

A Lifeguard Downstream: The Need for Innovation in Educating Working Learners

David Castro 04 April 2011

Introduction

Those active in human services or educational settings eventually hear a parable about people drowning in a river:

While walking along a river, a villager notices someone drowning. After pulling the swimmer ashore, the rescuer notices another person drowning. Before long, the river is filled with people struggling for breath, and more village rescuers run to assist. Some at risk are not saved; some fall back into the river after having been pulled ashore. One of the rescuers then departs, walking upstream alone.

"Where are you going?" the others cry, feeling a sense of panic at losing a rescue team member. As he continues, the lone rescuer calls back, "I'm going upstream to discover *why* these people keep falling into the river."

Consultants use this vignette to emphasize the importance of systems-thinking: the concept that addressing a problem's root cause matters more than grappling with its symptoms. A smart rescuer heads

upstream, we learn, to close down a dangerous swimming hole where the people are swept into the river, thereby saving future victims. We are counseled that those who drown during discovery of the fundamental solution are sacrificed for the greater good of stopping the drowning problem forever.

One can imagine many illustrations. Better to help smokers quit than to cure smoking-induced cancer, to teach people sensible diets than to perfect stomach-stapling, to promote abstinence and birth control than to manage unwanted pregnancies. This is ancient wisdom: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

During early tenure in community work, the river parable holds a powerful appeal. How satisfying to believe that we are working toward fundamental solutions capable of curing our problems permanently!

But wisdom born of longer experience shows that problems do not yield so easily. The parable has a second part:

The wise, system-thinking rescuer headed upstream to discover why people were falling into the river. Soon he sent back messages calling for supplies and researchers upstream, because he discovered *many* dangers causing the problem. Teams of rescuers left those drowning in order to become organized researchers, joining him upstream in pursuit of the fundamental solutions, leaving

only a few behind to help those already in the river. While the important work of fixing the problem *forever* proceeded in earnest, the stream of drowning victims continued.

After a few weeks, the upstream researchers requested that the village create the Institute for the Study of River Risks. They agreed to conduct a twenty-year longitudinal study of why people were falling to the river. The attention of the village was fixed upstream; meanwhile, the drowning continued.

After a twenty-year study involving randomized, double-blind control groups, the Institute declared that one particularly attractive swimming hole could, with unassailable scientific precision(!), be identified as the source of 90 percent of the drowning victims, now piled along the river banks downstream. A five-year plan was drawn up to erect high walls around the swimming hole, at a hefty cost to the village. Meanwhile, the drowning continued. "When the wall is finished, the drowning will cease," declared the founder of the Institute. "Ninety percent of it, at least!"

Five years later, after the swimming hole was walled off, the drowning continued at slightly lower rates. The Board members of the Institute organized a village conference at which international experts speculated that another swimming hole had opened even further upstream. They organized specialists with years of training in swimming

investigations and proceeded upstream once again, warning the village that, unfortunately, more funds were required. Meanwhile, the drowning continued.

Of course, the point of this second part of the parable is that determining the source of a problem is never straightforward. So the wise address both the symptoms *and* the fundamental solutions to a problem. We must put out the fire *and* discover the source, treat the illness *and* prevent recurrence. We must both close the swimming hole *and* rescue those drowning. The long view cannot become a substitute for action today. If knowing the cause of a problem with certainty takes decades and requires the sacrifice of generations, a pound of cure might just be warranted. As William Gladstone said, "Justice delayed is justice denied." In the words of John Maynard Keynes, "In the long run, we are all dead."

The river parable is a metaphor for our current situation in education policy. We have many resources working upstream; meanwhile, the drowning continues.

Education to the Rescue

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Education has become a critical prism through which to understand the twin challenges of poverty and income inequality. There was a time in American cities—particularly former industrial centers like Philadelphia,

Baltimore and Detroit—when large, productive organizations hired workers with little formal education. Residents could learn on the job and enjoy employment, and even upward mobility, throughout their lives. Wage levels supported families, allowed for home ownership and even supported modest capital accumulation.

Today our economy presents such workers with serious challenges. Large-scale manufacturing businesses have replaced labor with technology while outsourcing work to emerging economies off shore, reaping the benefits of wage efficiencies. At a macroeconomic level, the arrival of the information age, the rise of the service economy and the widespread deployment of complex equipment and even robotics in industry have placed enormous pressure on undereducated members of the workforce. Domestic worker productivity requires increasing levels of educational attainment. A high school diploma no longer guarantees a living wage; even college degree completion is not a panacea (see, e.g., Krugman 2011). Americans are slowly recognizing that long-term workforce productivity in our evolving economy depends not only on mastering the fundamentals of reading, writing and math but also on developing specialized knowledge and skills, along with a significant measure of emotional intelligence. Survival in this dynamic marketplace also requires the capacity for teamwork, navigation of complex social systems and continuous learning.

Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that poverty levels

and economic deprivation correlate convincingly with educational failure in communities. A high school dropout is likely to suffer unemployment and low wages. A college dropout is also likely to remain at the bottom of the economic ladder. The reverse is also true: those who persist and succeed in education are most likely to enjoy sustained periods of high productivity and to end up among the most affluent. To illustrate this trend, consider the statistics for selected wealthy and impoverished municipalities in America:

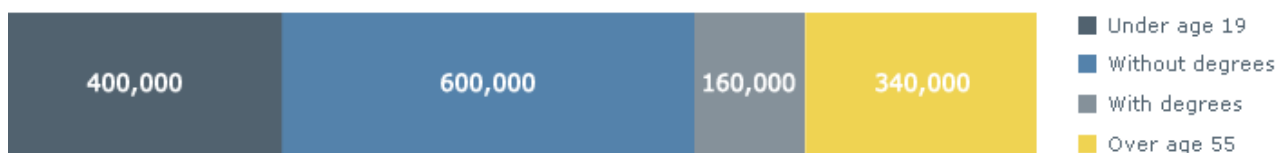
	Lake Forest, Ill.	Greenwich, Conn.	El Paso, Tex.	Philadelphia, Pa.
Average per capita income	\$94,000	\$92,000	\$17,000	\$20,000
Percentage of high school graduates	98%	94%	72%	79%
Percentage of college graduates (bachelor or higher)	75%	62%	21%	22%

Data patterns, according to the U.S. Census Bureau using the American FactFinder Tool, showing that college degree attainment is essential to robust productivity describe communities across the nation (see generally Baum, Ma, and Payea 2010).

Stubborn Local Demographics

Demographic realities in cities like Philadelphia suggest that without substantial innovation decades will pass before improved public education significantly impacts the overall economy. Philadelphia's population of about 1.5 million includes about 1.1 million adults beyond the traditional K–12 education age (20 or older). Of this group, about 340,000 are at or near retirement (55 or older). The remaining approximately 760,000 are in a category best described as active working learners: those eligible for work if not actively pursuing it. Statistics suggest that more than 75 percent of these working learners, or approximately 600,000, lack college degrees.

PHILADELPHIA: CURRENT PICTURE

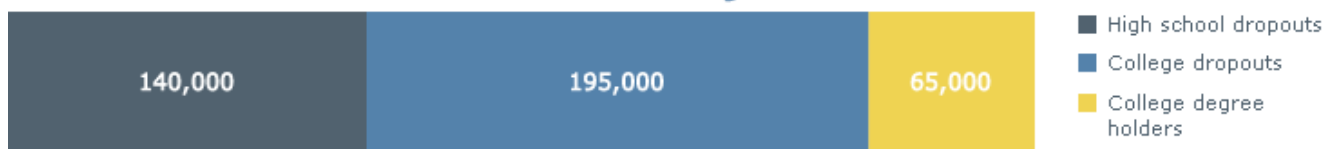


Poverty and economic deprivation rise from the stagnant pool of undereducated adults, whose low levels of educational attainment block access to labor market opportunities paying living wages. Many social ills ensue: the declining tax base, the increasing demand for public services to meet basic needs, diminishing capital accumulation to support entrepreneurship, declining value private property and other community assets that cannot be sustained without income, escalating crime and other social problems associated with joblessness and economic deprivation.

In addition to the pool of undereducated working learners,

Philadelphia has a stream of about 400,000 persons less than 25 years old. These will emerge into maturity over the next twenty years. At prevailing rates of educational success, we can predict that at least 35 percent of these (about 140,000) will drop out of high school. In a best case scenario, according to the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, we can also expect that at least 75 percent of those who graduate from high school (about 195,000) will not complete college.

PHILADELPHIA: PROBABLE TREND 2010-2030



We can predict that this group of high school dropouts combined with those who fail to complete college emerging from the educational pipeline will add approximately 335,000 over the next 20 years to the population of 600,000 Philadelphians lacking college degrees, driving the total number of undereducated adults up to 935,000.

This is what success looks like, given current educational performance levels and models.

Returning to the river metaphor, if those who fail to complete higher education are likely to drown in our economy, the number of drowning victims in our village river is steadily increasing!

Confronted with this reality, like the good systems-

thinking rescuer from the river parable, we have pointed all our resources upstream at the public school system, focusing on the pipeline of the population entering maturity. Our theory sounds convincing: if we can stop those in the stream from falling into the drowning pool of the undereducated, we can save them, thereby improving their lives as well as the local economy.

In Philadelphia, this fundamental strategy has been pursued vigorously. Investments over the past twenty years have been enormous, with the School District's resources having tripled, swelling from about a billion to over *three billion* per year (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). During that same time frame, particularly over the last decade that witnessed *doubling* of the District's revenues, the number of students served through public education (including District-run, contract and charter schools) has remained stable at about 200,000 or less (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). So analysis of public investments in education must recognize that population growth has not driven increased costs (like, for example, swelling Medicare expenses associated with retiring baby-boomers). To the contrary, significantly more money has been spent per capita to improve outcomes.

The many billions of additional dollars have produced some gains. Philadelphia PSSA scores for math and reading improved during the past decade, rising from less than 25 percent performing proficient or advanced to more than 50 percent. Graduation rates also improved

from 48 percent to 57 percent (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010: 10–11). Are these progress trends sufficient to alter the economic situation in Philadelphia?

Will Current Efforts Stop the Drowning? Not Yet!

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If we assume that the District can sustain these gains despite confronting a much more austere public funding environment that is likely to slow and possibly reverse funding increases, we might hope that the District could increase graduation rates to 75 percent for high school and 50 percent for college over the next twenty years. In 2010, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter called for working toward the goal of achieving a 36 percent college completion rate for the stream entering high school. Assuming such progress, 100,000 of the 400,000 in the educational pipeline would nevertheless drop out of high school, and 150,000 of the 300,000 completing high school would still fail to complete college. Thus, even a rosy projection would add 250,000 to the existing pool of 600,000 undereducated Philadelphians, bringing the total to 850,000.

Today approximately 220,000 of Philadelphia's population have achieved a bachelor degree or higher. Assuming that over the next twenty years Philadelphia can retain 75,000

new college graduates from the pipeline, we can expect the total number of degree holders to reach 295,000. At the same time, however, the total number of Philadelphians lacking college degrees would swell to 850,000. This would produce an overall college attainment rate for Philadelphia adults still languishing beneath 30 percent. A less optimistic (and perhaps more realistic) assessment of likely performance rates paints an even darker picture.

We have proceeded upriver to close the swimming hole, yet the drowning promises to continue.

The Big Picture

We must face the reality that fundamental economic improvements in Philadelphia will require new institutional strategies to serve the growing pool of undereducated adults, those composing the majority of the city's working-age residents. In other words, we must both address the systemic problem (improve performance for the pipeline of learners crossing into maturity) *and* help those who are drowning in the economy as a result of lack of educational achievement. This will require a strategy that leads not only youth but also adults through a practical curriculum that instills robust 21st-century skills and knowledge competencies tailored to the existing and emergent labor markets.

The most relevant existing model is offered through

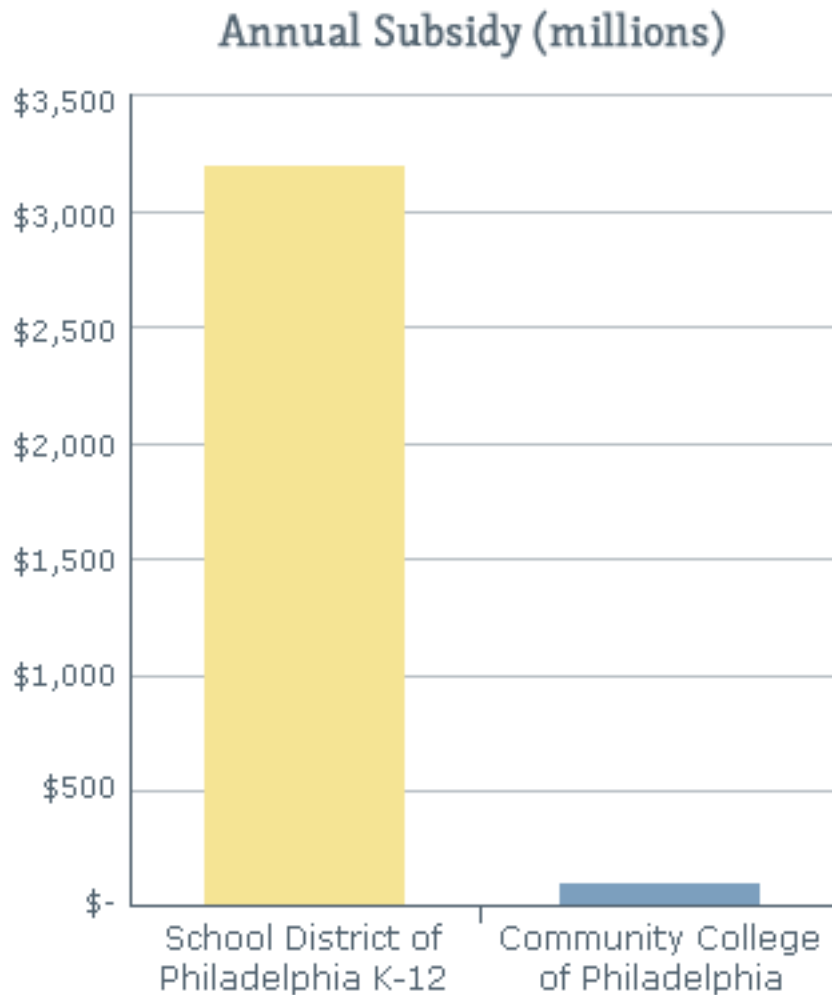
community two-year college programs, but these simply will not suffice in their current form. First, colleges—including community two-year colleges—are ill prepared to address remediation required for students who lack high school diplomas or who graduated so long ago that their skills have degraded. “Improving the effectiveness of developmental (remedial) education is perhaps the most important issue confronting community colleges today. Most entering community college students arrive with academic skills that do not allow them to participate effectively in at least some college-level courses” (Bailey and Alfonso 2005: 19). At best, colleges remediate learners through accelerated reading, math and composition courses that attempt (generally without success) to cover in weeks what high school students spend several years attempting to master. The GED in its current form is also not a viable solution. That GED graduates are generally not prepared for college should not surprise us. Why would we expect a course lasting at most several months and provided with meager resources to supply what the School District struggles to accomplish with millions of dollars and years of effort?

Second, colleges in their current form lack incentives and funding to pursue this effort at scale. Most successful institutions of higher education become selective, meaning that they decline admission to a substantial proportion of applicants using merit-based standards. For most institutions, selectivity is a point of pride. The

optimal business model for traditional colleges has been to increase tuition rates steadily while capping enrollment and working simultaneously to improve the caliber of their student body, making their programs more elite. In the new economy, if higher education remains a meritocracy, many who lack relative merit (in the eyes of admissions counselors) will go under.

Community colleges have a mission to practice open enrollment, but they lack sufficient resources to meet total demand. In a survey released February 9, 2011, by the Pearson Foundation, a nonprofit educational think tank in Mill Valley, Calif., about 20 percent of 1,434 community college students interviewed in November reported difficulty enrolling in required courses for the fall semester. Slightly more than three in ten students say that they had difficulty enrolling in courses that they needed for the fall 2010 semester or that they weren't able to enroll in certain classes because they were full (Pearson Foundation 2011). Community Colleges cannot possibly serve the vast pool of undereducated adults at existing resource scales. The state and local subsidy for Community College of Philadelphia, for example, is now about \$50 million per year to address a population of well over 600,000 residents lacking college degrees. To highlight the unbalanced allocation of resources, this budget to serve the needs of those drowning in the economy represents less than 2 percent of \$3.2 billion expended by the School District of Philadelphia on K–12

education to serve the needs of the upstream population of learners one third of the size (approximately 200,000).



Third, the relatively low cost of community colleges has made them the default option for traditional, middle-class college-age learners who achieve significant savings in their first two years before transferring to more expensive four-year colleges to complete their degrees. Increasingly, community colleges serve the mainstream pipeline of learners entering maturity, leaving behind the countless adults in the drowning pool of the undereducated. Today 32 percent of community college learners reported that they were taking the next step in their education after recently graduating from high school, and 60 percent reported that they intended to transfer to a four-year

college upon graduation (Pearson Foundation 2011). While public subsidies provide a terrific bargain for traditional students at the threshold of maturity, they are severely limited, and thus will not scale in an effort to serve a broader population. In order to benefit from economies of scale, community colleges have had to centralize operations at discrete locations. The campus-based, full-time enrollment model adopted by most colleges is not appropriate for working learners. It is not a viable option for many working parents who cannot juggle the demands of family and low-wage employment along with a full course load that requires commute time on an inconsistent schedule. The part-time option of taking one or two courses a semester in such a system reduces financial aid and creates an eight- to ten-year pathway to an associate degree. Many learners cannot maintain their efforts over such a long timeframe, leading to low rates of retention and graduation.

Now for Something Completely Different: Innovation in Serving the Working Learner

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What might be the primary elements of a new approach? Innovation must provide a life jacket to address the key challenges confronting adult working learners:

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Challenge Area	Need	Proposed In
Time constraints	Balance education with working and parenting, allowing for self-paced learning based on students' particular strengths and weaknesses.	Use blended programs to neighborhood underutilized based organ
Financial constraints	Be affordable, scaling cost to income levels and allowing repayment dependent upon income.	Price tuition grant financ participants, repayment c subsidized s
Need for remediation	Provide self-paced reading, math and composition coursework required to provide working adults with skills and knowledge that they should have acquired in high school and sufficient to allow for effective participation in college-level courses.	Create open programs th learning and master fund composition learning. All school diplo the basis of preferred Gr
Navigation of higher education system	Assist students in navigating academic and financial aid applications and ongoing communications with college offices as well as providing academic and career counseling so learning can be tailored to students' strengths and rational expectations of application to the workforce.	Work with co (e.g., faith-b organization counseling s support gro and retentio
	Take into accounts the needs	

Youth-oriented college structure and culture	and life experience of adult learners in respect of adult learning pedagogy involving experiential, active learning that allows for integration with life and practical applications to work, family and community.	Design curri embrace and pedagogy.
Connection to the labor market	Connect 21st-century skills and knowledge competencies to career ladders that offer short- and long-term opportunities for employment and income growth.	Organize pro guide curric supports wc with commu connections upward mok

Innovation in Action

During the past five years, assisted by targeted investments from the Knight Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, I-LEAD, Inc., has created and implemented a unique initiative delivering higher education to working learners designed to address their challenge areas and meet their needs. The ACE (Achieve College Education) collaborative is an I-LEAD-led consortium of 14 participating organizations (11 community partners and two institutions of higher education). ACE represents one model that is responsive to the working learner and has demonstrated success: over 400 working learners have earned or are pursuing an associate's degree with a graduation rate of 70 percent.

The innovative strategy at the heart of ACE engages fully accredited higher education providers in partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to deliver accelerated associate degree programs directly in low-income neighborhoods. The participating CBOs (major social service providers and faith-based organizations) leverage existing educational facilities and community relationships to host classes, recruit students and provide success services that increase outreach, retention and graduation rates. I-LEAD serves as facilitator, forming the partnerships, coordinating operations, providing technical assistance to designated CBO staff members, and also sourcing and training faculty in curriculum content and adult learning pedagogy. The strategy demonstrates social entrepreneurship by engaging the program's educational partners to reinvest tuition resources with I-LEAD and the CBO partners to sustain the program financially, effectively scaling resources for all of the consortium participants as the program grows.

Challenge Area	Innovation
Time constraints	Localized, consistent c
Financial constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time student stat • Leverage existing CBO
Need for remediation	Basic skills and for-crec
Navigation of higher education system	Cohort model with succ provided by CBOs
Youth-oriented college structure and culture	Employ adult learning p

The ACE model can easily be replicated to serve communities lacking higher education achievement. Most importantly, the model does not require major policy changes or significant grant funding in order to begin services and to scale rapidly. The model relies instead on efficient deployment of excess capacity with the promise of creating sustainable value for all of the cooperating partners. In this way, programs can evolve from one small cohort and scale efficiently to serve hundreds within a particular community. Many community-based nonprofits (including schools purposed to secondary education) possess significant underutilized educational infrastructure such as computer labs, classrooms, auditoriums and other conference spaces. Because of insufficient funding for community programs and local educational services, most of this infrastructure lies dormant for significant periods of time, particularly during the evenings when adult learners seek access. Similarly, within low-income neighborhoods there are often underemployed master's-prepared adults who can be trained and engaged as adjunct faculty to serve nontraditional learners. Many of these professionals have powerful social connections to the communities needing higher education services. As a result, there is an ample pool of potential adjuncts with both financial and mission-centered motivation to participate in such community-education programs.

The critical catalyst for the ACE program model is a progressive accredited higher education institution willing to extend programming to nontraditional learners using the ACE program's innovative approach. Fortunately, because accreditation works on a statewide basis allowing institutions to provide service beyond their immediate campus, a social entrepreneur in a particular community will have a broad range of options in most communities in terms of finding an institution willing to innovate in order to reach the social mission of the program: to increase the number of adults who earn degrees. By investing tuition proceeds with community partners who work to recruit and provide success services to students, the model can begin to scale without centralized policy decisions or large deployments of capital, and without significant infrastructure costs to the participating institutions, which can rely on existing facilities, resources and personnel to get the program started. Program investments can then be timed to coincide with escalating tuition receipts to allow for extremely efficient growth patterns that invest resources only where the program is beginning to succeed. In this way, the ACE model has the potential to become a fluid additional resource supplementing the community college system, efficiently extending higher education services to working learners.

If, as Einstein famously remarked, insanity is repeating the same action but expecting different outcomes, then innovation creates reason's pathway: trying something

different while testing and consolidating gains. It is time for innovation in addressing both the long-range causes and the short-term symptoms of educational failure. Our river full is of working adult learners who need college degrees and often fail to keep their heads above water; communities must experiment with new models for higher education. ACE is a glimpse of how communities can reconfigure educational resources and local assets to serve the adult working learner in a sustainable model. Investing in the capacity of citizens with forty years of productive work ahead of them promises powerful returns.

David Castro is a graduate of Haverford College (1983) and the University of Pennsylvania Law School (1986). In 1993, after a successful career both in private practice and as a prosecutor, he was awarded a Fellowship in the Kellogg National Leadership Program. He devoted his Fellowship to the study of community leadership and its relation to improving quality of life. Based upon this work, in 1995 Mr. Castro founded I-LEAD, Inc., a school for community leadership development. In 2002, in recognition of his work on behalf of Pennsylvania communities, he was awarded an Eisenhower Fellowship, which he used to study leadership and its impact on economic and community development in Turkey. In 2005, at the behest of trainees and in partnership with Harcum College, Mr. Castro translated I-LEAD's leadership

development curriculum into an accredited Associate Degree (MSCHE) and initiated the community-based delivery of higher education for working adults through what is now the ACE (Achieving College Education) Program. As a result of this project, in 2009, Mr. Castro was named an Ashoka Fellow by the Ashoka Global Funds for Social Change. A teacher at heart, he is frequently consulted as a speaker, serving on panel discussions and contributing regularly to blogs via the Ashoka network and the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal*.

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