes intelligence in its adult learners and trusts them to be in the driver's seat of their education. The personal learning plans are driven by the student with support from the Lab faculty, the Personal Learning Network, and other faculty. The personalized Action Research Project is completely student-designed and -driven, and Lab faculty make sure the Workplace and World Lab provides a supportive environment to develop, strengthen, assess, and complete the project. Faculty in other courses ensure that those courses also contribute to the action research projects across students. Students are equal players in assessing their academic work, and many students hold themselves to higher standards than others in their network might hold them.

Former Rhode Island Commissioner of Postsecondary Education Jim Purcell put it this way: "Education is all about bringing forth the capacity that exists within people, and College Unbound offers people the opportunity to expand their minds, finish their degrees, and build better lives. . . . These types of adult degree-completion programs are transformative not just for the individuals and their families, but also for our community and workforce" (Money, Littky, and Bush 2015).

CU views students as educational partners, so the college is just as much, if not more, *their* college as the board's and leadership's. Operationalizing this means that the students have been involved in the process of building the college, beyond the standard approach of a student representative on the board. CU leadership has kept students updated on every step in the state authorization, regional accreditation, and Title IV eligibility processes, and students involve themselves in important meetings, such as the Rhode Island Council on Higher Education hearing in spring 2015 to determine state authorization (described below). Being treated as partners in building and running a college is incredible empowering for the students and further motivates them to persist and complete. It also helps prepare them as future

Life is integrated and interdisciplinary. This makes sense to adults, and is what motivates them to stay engaged and persist to completion.

strategic leaders in their communities and workplaces. This level of student involvement was key in CU's accreditation, but existing colleges also can build this into their programming.

Finally, CU takes a different view of low-income working adult students' "barriers," e.g., being older, delaying enrollment, working, having children, etc., and sees them as assets that are critical to their learning, persistence, and completion. For example, rather than perceiving working full-time as a barrier to carrying a full-time course load, CU sees the working adult student's strong connection to work as a major asset for real-world experiential learning opportunities. They build the job into the Workplace and World Lab, the Action Research Project, the personal learning network, and the assessment model (professional mentors assess the student's learning). Appendix C provides a detailed comparison of the asset and barriers perspectives and program examples.

With the view of adult students from a more asset-based perspective, things really turn around. Students are more satisfied, engaged, and motivated to persist and complete, as evidenced in surveys and evaluations CU has conducted. Faculty expressed how much they enjoy working with adult learners: "I learn so much from the experience of teaching at CU. It pushes me as a teacher and as a scholar [of service learning, community education and engagement]. The opportunity to have adult learners in this kind of setting is invaluable," said Nick Longo, CU faculty member, faculty representative on the CU board, and professor and department chairperson, Public and Community Service Studies Providence College. Wyld confirmed this notion: "In my experience, once faculty teach adult students in an effective model and experience the richness they bring to the educational experience, they never want to go back."²¹

Educational Trauma

The second unique aspect of the CU model is that it recognizes many adult students have experienced educational trauma and provides educational trauma-informed instruction and programming. "Trauma can be defined as any experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors" (Davidson 2017). Over the last 30 years, we have learned much about how trauma affects children, both while they are children and as they mature into adults. Traumatic life experiences, also known as adverse childhood experiences or ACEs, include physical and/or sexual abuse; abandonment, neglect, or betrayal of trust by a caretaker; poverty; military combat; natural disasters; and death of a loved one.

These types of experiences trigger physical responses in the brain in which the amygdala—the "reptilian brain" or primal part of our brains that controls basic body functions and emotions—overtakes the rest of the brain and causes a fight or flight response. The person may experience anger, depression, avoidance, self-doubt, and impaired cognitive and executive functioning and not even realize it is happening or what is causing it. The direct experience may cause these reactions, but they may also linger and/or emerge later, triggered by other unrelated events.

Researchers in K–12 education have begun to develop a better understanding of how trauma affects children's learning and have developed information and resources for trauma-informed education. Goldie Hawn, the actress, has even developed a trauma-informed curriculum for children in elementary and middle school. In the last few years, researchers in the higher education space have recognized trauma, too, most prominently with the Northwest Education publication *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*.

Educational trauma is not as well researched; however, Lee-Anne Gray defined the term in 2011 as "the inadvertent perpetration and perpetuation of victimization of producers and consumers of the educational system" (Gray 2016). Her work focuses on K–12 students, and examples of educational trauma include a spectrum from the over-reliance on biased standardized testing, bullying, the over-diagnosis of attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), and the use of prescription medicines to control student behavior in classrooms, and culminating with the school-to-prison pipeline.

21 Interview on December 6, 2018.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Lynn Pasquerella, president, Association of American Colleges and Universities



Higher education is facing some serious challenges today. Many states are attempting to move away from higher education as a public good . . . it's becoming viewed as more of a private commodity. They are measuring the success of college solely on job acquisition and employment measures. They want to excise liberal arts education and public good from mission statements. There is such skepticism of higher education and liberal arts now. For the first time, there is bipartisan agreement that higher education is heading in the wrong direction. Any institution of higher education will have to address these growing concerns, as well as the decoupling of higher education from the American dream. It used to be assumed that the best pathway to a better life was through education, but that's not true today.

We certainly do need to change the structures and incentives within the academy. We need to re-evaluate what we value most today. Is it really publications and peer reviewed articles, or should we be more focused on high impact practices for students? Should we be focusing more on creating greater access and affordability? We should view students from more of an asset model versus deficit model. All of this requires transforming higher education in fundamental ways. We need to jettison the focus on prestige and reliance on rankings. Until we make these types of changes, we will not make progress.

I see College Unbound in relation to the AAC&U mission: to advance liberal arts education, equity, and democracy. For us, higher education always comes back to providing education for our democracy and making sure we don't perpetuate economic segregation in higher education. In this context, College Unbound provides access to excellence in higher education, particularly for those from lower SES backgrounds. And, College Unbound supports students every step of the way to ensure they develop the cognitive bandwidth for success. Prestigious institutions do this all the time—provide students both a rigorous curriculum and extensive student support and mentoring. This is the same type of support that privileged students get every day.

Cia Verschelden, in her 2017 book on cognitive bandwidth, *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization*, talks about underserved students often having depressed cognitive bandwidth in addition to the practical challenges of poverty. We have not spent enough time focusing on the realities of students' lives beyond the traditional students. Today, higher education institutions are serving such a broad diversity of students. College Unbound has done this; they understand their students and the realities of their lives. This is what we need if we want to educate for democracy—and we need to reach everyone.

College Unbound has proven itself as a success through innovative and effective collaborations with other institutions. They are successfully reaching out to and serving populations that we have historically ignored, e.g., prison population and those who are constrained due to circumstances of their lives. This is exactly what we need to do to connect curriculum to career in ways that allow students to develop authentic work and to be assessed based on progress over time in grappling with real world problems and the unscripted problems of the future. College Unbound includes a cohort model and multiple mentors that we know help people thrive in college and years later. Students engage in projects that last over multiple semesters and co-develop their curriculum, which empowers them for years afterward. I can't think of a better model that is grounded in equity and academic excellence. The CU model is the future of higher education.

Excerpt of interview on January 4, 2019.

Adult students (and many adults who have not even attempted postsecondary education) may have experienced these educational traumas as children, which can make returning to traditional education a terrifying and difficult endeavor. They may also have experienced additional educational trauma as adults attending traditional programs that are a bad fit for how they learn best; what interests and, therefore, motivates them; their work-school-family schedules; and their lives. The label “nontraditional” sums it up: this term implies that they are the oddballs, the ones who do not fit and should not be there. Add to this failed classes, dropping/stopping out of college (multiple times perhaps), and student debt without a degree to show for it, and that is a lot of educational trauma.

CU recognizes this educational trauma, creates a culture that does not re-traumatize adult students, and helps students develop the skills and confidence to work through past educational trauma to succeed in earning a degree. CU’s high retention, completion, and workforce outcomes validate the success of this perspective shift (see outcomes in Table 2 on page 17). Uvin, IEL President, noted: “The performance data speaks for itself. Compare CU’s adult student rates with those of other institutions serving the same population, and it’s clear that there is a ‘there’ there.”²²

The accreditation visiting team also “was impressed with the commitment to the college’s mission and the focus on developing a relationship-based program to serve the needs of adults who have not been successful in the traditional college model.” (“Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students of College Unbound,” 2018).

Interestingly, many of the emerging high-impact educational practices and innovations are a good fit for education trauma-informed programming. Guided pathways and active advising provide support and reduce the overwhelming confusion that comes from too many choices that may trigger the amygdala and the “fight or flight” response. Prior Learning Assessment and transfer credits acknowledge and validate a student’s prior learning and work. Real-world action research projects provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful work that benefits their workplaces and/or communities, building their skills and confidence and reinforcing their value in these spheres. Many of the action research projects also help students work through personal challenges that have hampered their success in school, work, family and life, empowering them beyond traditional project-based learning activities that students may be less invested in.

Cohorts create a safe environment for the students. One student, Chris, confirmed the power of cohorts: “This is not like traditional college, where you are with different groups of different students all the time...that does not engender a safe environment for students to feel safe being vulnerable...and therefore genuine and authentic.”²³

Other colleges understand the power of cohorts. For example, in describing Guttman Community College’s cohort model, President Scott Evenbeck stressed, “Feeling like you belong makes such a huge difference for our students.”²⁴ Guttman Community College starts first-time students in a summer bridge program a week and a half before school starts, in which they are placed in the cohorts they will spend the first year with and start to get to know each other and their faculty.

The Flexibility and Applicability of the College Unbound Cohort Model

The flexibility of the CU model means that it can be implemented in a variety of settings where returning adult students can be found. Here are three examples of the variety of settings CU has implemented the academic model through cohorts.

College cohorts. College Unbound has always been a cohort model. When it was a program attached to accredited institutions of higher education, CU implemented the personalized and cohort components of the academic model, while the accredited institution delivered most of the classes. CU ran the learning community and weekly cohort meetings, and managed the personal learning plans, personal learning networks, ePortfolios, and student learning exhibitions.

22 Interview on December 27, 2018.

23 Class observation September 17, 2018.

24 Interview on January 7, 2019.

STUDENT PROFILE



Zuli is a confident woman in her 30s. She enrolled at College Unbound in 2016, as a mother and a professional with deep and varied work and life experience.

Zuli became a teen mom between her sophomore and junior years in high school. She enrolled in an alternative high school diploma evening program and worked two part-time jobs. She took her senior year at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) and graduated with her high school diploma as valedictorian of her class and 32 college credits.

After a couple years of working multiple jobs while attending community college, she was offered a full-time position with a financial institution and decided to put her higher education dreams on hold to better provide for her family. Over the next six years, Zuli worked for two financial institutions. She was very interested in entrepreneurship and owned her own fashion business at age 21. Zuli honed her business skills by taking a variety of entrepreneurship classes and trainings at the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Leadership, Center for Women and Enterprise, and Social Enterprise Greenhouse.

Building on her financial and entrepreneurship experience, she transitioned to the nonprofit space, working at a nonprofit organization that provides youth programming. She taught middle and high school students important civics, business, and personal finance skills. She also worked at a youth arts organization and at Goodwill for 4.5 years, where she provided marketing, professional development trainings, job retention support and case management.

She got connected to College Unbound through an alumnus. She was motivated to apply because the program offered a full scholarship, and because "College Unbound had an answer for every single barrier I could think of for not being able to manage a degree program . . . they provide child care and dinner, they meet just once per week, etc., etc.!" The transfer process helped her bring in 27 credits from CCRI and she gained credits through the PLA process for the trainings and experiences she gained throughout her professional career.

Her Action Research Project is tied directly to her interest in fashion, business, and activism. Her organization partners with nonprofits working on various social justice issues and designs clothing made of recycled textiles, recycled polyester, and wearable technology that raises awareness of injustices such as human trafficking and child sex slavery and exploitation. Zuli will graduate in June 2019. She has been hired as the full-time director of recruitment and communications coordinator at College Unbound and has already recruited over 100 new students for fall 2019.



CU STUDENTS IN CLASS

In addition to being able to operate the cohorts as a program attached to an institution of higher education, CU has demonstrated that it can implement the cohorts as a stand-alone institution. As CU started the regional accreditation process (described below), it had to implement its own independent student cohorts unattached to another college to prove its ability to operate as a stand-alone institution. CU calls these cohorts “CU Solo cohorts” 1 and 2.

Employer-based cohorts. College Unbound has implemented two sets of employer-based program cohorts. The first was a degree program in partnership with an accredited institution. The second is a non-degree program under College Unbound as a stand-alone institution.

The first employer-based cohort was with the *Ashe Arts Cultural Center* in New Orleans and Roger Williams University (RWU). In the early days, before CU had fully transitioned into an adult-serving institution, the co-founder and director of the center contacted College Unbound to help her staff earn college degrees as the organization was preparing for leadership transitions. While her staff were knowledgeable and experienced professionals in the nonprofit art community in New Orleans, their lack of formal college degrees held them back from being recognized as professionals in the community and from career advancement opportunities, which also compromised the institutional sustainability of Ashe. Over two years, Ashe, College Unbound, and RWU designed a full-time college program in Cultural and Community Development.

Ashe’s 11 students enrolled at RWU through the CU cohort academic model. Although Ashe, College Unbound, and RWU worked with professors from several local colleges including Loyola, Xavier, Tulane, Delgado Community College, and Southern University at New Orleans, it was important that the degree program was offered by a college outside the city, giving the students a fresh start from educational trauma some may have experienced in previous higher education experiences. Additionally, the term, “unbound,” in College Unbound had an even deeper and more powerful meaning to these students who were African American descendants of enslaved peoples. Graduates of this program are now leaders at Ashe and other cultural institutions in the city. It has helped to strengthen the entire African American arts community in New Orleans. One graduate, Carlton Turner, has even been named a Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellow.²⁵

The second employer-based cohort is with the *United Way of Rhode Island*. Similar to the Ashe Arts Cultural Center, employees of the United Way are experienced professionals but are being held back in their careers due to the lack of a college degree. CU is providing a part-time non-degree program, and the United Way is providing tuition assistance. The goal is to transition these students to the CU degree program in the future. CU would like to continue to build similar partnerships with employers.

25 <https://www.fordfoundation.org/campaigns/the-art-of-change-meet-our-fellows/carlton-turner>

The Prison Program. One of the most promising CU cohort models is the Prison Program, according to several interviewees. This program was started in 2015 by a CU alumnus, who had been formerly incarcerated. It provides the CU cohort academic model in correctional institutions throughout Rhode Island. CU has taught anywhere from 15 to 24 credits in any one semester in the prisons, and student enrollment hovers around 80 to 100. The program has been supported by both Lumina Foundation and ECMC Foundation.

“A lot of us have had horrible experiences in life that led us off track,” said student Kimberly Fry. “College Unbound helps us to think more reflectively and incorporate our past into a future to create a whole new ideal of ourselves.” (Geigerich 2016). The goal of the program is to help students build momentum in a degree program while incarcerated to give them a springboard to finish the program after they have served their sentence.

“It shows them that they can lead a meaningful life, support themselves and support their families,” says First Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Ojetta Rogerice Thompson, a member of the College Unbound board. “It shows them how to have hope. Education is having the quality of your life changed.” (Geigerich 2016). Here, too, the term “unbound” has a deeper meaning for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

College Unbound’s Institutional and Governance Model

One of the critical strengths underscored by interviewees for this case study, external evaluators, and accreditors is College Unbound’s impressive and committed leadership and staff, board, and faculty.

Leadership Team

College Unbound has been built and led by two accomplished and entrepreneurial individuals that embody integrity and a deep commitment to student equality and social justice. President Dennis Littky is a nationally recognized education professional with over four decades of experience redesigning secondary and, more recently, postsecondary education to empower students by tapping into their passions and making learning meaningful.²⁶ He is the co-founder, with Elliot Washor, of Big Picture Learning, the organization that launched the Metropolitan Career and Technical Education Center in 1996 (the Met School), an innovative individualized learning approach to secondary education. Today, there are 75 Met Schools nationally and over 100 internationally. Adam Bush is a co-founder and College Unbound’s provost and vice president of academic affairs. He has been actively engaged at the postsecondary level in cultural arts, music, and social justice education.

While some interviewed for this case study expressed concern that the professional backgrounds of these two leaders were not robust enough in the higher education space specifically, many others indicated that their experience outside the academy is exactly what helps to make the College Unbound model unique, effective, and a good fit for students who also have been on the outside of higher education.

As College Unbound made the transition from a program of Big Picture Learning to an institution of higher education, it added additional leadership with deep experience in higher education. In 2013, Tracy Money joined as vice president of strategic planning. She has over 30 years of experience as a leader and innovator in education. Money has led the development of systems, processes, tools, and initiatives to support the College Unbound strategy and infrastructure.

In 2017, Robert L. Carothers joined CU as executive vice president. Carothers served for 18 years as the president of the University of Rhode Island (URI), and, before that, he was the chancellor of the Minnesota State University system. He was also president of Southwest Minnesota State University. Shortly thereafter, Robert A. Weygand joined as vice president for administration and finance. He has over 18 years’ experience in higher education including being on the faculty and director of the University of Rhode Island master of public administration program. He was previously the

²⁶ The president of CU, Dennis Littky, has doctorates in education and psychology, and decades of experience studying and understanding how students learn best. He has led and founded innovative K–12 schools in the U.S. and globally. Before starting College Unbound, he and his colleagues spent two years researching how students at the postsecondary level learn best.

vice president for administration and finance at URI and before that the president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education in Boston. He is a former U.S. congressman and Rhode Island lieutenant governor.

Board of Trustees

Since the beginning, College Unbound has had a strategic, committed, and engaged board. Across the interviews, the board has been described as “impressive,” “very talented,” and bringing “significant intellectual capital.”

CU leadership understands the importance of knowledgeable and well-respected board members for the college’s capacity, visibility, and public trust and has grown the board to include a former Rhode Island Commissioner of Higher Education, a state congressman, a national leading community college president and other higher education leaders, and federal and former state Supreme Court justices. The board has 11 to 25 members total, per bylaws, including six community and/or education leaders, one student or alumnus of College Unbound, one faculty representative, and the president of the college, *ex officio*. As a small startup, College Unbound’s initial board of trustees was a *founding* board, and some members were integrally involved in the day-to-day work of the program. As it has transitioned from a program to an institution, the board has transitioned to a *governing* board, following accreditation standards.

Faculty

College Unbound has 13 instructional faculty, 11 Lab faculty, and 12 alumni student teaching assistants. They are responsible for the development and delivery of instruction, as well as helping students make connections between class content and their Action Research Projects. Some faculty may serve on student Personal Learning Networks. All faculty are part-time adjuncts and are paid according to a per-student model. Instructional faculty are paid \$250 per student per course, with courses capped at 30 students. Faculty interviewed for this case study indicated that this was on par with other adjunct teaching jobs. Although College Unbound does not use a tenure model, it has evolved to a model in which “core” faculty have multi-year contracts. “Mentor” faculty receive stipends for mentoring new faculty and supporting the development of new courses.

College Unbound also employs Lab faculty, who provide instruction in the anchor Workplace and World Lab course. These faculty also advise students on their personal learning plans, facilitate students’ work in ongoing action research projects, and connect students to support services. They are core members of the students’ personal learning networks. Lab faculty are paid \$750 per student per semester, with advising loads capped at 30 (cohorts of 15 each, advisors assigned to no more than two cohorts). They also receive stipends for training and professional development.

College Unbound’s Business Model

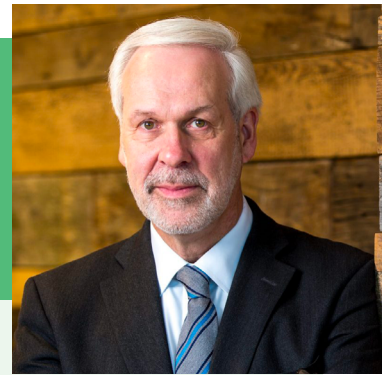
College Unbound’s annual budget is around \$1.4 million. Thus far, the majority of CU’s revenue has been from grants and gifts. In 2017, 45 percent of revenue was from grants, 26 percent from donor gifts, 23 percent in-kind (Big Picture Learning), and 6 percent from tuition (tuition revenue sharing with Charter Oak State College and some employer tuition assistance in the non-degree programs). Like any start-up with delayed access to revenue-generation (in this case, tuition paid with student financial aid), this innovative model has relied on capital funding in the early years.

Lumina Foundation has provided support since 2007 to explore the business model of an unaccredited institution that was providing a valuable and affordable educational opportunity for underserved students. “We were very clearly interested in supporting students who had limited opportunities, i.e., formerly incarcerated, working adults, etc. With CU getting close to full accreditation, we think that investment was successful,” said Haley Glover, strategy director at Lumina Foundation.²⁷ Lumina Foundation has also supported the CU prison program. The Nellie Mae Foundation also provided early financial support.

²⁷ Interview on December 18, 2019.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Paul LeBlanc, president, Southern New Hampshire University, and founder of College for America



College Unbound is serving students who are not being served now. It is creating access for students who don't otherwise have it. With innovative models like this, there is an opportunity for the field as a whole to learn. College Unbound is a place to experiment to do new things. Higher education is in a phase in which it must fundamentally reinvent itself. College Unbound is serving as a valuable sort of research and development function, if you will. Because it is doing higher education with constraints, it has to be creative.

A critical success factor to College Unbound getting this far is that they have an *inspired mission*. Dennis and Adam bring passion and commitment to a type of student who is in need and not well served currently. This has helped in their success. Also, they brought serious players around their table (board and staff). Dennis is one of the most creative educators in the nation, but his experience is in K–12 education. He and his partners had to prove that they could succeed in higher education, and they did that by showing they were smart enough to bring together a good team.

College Unbound will have to think about several things as it continues to move forward. First, it will need to get the necessary capital over the next few years to lay the foundation for sustainability. Second, it will really need to focus on marketing itself to its targeted adult students, which can be a challenge for a brand-new institution and a population that might be skeptical because it has higher opportunity costs to higher education and it has been preyed upon by less honorable institutions. Third, if it wants to grow, it will need resources, but it must be careful to not over-extend itself. It also will need to think about how to scale up a non-standardized model; what components can be standardized and centralized, like student information management systems, learning management systems, and back-office operations?

In higher education, there really isn't a "system." It is highly fragmented. In this fragmentation, there is an incredible amount of segmentation. Think about the College Unbounds and the College for Americas of the world . . . imagine an emerging class of schools that are recognized as this. They are fundamentally different than traditional institutions. One of the great joys of American higher education is the diversity. There are Ivy League colleges, work colleges (like Berea), schools that focus on members of the military, etc. With institutions like College Unbound and College for America, are we just seeing a new emergent segment here?

College Unbound and College for America are not really competition to existing institutions of higher education. The need is so big, we don't need to worry about competition. There are 36 million adults who started college and did not finish and another 40 million with no credits at all. In an age when postsecondary credentials are a prerequisite for success, we all need to be pitching in as much as we can. All of us are needed.

Excerpt of interview on December 10, 2018.

Beginning in 2015, the ECMC Foundation supported the first CU solo cohort required to begin the self-study phase of the accreditation process, and it provided funding for the development and expansion of the prison program. “We learned a lot about supporting the capacity-building efforts of institutions during the accreditation process through our two grants to College Unbound, and we are thrilled that CU has received candidacy for accreditation,” said Director Zeisler.²⁸ Today, ECMC Foundation’s Career Readiness strategy focuses on career and technical education up to an associate degree. The van Beuren Charitable Foundation in Newport, Rhode Island, also provided scholarships for 20 Aquidneck Island and Newport County residents in 2018.

CU was granted candidacy for accreditation in September 2018, retroactive to April 2018 (see timeline in Table 4 below), which allowed it to apply to participate in federal Title IV student financial assistance programs like the Pell Grant program. CU was approved to participate in Title IV programs in March 2019, and will start accepting student financial aid starting in the fall 2019 semester. This is a key part of the CU business model.

Like its academic model, CU’s business model is driven by its mission. The goal is to contain degree program costs to the students to below \$10,000 per year. At this rate, with a \$1.4 million budget, CU can break even with 140 students; however, it aims to enroll 200 students per year within the next few years in order to allow a financial cushion. Ideally, the cost of the program to the student would be the Pell Grant (maximum award is \$6,095 for the 2018–19 award year) plus \$1,000, which is just over \$7,000. To cover the outstanding \$3,000 per student without causing students to incur debt, CU will be providing each student with a \$1,100 merit scholarship, leveraging other philanthropic and state scholarship funds, drawing on tuition assistance programs, and exploring income share agreements.

Now that student financial aid will be a regular revenue stream, CU can transition from a primarily grant-funded institution to a more sustainable financing model. It projects it will be 80 percent tuition funded by fiscal year 2022.

As with most colleges, a significant percentage of the expenses are for personnel and benefits (68 percent). Unlike most institutions of higher education, College Unbound does not have its own campus. It leases administrative and classroom space at the Met School, using the classroom space at night, when it is otherwise sitting idle. Furthermore, CU does not intend to build a campus. Instead it has built into its DNA utilizing underused sites of community-based organizations and workplaces. As discussed above, all of CU’s faculty are part-time adjuncts. All of them have full- or part-time jobs either in academia or other professional workplaces and access employment benefits through their primary employment or spouses. College Unbound saves money with streamlined facility and staffing costs, which allows it to invest more in small class sizes and active advising with small advisee loads.

Additionally, CU saves money by incorporating many student support service functions directly into the degree program model. Rather than hiring additional advising staff, mentors, and learning community facilitators, CU has designed these supports into the academic model. Peer support is provided through student cohorts, which are organized around the first-semester common curriculum and the ongoing Workplace and World Lab (WWL). The \$10,000 annual tuition price allows CU to maintain optimally sized cohorts of 12 to 15 students each. All faculty and staff understand the importance of the cohorts to the academic model and intentionally provide hands-on coaching and encouragement to students and cohorts. WWL Lab faculty provide advising and assistance with academic and personal support as needed. Students are mentored by each member of their personal learning networks including the professional mentor, Lab faculty, field experts, and peer mentorship by fellow students. These smart design features enable significant financial efficiency. The business model and the mission mutually reinforce each other.

Sustainability of the College Unbound model has been an open question. It is difficult to raise millions of dollars over nearly a decade for the capital required to build a program from scratch. Many stakeholders are watching this aspect of CU carefully. “They need to make sure that their ship is not leaking before they take it out any deeper—especially because their student population is vulnerable,” says Strategy Director Glover of Lumina Foundation.²⁹

28 Interview on November 27, 2018.

29 Interview on December 18, 2018.



FACULTY MEETING WITH CU STUDENT

COLLEGE UNBOUND'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY TRIAD

College Unbound started as a program partnering with accredited higher education institutions. CU provided key components of the innovative effective academic model described above, including the Personal Learning Plan, Personal Learning Network, and Leadership and Change competencies. The accredited partner provided the higher education infrastructure—student information management system, transcribing, student aid—and many of the courses. Over the years, higher education partners included Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) in Manchester, New Hampshire, Roger Williams University in Providence, Rhode Island, and Charter Oak State College, a public online college based in New Britain, Connecticut.

College Unbound modeled the program with SNHU and, after graduating a class, moved the program entirely into Rhode Island. CU partnered with additional colleges to leverage their courses and provide students with access to financial aid. As the program matured, CU wanted to provide its own courses that integrated tightly with the other components of the academic model, such as the learning plan, Action Research Projects, and real-world assessment. It was time to evolve from a program to a financially sustainable stand-alone institution of higher education.

To do this, CU would need to earn approval from three key bodies in the triad overseeing higher education quality: (1) state authorization to operate as an institution of higher education in Rhode Island; (2) accreditation from the New England regional accrediting board; and (3) approval from the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the federal Title IV student aid programs. College Unbound achieved the first milestone in May 2015, earned candidacy for accreditation in September 2018, and was approved to participate in Title IV programs in March 2019. Table 4 provides a detailed timeline of key milestones.

TABLE 4: TIMELINE OF COLLEGE UNBOUND MILESTONES

Time period	Major Milestone
Fall 2009	Incubated as a program of Big Picture Learning
Fall 2012	Incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization
Fall 2013	Began to seek state approval and accreditation; had initial meeting with NEASC/NECHE staff
May 2015	Approved as 13th college in Rhode Island
Fall 2015	Initial NEASC/NECHE site visit and advice; site visit team indicated CU needed to operate as an independent institution with no partner college; CU began building independent institution
January 2016	Matriculated first CU solo cohort
February 2016	Submitted report of eligibility for accreditation
April 2016	NEASC/NECHE eligibility site visit
October 2016	NEASC/NECHE requested a second independent cohort of students, which CU enrolled in January 2017
May 2017	NEASC/NECHE determined eligible for apply for candidacy for accreditation
February 2018	Submitted self-study report for candidacy to NEASC/NECHE
April 2018	NEASC/NECHE candidacy site visit
September 2018	Granted candidacy for accreditation, retroactive to April 2018
November 2018	Submitted application to participate in federal Title IV student financial assistance programs
February 2019	Site visit for Title IV federal student financial aid program participation
March 2019	Approved to participate in Title IV programs
Fall 2019	Begin receiving Title IV funds

State Authorization

Each state has its own process for granting authorization to new higher education institutions to operate in the state. However, at a high level, the process is generally similar. The institution submits an application to the state office, board, council, or commission of higher education or postsecondary education. The application typically requires detailed information on the need for a new institution and its programs; evidence of the financial viability of the institution; and an application fee. The state authority reviews the application and provides a window for public review and comment, especially for existing institutions of higher education in the state. After review, the board members of the state authority vote on the institution’s application.

In Rhode Island, it is particularly difficult to earn state authorization. Before CU gained state authorization in May 2015, it had been two decades since any new institution of higher education was authorized in Rhode Island. College Unbound initially sought state authorization in 2010. It submitted an application to the Rhode Island Council on Postsecondary Education, but fell short of the very traditional institutional requirements necessary for approval.

A CONVERSATION WITH

James E. Purcell, former commissioner, Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (currently executive director, Alabama Commission on Higher Education)



Rhode Island is a tough state for an institution of higher education to get state authorization. It does not authorize out-of-state institutions to come in and offer on-the-ground programs; although, some institutions can “beam in” via distance learning. New on-the-ground institutions can be authorized, but that had not happened in the 20 years before College Unbound getting state authorization (although a handful try every year). It’s a tough climate. Existing institutions are part of the review process, and they really believe they are addressing the needs of all the students in the state; they also heartily interrogate the quality of any new institutions and their programs.

When College Unbound first approached my office, I took a hard look at them, too. I was very direct with them and pushed them to be more clear and precise about what they were doing. I also visited the campus several times to visit classes and attend student presentations. I was compelled by the deep engagement faculty and staff had with students and the students had with each other. I saw the enthusiasm of the leadership and the students. They were getting out of the college what we really want students to get: the opportunity to think through their own lives, apply their learning to something that matters.

Adult students are a hard market for traditional institutions to serve well. Often, they only give lip service to this population. They may think they are serving the same students, but College Unbound really serves an underserved population. They showed that there is a way to work with these students . . . to go where they are and allow them to frame their educational experience around life experiences. This makes learning more applicable to everyday life and the workplace. This is the future of higher education.

Excerpt of interview on November 20, 2018.

For a few years after that, CU sought approval to operate in the state as an institution of higher education through the legislative process. In the spring of 2014, state Representative Joseph McNamara (now on CU’s board) introduced legislation to create a pilot program to test the concept of CU as a degree completion college for Rhode Island adults, operating in partnership with Charter Oak State College in Connecticut (before that, CU was authorized to operate as a “teach out” program attached to Charter Oak State College for students who had started at Roger Williams University in Providence, Rhode Island). The bill passed the state House easily (the vote was 52-7), but never made it out of the Senate committee of jurisdiction. The biggest challenges to the bill were from private and vocational colleges who seemingly felt threatened by another institution possibly siphoning off their students and did not see a need for a higher education institution like College Unbound. There was also disapproval among some of the elite colleges in the state that CU was not rigorous enough to be approved as an institution of higher education. In general, there was quite a bit of bias against adult students, with some dissenters claiming that “these students don’t deserve a degree.”

After the state legislative strategy fizzled, CU went back to the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC). The experience of pursuing the legislative strategy helped CU leadership understand the difficulty and the political nature of the process, so they were much better prepared this time around. CU took the process very seriously. They met with then Postsecondary Commissioner James Purcell every other week to thoroughly understand every component of the process. They met with every member of the Rhode Island Council on Postsecondary Education. This is when they started building a high-powered board of trustees. They submitted a 1,200-page application to the RIOPC, which was “overkill,” but they were not taking any chances. They even got the governor to support their application.

On the night of the Council on Postsecondary Education hearing on CU, 75 CU students attended (as described above, CU leadership keeps students apprised and involved in the development of the college, so they are keenly attuned to and invested in *their* college). Several students and board members spoke, including a formerly incarcerated student, a Native American student, and the head of the board. The speeches were very inspiring and many received ovations from the board. The governor’s chief of staff even attended.

The board was so excited, they wanted to vote that night to approve CU. Due to procedure, they had to wait until the next meeting, in which all nine board members unanimously voted in May 2015 to approve College Unbound as the 13th college in Rhode Island. “All of us on the council are excited that this institution will open up a new pathway for hundreds of motivated Rhode Islanders who never completed their undergraduate degrees,” said Michael Bernstein, the council’s chairman (Arditi 2015). Commissioner Purcell elaborated: “Education is about creating pathways for students to fulfill their potential and contribute to our collective prosperity, and the College Unbound program has a history of success working with adult learners who are motivated to finish their degrees” (Arditi 2015).

CU earned state authorization for five years, which opened the door to begin the accreditation process.

Regional Accreditation

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) is the regional accreditor for colleges and universities in New England. Before a restructure in 2018, it was the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education under the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).³⁰ Over the years, NECHE has accredited many innovative institutions of higher education, including the Urban College of Boston, a two-year college started by a community development organization and serving mostly English as a second language learners; Vermont College of Fine Arts, a low-residency college of art that grew out of another college; and Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Massachusetts, a new college with an innovative and interdisciplinary curriculum focused specifically on engineering and entrepreneurship.

While the accreditation process was long and challenging for College Unbound, it was also valuable. According to Vice President and Provost Adam Bush, “CU is much stronger because of it. It did its job, which was to make CU an institution that could be a peer with others. CU is much transformed and improved—while still being true to its academic model for adult students.”³¹ In September 2018, CU was granted candidacy for accreditation, retroactive to April 2018, which has allowed it to apply to participate in federal Title IV student financial aid programs. It anticipates full accreditation by 2023.

In this section, we first provide quick overviews of higher education accreditation in the United States and the NECHE process in particular. Then, we turn to the story of College Unbound’s journey through the accreditation process to date.

Overview of Higher Education Accreditation in the U.S.

Higher education accreditation in the United States started in 1885, when the president of Harvard and several secondary school headmasters established the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) to build

30 For a summary of this transition, see this web page: <https://www.neasc.org/colleges-and-universities>.

31 Interview on November 19, 2018.

a taxonomy of higher education institutions in New England and define quality. Today, the three primary purposes of higher education accreditation are: (1) to ensure quality of higher education institutions and programs; (2) to facilitate continuous improvement of higher education institutions; and, for some bodies, (3) to establish criteria for professional certification and licensure. There are two basic types of accreditation: (1) institutional and (2) specialized or programmatic. Institutional accreditation “applies to an entire institution, indicating that each of an institution’s parts is contributing to the achievement of the institution’s objectives.”³² Specialized or programmatic accreditation applies to programs, departments, or schools within an institution.

Today, there are more than 60 higher education accrediting bodies in the U.S. They are divided into two types: regional and national. The seven regional accreditation commissions in the U.S. “operate in six geographic regions of the country through non-governmental, nonprofit voluntary associations” (New England Commission on Higher Education 2012). They accredit mostly academically oriented, nonprofit or state-owned institutions; accredit both at the institutional and program level; and have stringent standards for credits and degree programs. National accrediting bodies typically accredit vocational, technical, or career-based, for-profit schools. Some accredit at just the institutional level and some at both the institutional and program levels.

Accreditation is a voluntary, self-regulated, peer-review, non-governmental process to ensure quality and continuous improvement. However, it has also been instrumental in significant federal student aid programs, including the GI Bill and Title IV aid. In the “Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952, Congress required that institutions receiving GI Bill funds must be accredited” (Flores 2015). And, with the passage of the Higher Education Act in 1965, it required that all colleges and universities participating in federal student grant and loan programs be accredited. The U.S. Department of Education’s Accreditation Group located in the Office of Postsecondary Education handles accreditation matters, including reviewing, approving, and liaising with accreditors.

While each accrediting body has its own process, the components are generally similar and include:

1. **Standards:** The accreditor, in collaboration with educational institutions and/or programs, establishes standards.
2. **Self-study:** The institution or program seeking accreditation prepares an in-depth self-evaluation report that measures its performance against the standards established by the accreditor.
3. **On-site evaluation:** A team of peers selected by the accreditor reviews the institution or program on-site to determine first-hand if the applicant meets the established standards.
4. **Decision and publication:** Upon being satisfied that the applicant meets its standards, the accreditor grants accreditation or pre-accreditation status and lists the institution or program in an official publication with other similarly accredited or pre-accredited institutions or programs. Only public and private nonprofit institutions can qualify to award federal student aid based on pre-accreditation.
5. **Monitoring:** The accreditor monitors each accredited institution or program throughout the period of accreditation granted to verify that it continues to meet the accreditor’s standards.
6. **Reevaluation:** The accreditor periodically reevaluates each institution or program that it lists to ascertain whether continuation of its accredited or pre-accredited status is warranted.³³

Higher education accreditation has come under pressure over the last 15 to 20 years. A decade ago, some national accreditors were under fire for accrediting for-profit institutions with high tuitions, excessive student loan defaults, and low graduation rates, leaving many students in debt with no degree or no degree of value. More recently, accreditation

32 See the web page “Accreditation in the United States,” on the U.S. Department of Education website at <https://www2.ed.gov/print/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html#Overview>. Accessed April 24, 2019.

33 See the web page “Accreditation in the United States,” on the U.S. Department of Education website at <https://www2.ed.gov/print/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html#Overview>. Accessed April 24, 2019.

has been navigating the narrow road between the institution-facing role of continuous improvement and innovation, on the one hand, and quality assurance and public accountability, on the other.³⁴ Fingers point to the accrediting bodies themselves, as well as the U.S. Department of Education and its regulations regarding the scope and role of accreditation and its accreditor recognition process.

In response to these criticisms, the U.S. Department of Education outlined key proposals in a December 2018 white paper, “Rethinking Higher Education: Accreditation Reform.” The department suggested trimming accreditors’ scope of oversight, examining differential standards for regional and national accreditors, and providing room for more innovation. A month later in January, the department launched a new rule-making process to discuss accreditation reform with the broader higher education community. The department and the community agreed to specific reforms and this consensus agreement was published on July 12 as a proposed rule available for public comment. The department is obligated to consider the questions and concerns raised by the public before publishing a final rule, which is expected by November 1.

Summary of NECHE Accreditation Process and College Unbound's Regional Accreditation Journey

As described in the guide, *Becoming Accredited: A Guide for New England Institutions*, accreditation through the New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE) can be broken into four phases (details can be found in Appendix D):

Phase 1: Eligibility—the institution substantially meets the 19 Requirements of Affiliation and may apply for candidacy for accreditation in the next two years.

Phase 2: Candidacy—the institution has met the commission’s four Criteria for Candidacy and is progressing toward accreditation, but may not yet meet the commission’s nine Standards for Accreditation (and 184 specific descriptors of the standards). Note: the federal government uses the term, “pre-candidacy” for this phase.

Phase 3: Initial Accreditation—the institution meets all standards for accreditation at least minimally and has been granted initial accreditation. Normally occurs in the institution’s fifth year of candidacy. Institution submits to ongoing monitoring of progress.

Phase 4: Continuing Accreditation—the institution has continued accreditation. Every 10 years, the institution must go through a comprehensive evaluation process of institutional self-study (on the standards for accreditation), on-site evaluation by a group of peers, and a review and decision by the commission.

College Unbound is about halfway through Phase 2: Candidacy. This section details CU’s accreditation progress to date.

Phase 1: Eligibility. College Unbound had early initial conversations with NEASC/NECHE in 2013. They were still a very young program at the time, and President of the Commission Barbara E. Brittingham advised them to first partner with an accredited institution of higher education to get a closer understanding of how higher education institutions operate. CU felt this was good advice and followed it. In 2014, CU determined that it needed to become an independent institution of higher education so it began seeking state approval and regional accreditation. During the initial NEASC/NECHE site visit in fall 2015, CU was informed that its partnership model with already-accredited higher education institutions would not qualify it as an institution eligible to seek accreditation; it would need to operate as an independent institution for at least one academic year.

So, in fall 2015, CU began building itself as an independent higher education institution. It created an admissions program, student handbook and policies, course catalog, learning management system, etc. It refined and implemented enrollment, admissions, and transcript review policies and codified related systems. In the fall 2015, CU recruited and

³⁴ See, for example, “Innovation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education,” by Michael B. Horn and Alana Dunagan, Christensen Institute, June 2018.

admitted 15 students in the first CU solo cohort and raised \$15,000 per student to fund the program tuition-free. The first CU solo cohort matriculated in January 2016.

In February 2016, CU submitted its report of eligibility for accreditation, and the NEASC/NECHE site visit was in April. In October of that year, NEASC/NECHE determined that College Unbound was in substantial compliance with the Commission's requirements of affiliation. The decision letter from the commission was quite positive:

We are pleased to note the many ways College Unbound demonstrates its commitment to transitioning from a partnership model to a stand-alone institution that offers a Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership and Change (BAOLC) degree completion program to under-represented returning adult learners in Rhode Island. The institution's student-centric pedagogical model is particularly noteworthy, as is the support and engagement of its Board of Trustees, faculty, and staff. We concur with the visiting team that College Unbound has done a commendable job in establishing plans and guiding documents in preparation for Candidacy, including: Strategic Plan 2016-2020, hiring plans, and administrative staff and faculty roll-out plans. Further, we are pleased to learn that College Unbound has an established culture of assessment that will serve the institution well as it continues to develop and implement its comprehensive institutional assessment plans. College Unbound has accomplished a great deal in a short amount of time, and the institution's dedication to establishing a high-quality baccalaureate degree-granting institution is evident. (NEASC/NECHE eligibility site visit report)

However, to the commission, College Unbound still appeared to be a project and not an emerging college, since it had just one class and no apparent plans for enrolling a subsequent class. The commission requested CU enroll a second independent cohort of students, which CU did in January 2017. CU bolstered its financial sustainability efforts by hiring Robert Weygand to work with the College Unbound financial team and sharply focused on financing in board meetings and reports. In May 2017, the commission determined that CU was eligible to apply for candidacy for accreditation.

Phase 2: Candidacy. CU spent the rest of 2017 continuing to build the institution, and in February 2018, CU submitted its self-study report for candidacy. NEASC/NECHE conducted the candidacy site visit in April, and the commission granted candidacy status in September 2018, retroactive to April 2018.

College Unbound's Progress Toward Meeting the NECHE Standards for Accreditation

It is instructive to take a high-level look at how College Unbound is making progress toward meeting the standards for accreditation and a few places where they have had to stretch themselves, while remaining true to the innovative, student-driven academic model described above. The following highlights are based primarily on a review of the "Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students of College Unbound" by the evaluation team representing NEASC/NECHE, prepared after the site visit on April 8–11, 2018, and on interviews and reviews of other documents and evaluations of College Unbound. Table 5 reflects the authors' interpretations of the self-study and site visit reports; summary statements do not represent official NECHE findings.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Barbara E. Brittingham, president of the Commission, NECHE (New England Commission of Higher Education, the regional higher education accreditor)



We use the scales of justice image to show the two roles that NECHE (formally NEASC) plays and balances: (1) supporting and promoting institutional improvement and (2) assurance of quality to the public. The second one has become more important in the last few years because higher education is more expensive and more important in terms of people's own economic well-being. Of course, there are also important social goods that flow from higher education, too.

Becoming accredited has become more demanding over the decades. Technology has allowed the addition of data and reporting requirements. The other big challenge is that institutions seeking accreditation candidacy are not eligible for Title IV aid. We would not want to lower these barriers too much, but it could be interesting to explore whether an institution might have access to Title IV aid once they become eligible to pursue candidacy for accreditation, particularly if we strengthen the eligibility process.

NECHE feels it is important to have a tailored approach to institutional accreditation: establish clear key standards and then work with each individual institution through a peer review process to tell their story of how they meet the standards and effectively serve their students. Some of the other regional accreditors have "risk-based accreditation" or "tracks" which lay out different standards for different types of institutions. We think our process honors institutions' individuality, cultivates responsible innovation, and provides value for the institution, as well. One of the five goals in NECHE's strategic plan is to be open to innovation. There are so many independent colleges and universities in New England. Finding innovation has not been a problem. We have major diversity in this region, and one more point of diversity like College Unbound just makes it a little more interesting.

College Unbound reflects a growing awareness of how difficult it is to help working adults—with work and family obligations—complete a degree. It can be very hard to re-enroll adults with some credits but no degree. It is not easily done or College Unbound would not need to exist. There was the recent report that surveyed these adults and most of them said that they would not go back to school to finish their degree, even if they knew it would help them financially . . . they were so turned off by the experience.

College Unbound has done several things well. They have put together a very talented board, which boosts their reputation and the public trust. In addition, they have brought on board a solid staff with many years of experience in higher education who can help them understand this field. They are very creative and committed to doing important, difficult, and undervalued work. They have understood and appreciated the structure of the accreditation standards and worked hard to meet them. They also work well with employers, which is great because this model is a way for employers to maintain and develop talent. One of most interesting things College Unbound is doing is working in the prisons.

If College Unbound can demonstrate success with the students they aim to serve, that will be an enormous value to the field of higher education.

Excerpt of interview on December 20, 2018.

TABLE 5: NECHE ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND COLLEGE UNBOUND PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

<p>Standard 1: Mission and Purposes</p>	<p>College Unbound appears to be in a strong position to meet this standard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CU's mission and guiding principles are sharply targeted to low-income working adult returning students. • "College Unbound is designed to uniquely serve those students who are low-income, working adults who are traditionally underrepresented, and inadequately served, in our post-secondary institutions." (NEASC site visit team report). • In spring 2016 and spring 2017 College Unbound hired The Capacity Group to conduct one-on-one interviews with the students in the CU Solo cohorts specifically to assess whether they were delivering what they promised students. The Capacity Group found: "According to student self-reports from one-on-one confidential interviews, College Unbound maintains an extremely high degree of fidelity relative to the model it has laid out, and findings from the Year 2 cohort mirror findings from the Year 1 Cohort." • Internal student satisfaction surveys (customized instrument based on the National Survey of Student Engagement) and interviews conducted spring 2016, fall 2016, spring 2017, and fall 2017 found high degree of alignment with mission and purpose. • Staff and board satisfaction surveys (spring 2016, spring 2017) indicate understanding of and program alignment with mission.
<p>Standard 2: Planning and Evaluation</p>	<p>College Unbound continuously self-assesses, refines the model, and shares learnings with other institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2013, CU has partnered with the UMass Boston Higher Education doctoral program to study College Unbound priorities, processes, and policies. Doctoral students have taken on a different task for CU every year. For example, in 2017, students analyzed student satisfaction data. • March 2015 feasibility study by The Capacity Group to test the viability of CU's recruitment and marketing strategy, plans for scale, and associated staffing, resource, and financial plans. • Five-year strategic plan (2016–2021) with nine broad goals, specific strategies, measures, and target dates through which the mission is realized. • CU is a founding member of the Great Colleges For the New Majority Network, which distills and shares models of transformative education for adult students.
<p>Standard 3: Organization and Governance</p>	<p>CU has made improvements on this standard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NEASC/NECHE site visit team noted the "impressive" members of the governing board, which were also noted by several interviewees for this case study. • CU does not have a formal faculty governance structure, but the site visit team noted that this was not a concern, as faculty clearly expressed they had many opportunities and channels to contribute their input and expertise. <p>One area for improvement that CU needed to address had to do with its board of trustees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In late 2016 and 2017, the CU board needed to transition from a "founding board" of members engaged in the running of the college to a "governing board" providing advice and oversight rather than involved in the day-to-day operations of the college.

<p style="text-align: center;">Standard 4: The Academic Program</p>	<p>CU has made improvements on this standard and will continue to make more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site visit team indicated that CU meets requirements for a quality degree program. • It also noted that “A key strength of the program is the ongoing student projects, which act as both an anchor for students’ personal development and also a venue for conceptual application and experimentation.” <p>CU has made some and will need to make a few more changes to the academic program to fully meet the standard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2017, as part of the self-study process and on the recommendation of the accreditor, CU transitioned from two-credit to three-credit courses and nine-week to eight-week terms to facilitate student transfer of credits. CU felt this was “an important growth step” that benefited the college. • CU needs to work on mapping the various learning outcomes across the degree program. • CU has had to switch learning management systems and work with a company to specially design one that better supports the dynamic interactive learning and assessment model. • CU is working to layer the general education requirements of accreditation onto CU’s Leadership and Change “Big 10” competencies.
<p style="text-align: center;">Standard 5: Students</p>	<p>CU appears to excel on this standard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strength identified by the NEASC/NECHE site visit team is that “the college has developed an effective system of wrap around services and support that aligns with the needs of its students, including financial counseling, and effective intrusive advising system, and practical support such as meals and child care services.” (NEASC/NECHE site visit report). • “Students have built the ability and capacity to uniquely support one another in their academic, personal and professional growth.” • Interviewees for this case study noted how much CU is student-driven and empowers students.
<p style="text-align: center;">Standard 6: Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship</p>	<p>CU has demonstrated several areas of strength on this standard and has room for improvement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strength identified by the NEASC/NECHE site visit team was that “students enrolled in the college’s program can clearly articulate the relevance of their learning experience and are passionate about the academic model and support offered to ensure their success.” • All faculty “comprise a blend of impressive academic and professional experience.” • “The college has developed an impressive culture of learning and collegiality across the faculty by ensuring opportunities for faculty voice and inclusion across the college. . . . The Visiting Team were impressed to see the level of motivation and commitment of the faculty to the college.” Interviews with faculty for this case study confirmed this statement. <p>CU sees its own room for improvement on this standard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CU noted in its self-study report before the candidacy site visit that it is deeply committed to and desires to expand “a diverse faculty that demographically echoes the population it serves, honors local wisdom, and covers a wide range of experiences consisting of both practitioners and academicians.” Commitment to this effort is reflected in CU’s strategic plan, goal 3.

Standard 7: Institutional Resources

The site visit report noted several positive findings on this standard and sees room for improvement.

- A key strength identified by the NEASC/NECHE evaluation team is that "The college has a record of strong financial performance through fundraising, the development of cash reserves, and low overhead that allows it to financially support its students."
- "The college has balanced its budget annually, has no debt and enjoys a supportive relationship with Big Picture Learning (BPL) that decreases operating costs."
- "The [visiting] team found that the institution's chief financial officer is exceptionally well-qualified with deep expertise in higher education and a commitment to the mission of the college."
- "CU at present is sufficiently staffed with highly qualified personnel appropriate for its mission and current size."
- "The visiting team observed that key personnel were highly qualified, passionate and committed to the institution's mission."

However, CU has also run into some challenges and has had to make some changes:

- CU has addressed the "long-term financial stability" concerns NEASC/NECHE noted at the end of the eligibility for accreditation phase.
- CU has added significant staffing capacity to the college during the accreditation process, such as executive VP, VP for administration and finance, dean of instruction and student services, and admissions and enrollment staff. They have also hired a part-time senior information technologist to lead the design of new learning management and student information systems and will be staffing up even more in 2019, including hiring a director of financial aid, a director of communications, a director of enrollment/recruitment, and a director of information services/e-librarian.
- It has been a challenge to find a software platform(s) that can accommodate the personal learning plan- and portfolio-driven nature of CU's student-driven and real-world assessment approaches to learning. CU has begun to work with Motivis, a LMS start-up that had its beginnings designing the Learning Management System (LMS) infrastructure for Southern New Hampshire University's College for America. Motivis uses Salesforce on the back end to track student information. This company is designing a College Unbound LMS and Student Information System (SIS) that are integrated.
- CU has had to develop many of the internal infrastructure and institutional policies, processes, and procedures that were previously covered by partner higher education institutions. This has been time-consuming and required addition of more staff capacity; however, it has clearly strengthened the institution.
- CU has had to revisit one staff position. Previously, "advisor faculty," provided instruction in the Workplace and World Lab and advised students on their learning plans. However, given the default in the traditional model of higher education that "advisors" are limited to providing academic advising and connections to student services, this position was confusing to accreditors. CU's advisor faculty indeed are responsible for instruction in the Workplace and World Lab, as well as meeting with students on a weekly basis to provide advising-type services. CU determined it would need to change the job title and description to ensure that external stakeholders could clearly understand this. The new position is Lab faculty.

Standard 8: Educational Effectiveness	<p>Like standard 2 on planning and evaluation, CU excels here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site visit team noted that, because CU has been financially supported through grants from philanthropy and donors in the early years, “the college operates with a natural culture of evaluation and assessment. . . . This culture will help them build a fully developed system of assessment as they transition to become a stand-alone institution.”
Standard 9: Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure	<p>As noted by the site visit team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “College Unbound (CU) promotes a high standard of integrity and transparency with all members of the campus community and represents those standards in consistent and accurate ways. In its practices and procedures, the institution adheres to high ethical standards relative to students, prospective students, faculty, staff and administration, Board of Trustees, external agencies and organizations, and the general public.”

Federal Title IV Eligibility

Once College Unbound was granted candidacy for accreditation, it was able to apply to the U.S. Department of Education to participate in federal Higher Education Act Title IV student financial aid programs, including Pell Grants, student loans, work study, and others. This is a key aspect of CU’s financial sustainability.

College Unbound retained a consultant to assist with the application process and provide general guidance and advice. CU submitted its application and necessary financial statements to the U.S. Department of Education in November 2018, including an independent financial audit for the last three years and the next two fiscal year’s budgets and financial projections. In general, the application process was smooth because CU could simply re-use much of the information it had submitted for regional accreditation candidacy. However, it ran into one challenge concerning the financial audits: the federal government requires audits to be completed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS), rather than the generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) most other audits follow, including those required in the state authorization and accreditation phases. CU had to work with its accounting firm to redo the financial audits, which took about six weeks.

In February 2019, an agent from the Boston office of the U.S. Department of Education conducted a site visit to review the institution and its documentation and systems, and reported favorably on College Unbound. In March, CU was approved to participate in Title IV aid programs, receiving the participation agreements right in the middle of a CU board meeting. During the spring and summer of 2019, CU built institutional capacity to receive and manage student aid. It will be using the Campus Cafe enterprise resource planning software system, which is used by several colleges in New England and is a good program for a school the size of CU. College Unbound has retained the same student aid consultant to assist with student aid applications to ensure accuracy, particularly in these early days, and has hired a full-time student aid counselor. CU also has hired two recruitment officers to recruit new students (they do not advise on student financial aid). One is a CU graduate and is now a full-time employee; the other works part time.



CU FACULTY

Despite the financial audit setback, College Unbound completed the Title IV application process in record time: four months, compared to the typical 10 to 11 months. Several factors facilitated this swift application. First, College Unbound became thoroughly organized during the first two phases of the process—state authorization and regional accreditation—and so had virtually all of the necessary information readily available. Second, as in the first two phases, CU was in regular contact with officials to completely understand the process and build two-way familiarity. This familiarity paid off, because by the time the financial aid agent came for the site visit, he was excited to meet this institution he had read about and been in contact with. Third, the student aid consultant was a helpful resource in guiding College Unbound through the process. Lastly, the U.S. Department of Education showed great interest in College Unbound's responsible innovative model and tremendous success in engaging underserved students, a market of students not well-served by most other institutions, and so was supportive of its application.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

In researching and writing this case study on an innovative organization successfully becoming a higher education institution, we identified several pain points and lessons learned about how an innovative model for low-income working adult students fares in the journey through state authorization, regional accreditation, and Title IV eligibility. We also gained insights into the promise and viability of adult student innovations in higher education, more generally. These lessons and insights are summarized below and discussed in this section. Considerations for the future are shared in the next section.

Lessons Learned Across the Higher Education Quality Triad

- The process is accumulative, strengthening the institution to succeed as it builds; however, there is little early support for innovative models and stumbling blocks remain.
- The journey through the higher education quality triad requires perseverance, going above and beyond, and significant resources.
- Innovative institutions must strike a balance between fitting into traditional policies, norms, and expectations and preserving their own identity.
- Institutional leaders must understand that these processes are not just regulatory; they are relational and political, as well.

Deeper Lessons Learned from the Regional Accreditation Process

- The eligibility phase of regional accreditation seemed to be the most challenging.
- The regional accreditation process benefits the accreditor, as well as the applicant institution.
- Peer review is a critical component of the regional accreditation process; careful attention should be paid to ensure true peer review for innovative institutions and programs.
- Accreditation can strengthen your institution, and you can stay true to your innovation.

The Promise and Viability of Adult Student Innovations in Higher Education?

- Innovation does not always find fertile ground in the field of higher education.
- Partnerships can be invaluable assets in innovative models, but they are dynamic and subject to change.
- Innovative academic models require innovative business and governance models.
- Sustaining innovative models is essential, but difficult; the field needs thoughtful ideas and experimentation on how.
- We believe a deficit-based view rather than an asset-based view of adult students persists, particularly for underserved adults, which prevents many higher education stakeholders from effectively engaging these students.
- Effectively engaging underserved adult students will require a full commitment to transformational change.

Lessons Learned Across the Higher Education Quality Triad

1. **The process is accumulative, strengthening the institution to succeed as it builds; however, there is little early support for innovative models and stumbling blocks remain.** The quality triad process is accumulative, with each step building on the other. College Unbound was able to use what it learned in the state authorization phase to prepare for regional accreditation, including understanding the need to bolster the team with players familiar to and respected by higher education officials, framing the model in terms that would resonate with higher education practitioners, and being prepared for an arduous run. The step from regional accreditation candidacy to Title IV application was even more seamless, with information transferring from the accreditation self-study to the Title IV application. Additionally, College Unbound had built over two years the systems necessary to operate as a viable higher education institution.

However, the beginning of the process was rocky, and there were stumbling blocks along the way. At the beginning, the learning curve is the steepest, and the organization is the least knowledgeable about what is required. Unfortunately, this is also where there is little systemic support—either technical or financial—to help innovative organizations, particularly new nonprofit institutions, get a foothold. College Unbound is headed by one of the most entrepreneurial, strategic, and persistent pair of leaders in the country, who comprehended and worked through the process and acquired technical and financial support and higher education expertise as necessary. Nevertheless, it, too, ran into stumbling blocks, including an unsuccessful first attempt at state authorization, two setbacks in seeking eligibility to apply for regional accreditation candidacy, financial concerns, and several required changes to the academic model.

Innovation and quality assurance are both vital to the health of the nonprofit higher education sector. Where tension exists between them, we must assure that promising new models have a fair shot to successfully get through the higher education quality triad process. Given the stark challenges facing higher education today—declining enrollments of traditional students, the need to engage an untapped market of adult students, financial pressures and school closures, business models that trap colleges into outdated academic models—it may behoove higher education stakeholders to think creatively about how to more systematically seed and support responsible innovative models.

2. **The journey through the higher education quality triad requires perseverance, going above and beyond, and significant resources.** An important takeaway from documenting College Unbound's journey through the triad of state authorization, regional accreditation, and federal Title IV eligibility is that these processes require a lot of persistence. These are not easy processes, and there can be many setbacks. Additionally, since College Unbound is different from traditional models of higher education, it had to clear a higher bar, particularly in the state authorization process. This incredible amount of time and energy translated into hundreds of thousands of dollars in staff time to build the institution and processes, document and validate the components in reports and site visits, and do the legwork to complete each phase. These costs are in addition to the fees and site visit travel reimbursements paid by the institution seeking accreditation. Since federal student aid funds are not accessible until the institution has progressed through several initial steps, the institution will need to raise considerable resources from other sources, such as foundations and donors.³⁵

35 A similar innovative college founded recently is Guttman Community College in the New York CUNY system. It was founded in 2011 as the New Community College of CUNY. In April 2013, the college was renamed following a \$25 million endowment from the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation to CUNY, of which \$15 million supported the Guttman Community College Student Success Fund. While seeking regional accreditation, CUNY self-funded the equivalent of the financial aid for students in the first semester. Once Guttman Community College gained accreditation from the state of New York (which is on par with regional accreditation), it was able to successfully apply to participate in federal Title IV student aid programs. Accreditation and Title IV eligibility happened relatively quickly.

College Unbound took a proactive approach to each phase of the quality triad process, and it paid off. The school's credibility as a legitimate, responsible innovative institution successfully engaging students was so well-established by the time it applied for Title IV eligibility, the regional reviewer from the Department of Education was excited to visit the institution, and College Unbound completed that phase in less than half the time it normally takes.

3. **Innovative institutions must strike a balance between fitting into traditional policies, norms, and expectations and preserving their own identity.** It is remarkable how much College Unbound as an institution has in common with its students, particularly those who are first-generation college students. First-generation students have to walk an often-uncomfortable line between two worlds. In one, no one in their immediate family has been to college or understands what is required; some family members may even feel betrayed by the student who is moving outside their economic class and advancing to another.

In the other world of college, the student is surrounded by educated, middle class, mostly White people with whom they have rarely interacted, and college itself has a whole new set of systems (“What’s a ‘bursar’s office?’”), language (“What are credit hours?”), and norms (“You expect me to not work full time to support my family while I’m in school?”). First-generation students have to figure out how to learn and fit into the new world of college, while being true to themselves and their background. It is almost like learning to live in a new, foreign culture and speak a new language—but with few resources and guides.

Similarly, College Unbound has had to learn how to build and operate an institution of higher education, while remaining true to its student-driven academic model. College Unbound had several advantages, though, because the president has decades of experience building and running student-driven secondary schools, the vice president and provost is an accomplished practitioner scholar, and other institutional leadership and board members have decades of higher education institutional experience. Nevertheless, College Unbound and other nontraditional institutions do have to walk a line between traditional higher education and the innovative models they know work for their students. As is true with first-generation students, the more other stakeholders can understand this duality, appreciate the richness it brings, and be supportive, the better.

4. **Institutional leaders must understand that these processes are not just regulatory; they are relational and political as well.** The applications for state authorization and regional accreditation eligibility and candidacy were heavy lifts, requiring hundreds of pages of documentation and many hours of meetings to clearly understand what was required and pull it together. Just as important was the strategic legwork that College Unbound leadership put in to ensure that all reviewers understood College Unbound and how it is filling a void for working adult learners in the higher education system.

As College Unbound was seeking state authorization, leadership worked closely with Commissioner Purcell to precisely understand the process. President Littky talked with every member of the commission, higher education leaders across the state and region, and even engaged the governor’s office. This strategic awareness and champion-building was critical given that a new institution had not been authorized in the state in two decades, and some existing institutions lobbied against authorizing CU. College Unbound students who engaged in the process, particularly at the pivotal commission hearing, were also important to CU’s success. Empowered student voices clearly moved the state commission members and helped them see and feel the value of College Unbound for underserved students.

Deeper Lessons Learned from the Regional Accreditation Process

1. **The eligibility phase of regional accreditation seemed to be the most challenging.** College Unbound experienced two of the most significant setbacks in the whole journey during the eligibility phase. First, in order to demonstrate that College Unbound could be an independent institution, it had to demonstrate that it had systems for areas such as student registration, advising, and course delivery. CU had to design and deliver these systems from scratch for the accreditation process and had to operate a solo cohort of students in winter/spring 2016 to be considered for eligibility. This was because they needed to demonstrate that, in the future, they could do these things on their own as a stand-alone institution.

Second, the college was surprised to learn in the fall of 2016 that one solo cohort was not enough, and it would have to run a second cohort of students, who matriculated in January 2017. This was a major setback because the college had not budgeted to run a second solo cohort and because it caused a nearly year-long delay in College Unbound's anticipated timeline for accessing Title IV aid, a key source of sustainable funding. This delay contributed to the financial strain about which NECHE later raised concerns.

These were big steps for a new institution with an innovative model different from the traditional model of higher education. College Unbound was able to manage them due to the tenacity of the leadership and healthy philanthropic support, but it was a narrow margin of success.

2. **The regional accreditation process benefits the accreditor, as well as the applicant institution.** As discussed in this case study, College Unbound found the accreditation process helpful in building a sustainable institution. The accreditation process is valuable to the accreditor, too. For example, individual members of the accreditation review and visiting teams learn a great deal about new ways of engaging different types of students in learning and degree attainment. Some college leaders view serving on accreditation review and site visit teams as an important part of their professional development.

Secondly, accrediting new and innovative models helps the accrediting body gain experience with new models and approaches. This is especially important at a dynamic time in higher education when student demographics are changing significantly, and institutions are seeking new and more effective ways of engaging with underserved students. According to Chancellor Cantor, "It's a real testament to Adam, Dennis, Tracy, and the team that they have earned candidacy for accreditation. And, it's a testament to the accreditors that they could see the value in what CU is doing."³⁶

3. **Peer review is a critical component of the regional accreditation process; careful attention should be paid to ensure true peer review for innovative institutions and programs.** A key feature of the higher education accreditation process is institutional review by peers. This is important because peers will have the best understanding of an institution's particular context, students, components, and challenges. From a quality assurance perspective, peers will have a sense of where the holes are. From an institutional continuous improvement perspective, peers will understand what the institution is trying to achieve and be able to offer meaningful advice.

With institutions that are on the leading edge of innovation, like College Unbound, it can be hard to find true peers to participate in this review process. There are many nontraditional institutions of higher education in New England; therefore, NEASC/NECHE is familiar with innovative institutions and academic models and was mostly able to provide true peers for College Unbound, particularly the candidacy site visit team. However, accreditation peer review team members are volunteers, and the pool of available volunteers may not reflect the growing number of innovative institutions in a region.

³⁶ Interview on December 21, 2018.

All accrediting bodies should pay careful attention to ensuring that there are enough innovative peers in the volunteer pool and there is a strong match between the institution seeking accreditation and the peer review team. Also, since some early reviews of institutions may be conducted by accreditation commission staff, it is important to ensure that these individuals understand and are open to innovative models as well.

4. **Accreditation can strengthen your institution, and you can stay true to your innovation.** College Unbound found that the NEASC/NECHE accreditation process strengthened the institution without compromising its effective academic model for underserved adult students. They learned what it means “to move from program to institution.” Board member and IEL President Uvin shared, “The accreditation criteria and self-assessment definitely resulted in quite a few improvements in policies, practices, and procedures. By the time of the site visit, CU was a much-strengthened institution.”³⁷

Whether accreditation supports or suppresses innovation may depend on the specific accrediting body, processes, and people involved. NECHE appears to be truly supportive of innovative higher education models, as evidenced in the types of colleges it has accredited and in the preamble to the *NECHE Standards for Accreditation*: “By design, the Standards as explicated welcome perceptive and imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education.”

Another perspective is that the question discussed in higher education today of whether accreditation hinders innovation is the wrong line of thought. Wyld maintains, “Accreditation does not stifle innovation; it can help give birth to it, in fact. Whether or not accreditation stifles innovation is the wrong debate anyway, and adult learners should not be getting caught up in the wrong debate.”³⁸

The Promise and Viability of Adult Student Innovations in Higher Education

1. **Innovation does not always find fertile ground in the field of higher education.** Although perceptions and attitudes may be changing, higher education has enjoyed an august and hallowed presence in U.S. culture. There is a tendency toward the traditional and a certain inertia and gravitational pull toward the status quo, which poses challenges to innovative practices and institutions. College Unbound ran into these challenges at several turns, such as when other institutions of higher education in Rhode Island lobbied against CU’s authorization.

Additionally, the field of higher education lacks systematic structures, processes, and funding to seed and institutionalize innovation. Much of the innovation in this space has been supported by philanthropic funding, which is terrific, but not a sustainable strategy for developing and sustaining the types of new practices, approaches, and, perhaps, new institutions, that are required to meet the evolving higher education needs of our society.

2. **Partnerships can be invaluable assets in innovative models, but they are dynamic and subject to change.** In many cases, partnerships are essential components of the College Unbound model. The partnership with Big Picture Learning helped incubate College Unbound. Partnerships with other colleges, universities, and learning providers expand learning opportunities for students, both in real time and as credit for prior learning through PLA and transfer credits. Partnerships also help to keep costs low: College Unbound saves money on facilities by holding classes at the Met School, in the workplace, and at prisons and by brokering library partnerships with Brown University and the public library.

³⁷ Interview on December 27, 2018.

³⁸ Interview on January 7, 2019.



CU OPENING DAY

Partnerships also can be tricky. In the early days when CU was an academic program, it often did not have equal standing with accredited colleges and could be discounted or ostracized within the institution. This, of course, varied by how innovative and open-minded the partnering institution was. Sometimes, leadership or priorities shift in a partner institution, changing its commitment to the innovative model. Innovative institutions must pick their partners carefully and continuously assess whether partnerships help accomplish the mission and goals.

3. **Innovative academic models require innovative business and governance models.** “Conventional colleges are trapped by their own business models,” notes Adam Bush, CU vice president of academic affairs and provost.³⁹ Their business models have evolved in response to their educational models, which are designed as campus-heavy, faculty-centered, course-based degree programs with a prioritization on faculty research and tenure. The College Unbound model shifts these priorities, putting students in the driver’s seat of their education, crafting the academic model to support their academic and career-building priorities, focusing on student action research, and discarding the traditional tenure model. CU also significantly drives down campus capital costs. Resources are shifted to student scholarships, small classes, and highly personalized learning in small cohorts. Low-cost, highly personalized models are counterintuitive, yet College Unbound is a successful example.

Given colleges’ flat or declining revenues due to stagnant state support, pressure to keep tuition increases low, and declining student enrollment at several colleges, many colleges are already revisiting their business models. This may be the time to also consider how to craft a budget to provide more support for new academic models. Instead of doing less of the same thing, perhaps colleges should do something different that may work better for students and also streamline costs. One example of how to begin to budget for different models can be found at the University of New England in Maine. This college sets aside a separate pot of money in the college budget specifically for strategic initiatives in which the college can innovate. This part of the budget is completely separate from the operations budget, providing flexibility and room for creativity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Interview on November 19, 2018.

⁴⁰ Example shared at a session at the annual NEASC/NECHE meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, December 12–14, 2018.

4. **Sustaining innovative models is essential, but difficult; the field needs thoughtful ideas and experimentation on how.** Sustaining the enterprise is a key criterion for all three parts of the higher education quality triad because new and existing institutions have an ethical obligation to their students to sustain the institution. It is critical that new institutions plan from the beginning for sustainability. Of course, participating in federal Title IV student financial aid programs is a key part of this equation; however, this revenue stream does not materialize until five or six years after organizations begin their journey through the triad, which is after development, implementation, and stabilization of the program.

Even with federal Title IV dollars, institutions that want to remain affordable for low-income students will need to supplement programs and/or reduce costs. College Unbound does some of each, but cost reduction is a significant part of the strategy. Leveraging underutilized spaces, such as high school classrooms and workplaces at night, allows CU to save money and meet adult student scheduling needs. Weaving mentors, peer mentorship, learning communities, individual-driven project-based learning, and student supports into the academic model saves even more costs because CU does not have to hire additional specialized staff and faculty.

However, how to sustain new higher education models that do not precisely fit the traditional higher education established structure is still a challenge. As former Rhode Island Commissioner Dann-Messier shared, “The work of CU is very important. We need models that push traditional institutions to be more innovative. But we also need to figure out how to sustain the innovative models.”⁴¹

5. **We believe a deficit-based view rather than an asset-based view of adult students persists, particularly for underserved adults, which prevents many higher education stakeholders from effectively engaging these students.** The lack of effective degree programs for underserved adult students and the language we use to describe them indicates that there may be an implicit bias against this population of students. It can exist among higher education institutions, leaders, faculty, and staff; among policymakers and regulators; and even among some supporters of underserved students more broadly, such as educators, service providers, and funders. Sometimes it is more obvious, as when it was overheard during CU’s quest for state approval that “these students don’t deserve degrees.”

Sometimes it may be more subtle. For example, it can be in the language we use, such as “nontraditional” and “underrepresented” student—positioning them as the “other” (Soares 2013). It is also in the way we continuously describe these students as burdened with multiple “barriers” and in need of so much “help” and so many “supports,” rather than seeing their characteristics as assets and strengths. It is in our assumptions that too many supports for these students simply prop them up and threaten to undermine academic rigor—rather than believing that these students can succeed in a rigorous program with the right design and supports. This implicit bias against underrepresented adult students often is compounded by implicit racial bias.

This deficit-based view has kept us from designing on a broad scale higher education programs and institutions that are better fits for and more effectively engage low-income working adult students. It is a significant contributor to their low completion rates. Some of it has been internalized by the students themselves. This implicit bias must be recognized and expressly addressed to pave the way for higher education institutions to more effectively engage these students, meeting our national and state credential attainment goals and ensuring the educated workforces and communities we want for our future. ACE has provided some recommendations toward this end in the 2017 report *The Post-Traditional Learners Manifesto Revisited: Aligning Postsecondary Education with Real Life for Adult Student Success*, by Louis Soares, Jonathan S. Gagliardi, and Christopher J. Nellum.

41 Interview on January 4, 2019.

6. **Effectively engaging underserved adult students will require a full commitment to transformational change.** Although the College Unbound model is grounded in proven high-impact and innovative practices, it has had the advantage of being able to design a program from scratch. To accomplish similar design outcomes, existing institutions would need to alter often entrenched programs, practices, faculty, staff, and norms. To say this will not be easy is an understatement, but doing so is not impossible. Institutions will need to commit to transformational change. This means ensuring leadership is fully on board and carving out a protected space for innovative practices to grow unencumbered by traditional practices, habits, and modes of thinking, as well as institutional politics and competition for resources.

Many institutions are already beginning down this path. “I think more and more institutions are more willing to stretch these days, given the changing context of higher education and the changes in the student body,” noted Chancellor Cantor.⁴² College Unbound leadership co-founded the [Great Colleges for the New Majority Network](#) of colleges and baccalaureate programs “dedicated not only to access and completion, but also to transformative and engaged learning for adult, nontraditional students. We represent a new venture in U.S. higher education: a community of practice dedicated not simply to degree attainment, but also to great teaching and learning for working adults who seek a bachelor’s education and beyond.”⁴³ This network would be a great place to begin for institutions seeking to engage adult students in new and more effective ways.

As we’ve seen historically, many innovations to engage underserved adult students have come and gone, fading with budget cuts or morphing into something different with leadership changes. Without institutional transformational change, it’s too easy to slip back into the old ways of doing things. But, given the changing demographics and the demand for postsecondary education, we need to ensure we do not regress. The institutions that figure out how to serve a wide range of underserved students, especially the large market of adult students, will be among those that thrive in the coming decades.

⁴² Interview on December 21, 2018.

⁴³ Great Colleges for the New Majority Network website: <https://www.collegeunbound.org/apps/pages/greatcolleges>.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Helping higher education succeed in engaging underserved adult students is vital to our national and state credential attainment goals, to ensuring we have the workforce we need for a strong economy, and to our democracy and civic health. But we are woefully behind in making sufficient progress in understanding and effectively engaging this population of students. In this final section of this case study, we share a few ideas that we think could help move us forward, based on what we have learned.

1. **Significantly more investment in knowledge development, professional development, and tools to support innovative new models for underserved and unserved adult students.**

Foundations and the federal government should consider investments in the following:

- a. **Financial and technical support for experimentation with and documentation of innovative academic-business-governance (A-B-G) models.** The field needs more examples of viable models and support for seeding and sustaining them at new and existing institutions. For example, Lumina Foundation supported College Unbound in exploring a new business model for an unaccredited postsecondary organization engaging underserved and unserved adult students. The field needs more of this type of support and experimentation, particularly in the nonprofit higher education space, where support is most lacking.
- b. **Research and thought leadership to develop a taxonomy of innovative A-B-G models.** As more innovative models for effectively engaging and educating adult students emerge, it would be helpful to systemically understand them, as well as their commonalities and differences. Such a taxonomy and the ideas and lessons from the experimentation described above, as well as others, should be shared widely to spur more creative thinking and testing of new models. Audiences should include but not be limited to state higher education commissioners, state higher education executive officers, regional accreditors, institutions, funders, policymakers, and higher education leadership groups and fellows.
- c. **Higher education innovation incubators.** As discussed in the lessons learned, although there are sometimes bursts of philanthropic or public funding to seed innovation, there are no *systematic* structures, processes, or funding sources to consistently promote and institutionalize innovation in higher education. An important organization in the College Unbound story was Big Picture Learning, which served an incubator role, providing CU with funding and a safe space in which to evolve and develop as a viable stand-alone institution, regional accreditation, and Title IV eligibility. This role is similar to that of an accelerator for tech start-up companies. We should explore this concept of higher education innovation incubators as a way to not only seed innovation but also experiment with scaling and sustaining models for underserved adult students.
- d. **Research and thought leadership to think more expansively and creatively about what it means to scale these models and various types of scale.** The default thought process on scale is to take an effective model that has proven itself in prototype and expand it to serve significantly more students, such as through bigger programs, bigger institutions, and IT solutions to reach hundreds or thousands of students across the country or globe. However, this type of scaling is antithetical to the success of the College Unbound model, which works precisely because the cohorts are small, intimate communities that provide the context for student success. Effective scaling for a model like College Unbound more likely involves adoption and adaptation of the model in multiple and varied settings rather than one institution going bigger. The higher education community needs more research and experimentation with different types of scale, what works with different situations and models, and how to support successful scale up appropriate for different innovations.

- e. **Research and thought leadership on how to *sustain* innovative models.** A question that has come up in this case study more than once is how does College Unbound *sustain* its innovative model? How does it ensure ongoing commitment to the student-driven philosophy when the mission-driven founders have moved on? If it expands or replicates, how does it ensure fidelity to the model? How can it achieve an affordable cost to students of “Pell Grant plus \$1,000”? What alternative funding models should be explored, e.g., income share agreements, free first semester models, subscription-based learning models? Other innovative higher education models face similar questions; more research and experimentation are needed.
- f. **More professional development on adult-student-driven academic models and institutional culture change.** As one interviewee stated, “most faculty have no training in what alternative styles of education look like. The field needs to help develop these types of skills. Some institutions may have to hire new people and prepare them to work in these innovations.” It would be helpful to have professional development opportunities, resources, and tools for faculty to learn how to effectively use high-impact and innovative educational models and how to effectively facilitate adult learning. Useful tools could include guides, training programs, curricula, and externships. The field also needs professional development curriculum and offerings to help faculty in more traditional institutions shift their perspective on underserved adult students toward a more asset-based understanding.
- g. **Continued investment in development and use of tools that support innovative models.** Important tools in the College Unbound model are course credit transfers, prior learning assessment, Learning in Public credit assessment, and ACE’s College Credit Recommendation Service. Additional tools and resources to help students transfer credits between institutions and document learning outside higher education would be helpful. The effort by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) launched in December 2018, “Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century: A Research Initiative to Inform Policy and Practice,” to map postsecondary recognition of learning policy and practice and evaluate learning assessment methods will be informative. Maximizing recognition of adult student learning from a much wider angle than previously considered is essential for honoring adult learners’ knowledge, providing momentum in their degree programs, and accelerating progress toward national and state degree completion goals.

The field also could use additional tools for assessing and adapting institutions to more effectively engage and educate adult students. One useful tool is CAEL’s Adult Learner 360, based on CAEL’s Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults. Financial and technical assistance to help institutions use these types of tools is essential

2. Regional accreditation can more proactively support innovative models.

- a. **Incorporate innovation into regional accreditation’s roles of quality assurance and continuous improvement.** The two main roles of regional accreditation today are quality assurance and continuous improvement. These are and will remain vitally important; however, given the significant need for new approaches and models, particularly for unserved and underserved adult students, we should think about how regional accreditation can more proactively support *innovation* through standards and processes. This may require a new look at which metrics demonstrate success and the balance between measuring inputs versus outputs and outcomes.

4. **Explore providing limited eligibility for federal Title IV student aid to institutions during pre-accreditation.** As discussed, the higher education quality triad process poses many barriers and stumbling blocks for innovative new institutions, particularly in the regional accreditation eligibility phase, when the learning curve is the steepest and there is no systemic sustainable funding source. Legitimately, the purpose is to make it difficult for unscrupulous institutions to defraud the federal student aid system and harm students. However, it does have quite a dampening effect on innovation, as well. One idea that has been suggested by the president of NECHE is to consider providing limited access to Title IV student aid for institutions during the eligibility phase of the regional accreditation process, while strengthening expectations and supports for institutions in order to prevent fraud and abuse. This idea is in line with other considerations discussed that explore how to provide more of a transition experience in the higher education quality triad, rather than abrupt steps, i.e., the WSCUC incubation policy and peer mentors during eligibility phase.

In conclusion, we believe College Unbound's experience building a student-driven academic model and institution and surmounting the travails of state authorization, regional accreditation, and federal Title IV eligibility is instructive. We share this case study in the hopes that other higher education institutions will be inspired by College Unbound's philosophy, approach, accomplishments, and lessons learned.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE STUDENT TRANSCRIPT



OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT
Date Printed: 2/27/2019
Page: 1 of 3

Student: Program Title: **Organizational Leadership and Change** Degree Level: **Undergraduate BA**
Date: 2/27/2019
Awarded Date: Status: **Sought**

TRANSFER CREDITS

COURSE TITLE	COURSE CODE	ACCEPTED FROM	ACCEPTED TERM	CREDITS EARNED
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Advocacy for Self and Others	B 1			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Collaboration	B 7			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Creativity	B 3			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Intercultural Engagement	B 9			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Problem Solving	B 10			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Reflection	B 5			1.0000
Big 10 Leadership and Change Competency: Resiliency	B 6			1.0000
Distribution Requirement: History	DR HIST	Community College of Rhode Island	Spring 2016	3.0000
Distribution Requirement: Literature & Fine Arts	DR LFA	Community College of Rhode Island	Spring 2016	3.0000
Free Electives (Transferred)	ELECT XXX	Community College of Rhode Island	Spring 2016	18.0000
OLC Major Requirement: Leadership Studies	MR LS	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning	Summer 2016	3.0000

TOTALS	CREDITS EARNED
Term	34.0000

INSTITUTION CREDITS

Term: **Spring**

Term Dates: 1/1/2016 to 5/30/2016

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
AH 330	Writing for Change	2.0000	2.0000	A-
OLC 215	Intro to Organizational Leadership and Change with Integrated Workplace and World Lab	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLC 355	Reframing Failure	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLCWLL A200	Workplace and World Lab A	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLCWLL B201	Workplace and World Lab B	2.0000	2.0000	A
SBSCI 305	Contextualizing Work	2.0000	2.0000	A

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	12.0000	12.0000	12.0000	3.9450
Cumulative	12.0000	14.0000	14.0000	3.9450

Term: **Summer**

Term Dates: 6/1/2016 to 8/31/2016

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
OLC 220	Learning From Experience	3.0000	3.0000	A

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	4.0000
Cumulative	15.0000	17.0000	17.0000	3.9560

Term: **Fall**

Term Dates: 9/1/2016 to 12/31/2016

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
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OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

Date Printed: 2/27/2019

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Student:

Program Title: **Organizational Leadership and Change** Degree Level: **Undergraduate BA**

Date: **2/27/2019**

Awarded Date:

Status: **Sought**

CVC 205	Ethics of Critical Care and Critical Generosity	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLC 310	Community Assessment	2.0000	2.0000	P
OLC 375	Understanding Non-Profit Management	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLCWWL C202	Workplace and World Lab C	2.0000	2.0000	A-
OLCWWL D203	Workplace and World Lab D	2.0000	2.0000	A-
SBSCI 200	Collaboration and Group Dynamics	2.0000	2.0000	A

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	10.0000	12.0000	12.0000	3.8680
Cumulative	25.0000	29.0000	29.0000	3.9208

Term: **Spring**

Term Dates: **1/1/2017 to 5/1/2017**

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
AH 299	Independent Study: Arts and Humanities	4.0000	4.0000	A
CVC 300	Bodies, Power, & Community	2.0000	2.0000	A
MTH 200	Statistics for Problem Solving I	2.0000	2.0000	P
MTH 206	Data and Assessment	2.0000	2.0000	P
OLCWWL E204	Workplace & World Lab E	2.0000	2.0000	A-
OLCWWL F205	Workplace and World Lab F	2.0000	2.0000	A-
SCI 200	Environmental Science I	3.0000	3.0000	P

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	10.0000	17.0000	17.0000	3.8680
Cumulative	35.0000	46.0000	46.0000	3.9057

Term: **Summer**

Term Dates: **6/1/2017 to 8/31/2017**

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
AH300	Digital Storytelling	2.0000	2.0000	A
CVC 305	Global Citizenship	2.0000	2.0000	A

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000
Cumulative	39.0000	50.0000	50.0000	3.9154

Term: **Fall**

Term Dates: **9/12/2017 to 1/15/2018**

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
AH 205	Creative Writing	2.0000	2.0000	A
AH 299	Independent Study: Arts and Humanities	4.0000	4.0000	A
CVC 230	Emergent Strategy as Research	2.0000	2.0000	A
CVC 399	Independent Study: Civics	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLC 204	Research for Change	2.0000	2.0000	A
OLCWWL G206	Workplace and World Lab G	2.0000	2.0000	B+
OLCWWL H207	Workplace and World Lab H	2.0000	2.0000	A-

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	16.0000	16.0000	16.0000	3.8750
Cumulative	55.0000	66.0000	66.0000	3.9036

Term: **Spring**

Term Dates: **1/16/2018 to 5/25/2018**

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
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OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

Date Printed: 2/27/2019

Page: 3 of 3

Student:

Program Title: **Organizational Leadership and Change** Degree Level: **Undergraduate BA**

Date: 2/27/2019

Awarded Date:

Status: **Sought**

CVC 399	Independent Study: Civics	3.0000	3.0000	A
EXP 201	Experiential Learning: Pedagogies and Social Change	3.0000	3.0000	A
EXP 301	Experiential Learning Level II: History of Higher Education	3.0000	3.0000	A
MTH 205	Statistics for Problem Solving (Data Collection & Assessment)	3.0000	3.0000	A
OLC 405	Capstone B	3.0000	3.0000	A
OLCWWL I208	Workplace and World Lab I	3.0000	3.0000	A

TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	18.0000	18.0000	18.0000	4.0000
Cumulative	73.0000	84.0000	84.0000	3.9274

Term: **Summer**

Term Dates: 6/11/2018 to 8/11/2018

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	FINAL GRADE VALUE
SCI 205	Environmental Science II	4.0000	4.0000	B-

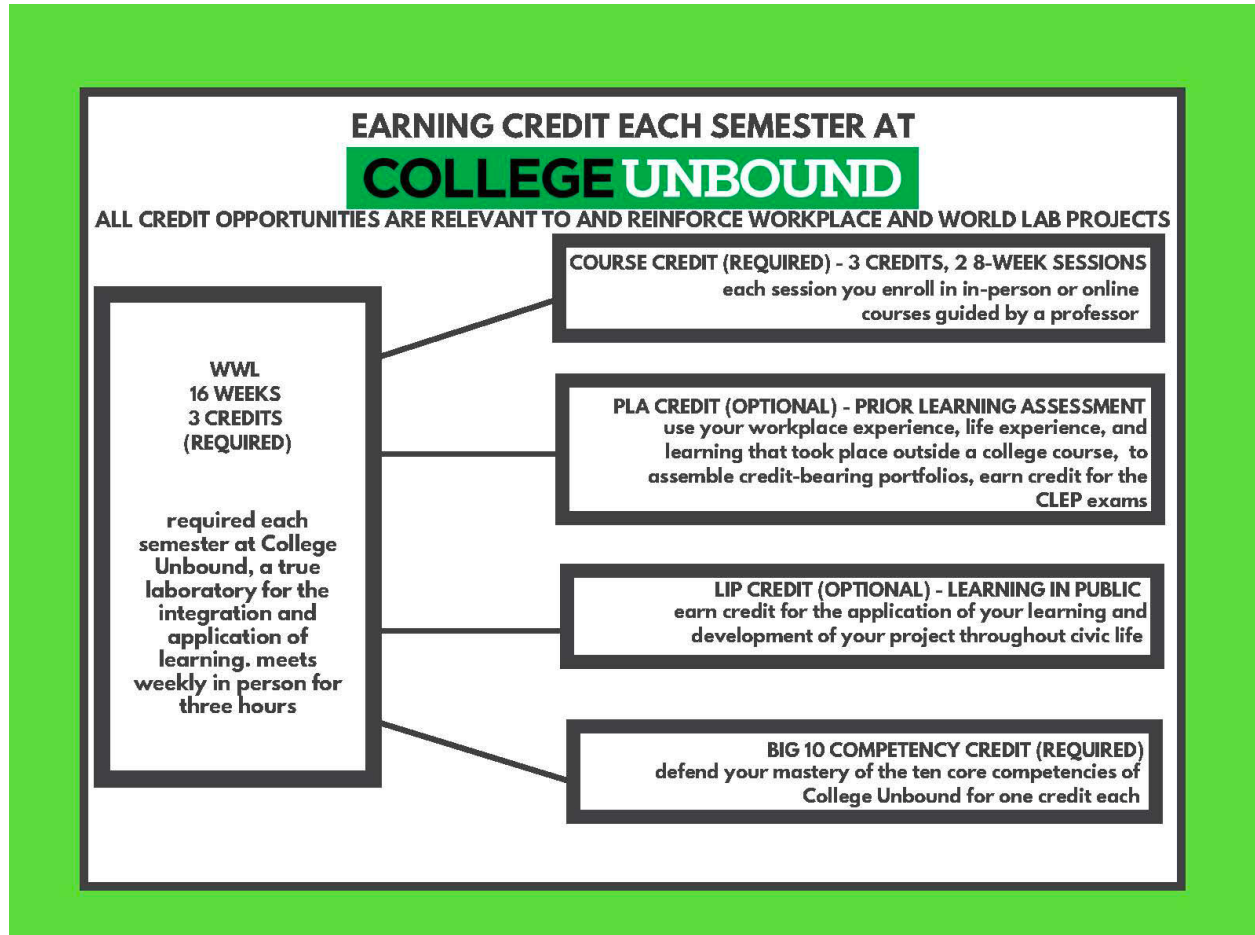
TOTALS	CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR TOTAL GPA	CREDITS ATTEMPTED	CREDITS EARNED	GPA
Term	4.0000	4.0000	4.0000	2.6700
Cumulative	77.0000	88.0000	88.0000	3.8621

PROGRAM TOTALS

TOTALS	TOTAL CREDITS ATTEMPTED FOR GPA	TOTAL ATTEMPTED CREDITS	TOTAL EARNED CREDITS	GPA
Institution	77.00	88.00	88.00	3.8600
Transfer	-	32.00	32.00	-
Overall	77.00	120.00	120.00	3.8600

END TRANSCRIPT

APPENDIX B: HOW STUDENTS EARN CREDIT AT COLLEGE UNBOUND



APPENDIX C: CHANGING OUR PERCEPTIONS OF ADULT LEARNERS' CHARACTERISTICS FROM BARRIERS OR RISK FACTORS TO ASSETS AND RETENTION/COMPLETION FACTORS

Adult student characteristics ⁴⁴	Perception through the “nontraditional student” student lens; deficit model	Perception through an asset model lens	Program examples
Works full time/ is financial independent; may be connected to the military (active duty, veteran, National Guard)	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier: working full time prevents or challenges student from attending school full time, jeopardizing retention and completion. Military obligations compete with school time.</p>	<p>+ Working full time provides ready-access to experiential learning opportunities and meaningful real-world problems to tackle in projects.</p> <p>+ Military experience brings prior learning and skills, life experiences and a world view that enhances educational experience, and practiced discipline.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » College Unbound provides ample prior learning assessment and transfer credits. » The Personal Learning Network includes professional mentors and field advisors; real-world assessments of students' work. » College Unbound weaves work, military experience, and community into academic programming, e.g., Workplace and World Lab (WWL). » Guttman Community College's Ethnographies of Work class is similar to CU's WWL
Older (usually age 25 years+)	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier: older students often have work and life obligations that compete with and complicate their educational path in traditional institutions and programs.</p>	<p>+ Being older means the student has amassed interesting life, work, and, likely, educational experiences that can be useful curriculum material in the academic model. Also, older students may have a clearer view of why they are seeking a credential, providing more fuel for their educational journey.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Capture educational experiences and credits in prior learning assessments to provide a foundation and momentum for rest of educational program. » Shape academic program and assignments to leverage student knowledge and wisdom to strengthen the learning and provide meaningful opportunities for students to contribute to society.

Adult student characteristics ⁴⁴	Perception through the “nontraditional student” student lens; deficit model	Perception through an asset model lens	Program examples
Delayed enrollment between high school and college	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier; student may have “rusty” academic skills and learning habits, i.e., note taking, time management, etc. Also, harder to find and recruit them because they are not “captured audiences” in high schools.</p>	<p>✦ Students who have delayed enrollment have many of the same assets as older students above.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Most adult students are working, so they can be found at places of employment, as well as community organizations, churches, their children’s schools and school organizations. » Many institutions, including but in addition to CU, have formed partnerships with employers to reach adult students. » CU reaches out to community groups and church leaders to explore partnerships (and they are approached by these leaders, as well). » CU provides stipends to current students and alumni to recruit peers. Adult students can be very effective at word-of-mouth advertising.
Have dependents	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier; family obligations compete with and complicate educational path. Student may require child care, which is an expensive support service.</p>	<p>✦ For most low-income working adult students, their children are an important motivating factor for earning a degree: on a practical level, they want to earn more money to provide economic stability and a good life for their children. Socio-culturally, they want to be a positive role model for their family.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Embrace family members and student’s role as parent. Showing interest in students’ families provides a positive reminder of why student is enrolled, and can be a consistent nudge supporting retention and completion. Traditional colleges host parent weekends. The University of Louisville does this with a Workforce Wednesday party every semester, in which students and their families enjoy activities and snacks together. » Limit formal class time and provide maximum scheduling flexibility so student can arrange time for school, work, and family in a way that works for them. » Provide child care as needed. » Celebrate students and their successes with families. Meaningful graduation ceremonies are essential.

Adult student characteristics ⁴⁴	Perception through the “nontraditional student” student lens; deficit model	Perception through an asset model lens	Program examples
Enroll part time	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier; students who enroll part time drag out their education and increase their chances of dropping out.</p>	<p>✦ Students enroll part time in traditional educational programs because the programs don't fit their school-work-life balance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Design educational programs differently—to better fit working adult students and they will be able to enroll full time. » Like everyone, working adult students' lives and obligations vary over time. Trust students to judge when they may need to reduce enrollment to part time to allow more time for other aspects of life. Encourage and support them to bump back up to full time when they can.
Racial minority	<p>◆ Risk factor/barrier; racial and ethnic minority students, on average, have lower success rates than white students.</p>	<p>✦ Traditional educational institutions and programs have been designed for and by white students, around white cultural assumptions about learning styles, economic status, and culture. Implicit racial bias inadvertently makes for mis-fits between student and program. As does implicit age and class biases, which interact with racial bias.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be aware of implicit race, age, and class bias. Assume intelligence in all students. Value all students and their experiences. » Talk openly about bias...to acknowledge it for students and to actively work toward inclusion and equity. » Hire faculty and staff who understand implicit bias and are committed inclusion and equity.

Adult student characteristics ⁴⁴	Perception through the “nontraditional student” student lens; deficit model	Perception through an asset model lens	Program examples
Multiple of the above characteristics	<p>◆ Risk factors and barriers compound themselves, significantly reducing student's chances of success.</p>	<p>✦ Having held at bay multiple risk factors to be enrolled in an educational program means these students have grit (Angela Duckworth defines as “passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal”). Grit is the fuel to power persistence and completion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Acknowledge the challenges students have/are facing and overcoming and the grit they have demonstrated to get this far. Provide positive reinforcement. Build confidence. Public acknowledgment of students' successes. » Surround students with supportive voices, including mentors; faculty and advisors who understand and appreciate these students, their life context, and their successes; involve people in the community and workplace that support student success from that direction. » Design multiple opportunities and venues for students to prove themselves (and build more grit), e.g., presentations on their work, portfolios, etc.

APPENDIX D: NECHE ACCREDITATION PHASES

The New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE) accreditation process consists of four phases:

Phase I: Eligibility—meaning that the institution substantially meets the 19 *Requirements of Affiliation* and may apply for candidacy for accreditation in the next two years. The steps in this phase include:

- a. An in-person meeting with NECHE staff to help the commission learn more about the institution and to help the institution learn more about accreditation.
- b. Staff visit and advice to the institution—first the institution prepares a draft report of eligibility outlining how it meets the requirements of affiliation. Senior NECHE staff visit the institution and provide confidential, written feedback on the draft report that includes advice on further pursuit of eligibility.
- c. Report of eligibility—the institution may finalize its report of eligibility based on the feedback and submit the final report.
- d. Eligibility visit—a team of commission staff and two peer evaluators visit the institution and prepare a report to the commission validating the contents of the institution's eligibility report and making a recommendation to the commission regarding whether the institution should be allowed to move forward with a formal application for candidacy for accreditation.
- e. Commission decision on eligibility—at a regularly scheduled meeting, the commission will determine if the institution should be declared eligible to apply for candidacy.

Phase 2: Candidacy—meaning that the institution has met the commission's four *Criteria for Candidacy* and is progressing toward accreditation, but may not yet meet the commission's nine *Standards for Accreditation* (and 184 specific descriptors of the standards).

- a. Institution self-study report—the institution prepares a report outlining how it meets the standards for accreditation candidacy
- b. Candidacy visit—a team of five to seven peers from similar institutions conducts a three-day visit and privately presents the team's findings to the head of the institution on the last day.
- c. Candidacy site visit report—the site visit team prepares a report to the commission (also submitted to the institution) assessing the extent to which the institution meets the criteria for candidacy and its potential for attaining initial accreditation within no more than five years.
- d. Commission decision on candidacy—at a regularly-scheduled meeting, the commission meets with the head of the institution and the site visit team chair and reviews all written reports to date to determine if the institution is approved for status as a candidate for accreditation. Institution is notified in writing after the meeting.
- e. Biennial review of candidacy—the purpose is to determine if the institution is continuing to meet the four criteria for candidacy and making progress toward accreditation; the steps include:
 - i. Institution prepares a biennial report—this is an update to the self-study report, noting progress and outlining next steps
 - ii. On-site evaluation—a team of three to four peers will conduct a two- to three-day site visit and conduct an exit meeting with the head of the institution.

- iii. Visiting team report—the visiting team prepares a report to the commission and the institution similar to that following the site visit for candidacy. The institution is asked to provide a written response to the site visit team report.
 - iv. Commission action on biennial review—at a regularly-scheduled meeting, the commission meets with the head of the institution and the site visit team chair and determines whether to continue the institution's candidacy status.
- f. Note: being approved for candidacy for accreditation enables an institution to apply to participate in the U.S. Department of Education's Title IV student financial assistance programs.

Phase 3: Initial Accreditation—meaning that the institution meets all standards for accreditation at least minimally and has been granted initial accreditation. Normally occurs in the institution's fifth year of candidacy.

- a. The steps are the same as those for candidacy above: self-study, team visit, team report and confidential recommendation, institution response, and commission decision.
- b. During the five years of initial accreditation, institutions must submit an online data form annually, must notify and get the approval of the commission of any substantial changes to the institution or its programs, and must undergo another comprehensive evaluation in five years.

Phase 4: Continuing Accreditation—meaning that the institution has continued accreditation. Every 10 years, the institution must go through a comprehensive evaluation process of institutional self-study (on the standards for accreditation), on-site evaluation by a group of peers, and a review and decision by the commission.

