



COLLEGE UNBOUND, a Big Picture Initiative: Why Innovation is Needed in Post Secondary Education

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Two critical problems are facing America's economy and its education system: the lack of meaningful opportunity for first-generation students to graduate from college and quality of learning.

Currently, 53 percent of Americans earn some degree or credential after high school and only 20 percent of low-income students earn a degree or a credential after high school. In the City of Boston, two-thirds of high school graduates who enrolled in college failed to earn degrees.¹ In addition, a recent report from The Center for American Progress (CAP) reinforces existing research that states while the number of students entering post-secondary education has grown over the last three decades, the number of students attaining a degree has declined. In fact, a recent OCED report notes that the "United States now has the highest college dropout rate among developed countries."² If we disaggregated this data the dropout rates would overwhelmingly be first-generation students—students historically underserved by higher education. In fact, research shows that students from the lowest SES quartile have a 6% chance of graduating from college, where as students from the highest SES quartile have a greater than 70% chance.

The CAP report also identifies, and buttresses the work of Diana Oblinger, *What Business Want from Higher Education*, that even when students earn a degree they have not acquired the knowledge and skills employers and the workplace require. In fact, "over 40% of graduates don't have the necessary applied skills for success. The transition between work and learning is both an acute and ongoing challenge for today's students."³ A recent survey commissioned by the Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) underscores this point. A full "63 percent of employers believe that too many recent college graduates do not have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy."⁴ And, a majority of employers believe "that only half or few recent graduates have the skills and knowledge needed to advance or be promoted in their companies."⁵ More alarming, in "none of the twelve skills and areas of knowledge tested—from writing to global knowledge to ethical judgment—did a majority of employers rate recent graduates as 'very well prepared.'"⁶ Students must not only earn a degree, they must earn a degree that has personal value and demonstrates worth in the market place.

The combination of these two issues creates a profound challenge for the American marketplace and higher education. Higher education must work to better ensure its graduates are prepared to apply knowledge, solve complex problems across disciplines, work effectively in projects, etc. This means a fundamentally different way of thinking about the delivery of education. Moving from classrooms to conference rooms; from lecture halls to construction sites; from disconnected courses to real-world problem solving; from static environments to dynamic ones. The workplace and society needs graduates who can perform, lead, and innovate. We live in a time where an individual cannot afford the costs of not earning a degree and government cannot afford the costs associated with high non-completion rates. Degree completion is essential for upward mobility and for our economy and democracy to thrive and prosper.

¹ Vaznis, James, "Hub grads come up short in college: Most of class of 2000 have failed to earn degrees." *The Boston Globe*, November 17, 2008.

² Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2007*.

³ Soares, Louis and Christopher Mazzeo. "College-Ready Students, Student Ready Colleges," *The Center for American Progress*, August 2008.

⁴ The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise. "College Learning for the New Global Century." *Association of American Colleges and Universities*. 2008.

⁵ The National Leadership Council for Education & America's Promise. 2008.

⁶ The National Leadership Council for Education & America's Promise. 2008.

A Solution: Big Picture Learning's College Unbound

College Unbound allows first generation students to apprentice with entrepreneurs, scientists, innovators, designers, and medical personnel, to study and learn in a range of diverse environments, and to work with faculty, advisors, and fellow students to tackle real world problems. Students will bring the know-how and experience gathered outside the college walls back to small groups of faculty and student cohorts where they will be challenged to build on their experiences and apply them in an academic context.

This unique life to text, student-centered curriculum begins with the student—his/her passions, questions, and inquiry. In the process of intentionally exploring passions and interests, students work toward developing competencies required to earn a degree.

Live-learning empowers students and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement (live-learning) in a specific field of interest. Students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, critical thinking, analytical and problem-solving skills, and includes a demonstrated ability to apply skills and knowledge in the real-world. As George Kuh and his colleagues describe in their book, Student Success in College, students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings.

Participants achieve learning outcomes through project based learning experiences and are placed in various "live learning" environments in and around Providence, Rhode Island ranging from local community development non profit organizations to local businesses. Students demonstrate proficiency of learning outcomes through portfolios of their work and regular evaluation by University faculty and industry experts.

The three-year, year round Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) program empowers students and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement (live-learning) in a specific field of interest. Students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, critical thinking, analytical and problem-solving skills, and includes a demonstrated ability to apply skills and knowledge in the real-world.

The Bachelor of General Studies creates a framework within which students collaborate with their lead faculty and live-learning mentor to plan a course of study that is centered around the student's passions and interests. Students are expected to demonstrate competence and learning in areas articulated in the BGS. Starting in their freshmen year, the students will work at live-learning (internships) sites alongside cutting-edge professional advisors who will help evaluate their performance.

In addition, the program is dedicated to immersing the students in educational experiences that expand student horizons, literally and figuratively. To encourage cross-cultural understanding and learning in new environments, our students will travel on education-based trips as a part of their course of study. These travel experiences and live-learning done abroad will enrich their understanding of world issues and the global economy. Trips will be both international and domestic, and will be done in groups or individually. At a fundamental level, these trips will allow students to learn and think about social and ecological context—first hand—and then work to make a difference.

Over their three-year experience, students will have demonstrated their ability to solve complex problems, work in teams, communicate effectively, apply concepts across disciplines, etc.--abilities that are sought after by businesses, corporations, and organizations. Students will graduate prepared to effectively participate in the global economy and they will leave with the skills and knowledge required to be engaged in the world and successful in life.