

Disrupting College: How Innovative Institutions Can Change Higher Education

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Boston College
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DISRUPTING COLLEGE:
HOW INNOVATIVE INSTITUTIONS CAN CHANGE HIGHER EDUCATION

Dissertation
by

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How Innovative Institutions Can Change Higher Education

by

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ABSTRACT

For decades, critics have been calling attention to the slow pace of change in higher education (Cohen & March, 1974; Kliwer, 1999; Menand, 2010; Murray, 2008). This pace is clearly at odds with the significant reform necessary to meet the rapidly changing needs of and demands upon the system. Despite the inertia of the past, it seems imperative that we find approaches to innovation that will facilitate increased college access and cost management. This study examined one organization—College Unbound—that identifies itself as a potential *disruptive innovation*, an innovation that meets the needs of an underserved population, with the potential to “disrupt” the way entire sector operates (Christensen, 1997).

Empirical applications of disruptive innovation theory to higher education are limited, and yet there is a strong rationale for its application to the challenge of increasing access and persistence. In an effort to increase understanding of how disruptive

innovation might impact higher education, this study looked at how the characteristics of College Unbound and its relationship to the external environment affected the potential capacity of the organization to disrupt the field of higher education.

One common characteristic of disruptive organizations is having a enough structural flexibility to respond to changing market and environmental needs (Christensen, 1997). At College Unbound, the primary pivot was a shift in the organization's target population, from full-time traditional-aged college students in the first three years of the program, to a model of educating adult learners. This transition occurred in response to both the external market, and to tighten the alignment between College Unbound's staff and internal resources.

College Unbound has also faced concerns from both internal and external audiences because of perceptions about quality. To address these concern, College Unbound adapted by changing its internal configuration, and its external partners and relationship to the external environment. Based on these findings, implications for disruption and innovation in higher education are discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

What drives the field of higher education toward reform and innovation?

Colleges and universities in the United States have been in a near-constant state of change since the inception of the first American colleges in the seventeenth century (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Throughout the ensuing time period, the goals of higher education have been a moving target, with changing expectations as to the purposes and goals of American higher education, questions about who should be able to participate in American higher education, and disagreement as to the standards to which the educational system is held.

One such standard—global competitiveness—has been a recent driver of a renewed interest in higher education reform. In response to concerns about global workforce competitiveness, President Obama issued a call to action to the nation, asking all Americans to attend at least one year of college in an effort to return the United States to the status as most educated nation in the world (Obama, 2009). Achieving this goal will require American colleges and universities to address significant barriers: most importantly, challenges related to improving access to college for all Americans, and reducing the cost of higher education, so we can afford—as a nation and as individuals—to take on the costs associated with this increase in access. This study examines one organization—College Unbound—that is attempting to solve exactly this challenge: increasing college access for first generation college students, while also redesigning the college model to address concerns about cost. College Unbound identifies itself as a *disruptive innovation*, an innovation that meets the needs of an unserved or underserved

population, with the potential to “disrupt” the way entire sector operates (Christensen, 1997). What can higher education—a sector that has been slow to recognize and adopt change—learn from this “disruptive” approach?

Focus of the Study and Theoretical Rationale

For decades, critics have been calling attention to the slow pace of change in higher education (Cohen & March, 1974; Kliwer, 1999; Menand, 2010; Murray, 2008). This pace is clearly at odds with the significant reform necessary to meet the rapidly changing needs of and demands upon the system. Despite the inertia of the past, it seems imperative that we find approaches that will facilitate increased college access as well as cost management. Unfortunately, existing literature on reform and innovation in higher education offers minimal guidance as to how to move forward. There is a large body of empirical literature about the innovative institutions formed during the 1960s (Grant & Riesman, 1978; Levine, 1980; Kliwer, 1999), but as will be detailed in chapter two, these works are limited in many respects, offering very little direction for today’s would-be higher education innovators. More contemporary works focused on higher education reform (Menand, 2010; Zemsky, 2009) offer advice on what systemic changes might be made, but are short on practical details as to how to achieve these goals. Even more vexing, few of these works offer more than a passing connection to the deep literature on organizational innovation, making it difficult to connect these examples to the theory in a way that makes it possible to reliably use them as models for future innovation.

Given a lack of strong theoretical models of innovation in the higher education literature, there has been growing interest in applying theory from the management literature to the higher education context. In particular, the writing of Christensen,

Anthony, and Roth (2004) and Kamanetz (2010) describing application of disruptive innovation in a higher education context shows promise. While empirical applications of disruptive innovation theory to higher education are still limited, there is a strong rationale for its application to the challenge of increasing access and persistence.

Disruptive innovation is defined as an innovation—including a product, service or business model—that is undesirable or unusable to existing consumers in mainstream markets, but is able to address the needs of those whose needs are unmet or are poorly met by the existing market (Christensen, 1997). Christensen, Johnson, and Rigby (2002) described two audiences for disruptive innovations: non-consumers and over-served consumers. They described non-consumers as a group whose needs are not met by the current mainstream market, and thus do not participate in that market. The second audience they identify is over-served consumers. These are individuals who participate in the current market, but who do not use all of the features of an existing product or service, often because they do not have the expertise needed to utilize all of the features. These two descriptions mirror the exact audiences we need to better serve in American higher education: To increase access, we must reach those who are not currently served by higher education: the non-consumers (Christensen et al., 2002). Research on college persistence as a function of student involvement (Astin, 1984), suggests that at least some students who drop out of college before graduating may fall into the over-served audience, not taking advantage of all available features (using their product-driven terminology) offered within higher education, such as mentorship and extracurricular programs (Christensen et al., 2002).

In addition to the strong conceptual fit with the goal of increasing college participation, disruptive innovation also addresses concerns about the cost of higher education. While most innovations—termed *sustaining innovations* by Christensen—lead to both increased quality and increased cost, a key characteristic of disruptive innovation is lower cost as compared to the alternative, often made possible by offering a simpler structure and fewer features (1997).

Disruptive innovation is also a desirable framework in the current context because of its inclusion of both organizational and environmental factors, and integration of these issues into a comprehensive theory. Inclusion of both of these factors is essential to analysis of change in higher education, given that existing change literature in higher education shows evidence of the impact of both internal and environmental factors on the success and failure of innovation (Kliwer, 1999; Levine, 1980).

While there is a limited amount of literature that has explored application of disruptive innovation theory to higher education, this work has largely been anecdotal (Archer, Anderson, & Garrison, 1999; Christensen, 1997; Kamanetz, 2010). Empirical work often looks retrospectively at large market trends in higher education, such as growth of the community college movement, without focusing on how these disruptive innovations are formed and fostered within institutions (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004; Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles, & Sadtler, 2006).

Given this context—revealing a gap in understanding of how disruptive innovations are formed and fostered within an institution—this study will take an in-depth look at a new, innovative college that was created specifically to meet the needs of first generation students and other underserved populations. This organization, College Unbound, was

selected based on its possibilities as a revelatory case (Yin, 2004). As College Unbound is a very new institution—with just one year in existence at the start of this project—it offers the opportunity to study a possible disruptive innovation from nearly the beginning of its existence. College Unbound is explicit in its desire to create disruptive innovation in higher education, and has also been recognized in the popular press as a potentially disruptive innovation (Kamanetz, 2010). With just a handful of organizations in higher education explicitly identified as potential disruptive innovations, this represents an unprecedented opportunity to research the emergent stage of a disruptive innovation as it occurs.

This case study analysis of a disruptive innovation in an emerging institution offers important contributions to the higher education literature, and has the potential of offering theory-based direction to higher education practitioners and policy makers. Theory-based tools for decision making may be of particular relevance at times when there is a shift in underlying environmental assumptions, which may render experience-based and historically-driven decision-making suspect (Hartley, 1994). Today is arguably a moment in history when the environment has made this type of shift. Since the transition of federal higher education subsidies from the institution to the student in the 1970s, higher education administrators have been increasingly compelled to address students from a market-based perspective, essentially as customers (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2005). Increased status of professionals responsible for addressing students as a market is evidenced by the growth of the enrollment management profession, which has reached the point where it now has its own professional organizations and graduate programs, and has built a powerful position in the university, often reporting directly to

the president (Kirp, 2003). While traditionally a primary social goal of higher education has been to prepare citizens that can challenge the government and participate in civic discourse (Gutmann, 1982), the rise of the student-as-consumer mentality has over time moved higher education away from socially-driven goals, and toward consumer-driven outcomes. Recently, the federal government has voiced concerns about consumer-driven, for-profit institutions that appear to be prioritizing enrollment and profits over positive outcomes for students, to the point of initiating undercover investigations of alleged abuses at these institutions (Field, 2010).

Regardless of how one views a market-driven landscape in American higher education, the acknowledgement of market forces is imperative for any contemporary understanding of how innovation develops in higher education. As a theory that encompasses market forces in addition to internal capabilities, disruptive innovation offers strong explanatory power in our current environment, potentially offering answers where analysis of our past decisions may not. As this study will examine how forces both internal and external to the organization impact organizational innovation, it will likely offer valuable insight for both practitioners and policy makers who are interested in both leading and responding to innovation in higher education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the development of a new, innovative college, and how internal and external factors both support and hinder the development of the organization and its goal of disrupting higher education to meet the needs of underserved consumers. Christensen et al. (2004) identify organizational characteristics and environmental conditions that affect an organization's theoretical capacity to disrupt.

While the qualitative nature of these characteristics and conditions precludes quantitative prediction, these factors do allow analysts to capture the potential capacity for an organization to disrupt. This capacity for disruptive innovation is what is assessed in the following research question:

- In an emerging disruptive higher education organization, how do the characteristics of the organization and its relationship to the external environment affect the potential capacity of the organization to disrupt the field of higher education?

Exploration of this main question was guided by the following sub-questions, which mirror key concepts explored in disruptive innovation theory, including issues of external environment and organizational characteristics (Christensen et al., 2004).

Organizational Characteristics

Christensen et al. (2004) identify three key types of characteristics that affect an organization's capacity to develop a disruptive innovation: resources, processes, and values. These concepts frame my sub-questions about the organization's internal characteristics:

- How do the organization's resources (e.g. people, finances) affect the organization's capacity for disruption?
- How do the organization's processes affect the organization's capacity for disruption?
- How do the organization's values affect the organization's capacity for disruption?

External Environment

Christensen et al. (2004) note the importance of considering both market-based forces, and non-market forces on a disruptive innovation. Their characterization of non-market forces as impacting both the ability of an organization to disrupt and the incentive for an organization to disrupt lead to the following sub-questions:

- How does the organization's interaction with the higher education market affect the organization's ability and incentive to disrupt?
- How do non-market forces (e.g. government funding, accreditation systems) affect the affect the organization's ability and incentive to disrupt?

Significance of the Study

When evaluated based on the standard of college access and participation, the United States has fallen behind. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, while Americans age 35 and older still rank among the most highly educated in the world, those aged 25 to 35 have fallen to tenth in the world in terms of college degree attainment (NCPPE, 2008).

The extent of this challenge becomes even clearer when examining college enrollment among first-generation college students, as compared to those whose parents hold at least a bachelor's degree. In 1999, only 54% of students whose parents completed high school but not college enrolled in college, and only 36% of those whose parents did not complete high school enrolled in college. This compares poorly to the 82% enrollment rate of students whose parents had graduated from college. Furthermore, first-generation status is negatively correlated with college enrollment, even when other factors including academic preparation are taken into account (Choy, 2001), suggesting

that the issue of disparities in K-12 education does not tell the whole story. Concern about first generation college students is not limited simply to generational characteristics, but is also correlated with race and income, with first generation college students more likely to also be Black or Hispanic, as well as from families in the lowest income bracket (Choy, 2001). In addition to these disparities in college enrollment, there is significant evidence that colleges are serving first-generation students less effectively when compared to other undergraduates. First generation college students who aspire to a bachelor's degree are less likely than their peers to persist in college after two years, and are less likely to obtain a degree (Choy, 2001). According to this data, not only do we need to do better in enrolling first-generation students into college, but we need to develop more effective ways of meeting their needs once they are in college in order to help them persist until graduation.

The goal of higher education for all Americans raises questions not just of access and persistence, but also of price and cost. In the past decade, paying for college has become more burdensome to low and middle-income families. (NCPPE, 2008). The net price of college for both public and private institutions has gone down marginally in the past five years, but this has not kept pace with decreases in average wages earned by Americans (College Board, 2009a). Even with financial aid, families with incomes in the lowest 20% of the population paid 55% of their income each year to send their children to college in 2008, an increase from 39% of income in 2000. Median income families paid 25% of their income to send their children to college, up from 18% in 2000 (NCPPE, 2008). The price of college is not rising just in relation to income; it is also rising as compared to the price of other goods and services, and has been for the past thirty years

(College Board, 2009a). Also, tuition is only one concern. Even students who have grants that cover full tuition often struggle to pay living expenses including room and board. (College Board, 2009a).

One factor in the rising price of college is the cost of doing business for our institutions of higher education. According to the Commonfund Institute's (2009) higher education price index, the operating costs of universities are rising faster than the consumer price index, a benchmark measure used to evaluate buying power in the general population. Drivers of the growing costs of higher education include the salaries of faculty, professional staff, and clerical staff, as well as the cost of fringe benefits (Commonfund Institute, 2009). This has continued to be the case, even as faculty compensation has not kept pace with the growth of salaries in other professional fields (College Board, 2009a).

These facts would seem to suggest that our current model of delivering higher education cannot remain tenable from a cost perspective. Furthermore, it is clear that the federal government cannot sustain increases in federal financial aid as the sole strategy to improve college affordability. In recent years, affordability has been decreasing for American college students even as federal aid for students has increased, including a 15% increase in 2008-2009. Eroding affordability can be partially attributed to decreases in private and state aid during this time, resulting in an overall 1% decrease in aid available to students (College Board, 2009b). To complicate matters, state appropriations for student aid have fluctuated over time in response to state budgetary needs, making this an unreliable long-term resource at best (College Board, 2009b).

It seems clear that if the American higher education system is to make significant strides toward equal access to college for all Americans, we will need innovative ideas that improve access and persistence for first generation college students, that also address growing concerns about cost and price. Yet, it may be a challenge to innovate our way to a solution, since innovation itself often causes increases in costs, as services and quality are improved (Christensen, 1997). For example, by increasing support structures for first generation students, without additional structural changes, we will likely also need to increase staffing and thus costs. It is here that a disruptive innovation may hold the most promise. Because disruptive innovations occur at the low end of a market, they have lower cost structures than their mainstream alternatives. Consequently, a disruptive innovation may have the potential to address both access and cost concerns.

Finally, studying disruptive innovation is of particular interest to the field, because the theory suggests that disruptive innovations, while initially introduced at the margins of a market, will eventually improve in quality to the point of “disrupting” the existing market. For higher education, this suggests that disruptive innovations developed to address the needs of underserved populations such as first-generation college students, may eventually disrupt the entire market, and offer benefits compelling to what we consider to be traditional college students. Given that questions of quality and cost are echoing across socioeconomic barriers, innovations that have the potential to impact the entire sector may be particularly relevant for study.

Definition of Terms

Given the cross-disciplinary nature of this study, combining concepts from both the higher education and management literatures, I have taken extra care to define terms that

may be common in one literature, but may have different meanings to those outside the discipline. Rather than present technical definitions from the literature, I endeavored to simplify these terms as much as possible, offering clear explanations without diluting the meaning of each term.

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined as used in the existing disruptive innovation theory, to provide consistency with the existing literature (Christensen, 1997; Christensen et al., 2004; Christensen & Overdorf, 2000):

- Disruptive innovation: An innovation—including a product, service or business model—that is undesirable or unusable to existing consumers in mainstream markets, but is able to address the needs of non-consumers and/or consumers at the low end of an existing market. As the disruptive innovation improves over time, it can overtake the dominant model, causing a disruption in the sector.
- Sustaining innovation: An innovation that improves the performance of an existing product, service, or business model, and thus moves an organization along an already established trajectory toward a higher level of quality, features, and/or cost.
- Business model: The process by which an organization organizes itself to deliver products and/or services, how it structures cost and price, to whom it offers its products and services, and how it offers said products and services.
- Emergent: An organization or strategy that evolves based on signals from the environment (as opposed to a deliberate organization or strategy).
- Resources: Tangible and intangible assets of an organization, including but not limited to people, financial resources, and equipment.

- Processes: The recurring tasks, patterns of interaction, methods of allocating resources, communicating and making decisions used within an organization.
- Values: In the context of disruptive innovation the term refers specifically to the criteria used to prioritize and allocate resources to opportunities.

The following terms are common in the economics and business literature, and are presented here in an effort to provide clarity for readers unfamiliar with these literatures, or who are not accustomed to applying these concepts to higher education:

- Consumer: In the most general terms, an individual who uses a product or service. In the context of this study, students are the consumers
- Market forces: Refers to all entities that have an impact on supply or demand in a given environment, including consumers (i.e. students) and competitors (i.e. other institutions).
- Non-market forces: Refers to all forces external to a given organization that are not part of the market. These typically include, but are not limited to social, political, technological and economic forces (Kotler & Armstrong, 2007).
- Environment: Refers to all forces external to a given organization, including market and non-market forces.

Finally, the following terms are taken from the higher education literature:

- Access: While traditionally referring only to the ability to enter higher education, I will use an expanded definition that additionally includes the ability to take advantage of higher education once there, and ultimately to persist through a higher education program. (Adelman, 2007)

- Persistence: The ability for a student to complete a degree program once that program has been started (e.g. to persist through to the end) (Astin, 1984).

Overview of the Study

This dissertation includes seven chapters. Chapter two is a review of the relevant literature on disruptive innovation theory, as well as some related theoretical constructs that will be used in the dissertation. Also, this chapter includes a review of the higher education innovation literature. Chapter three describes the research design and methodology in detail, offering a rationale for the methodology and design, as well as provides information about data collection and analysis, discusses issues of study reliability and validity, and address limitations of the study. Chapter four includes an overview of the case site, College Unbound, from historical and programmatic perspectives. Chapters five and six present research findings, and chapter seven discusses analysis and implications of the findings from both a theoretical and practical perspective, and offers direction for future research in this area.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

While there are many disparate definitions and approaches to the overlapping ideas of reform and innovation, this dissertation looks specifically at one approach to innovating—the creation of new institutions—and one theoretical framework from which to understand this approach to innovation—disruptive innovation theory. In order to form a basis from which to understand this phenomenon and theory, this chapter will look briefly at the small literature on reform driven by the creation of new institutions of higher education, and then will cover the extensive disruptive innovation literature. Review of the disruptive innovation literature will begin with a broad overview and summary of the theory—including what makes innovation disruptive and who is targeted through disruptive innovation—and then focus on use of the theory to understand the management and prediction of organizational behavior within a specific industry, critiques of the theory in the literature, and examples of the application of disruptive innovation theory to higher education and related sectors. Finally, the chapter concludes with a rationale for application of disruptive innovation theory to current challenges facing higher education.

Innovative Colleges: Understanding New Institutions as Drivers of Reform

While the call for change in higher education is significant, and there is broad agreement that changes in society dictate changes within the academy, higher education has remained slow to change (Murray, 2008). The literature on change in higher education points to the unique nature of higher education institutions as responsible for

this slow, or sometimes non-existent change (Baldrige, Riley, Ecker, & Curtis, 1978). Perhaps it is for this reason that the literature on innovation within higher education—mirroring the major reform movements in higher education—seems to focus on the creation of new institutions, rather than reform of existing organizations (Kliwer, 1999). The idea of creating new institutions of higher education as part of a reform effort can be traced back at least 100 years, to the founding of Reed College (Clark, 1970). In-depth documentation of the development of experimental institutions is rooted in the work of Alexander Meiklejohn. Meiklejohn (1932) forwarded the concept of an intentionally experimental institution, with his proposal for an Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. The Experimental College was designed to break down the fundamental structure of higher education, rethinking each aspect of the university. While Meiklejohn's experiment rapidly dissolved, his account serves as one of the first in-depth accounts of how an experimental institution can act as a catalyst for innovation within higher education, and how organizational factors may lead to failure of the innovation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the call for reform of higher education led to the creation of scores of new, innovative colleges (Kliwer, 1999). Over 500 new institutions were formed between the late sixties and mid seventies—at a time when many traditional colleges were facing economic hardship—many with the explicit belief that meeting the needs of new student populations required the development of new colleges (Mayhew, 1977). The opportunity to understand how these new and innovative colleges impacted the broader field of higher education is largely limited due to significant gaps in the literature. Much has been written about the new institutions created during the sixties and seventies, but this literature is characterized by non-

empirical and descriptive works focusing on single institutions, and fails to make connections across institutions or address implications for the larger field of higher education (Kliwer, 1999).

There are a limited number of studies that look across institutions, providing a broader look at the landscape of reform-movement colleges. MacDonald (1973) compiled the stories of five experimental colleges—Bensalem, Antioch Putney, Franconia, Old Westbury and Fairhaven—juxtaposing the dream that shaped the creation of each institution with a sobering account of each institution’s reality. The goal of this work is to show the challenges and successes of these institutions, but it leaves analysis of these challenges and successes to the reader. Drawing no connections between institutions, this work is ultimately of limited value to those seeking to draw broader conclusions about the studied institutions. Grant and Riesman’s (1978) *Perpetual Dream* is perhaps the most widely cited and most comprehensive cross-institutional analysis of innovative colleges. This influential work characterizes these institutions as either telic reforms—those that redefine the goals of higher education—or popular reforms, which attempt to change the process of education. Grant and Riesman’s descriptive work is insightful, and offers a sense of what made these institutions unique. They also offer a typology of how these institutions fit together in the college reform movement, which offers an important historical contribution to the literature. Unfortunately, Grant and Riesman stop short of providing a systematic analysis of how or why these institutions—and their accompanying innovations—succeed or fail. Thus, they offer inspiration, but not instruction, to future innovators.

Levine's (1980) *Why Innovation Fails* was the first attempt to address many of the questions lingering from the perceived failure of the 1960s reform movement colleges. This work presents a stage theory to describe the process that innovative institutions go through from establishment to termination. Unfortunately, Levine's work is limited both by his sample of institutions, as well as the scope of his theoretical constructs. Levine looked only at innovative institutions within the State University of New York at Buffalo, begging the question of how the unique characteristics of this one state institution may have colored his fairly narrow findings. Perhaps even more limiting, his institutionalization-termination model defines failure as, "a premature decline in the planned level of impact or influence of an innovation on the host organization" (p. 156). This definition is problematic because it presumes that innovative colleges are housed within a larger university or organization, giving the reader no ability to apply this model to freestanding innovative institutions. Levine's (1980) definition of failure also fails to acknowledge transmission of innovations across the field to other institutions, one way that innovations may survive, even when the institutions themselves cease to exist. Still, Levine's work offers some explanation of failure for these sub-institutions, with decreases in profitability and/or compatibility identified as most predictive. Levine defined profitability as the degree to which an innovation meets the needs of its parent institution, and compatibility as the degree to which an innovation avoids disturbing the boundaries of appropriateness in an institution. In essence, Levine would argue that 1960s innovations may have failed in part because waning tolerance for radical thinking in the late 1970s and the 1980s shrank the boundaries of appropriateness and compatibility among parent institutions, reducing tolerance for innovations that had

survived to that point, and making these innovations politically untenable. This is a cautionary tale for would-be innovators within larger institutions, but one with questionable extensibility given the limited scope of Levine's sample. That said, Levine's findings are similar to other analyses of power and political interests in higher education (Baldrige, 1971), indicating that Levine's (1980) findings may be extendable more broadly across institutions of higher education.

Kliewer (1999) attempted to address some of these gaps in the literature, looking across a broad range of institutions—similar to the approach of Grant and Riesman (1978)—while also attempting to understand drivers of success and failure—similar to Levine's (1980) work. Choosing from over 300 colleges that met her criteria—undergraduate colleges founded in the 1960s and 1970s reform movement—Kliewer (1999) narrowed this exhaustive list down to six institutions for in-depth case analysis: Hampshire College, The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, University of California Santa Cruz, and Evergreen State College. These institutions were selected with diversity in mind, and were recommended by a panel of higher education leaders, all with the goal of making Kliewer's findings more broadly applicable across higher education, especially important given shortcomings in the earlier literature.

Kliewer (1999) looked first across institutions to understand how innovative colleges remain innovative over time, identifying both facilitating and inhibiting factors. She noted that facilitating factors include the continued involvement of founding faculty members, an approach to faculty recruitment that emphasizes cultural fit, an administration that values and rewards innovation, and an organizational structure that is

flexible and flat. Inhibiting factors include being part of a public university system, cultural and demographic shifts in enrollment, and increasing student-faculty ratios.

Kliewer (1999) also looked at the survival of innovative colleges, examining factors that enhance the survival of these institutions. The author found survival of innovative institutions correlated with being part of a consortium or some larger group of institutions, with the ability to adapt to new realities and change direction, and even with a later date of founding. In response to the latter, Kliewer posited the idea that institutions founded later (limited of course to her pool of 1960s and 1970s institutions) may have learned from the mistakes of earlier institutions, explaining this survival trend.

While the collective literature on innovative colleges offers insights about a broad range of innovative institutions, little insight is provided about the successes of the actual innovations created and fostered within these distinctive organizations. Grant and Riesman (1978) offered a typology of their telic reforms, organizing them into neo-classical, aesthetic-expressive, communal-expressive, and activist-radical groupings. These groupings spoke to the broader societal reform efforts of the time period, but offer very little insight about how to understand new colleges in a contemporary context. Predictably, their proposal for next steps offered insight into one possible future for undergraduate education, but no insight into a legacy for innovation itself as we moved out of the 1970s.

Levine (1980) and Kliewer (1999) each offered thoughts on how to make innovative institutions durable. For Levine (1980), this is a story of political will whose ultimate recommendation for innovators is to stay within prescribed boundaries.

Kliwer's (1999) recommendations are for institutions to mirror those organization that have endured, by keeping and recruiting faculty that are committed to innovation, establishing systems that reward innovation, and developing affiliations and partnerships with other institutions. These combined recommendations offer some direction for leaders interested in building and sustaining innovative institutions, but offers little in the way of recommendations related to creating and maintaining innovative institutions that are able to transmit their innovations to the larger field of institutions.

In summary, Grant and Riesman (1978) presented a reform movement that is not simply interested in creating individual institutions that push the envelope, but rather a movement that seeks to rewrite our understanding of the field of higher education by growing innovations within these experimental institutions, and by extension use higher education as one resource to create broader reform in society. While the subsequent literature does an admirable job filling in gaps and questions inspired by the pioneering work of *The Perpetual Dream*, there is still a dearth of literature that helps us systematically understand how innovative colleges have and can be incubators and champions for innovative ideas that ultimately will diffuse throughout higher education, impacting not just one institution, but the entire field, and ultimately the nation.

Disruptive Innovation

One possible reason why past literature on innovation in higher education fails to offer significant explanatory power is because today's environment is significantly different than in the past. Today, market-based and technological forces are significant drivers of the external environment for higher education, as evidenced by increasing

efforts focused on student recruitment, and growth of online education and other technological changes. While some work looks at organizational explanations for success or failure (Grant & Riesman 1978; Kliewer, 1999), and others look at environmental explanations (Levine, 1980), there are no recent studies of higher education reform that reflect the changing markets, both mainstream and marginalized, and recent technological drivers of change. Disruptive innovation focuses on these environmental factors, and thus offers possible value to those studying reform in higher education.

The theory of disruptive innovation was forwarded by Christensen (1997) in his widely read business book *The Innovators Dilemma*. Christensen sought to understand why highly successful companies with a history of success at the forefront of their industry often lost out in the end to smaller, newer companies with fewer resources and capabilities. Christensen was interested in finding a theory-driven explanation for these failures, rather than simply chalking it up to luck or randomness.

In studying industries where he saw these dynamics at play, Christensen (1997) found a key difference between innovations that solidified the strength of established firms, and innovations where firms new to a market were more successful than established firms. Christensen called the first type of innovations, those that solidify the firm, sustaining innovations. Sustaining innovations take an existing product, service, or process in an organization and enhance it in a way that improves its quality as measured by the traditional values of the industry. In contrast, a disruptive innovation often starts out as inferior to mainstream options as measured by the mainstream. However, the disruptive innovation is still successful because it meets the needs of a non-traditional

consumer, who does not share the values of the mainstream, and has needs that are met by the disruptive innovation.

To clarify these concepts, Christensen (1997) used the disk drive industry as an example. He noted that during the early era of the personal computer, 5 ¼ -inch drives were the norm, and companies worked tirelessly to innovate in ways that increased the amount of information that could be stored on these devices. During this time, there were a number of sustaining innovations related to the density of data that could be stored on a drive. At the same time, these companies were ignoring the idea of producing physically smaller drives, largely because their customers were most interested in storage capacity, and physically smaller drives offered less storage. What these drive manufacturers failed to foresee was the growth of the slim-form desktop and laptop computer markets. As these markets grew, demand grew for smaller hard drives that would fit in these machines. Christensen argued that existing manufacturers failed to anticipate this need because they were busy serving a different, more mainstream market, and did not understand that the values of this emerging market would be different. Therefore, entrant manufacturers with less experience were able to innovate in a different way, what Christensen called a disruptive innovation, to meet the needs of this new audience.

Innovating For Whom?

A key concept that Christensen (1997) conveyed is that a disruptive innovation is not necessarily the most radical. In his example, the technology used in smaller disk drives is no different than that in larger drives. Instead, the concept of disruption describes changes to the market more so than to the innovative product or service. This

market emphasis offers a potentially important lens through which to view higher education at a time when schools are increasingly consumer-focused.

Christensen et al. (2002) identified two audiences for disruptive innovations: non-consumers and over-served consumers. Christensen et al. (2002) described non-consumers as a group whose needs are not met by the current mainstream market, and thus do not participate in that market. They identified a number of reasons why non-consumers might not be participants in the existing market: lack of financial means to participate, lack of expertise or knowledge needed to participate, or need for a non-standard place or time to participate. Consequently, disruptive innovations meet the needs of the non-consumer population by being simpler and easier to use, less expensive, and more flexible in terms of time and place.

The second audience that Christensen et al. (2002) addressed are over-served consumers. These are individuals who participate in the current market, but who do not use all of the features of the existing product or service, either because they do not value these features, or because they do not have the expertise needed to utilize all of the features. These individuals would be served equally well—or perhaps better—by a simpler version of the product or service, but often this is not available. Thus, a disruptive innovation meets the needs of this audience by offering something simpler that is more aligned to the values of the under-consuming market.

How Disruptive Innovation is “Disruptive”

While Christensen’s (1997) disruptive innovation occurs initially at the margins of an industry, the end game is of course disruption of the larger, more mainstream

market. Christensen explained that this happens through two mechanisms, as illustrated in figure 1: First, the values of the mainstream market may change over time to more closely mirror the values of the non-consumer. Put another way, this segment of the market grows to consume the previously dominant segment. Looking back at Christensen's example of the disk drive market, we can see how over time laptops and smaller computers have replaced larger desktop computers, and thus the market for smaller disk drives eclipsed the market for larger drives. Second, Christensen argued that over time, the disruptive innovation goes through its own process of improvement, eventually reaching the point where quality and features meet the needs of the mainstream market. Again, using disk drives as an example, the smaller drives that initially held only a limited amount of data eventually improved to the point of holding enough data to satisfy the mainstream audience, and indeed today hold significantly more data than their larger predecessors, easily meeting the storage needs of the mainstream computer user.

Adner (2002) reframed this idea from an economic perspective, noting that as mainstream products and services add sustaining innovations over time, the marginal utility of these innovations to the consumer decreases, even as the cost and quality of the product or service increases. From this perspective, Adner reinforced Christensen's (1997) idea that mainstream products in mature markets offer more quality and features than many consumers need, creating an ever-larger population of over-served consumers, and setting the stage for a disruptive innovation to occur.

Predicting Disruption

Christensen (2006) asserted that through careful research, his theory of disruptive innovation moves past the descriptive toward a normative theory. Put differently, he believes that by using both inductive and deductive reasoning, his theory can be further refined to improve our ability to not only label innovations as sustaining or disruptive after the fact, but also to predict when an innovation will be disruptive. Govindarajan and Kopalle (2006) constructed and tested a disruptive innovation scale, and believe the instrument is capable of predicting relative likelihood of disruption among a group of organizations, but not go as far as to offer a yes or no prediction for a single organization that is attempting to disrupt an industry.

In an attempt to highlight how the theory in its current form has been of predictive use, Christensen (2006) pointed to four examples where disruptive innovations were predicted in the literature before the disruption occurred. It is important to note, however that these innovations occurred were all technological innovations, raising the question of whether disruptive innovation in services or business models can be accurately predicted. This point is reinforced by Markides (2006), who called for additional exploration into the differences between product, service, and business model innovations.

Environmental factors for predicting disruption. Christensen, Anthony, and Roth (2004) point toward an analysis of both market-based and non-market factors in an effort to predict disruption in a given market. By identifying nonconsumers and overshot consumers in a given market, it is then possible to look for organizations that are trying to reach out to these key populations. They argue that it is possible to identify these

dynamics in any market by looking for either a high rate of growth among an emerging market, or a high level of activity among a specific audience within a market (e.g. students, small business owners, developing countries). Christensen et al. emphasize the importance of not looking at the size of this emerging market, but only at the growth rate. This is because at the emerging stage of disruption, actual market size might be quite small, but growth is likely to happen rapidly. Schmidt (2004) looked at evaluating existing products in the marketplace to understand the points at which an existing market is ready for disruption. He theorized that if existing products overshoot the market in traditional attributes but undershoot in secondary attributes, one might predict disruption that emphasizes the secondary attributes of products while offering less quality in terms of the current market's primary attributes.

Christensen et al. (2004) also pointed to non-market environmental factors—specifically government and regulatory agencies—as an important consideration in predicting disruptive innovation. Christensen et al. used a framework that examines both motivation and ability to disrupt. By mapping the challenges to disruption (i.e. ability) and the incentives to disrupt (i.e. motivation), one will have a greater understanding of how non-market forces impact the potential for disruptive innovation in a given industry. In addition, Christensen et al. recommended examining the actions being taken to change this landscape, and if these actions will create a more favorable environment for disruptive innovation. Christensen et al. cautioned against the simplistic view that less regulation is more favorable to innovation, and instead pushed toward a more nuanced evaluation of non-market forces.

Organizational factors for predicting disruption. Even if a given industry or market is primed for disruptive innovation, this does not guarantee that a specific organization is capable of taking advantage of this situation and actually disrupting the given market. Christensen et al. (2004) offered a model to examine the capacity of an organization to disrupt the market. They looked at three key elements in this analysis: resources, processes, and values, asking and answering the following questions:

1. Does a firm have or can it marshal the resources required to attack an opportunity?
2. Do the firm's processes effectively and efficiently facilitate it doing what needs to be done?
3. Do the firm's values allow it to prioritize one opportunity over other options on its plate? (p. 32)

Managing Disruptive Innovation

While there may not be a clear consensus in the literature on whether disruptive innovation can be predicted, there is a general acceptance of the idea that organizations can be designed and managed in ways that enable and encourage the capacity for disruptive innovation. Christensen and Raynor (2003) forwarded a prescription for developing organizations with a strong likelihood for disruption through a synthesis of the broader management literature—addressing markets and consumers, scope and size of the innovative initiative, commoditization and value chains, strategy development, and financing—all from the perspective of enabling disruptive innovation. While interesting to the prospective innovator, they presented little empirical evidence that managers might be able to harness disruptive innovation within an existing company. Yu and Hang

(2009) addressed this point in a comprehensive review of the disruptive innovation literature, synthesizing and organizing literature in support of Christensen and Raynor's (2003) belief that disruptive innovation, while more likely to occur in new entrants, can be managed in both new and established firms. Yu and Hang (2009) accomplished this by citing both the literature showing many examples of disruptive innovations in organizations new to the market (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Henderson & Clark, 1990), and also some examples where disruptive innovations occur within established organizations (Ahuja & Lampert, 2001; Hill & Rothaermel, 2003; Paap & Katz 2004; Rothaermel, 2001). However, Yu and Hang (2009) did note that the large body of literature on innovation research points to a correlation between smaller business size and increased innovation effectiveness. For this reasons, they advocate specifically for Christensen and Raynor's (2003) recommendation that larger firms set aside smaller autonomous business units from which to create disruptive innovation.

Christensen, Johnson and Horn (2008) further clarified the differences between the types of teams well-poised to create disruptive innovation as opposed to those suited for sustaining innovation. The authors made a distinction between lightweight teams, those where members are representative of their functional areas, and heavyweight teams, where members bring their functional expertise but transcend their functional interest and representation. Lightweight teams are well suited for developing innovative projects that sustain the current trajectory, but are poorly suited to create disruptive innovation. In contrast, heavyweight teams that are able to move past their individual functional mindsets and interests have a better chance of avoiding what the authors term

architectural barriers: constraints that force the team to create something that continues to meet the interests and parameters of existing functional silos within the organization.

Other researchers also offer ideas as to how disruptive innovation may be encouraged or hindered. Henderson (2006) noted that managers are often socialized and professionalized in the same ways, leading them to serve established markets—and therefore prioritize sustaining innovations—to the detriment of disruption. In a related point, Govindarajan and Kopalle (2006) noted that the typically short-term incentive plans of senior managers prevents them from taking the long view needed to see the value in disruptive innovations. Hogan (2005) recommended separating resources into specific areas for developing sustaining innovations vs. disruptive innovations as one possible way to overcome the errors in resource allocation caused by management bias toward sustaining innovations.

Critiques of Disruptive Innovation Theory

While disruptive innovation has captured the imagination of the popular business press, the theory has also come under scrutiny in some circles (Yu & Chang, 2009). Chief among these concerns is the name of the theory. Schmidt and Druehl (2008) argued that the concept of disruption in common usage is quite different than how Christensen has used the term. Christensen (2006) ceded this point, but also acknowledges that the already broad use of the term makes this point largely academic, since it would be difficult to rename the theory. Among the more vocal critics of disruptive innovation theory is Markides (2006) who argued that while innovation of products, services, and business process share some commonalities, they also have key

differences that are not addressed by disruptive innovation theory and need to be articulated in the literature. Markides (1998) also raised concerns about established companies that implicitly value disruptive innovations over sustaining innovations. He argued that often the best course of action is for established companies to ignore disruptive forces. Christensen (2006) refuted the second of Markides' critiques, noting that while action is not always warranted, analysis of the situation with sound theory is always an appropriate action. Christensen also noted that Markides' underlying assumption that a firm's goal is survival may not be universally accurate.

Applying Disruptive Innovation Theory to Higher Education

With initial application of disruptive innovation theory to the high-tech sector (Christensen, 1997), it is not immediately obvious that the theory would be relevant to higher education. However, there is a limited amount of literature that addresses the possibility of disruptive innovation in higher education, as well additional literature that speaks to disruptive innovation in related fields.

Higher Education Examples

Christensen (1997) used higher education examples in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, noting that in-house corporate training facilities are disruptive relative to traditional graduate business schools, that Internet-based distance education is disruptive relative to campus-based education, and that custom digital textbooks are disruptive relative to traditional textbooks. While these are compelling examples, Christensen merely lists these in a table, and leaves it up to the reader to determine why these examples are disruptive.

Christensen et al. (2004) used higher education as an explanatory case study in their explanation of how to predict disruption in a given field. They assert that disruption is under way in higher education, and will lead to widespread reduction in the cost of higher education and dramatically increased participation. The examples that Christensen et al. point to with this assertion are community colleges, for-profit institutions, and corporate training programs. These examples push at the boundaries of traditional higher education, and Christensen et al. argued that their hallmarks of serving nonconsumers and overshot consumers, lower cost structures than traditional institutions, accessibility to those who may not have the credentials or expertise to attend traditional institutions, and rapid growth make these schools and programs textbook examples of disruptive innovation.

Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles and Sadtler (2006) took a more in-depth look at an innovation in the higher education setting. Specifically, they looked at community colleges, arguing that these two-year institutions are disruptive innovations. As evidence, the authors pointed to the fact that community colleges offer a simpler product than traditional four-year institutions, serving the needs of consumers who might be either over-served by traditional higher education, or perhaps are unable to access traditional higher education for reasons of cost, time, or preparedness. Christensen et al. (2006) noted that by funneling students into the community college system, states have been able to free up resources: they have been able to reduce the shortage of housing at four-year public institutions, as well as reduce the need for higher level professors to teach introductory and remedial courses that can be taught in a more cost-effective manner at the community college level. The authors noted the high percentage of students served by

community colleges, 44% at the time of publication, as providing some evidence that community college is truly a disruptive innovation, having gained significant market share as compared to traditional undergraduate colleges.

Archer et al. (1999) offered a suggestion of how to foster disruptive innovation in higher education, with a proposal for how to introduce an innovation such as online distance learning in a traditional university setting. The authors indicated a belief that while disruptive innovation was originally applied as a corporate model, it does have explanatory power in the higher education setting. They suggested using departments of continuing education as incubators for disruptive innovation in higher education, and presented a case study of the University of Alberta. Archer et al. expressed some concerns about how distribution of power in traditional higher education settings may hinder disruptive innovations, but concluded that continuing education departments offer shelter from these challenges and offer potential for disruptive innovation. The authors argued that this approach to introducing a disruptive innovation will allow traditional universities to begin introducing new ideas that are able to cause market disruptions, allowing these traditional institutions to survive, and perhaps thrive, among disruption.

Other Examples in Education

Christensen et al. (2006) wrote about online classes in high schools as a disruptive innovation. They note that in order for these innovations to be disruptive, they must cater to non-consumers. That is, the courses offered online must be in areas that either cannot be met by the traditional classroom teacher, or are not delivered in a traditional setting. Christensen et al. (2008) built upon this, writing about computer-assisted individualized

education as an innovation to secondary education in their book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. This book is notable as the most in-depth account of disruptive innovation in education to date. The authors applied disruptive innovation in a predictive way to the challenges of secondary education, preparing a compelling argument for their vision of how computer-assisted individualized learning will be disruptive to mainstream education. Of note is an in-depth discussion about how to predict the timing of adoption of innovations by measuring market saturation across time and extrapolating into the future, although it is unclear that this approach has merit outside of technology-driven innovations.

Also of interest is Christensen et al.'s (2008) analysis of the challenges faced by public secondary schools as they attempt to innovate. The authors admitted that large public systems may face challenges adopting innovations, and that the adoption process may not mirror that of the corporate setting, while also offering suggestions to school leaders regarding the management of the innovation process. A central theme is that to enable disruptive innovations in schools, leaders should assign dedicated teams to these projects, where allegiance is primarily to the innovation, and not to departmental silos. Similarly, the authors called for charter schools to be test beds for disruptive innovation, but caution that too often charter schools reinforce the status quo, rather than innovate in a way that is disruptive. They implored funders to ensure that charter and pilot schools innovate in ways that traditional schools are unable, as this is the primary justification for having these types of schools.

Other Social Sector Examples: Disrupting Healthcare

For critics concerned that disruptive innovation is only applicable to product development in the corporate sector, Christensen (1997) offered a number of social sector examples, in addition to above-cited education examples, including a number of innovations from healthcare. These examples include nurse practitioners as disruptive to medical doctors, and outpatient clinics and in-home care as disruptive to hospitals. Christensen et al. (2006) looked at MinuteClinics as a disruptive innovation as compared to traditional doctor visits. They noted that this simpler, more convenient product introduced little that would be considered radically innovative, yet proved nonetheless to be disruptive, growing at an enormous pace. Christensen, Bohmer, and Kenagy (2000) looked broadly at how systems advances can impact healthcare, and the role of physicians and nurse practitioners in this system. Christensen, Grossman and Huang (2008) offered an even more detailed analysis, looking at disruption in hospitals, in physician practice, and in the treatment of chronic illness. The broad take-away from this work for the purposes of this review is providing additional support for the idea that disruptive innovation theory is applicable across sectors and types of innovation.

Critiques of Applying Market-Based Models to Higher Education

Observers have sounded the alarm bells about the growing corporatization of American higher education. Like corporations, institutions of higher education have taken on a view of their work that involves workers that make things, products to sell, and consumers to purchase and consume, essentially adopting a market-based perspective (Bok, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Washburn, 2005). These critics offer a number of compelling

arguments as to why this push toward a market-driven model is less than ideal. Bok (2003) argued that the corporate viewpoint interferes with the forces that drive institutions of higher education to standards of excellence, instead pushing toward standards set by the student-as-consumer.

The marketization of the student recruitment and admissions process was jumpstarted in the early 1970s, when federal legislation shifted financial aid from the institution to the individual student (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2005). Proponents argued that this shift would institute market-based discipline among institutions, and among other benefits reduce costs, a goal that has never been realized (Slaughter & Rhoades). At the same time, admissions directors began to shift their own thinking toward a market-based, corporate orientation. The idea of enrollment management—advocating involvement in nearly every aspect of what happens within a university, as long as the corporate-style manager perceives the area to have influence over students’ desire to attend the institution—was developed in the mid-1970s at Boston College (Kirp, 2003). This thinking is based on the idea that student recruitment is essentially the same as corporate marketing, and thus advocates the kind of market-based consideration that is *de rigueur* in the corporate world, with influence over product development, branding, pricing and more. Enrollment management has emerged as a growing profession, replete with its own professional organizations and graduate programs, and has built a powerful position in the university, often reporting directly to the president (Kirp, 2003).

Critics of marketing influences in higher education are also concerned about the impact of consumerism on the curriculum. There is a national trend occurring where universities are systematically trimming traditional humanities subjects like history,

philosophy, and religion, and expanding professional programs that students are demanding (Washburn, 2005). This is of concern because this type of utilitarian education may prepare career men and women, but does not meet the traditional social goals of higher education to prepare citizens that can challenge the government and participate in civic discourse (Gutmann, 1982). Put another way, allowing a market orientation to dictate the future of higher education may facilitate the preparation of students to live in a corporate, capitalist society, but to the detriment of preparing them for participation in a democratic society.

Kirp (2003) saw market-driven institutions making decisions about faculty and curriculum based on concerns about rankings data and other media-driven sources of legitimacy. Little care is taken to build a balanced faculty for teaching purposes. In fact, Kirp argued, there is a growing incentive to recruit a superstar faculty cohort with homogenous, specialized research interests in order to attract a community of these superstars. In extreme cases, undergraduate students may not encounter a tenured professor in the classroom until their senior year of college, if at all. Often, adjuncts teach freshman introductory courses that are seen by tenured faculty as least desirable, leaving the least experienced faculty members teaching the students who need the most support: students who are just transitioning to college (Kirp, 2003).

While the disruptive innovation literature does not specifically address concerns about applying this market-driven theory to higher education, there are some characteristics of disruptive innovation that may implicitly address these concerns. Of central importance is the concept that disruptive innovations meet the needs of non-mainstream consumers, and by extension address consumer values outside of the standard

value system of the market (Christensen, 1997). One might argue, therefore, that application of disruptive innovation theory to the field of higher education may provide a necessary counterpoint to dominant market-based values that are threatening traditional higher education, rather than a reinforcement of market values. Still, it will be important for future literature in this area to explicitly acknowledge and address concerns about consumerism in higher education.

Disruptive Innovation in Higher Education: Directions for Research

While few have called specifically for disruptive innovations to change the landscape of higher education, there has been some interest in how innovative new institutions can reform the field. Tagg (2005) called for the formation of charter colleges as the legacy of experimental colleges. While he does not use the disruptive innovation language, his concept mirrors the characteristics of disruptive incubators: these colleges would be created within existing universities, but have only loose ties to the parent organization. Tagg noted that it is not enough to simply create innovative institutions, but rather we must commit to a rigorous plan of research to help us understand the successes and failures, and facilitate adoption of these changes in other institutions.

Meeting the Needs of a Broader Student Population Through Disruptive Innovation

If we are to address the gaps in attendance and persistence of nontraditional and first-generation college students as discussed earlier in this paper, a multi-pronged approach is likely to be more effective than simply one strategy. Disruptive innovation has been presented as a construct, because of the striking parallels between the needs of nontraditional and first-generation students and the characteristics of disruptive

innovation. For example, Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) found that older adult students often do not take advantage of the full range of services offered by the university. Students reported that these services, although needed, were not utilized because they were not available at times when students were able to access them. These findings closely match the profile of Christensen et al.'s (2002) over-served consumers. While this term may seem counterintuitive for this group that is not succeeding, it fits of the disruptive innovation profile of a consumer group that does not take advantage of all services because of a need to access these services in nontraditional places and at nontraditional times. These students also reported less campus involvement because they were not confident about what was expected of them in the university setting (Tones et al., 2009). This also lines up with the consumer market for a disruptive innovation, made up of those that do not have the skills or knowledge to utilize the product or service.

Disruptive innovation also seems to be a fit from a market perspective when looking at first generation college students. With significantly lower enrollment rates than their peers whose parents have undergraduate degrees (Choy, 2001), first generation college students fit Christensen et al.'s (2002) definition of non-consumers. Also, this group places different values on a college education, being much more likely than their peers to prioritize college due to increased career and economic opportunities, rather than due to other intrinsic or extrinsic motivators. This mirrors Christensen et al.'s (2002) assertion that disruptive innovations meet the needs of non-consumers by meeting the needs of a different set of values.

While the fit between the goals of innovating to meet the unique needs of nontraditional and first-generation college students and the characteristics of disruptive

innovation point to a need for further exploration, other characteristics of disruptive innovation may raise some concern. Specifically, Christensen (1997) made the point that disruptive innovations are initially of lower quality than the traditional product or service by traditional measures. It will be important for future research to better understand the social implications of how this dynamic of providing a product with lower quality—albeit as measured by a traditional value system—to some of our most at risk students plays itself out, and to be vigilant to possible inequities introduced by this dynamic.

Disruptive Innovation as a Mechanism for Reducing Cost and Price in Higher Education

As noted in chapter one, cost and price have become a significant concern in higher education (NCPPE, 2008). The cost-related characteristics of disruptive innovation may provide a mechanism to disrupt these increasing costs and the related increases in the price of higher education. Christensen (1997) noted that sustaining innovations lead to increases in price over time, as the complexity, quality and features of a product or service increase. Over time, both cost and quality may extend past the needs and ability of the mainstream market to pay for the product or service.

This dynamic may mirror the current state of traditional higher education, where decades of sustaining innovations and improvements have created institutions that excel at educating the so-called traditional college student, but at a cost that is unsustainable in the long term. In these instances, disruptive innovation theory would predict that many consumers will continue to participate in the mainstream market, until an acceptable alternative to this market becomes available. In these cases, a disruptive innovation

would provide a simpler, lower cost option that better meets the needs of a growing segment of the market. Over time, the disruptive innovation would improve to the point of offering sufficient value to the mainstream market (Christensen, 1997). Given structural challenges in traditional higher education that prevent a straightforward approach to cost and price reduction (College Board, 2009a), a disruptive innovation may be a reasonable vehicle to achieve these reductions.

Disruptive Innovation as a Tool for Understanding Higher Education Innovation

In addition to the fit between target populations and the concepts of non-consumers and over-served consumers, disruptive innovation as a theoretical model offers educational researchers the possibility of both prescriptive and predictive uses (Christensen et al., 2008). With concerns that the higher education innovation literature does not offer much in the way of explanatory power regarding the successes and failures of innovative institutions (Kliwer, 1999), disruptive innovation theory could prove a useful construct in explaining at least some of these phenomena.

Christensen et al. (2008) expressed a belief that through application of disruptive innovation theory to various settings including education, there will be value added in both opportunity to empirically reinforce the theory, by finding examples where the theory works well, and to refine the theory, by understanding the places where the theory does not work, and can therefore be adjusted and made more accurate. Given the very limited number of applications of disruptive innovation to higher education, and the absence of robust organizational studies, there is significant opportunity to solidify the

literature by both strengthening and refining disruptive innovation theory as it applies to higher education.

CHAPTER THREE

Design of the Study

This study examines one institution's efforts to innovate in a way that disrupts—that is, transforms the environment—of higher education in the United States. Underlying this study is a belief that disruptive innovation theory may hold explanatory power for reform currently underway in higher education, and perhaps more importantly, may offer insight and understanding to those who seek to transform higher education in the future. As detailed in chapter two, while the literature offers examples of disruptive innovation in higher education, there are no contemporary, in-depth studies of disruptive innovation in higher education that seek to examine how the process of disruptive innovation happens within an organization.

This chapter presents the study design and offers rationale for my approach to this research project. First, I review the research questions presented in chapter one. Next, I outline the design and methodology of the study, the rationale for selecting a single qualitative case study design, and a description of the site—College Unbound—that I have selected. I follow this with a discussion about defining my unit of analysis, which is in turn followed by a detailed description of how I collected and analyzed my data. Finally, I address issues of reliability and validity, as well as limitations of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study, as articulated in chapter one, are:

Primary question

- In an emerging disruptive higher education organization, how do the characteristics of the organization and its relationship to the external environment

affect the theoretical capacity of the organization to disrupt the field of higher education?

Sub-questions related to organizational characteristics

- How do the organization's resources (e.g. people, finances) affect the organization's capacity for disruption?
- How do the organization's processes affect the organization's capacity for disruption?
- How do the organization's values affect the organization's capacity for disruption?

Sub-questions related to external environment

- How does the organization's interaction with the higher education market affect the organization's ability and incentive to disrupt?
- How do non-market forces (e.g. government funding, accreditation systems) affect the organization's ability and incentive to disrupt?

Research Design and Methodology

In an effort to strengthen our understanding of how the characteristics of higher education institutions and their environments impact innovation within institutions, I conducted a case study of College Unbound, a small undergraduate program based in Providence, Rhode Island that began operations in Fall 2009. College Unbound founders are explicit in their desire not only to create an innovative college, but to create a disruptive innovation that will impact the larger field of higher education.

There are many reasons for selecting a qualitative case method for this study. First is the fit between the questions being asked and the case study method. Yin (2009) notes

that a case study is well suited to answering explanatory “how” questions that examine “operational links needing to be traced over time” (p. 9). In this project, the questions at hand require an understanding of interactions both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment, which are examples of the operational links to which Yin (2009) refers. Yin (2009) also notes that while an experimental design may be appropriate to answer some types of “how” questions, experimental design requires the researcher to be able to manipulate the behavior events in question. This type of manipulation is neither possible nor desirable in this instance, strengthening the decision to use a case study approach.

A case study is also an appropriate choice because of the bounded but interconnected nature of the questions being posed. Merriam (2009) explains that a case is, by definition, a bounded system. That is, where the object of the study is a “unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 40). In this instance, the questions specifically address the characteristics of one organization, College Unbound, making a case study approach a strong fit. While the questions do address the environment surrounding the organization, it is important to note that the environment is only examined in relation to its impact on and interaction with the organization, reinforcing the bounded nature of this study.

In addition to strong fit with the research questions, I also selected the case study method because of its fit with the nature of the phenomenon in question—disruptive innovation in higher education—and the gaps in the literature related to disruptive innovation in higher education. Yin (2009) notes that case study design is appropriate in situations where the researcher is studying a “contemporary phenomenon in depth,” and

where “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). An in depth study is relevant in this circumstance, both because the research questions dictate a need for depth, and also because the existing literature on disruptive innovation in higher education has a gap related to in-depth empirical studies, as identified in chapter two. Further, Hartley (1994) notes that in studies of organizational processes that are highly contextual—such as innovation—it is difficult to disentangle the phenomenon and context. Case study method allows us to study the phenomenon at hand in context, eliminating the need to generate this separation artificially.

Rationale for Case Selection

Stake (2010) differentiates between intrinsic cases—those that are studied because of a particular interest in the specific case—and instrumental cases that are studied because they offer insight into a broader issue. In this instance, selection of College Unbound is primarily for instrumental purposes. That is, the primary purpose of this study is to better understand the broader phenomenon of disruptive innovation in higher education. However, the work of College Unbound, and their goal of improving the college experience for underserved populations, is also of substantive interest.

Yin (2009) notes that there are a number of rationales for selecting a single case study design, including selection of a revelatory case. Yin describes a revelatory case as one where “the investigator has access to a situation previously inaccessible to scientific observation.” (p. 49). College Unbound falls into that category because of its unique status as an emerging disruptive innovation, named in the popular literature (Kamenetz, 2010). While historical analysis of disruptive innovations in higher education has been conducted (Christensen et al., 2004), there are no examples in the literature of emerging

disruptive innovations in higher education, likely because disruptive innovation in higher education is often not identified until much later in the innovative process when the innovation has reached some level of market saturation. While historical analysis of these innovations has been an effective tool for understanding the types of organizations that have been successful at disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997), these analyses have generally ignored the “how” questions that this study addresses and that is particularly suited to a single-case study design.

The College Unbound case is also of interest because of what it is not. Yin (2009) indicates that a case may be selected because it is an extreme or unique case. In the area of disruptive innovation in higher education, the majority of contemporary examples in the literature fit one profile: for-profit institutions that deliver higher education through an online or distance model. College Unbound, as a non-profit, residence-based institution, offers the opportunity to examine disruptive innovation without unintentionally intertwining the issues of for-profit and online education. This is important as neither for-profit nor online education is considered the norm in American higher education.

Finally, College Unbound was selected because of the level of access offered by the institution. Yin (2009) indicates that access is often a primary factor in choosing a specific case for study. In this instance, College Unbound has offered a very high level of access to interact with staff and students at both public events and private meetings, and has expressed a strong willingness to facilitate access to institutional partners. This level of openness was critical to fully understanding the organization, and is thus a strong rationale for selecting College Unbound as a single case study.

Challenges Related to the Unit of Analysis

Yin (2009) indicates that a lack of specificity regarding unit of analysis is a common problem faced by case study researchers, and one that should be addressed by clearly delineating the unit of analysis in a specific case study. As this study and its questions are organizational in nature, it would seem that the case at hand, the College Unbound organization, is relatively straightforward to delineate. However, as described in the site description above, College Unbound is a fairly fluid organization, developing through partnerships and other loose affiliations, rather than a more traditional, confined organizational structure. For this reason, it is important to describe the explicit boundaries of College Unbound.

As the primary goal of this study is to understand disruptive innovation in the context of a higher education organization, It is important to not ignore any facet of the context, and thus to take a broad approach to understanding the organization. Also an important consideration is the organization's own self-definition, which is broadly inclusive, rather than exclusive. Thus, I define a member of the organization as anyone who has a documented role, affiliation, or partnership with College Unbound. This includes staff and students, but also internship advisors and thought partners whom students and staff have identified. Also included are individuals at partner organizations (those organizations with a formal, documented relationship with College Unbound) who have specific functional and decision-making roles related to the College Unbound partnership. While this approach to understanding the organization leaves some ambiguity, an inclusive approach leaves the door open to the most comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the organization.

Data Collection

Merriam (2009) identifies interviews, observation, and documents as the three most common types of data used in qualitative analysis. In this study, I plan to collect all three types of data, as each type of data will yield important and complementary findings. Merriam (2009) notes that in applied fields of research such as education, interviews are the primary form of data collection. This proved to be true in the College Unbound study, although other forms of data were important secondary sources.

Merriam (2009) organizes interview type by the level of structure inherent in the process, ranging from highly structured to unstructured. In highly structured interviews, the wording and order of questions is predetermined, which Merriam (2009) notes is useful for collecting demographic data, but lacks the flexibility needed for qualitative studies that assume individuals have unique ways of looking at the world. On the other end of the spectrum, Merriam notes that unstructured interviews are particularly useful when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask appropriate questions. In the middle of these two extremes are semi-structured interviews, which use an interview guide to structure the conversation, but allows for more flexibility as the wording and order of questions is not predetermined. Given that I approached this study with enough background knowledge to ask relevant questions, as well as the belief that participants bring a unique perspective and approach to the organization, a semi-structured interview approach made the most sense in this case. To avoid missing important questions due to interviewer bias, I also conducted informal, unstructured interviews with the individuals who have been the most involved with the development college unbound (i.e. the leadership). The goal of these unstructured interviews was to

surface important ideas that may not be uncovered during the semi-structured interview process, and use this opportunity to inform future interviews.

Merriam (2009) notes that within a case study, two levels of sampling must occur. First, the case must be selected. In this instance, College Unbound is the case and rationale has been outlined above. The second level of sampling includes the decision about whom to interview. In selecting individuals to interview, I used a form of maximum variation sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with the goal of gaining access to the broadest range of viewpoints and the most complex understanding of the organization. To do this, I worked with a key contact in the organization to identify each relevant group within the organization (e.g. faculty, staff, students, internship advisors, partners) and ensure that each group was adequately represented in the interview sample. Because of College Unbound's small size, it was possible to interview nearly all of the students, faculty, and staff at various moments in the development of the organization. Because of the fast-changing nature of the organization, some staff and students were not available. I did hold in-depth interviews with each of the core members of the College Unbound staff: the two co-directors and the Director of Curriculum in Providence, and the director of College Unbound at Southern New Hampshire University. In some cases, I was able to conduct multiple interviews with staff members, and used the concept of saturation as my criteria for continued interviewing, continuing to hold interviews until I was no longer capturing new, relevant information about the organization. I conducted interviews with 16 students across multiple locations and cohorts. I worked with my key contact to identify two community partners with significant experience with College Unbound.

Table 1
List of individuals interviewed

Name/Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Location
Joyce	Partner Org	F	New Orleans
Sheldon	Partner Org	M	Providence
Dennis Littky*	Staff	M	Providence
Nick	Staff	M	Providence
Patricia	Staff	F	Providence
Jaime Scurry*	Staff	F	Providence
Beth Sheehan*	Staff	F	New Hampshire
Adam Bush*	Staff	M	Providence
Mike Reeves*	Staff	M	New Hampshire
Ashleigh	Student	F	New Hampshire
Celeste	Student	F	New Orleans
Jeremy	Student	M	Providence
Nicole	Student	F	Providence
Mary	Student	F	Providence
Diane	Student	F	Providence
Sheila	Student	F	Providence
George	Student	M	Providence
William	Student	M	Providence
Gloria	Student	F	Providence
Jason	Student	M	Providence
Shaun	Student	M	Providence
Barbara	Student	F	Providence
Doug	Student	M	Providence
John	Student	M	Providence
Rich	Student	M	Providence

Note: Asterisk () indicates staff who have not been de-identified. Other names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.*

In addition to interviews, I utilized direct observation as a secondary method of data collection. Yin (2009) indicates that observation is “often useful in providing additional information about the topic being studied.” (p. 110). The structure of College Unbound provided rich opportunities for observation, as the organization’s culture includes a great number of ritualized events that hold significant meaning within the organization. While interviews touched on the importance of these events, direct

observation provided an unfiltered look at these critical moments in the organization's work. I attended and observed a new student orientation, mid-semester and semester-end student exhibitions (presentations and evaluations), a weekly seminar, and a graduation ceremony. One challenge I anticipated as an observer was delineating a clear role on the spectrum between neutral observation and participant-observation. Yin (2009) describes participant observation as "a special mode of observation in which you are not merely a passive observer. Instead, you may assume a variety of roles...and may actually participate in the events being studied." Yin acknowledges the significant challenges presented by participant-observation, particularly those related to introducing bias, but also acknowledges that participant-observation may create opportunities to conduct a richer study. Yin (2009) notes that participant-observation has been used frequently and successfully in studies of urban neighborhood where researchers participate in informal aspects of daily life, and Gummesson (1999) acknowledges that in organizational studies, participant-observation is common as researchers often serve as organizational consultants. In this instance, I perceived that aspects of both of these roles may be relevant. Even in initial conversations with College Unbound leadership, as I negotiated access, they expressed a desire to see me as somewhat of an insider who participated in cultural aspects of the organization, and also as a consultant who was able to contribute my expertise to the near-constant problem solving and brainstorming activities that seem to go on at any given moment in their organizational meetings and informal discussions. By allowing myself to take part in the most public of these rituals—those that welcome outsiders and thus do not require me to explicitly identify as an insider—offered returns far greater than the challenges created. In understanding where the line between observer

and participant lies, Merriam's (2009) category *observer as participant* seems the most appropriate to my role. Merriam describes this relationship as one where the researcher takes on some aspects of an insider identity, but does not become part of the core group. I selected events and meetings to observe based on recommendations from insiders within the organization, and allowed these insiders to help guide the appropriate level of participation and observation at these moments, mindful of how my actions impacted my relationship to the observed. I used a combination of video recording, audio recording, and field notes to record my observations, as is appropriate and minimally intrusive given the setting.

Yin (2009) notes that, "For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p.87). For this reason, I included analysis of relevant documents in my research. College Unbound has offered access to a host of documents that address the creation of the institution, and document its early years of existence. I included public and some internal documents as a secondary source of data to help verify and support analysis of the interviews and observations that formed the bulk of my research efforts. As memory—even of fairly recent events—is inherently biased, documents were an important check to ensure integrity of the data collected. However, I also heeded Yin's (2009) caution that documents also contain their own biases and may not be completely accurate. As an answer to this concern, I remained mindful to not privilege any form of data as more accurate than another, consider what is both said and left unsaid in all types of data collected, and reviewed all collected data with some skepticism and in light of the larger picture.

Data Analysis

While data collection and analysis in a quantitative study might be distinct processes, Merriam (2009) cautions against this approach in qualitative work. She writes, “A qualitative design is emergent... The process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic.” (p. 169). Given this, I began the data analysis process nearly simultaneously with data collection, by transcribing and performing initial analysis as soon after each interview or observation as was possible, and also by capturing field notes—largely written but also through use of a portable recording device—immediately following each interview or observation. These field notes contained not only my concrete observations, but also served as a way to document questions for follow up and capture emerging ideas and insights that served as the basis for later analysis.

To ensure confidentiality of research participants and integrity of data, all transcripts and documents were stored in a password-protected electronic folder, and backed up to an encrypted, password protected, offsite backup server. Additionally, audio and video recordings of interviews and observations were digitized and stored electronically using the same security measures. As the organization is very small, I made no attempt at participant anonymity in instances where it would be impossible to do so while also offering role context. In cases where anonymity was possible and could offer some participant protection, I assigned pseudonyms to individuals. Access to raw data and initial analysis was restricted to myself, and any data that could harm the participant was anonymized through aggregation and generalization.

Initial organization and coding of the data will be facilitated through use of open source TAMS Analyser software, which allowed centralization and analysis of transcripts

and field notes. Yin (2009) cautions that software is only a tool, and that additional strategies will be needed to successfully organize and code data. Based on Yin's (2009) recommendation that theoretical propositions are a preferred basis of organization, I relied on disruptive innovation theory and the related implicit assumptions within the research questions as a primary organizing construct in the initial coding phase. For example, the sub-question "How do the organization's resources (e.g. people, finances) affect the organization's capacity for disruption?" implicitly proposes, based on disruptive innovation theory, that the organization's resources affect the organization's success, and will also serve as a strong initial structure for organizing and coding data. To avoid falling into the trap of falsely confirming initial assumptions, Yin's (2009) *rival explanations* strategy was used as a second principle in data coding and analysis. Through this approach, I explored alternative explanations from both the higher education innovation literature, as well as from research participants and tested against the data.

After the initial coding process, I used memo writing as a tool for deepening analysis and making higher-level connections. Saldana (2009) describes the purpose of an analytic memo, "to document and reflect on: your process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes and concepts in your data." (p. 32). Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommend memos to aid the qualitative researcher in getting distance from the data and assist with efforts toward abstraction. These memos were connected to TAMS Analyser and coded as well—per Saldana's (2009) recommendation—to ensure that critical ideas were not lost at this stage. Initial coding and memos served as a basis for a second level

of coding, from which emerged two substantial themes that are discussed in chapters five and six of this dissertation.

Validity and Reliability

Merriam (2009) notes, “Regardless of the type of research, validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented.” (p. 210). Merriam (2009) emphasizes the importance of reliable and valid results—which she collectively labels rigor—in applied fields, because of the direct impact of the research on people’s lives. Through the careful construction and execution of this research project, I believe that I achieve this measure of rigor, as broken down into traditional categories of construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2009).

Construct validity, although particularly challenging in case study design, can be achieved by defining key constructs in specific terms, and connecting appropriate measures to these constructs (Yin, 2009). In this project, construct validity is aided by the use of constructs from disruptive innovation theory, which has already assigned specific meanings to key constructs.

Internal validity addresses the question of how well research findings match reality (Merriam, 2009). While most qualitative research does not presume a simple reality that is capable of being fully grasped, there are nonetheless approaches to ensuring internal validity (Merriam, 2009). I incorporated the following approaches to internal validity in my research design: According to Merriam (2009), triangulation is the most effective of these techniques, and involves comparing and crosschecking data collected in

multiple ways (e.g. interview, observation, and documents), and across times, places and people. Merriam (2009) also advocates use of member checks to improve internal validity. This approach asks research participants to review emerging analysis and provide feedback as to whether they recognize their own experience in the analysis. Yin (2009) proposes rival explanation analysis, explained above in the data analysis section, as a tool to improve internal validity.

External validity addresses the extent to which findings can be generalized (Merriam, 2009). While critics of case study design often assert that the method does not result in generalizable findings, Yin (2009) asserts that these critics are misunderstanding the goals of case study analysis, and that while statistical generalization is not possible in qualitative research, analytical generalization—that is, generalization from the case to broader theory—is possible. Yin concludes that in the instance of a single case study, connection to existing theory strengthens external validity.

Reliability address the concern that should a researcher follow the same procedures over again, the same findings would be reached, that is, the study can be replicated (Yin, 2009). The idea of replication is questionable in the social sciences, both because people's behavior is rarely static, and individuals all experience reality differently (Merriam, 2009). Still, Yin (2009) acknowledges that even if these challenges were not present, qualitative researchers rarely document their procedures in a systematic way that would allow for research to be exactly repeated. Yin recommends development of a case study database—essentially the file repository described above—as well as a case study protocol to guide data collection.

Limitations of the Study

While this study has been designed to address a significant gap in the literature in the area of innovation in higher education and draw connections between higher education innovation and disruptive innovation theory, and thus represents an important contribution to the literature, there are some limitations to this study that I wish to make explicit. First, I wish to call attention to limitations inherent to case study research. While this method was selected for numerous reasons explained throughout this chapter, the limitations of a study that examines one institution at one moment in time must be recognized. As detailed in the above section on validity and reliability, it is not possible to achieve results that are truly generalizable in the statistical sense of that term, and must be taken into consideration by those who are evaluating the results of this study for application to their own work.

Additional limitations include researcher bias. As a doctoral student in higher education, an employee of a university, and a consumer of nearly ten years of higher education, I come to this study with countless preconceptions about the nature of higher education. Given a study of disruptive innovation, my own preconceptions may color my understanding and interpretation of College Unbound. Additionally, my desire to see solutions to some of higher education's most vexing problems may color the way I understand and experience College Unbound. In short, while I am not an advocate or critic of College Unbound, I am hardly a neutral party, and this has doubtlessly impacted my analysis.

Finally, the perspective of this study is limited by the theoretical point of view inherent in disruptive innovation theory. While this study is situated in the broader

literature of higher education innovation, the focus of the research questions and thus the perspective of the analysis is colored by the market focus of disruptive innovation theory.

CHAPTER FOUR

College Unbound Case Description

A casual observer interested in the College Unbound program might find it challenging to understand this organization, given both the lack of a permanent physical location where College Unbound fully exists, and the ever-changing nature of the College Unbound program since its start in 2009. This chapter describes the experience of being a student at College Unbound at various points in time, from its origins as a residential program for first generation college students partnered with Roger Williams University in 2009, to its existence as an adult learner program partnered with Charter Oak State College in 2015. College Unbound also partnered with Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), which is discussed more fully in later chapters.

Founded by Big Picture Learning's Dennis Littky and Jaime Scurry (and shortly after joined by Adam Bush), College Unbound was initially able to offer Bachelor's degrees to its graduates through a partnership with Roger Williams University. The goal of College Unbound is to meet the educational needs of underrepresented students who have not been well served by traditional higher education, by providing a highly individualized, student-centered education rooted in real-world learning. College Unbound's leaders were explicitly interested in disrupting traditional higher education to better serve these populations. Mission statements for College Unbound from 2009 and 2015 are included in Appendix B.

Big Picture Learning and The Met

In order to fully understand how College Unbound came into existence, it is essential to understand Littky's history as an educational innovator and the history of Big

Picture Learning, the school reform organization that Littky co-founded with Elliot Washor. In 1995, Littky and Washor, long-time educational collaborators then in residence at Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform, created Big Picture Learning in an effort to reform high school education. Their vision was realized through the creation of a radically innovative high school in Providence, called the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, referred to as "The Met."

The first Met school opened in 1996, offering students a highly individualized learning experience. Committed to engaging its students through real-world learning, the Big Picture model eschews traditional classrooms in favor of highly-flexible advisories. Each advisor—Met's word for teacher—works with 14-17 students, and generally has the same group for four years. This allows the advisor to develop a deep connection with each student, and a strong understanding of each student's interests and passions. Further, each Big Picture school is intentionally small—with approximately 100 students—with the goal of having each student known within the entire school community. This is critical in the Big Picture model, as students and advisors collaborate to develop learning opportunities around students' interests, including internships and projects that fully engage the student and achieve desired learning outcomes. The Big Picture philosophy, described as "life to text," places an emphasis on bringing the real world to bear on academic experience. Littky and Washor believe that it is this connection to real, meaningful work that keeps students interested and engaged. Rather than evaluating student progress through traditional examinations, Met students give "exhibitions" each semester, presenting and defending their work publicly. For more information about the Met, Eliot Levine's (2002) *One Kid at a Time* documents the early years of the school.

For more information about Big Picture’s learning philosophy, Littky’s (2004) *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone’s Business* is an authoritative source.

Big Picture Finds Success, Goes to Scale

When the first Met class graduated in 2000, education reform leaders took notice. With a 96% graduation rate and a 98% college acceptance rate among graduates, the Met was demonstrating significantly stronger performance as compared to peer schools serving a similar student population—predominantly “at risk” racial and ethnic minorities. This attention led to support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to replicate the Big Picture model across the United States. Today, there are 123 schools across the globe that are based on the Big Picture philosophy and are part of the Big Picture network. Big Picture’s replication effort is documented in *Going to Scale with New School Designs* (McDonald, Klein, & Riordan, 2009).

Starting the Big Picture College

While Big Picture’s success at getting students to graduate high school and gain acceptance to college is impressive, frustration with low retention rates for low-income, first generation college students pushed Littky to think about how the Big Picture philosophy would translate to higher education.

The College Unbound Philosophy and Culture

Littky and College Unbound co-director Jaime Scurry developed the initial model, with input from Adam Bush, starting from initial conversations in 2007, moving quickly from idea to execution. Their core philosophy, stemming from the success of the

Big Picture high schools, focused on being relevant to each student's life, focusing on one student at a time. Believing that most students leave school because they are alienated from a program that is not connected to their lives, College Unbound was designed to be student-centered, focused on individual learning plans, and utilized the city as its campus, integrating internships and other real-world projects with a seminar that attempted to draw connections between the lived experience of students and academics.

The model assigned a personal and academic support network to each student. Faculty members, internship advisors, and other outside "thought partners" worked to ensure that each student was growing, learning, and making vital connections to resources and ideas that would further their goals. Like the Big Picture high school model, students presented their work in public exhibitions, and were also expected to participate in their peers' exhibitions, probing and questioning each other to take ideas to the next level. This collaborative model was a fit for Bush, who believes education has become far too focused on individual success, to the detriment of collective success.

College Unbound emphasized both individual learning, and also collective accountability for an environment that encourages personal learning and growth. Mirroring the "city as a campus" dispersed nature of the learning experience, the organizational structure of College Unbound was similarly dispersed and informal. With a initial faculty and staff of five, students' needs were met largely through partnerships and by accessing community-based resources.

Scurry, who came to College Unbound with a higher education policy background, was particularly interested in creating major change in higher education, and looking at an alternative, experiential, competency-based model as a future direction of higher education.

For all three leaders, there was consensus that College Unbound should develop students' critical thinking skills as effectively as the best liberal arts programs, and do so in a way that valued students interests and life experiences. And, importantly, this had to happen in a way that broadened access to higher education to those most at risk and least served by traditional higher education.

The First Cohorts: The Residential Model

In August 2009, the eight first-generation college students who made up College Unbound embarked on a two-week journey from Los Angeles to Providence, Rhode Island. Adam Bush, then the Director of Curriculum for College Unbound, drove the bus on its tour of each student's hometown. Bush worked with each student, planning a tour of each city from the student's perspective. As the group made their way across the United States, they learned not only about each student's background, but about the personalities, interests and ambitions of each other. This is how the first class of College Unbound was born.

The Learning Community

When this first cohort arrived in Providence, they moved into a house in South Providence, across the street from the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center high school, referred to as "The Met," where College Unbound used space for its administrative offices. The house, referred to as the learning community, was a typical

South Providence triple-decker, sandwiched between two other buildings and built right up to the sidewalk. A visitor would see no external signs that this was any different than any other house on the street. There was no yard to speak of. Students lived on the second and third floors, with a kitchen, living room and seminar space on the first floor. The house had been renovated for College Unbound, and furnished in a utilitarian fashion.

The kitchen and living room were open and relatively small for a home for eight, and on any given night you could find three or four students and maybe a visitor or two hanging out on the overstuffed sofa and studying at the kitchen table. For the first two years of College Unbound, most of the students resided here, with a faculty in residence for the first year, and a resident director the second year.

The idea behind the learning community was to form a close-knit community where students would learn to work and live together. College Unbound provided students with funds to assist with the upkeep and day-to-day activities of the house, including money for cleaning supplies and groceries. Students and residential staff convened regular house meetings, where students worked through the mundane but important issues facing any housemates: managing the household chores and coexisting in a shared space.

With eight students all living away from home for the first time, the social support at the house was an important but often challenging piece of the College Unbound experience. One student described living in the house as follows:

Social-wise it was definitely a challenge living in a house with, you know, people from different states, different cultures, different food habits, different living habits. You know, typical. It was challenging.

Internships and Project-Based Learning

The philosophy of College Unbound was “life to text,” proposing that students should go out into the world, explore their interests, create internships and projects around those interests, and then translate those interests into formal, documented learning. The process was based on the work Littky had done with the Big Picture high schools. In the residential model, students spent three full work days each week (approximately 25 hours per week) at their internship site, making this the center of their learning.

In the first semester, so students could jump right into the work, Littky arranged internships with area businesses and organizations where he had connections, and projects were retrofitted to meet the needs and interests of students. In later semesters, when students had began developing their own connections in Providence and faculty were more familiar with their individual interest, students were able to seek out internships that held more individual meaning to them.

The internships were as varied as the students themselves. One student spent the first semester at an advertising agency. A student with an interest in social justice and the arts worked with a local non-profit focused on non-violence, and a third student did a stint at ABC working on the set of a television show. In each case, the students worked with one of the College Unbound faculty to develop projects and assignments within the internship, some that had practical value for the organizations, and others that were for their own personal development and leveraged the context of the internship.

For example, the social-justice-minded student developed and taught a non-violence curriculum, and produced a series of spoken word events in Providence that

brought the community into the dialogue about non-violence, all in concert with the mission and work of her host organization. The student at ABC studios fulfilled a writing requirement by writing a script for a television show, and although her professional mentor critiqued the work, there was never an expectation that her script would be used by the studio.

The faculty worked individually with each student in weekly one-on-one advising meetings, discussing the nature of the internships, and developing syllabi around the internships to document skills development. Typically, faculty would recommend related readings, ask students to research areas of interest, and generally prompt further exploration through individual dialogue.

The Seminar

Students attended intensive seminars during the morning twice each week—on the days they were not at their internships—supplemented by group activities in the evenings. Without a permanent space of its own, College Unbound held seminars in the house at first, later at the public library, and then in rented seminar spaces. The seminar was taught initially by teaching fellows, and then by College Unbound faculty Jamie Scurry and Adam Bush.

The seminars were designed to integrate the individual learning students gained from their internships and projects with broad, multidisciplinary courses that could connect with the internships and individual project-based learning. Seminar topics included community development, leadership, and globalization, among others.

While seminars took on the format of traditional college courses, College Unbound put significant effort toward applying the internship experiences to the seminar

topics, encouraging students to lead discussions that connected these elements, and bringing in guest speakers who were sometime affiliated with internship sites. While some students saw clear connections (for example, the students working at the non-violence organization found it straightforward to apply learning from the community development seminar), others struggled more to bring their internship experiences into their discussions and analysis of their shared readings.

Exhibitions

Another carry-over Littky brought from the Big Picture high schools was exhibitions. The primary evaluation tool and course deliverable for College Unbound, exhibitions were public presentations that students gave at the end of each semester. The exhibitions demonstrated their learning progress, showcased the work they completed during the semester, and gave students an opportunity to lead a discussion about that work with their classmates, faculty, internship mentors, and other outside visitors and experts.

Typically, students would put together a brief presentation, and then took questions and facilitated the discussion. An important goal of the exhibition for students was to conceptually bring together collective learning outcomes from the seminar with individual learning goals from their internship project. While students did have other deliverables related to their work (a literature review was an often-bemoaned hurdle students faced, and nearly all internships required deliverables to the organization), the exhibition generally stood in place of testing and other traditional evaluation mechanisms.

The Adult Learner Population

Early on, College Unbound began hearing from adults in the local community that they would be interested in being a part of a version of College Unbound for adult learners if the program could be flexible enough to accommodate their already-full work and personal lives. College Unbound began incorporating adult learners into its program from the second semester of the first year, and by 2011 was only admitting new adult learners to its program. After the first two cohorts of residential students graduated, the residential components were fully eliminated. While the core components of College Unbound remained the same, the experience was altered to meet the needs of the adult learner population.

Project-Based Learning for Working Adults

Because the adult learners generally had full-time work commitments, College Unbound altered its approach to meet their needs, with an eye toward honoring the real-world learning that was already occurring for adult students in their work and lives. Students were encouraged to design projects around their jobs, and the College Unbound faculty focused on how to add value by enriching conversations, tackling issues and engaging in their work in new and deeper ways, and integrating theory and practice.

The project-based piece of this work started with students meeting one-on-one each week with a faculty advisor, who would coach the student to connect their personal and work lives to projects where they would find meaning. They also designed projects to help students complete course equivalents, first at Roger Williams University, and later integrate with courses developed by College Unbound and delivered online through Charter Oak State College.

Again, projects were as varied as the students. While one student researched this history, practice and science of cosmetics to deepen his connection to his retail job at a beauty store, another explored questions of social justice and community while planning and launching a successful non-profit organization.

With adult learners from a broad range of backgrounds, College Unbound's one-on-one advising was purposefully flexible and tailored to these learners. Bush encouraged the advisors to give space to students to develop their own pathway, outside of the constraints of the syllabus. He was confident that students would, through directed conversation, find their own interests and pathways through the work, and find ways to connect the work back to course requirements.

Weekly Seminar

To satisfy seat-time requirements of its degree-granting partners, and build a community of learners, College Unbound students continued to attend a weekly seminar, just one evening a week for the adult learners. Honoring the busy lives of students, College Unbound provided food each week before the seminar, and then would start the 2.5-hour class at 6 p.m. to ensure working students could arrive on time. With seminars in the evenings, College Unbound was able to use seminar space at the Met high school.

In the first year, with 25 students, all students attended seminar together, frequently breaking up into smaller groups for discussion. The focus of the seminar was tightly connected to the students' internships and projects. Students would spend much of the time presenting their work, sharing challenges with their peers, and getting feedback. As College Unbound grew to 75 students, the seminar would be broken up into different groups, meeting on different nights of the week.

As College Unbound was committed to valuing the full lives of its students, it also was committed to finding ways to fully evaluate both the cognitive and non-cognitive growth of the students. To this end, it developed ten learning goals to assess student growth: integrated and applied learning, critical thinking, problem solving, communication (written, oral, visual), accountability, collaboration, creativity, reflection, resilience, and advocacy for self and others (a full description of the Big Ten Learning Goals is included in Appendix C). Students adopted these goals, incorporating them into their own learning plans in consultation with their advisors, and using them as a shared language to discuss their growth with their peers.

Getting Credit

As the adult learner model evolved, College Unbound was working moment-by-moment to figure out how to ensure students could get appropriate course credits for their work, first from Roger Williams and later from Charter Oak. Initially, when partnered with Roger Williams, advisors worked with students to develop syllabi for course equivalents that met degree requirements, creating learning experiences connected to the individual student's project.

In practice, this functioned a bit like a big puzzle. Because the adult learners generally entered with existing college credits, faculty advisors were matchmakers of sorts, devising learning that met a graduation requirement while still connecting to a student's interests and relating to their work lives. In some cases, faculty arranged for tutoring or more formal coursework to supplement a student's project-based work.

Because of the emergent nature of this process, students were initially quite confused about how classes were being configured and documented. One student described his experience:

Like there were certain classes that I didn't know I was in until I was actually in them. They told me, "Oh, by the way, you're in math class." I was like, "What? I didn't even know."

Later, College Unbound changed their degree-granting partner from Roger Williams to Charter Oak, and the process for documenting work and assigning credit changed again. While Roger Williams granted credit for life learning, Charter Oak, as an online college, only granted credit for online courses. College Unbound partnered with Charter Oak to develop a set of courses for its students that attempted to put each student's project at the center of the course, but the much more rigid requirements of Charter Oak made this a somewhat challenging partnership.

Students in the Charter Oak model were required to go online and complete regular assignments, such as posting reflections to a discussion board, and complete a shared set of readings, rather than being allowed to follow a completely individualized plan. In the Charter Oak model, students would complete exhibitions every eight weeks, coinciding with the length of classes online, and videos of these exhibitions would be uploaded to the Charter Oak online system as documentation of their work. While the more-rigid nature of this partnership would test both College Unbound and Charter Oak, it was flexible enough to keep the core components of College Unbound intact and still offer an accredited degree.

Creating Change

In both the residential program and the adult learner program, there was consensus from faculty, students, and community partners that the College Unbound students were being transformed by their experiences. Bush credits the transformation that many students went through to something simple: the confidence that comes with having your ideas validated and valued. He argues that the model centered around valuing students' lives, and in turn the students value their own lives and experiences, including learning, in new and transformational ways.

CHAPTER FIVE

Finding a Market: The Transformation from Residency to the Adult Learner

This study examines College Unbound—a new, innovative college—and how internal and external factors have supported and hindered its organizational development and goal of disrupting higher education. In doing so, I have conducted 33 interviews with 20 staff, students, and partners of College Unbound, examining both the characteristics of the organization (resources, processes, and values) and the organization’s relationship to its environment (market and non-market forces). I have also supported this primary data with secondary data from College Unbound’s records, public website and social media accounts.

While a simple analysis of each of these elements in isolation might yield some limited insights, the explanatory power of disruptive innovation theory lies in the interaction between internal and external forces (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004), a dynamic that was quickly apparent in my analysis of the data from this study. Initial coding of interviews simply using the above categories was straightforward, but yielded few explanatory insights. A second review, looking at the interaction of these elements across broader themes found in the disruptive innovation literature, proved more useful, resulting in the identification of two broad themes that cut across all of the data collected. In selecting these themes, I was specifically looking for institutional dynamics that were reflected in the existing disruptive innovation literature.

In chapters four and five, I often let my interview subjects—mostly the leadership of College Unbound—explain their interpretation in their own words, through extensive

quoting, as their rhetoric is an important part of the story worth capturing verbatim. In the final chapter, I revisit these themes in light of disruptive innovation theory, and evaluate College Unbound's potential as a disruptive force.

This chapter will examine the first of these two broad themes—answering questions of defining the college's target market—and how internal and external forces influenced the development and disruptive nature of College Unbound in relation to these themes.

The Founding of College Unbound

To fully understand College Unbound, requires understanding its founder, Dennis Littky. While not physically large, Littky is a commanding presence in any room. Part of this is his distinct look. Rarely seen without his vibrant colored hat, and sporting a neatly groomed white beard and mustache, and wire-rimmed glasses, Littky stands out in a crowd. But even without his signature look, Littky's energy easily fills the room. But his is an approachable, warm energy. Those meeting Dennis for the first time will note a salesman-like enthusiasm for selling his ideas, which are constantly evolving and expanding. His students, who affectionately call him Doc, do not hesitate to approach with questions and to say hello.

Littky's comfortable presence and confidence are not unearned. He has spent decades reforming secondary education. Somewhat of an icon in his field, Littky and his work has been featured in books and movies, and he has commanded audiences both of educators and policy makers, and of business leaders. The culmination of Littky's work as a secondary school reformer was the creation of Big Picture and its first school, the

Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (known as the MET) in Providence, RI, in partnership with Littky's long-time collaborator Elliot Washor.

The MET high school offers each student an individualized learning plan, a deep relationship with an advisor who shapes the learning experience, and an internship experience that is at the center of the educational process. Today, the MET is the flagship school of Big Picture Learning, which has supported the creation of more than 60 schools that utilize Littky's model.

Littky and Washor had impressive outcomes at the MET, with 98% of students attaining acceptance to college, an impressive feat given that most students are first-generation college goers. Still, Littky was concerned that Big Picture high school graduates, and first-generation college students in general, were entering a less than ideal college environment. He explains:

After [working in secondary education] for 40 years, I started seeing the stats of what happens if you're a poor kid and you go off to college, and the stunning stat of 89% of first-generation kids, regardless what color, who start college don't finish. You do all this work and then the colleges aren't set up to really work with the kids.

This concern led Littky to the idea of starting a college as part of Big Picture Learning, one that would be designed around Big Picture's philosophy and meet the needs of first generation and underrepresented college students. This idea would become College Unbound.

Planning for a New Residential College

Littky brought in Jaime Scurry, who was already running a teacher training program for Big Picture, as his co-director for the launch of what would eventually be College Unbound. Littky, Scurry, and later Adam Bush as director of curriculum, would shape Dennis' original vision into reality.

From its earliest days, College Unbound envisioned itself as a residential college, and invested significant time and effort into finding a financially sustainable model to house its students. Even as he was dreaming up housing plans, trusted colleagues were warning Littky away from a residential model:

We decided against everyone's word that having housing [would] be a horror show. Everyone told us that it's too much responsibility, that no one wants that kind of responsibility for 18 year olds. It's always been my experience of feeling like a team with the students and doing stuff. I thought [College Unbound] would even be more so, and that's why we made the decision.

Part of the appeal of a residential model at the time, was the opportunity to take advantage of inexpensive real estate in Providence's south side. Scurry explains:

It was right at the time of the foreclosures. The foreclosures started coming in, so [we wondered] how could we use some of the federal funds to come in to actually recover properties, turn them into residences. So we hired a lot of people and went through this whole urban redesign plan.

Littky discusses these early plans:

[We] had a whole plan written up, with 15 houses. We were talking about [how] alumni could live on the first floor; get rent from our college students on the next two floors. We knew where every foreclosed house was. We spent hundreds and hundreds of hours. I probably spent 20 hours a week looking at houses and meeting with lawyers, meeting with housing people and trying to figure this out.

Yet, Littky explains, the planning and effort never reached fruition.

[We were planning for] the federal government to give us \$75,000 a floor to redo it. For a hundred reasons a lot of that stuff didn't happen. The money got held up. That house across the street, we should have bought. That house was \$30,000 but it had mold in it so we were afraid. We ended up renting a house.

The First Cohort

The earliest design of College Unbound envisioned a first cohort of ten traditional-aged, first generation students living and learning together in Providence, RI. While Scurry initially hoped to recruit this first cohort from a diverse set of high schools, Littky focused on recruiting students from Big Picture high schools. He believed that students who were already familiar with his educational approach would find a similar college appealing and adapt more readily.

But this limited pool of Big Picture high school graduates did not find Littky's offer as compelling as expected. From its earliest days, College Unbound had a challenge recruiting and keeping traditional-aged college students. Despite a national recruiting effort focused on Big Picture high schools, College Unbound would launch in August 2009 with just eight students. George, a College Unbound student in the first cohort

shared the reaction of his high school classmates upon hearing he would attend College Unbound: “Everybody was wondering, ‘Why the heck do you want to go to the [Big Picture] college? We just got out of that, why do you want to go back for another three years?’”

The first cohort of eight College Unbound students kicked off their first year with a bus trip across the country, led by director of curriculum Adam Bush. The trip concluded in Providence, where students moved into a newly renovated house directly across the street from the MET campus in the south side of Providence, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. This house was envisioned not just as a place to sleep, but as a shared space of learning. The students and staff referred to it as the learning community.

The house was unassuming. There was no signage outside, and from the street no one would suspect that this was the home of a College. The house shared its characteristics with most homes in Providence’s south side, an immigrant community. It sat on a very small lot, with other houses on either side. It maximized the small lot by rising three levels. The front door opened directly into a living room, which in turn was open to a kitchen. This was the bulk of the shared living space, as the rest was renovated as bedrooms for the students. The house was cluttered and full of activity and music. Outwardly, there were few signs of concern.

Yet, that first cohort of College Unbound students faced personal and social challenges common to new college-goers, much of it centered on the social life at the house. Barbara, a student in College Unbound’s first cohort gives this account of the social challenges she faced in those first weeks:

Little things would piss me off and I'd just take my anger out on people but I was thinking it was for a good reason. For example, one of my roommates would say something that was very inappropriate. He didn't ... know how it affected me because I had a history with what he had said. It was just a little 'jokey joke' about this, he said, but it pushed me to my limits and I became very, very violent.

What may seem like ordinary adjustment issues were exacerbated by the size and structure of the College Unbound program, with only eight student.. Other students, even those who tried to stay away from the interpersonal conflict, still keenly felt the impact on their college experience.

Gloria: There's [been] a lot of drama in the house this year. The learning community wasn't really established like we would think it would be. That stress that was added on from the drama was just unneeded and probably made my year a lot harder than it had to be.

Jeremy: There have been some really hard moments with the learning community. [Living] in the house has had many ups and downs. I thought I would be closer with the group than I am.

A number of the students expressed a desire for a college experience within a larger community. Jeremy noted "I still wish that we got to interact with more college students our age and just have that, I guess, greater pool to navigate because that's something I like to do."

That many of the students came from similar Big Picture high schools was also a cause for concern for some students, including Gloria. "Right now it's a lot of people

from Big Picture, a lot of people who are involved in Big Picture, but I feel like I need to be outside of Big Picture sometimes.”

The interpersonal issues that the students faced caused further challenges because of a mismatch in staffing for the residential learning community. Scurry explains that their first faculty in residence was a poor fit for College Unbound’s needs, both in terms of his skill set and interests:

[Our faculty in residence] came in first, and there was sort of a honeymoon period. That didn’t last because he was being asked to sort of be more of a resident director than a faculty in residence. It wasn’t the right role, and [as a consequence] there was tension.

Littky noted as a result of this staffing challenge, there was a programmatic gap in the residential experience of the students:

I think the biggest problems were the isolation, not having enough psychological sociological support for them, and not getting them oriented in. [To be successful], we have to really plan stuff. We do go to every library; we do meet people from each place; we do hit our five places where you can eat food cheaply and people can hang out. We need to show students where you can get a cup of coffee and sit there all day and talk.

Many of the challenges that students faced related to their expectations of what college is and should be like. Scurry noted:

It's not easy when you have 18-year-olds who have chosen to come here, and even though they have they still have a very pop culture notion of what college was about. They wanted quads. They wanted parties. They want to sleep in and blow off classes.

Students also expressed a need for more structure than the College Unbound model was providing. After a year of feeling unrooted from the curriculum, Jeremy took action on his own: "I decided this semester that I wanted to take more traditional classes because I felt like I needed more structure."

While there were undeniable challenges with the residential model, there were also learning successes that Littky and Bush believed were worth continuing with. They saw evidence of students succeeding in ways that may not have been possible in traditional colleges. When College Unbound was successful, it was often because of an extremely high-touch approach to working with students. Most of the first cohorts expressed amazement and appreciation for the amount of support they received:

Nicole: Late night's lasagna at Jamie's house, that was the best. She was like, 'you can come on over if you need help preparing or we can go to the beach' or Adam would always offer to go to a coffee shop to help with our preparation. When I did use them, they were absolutely amazing.

Mary: We have tons of help. Jamie and Adam. She's available on weekends. She's a wife and a mother. She has kids, and she's available to help us on the weekends. So I mean, this is a lot. And Adam, he's, I don't even know how he

sleeps at night. He's always busy. But, you know, it's just like, 'hey, if you need our help, just call us up.' So they're definitely there to help.

Barbara: At a traditional college I would not have been able to get the support that I needed and I would not have been able to get people to push me the way that the staff has pushed me. A lot of the times I hated it. I didn't want to be pushed but I'm grateful that I was pushed because it helped me make better decisions.

Year Two: Recruiting a Broader Cohort

With challenges recruiting a first cohort from Big Picture high schools—ultimately with only eight students rather than the ten students that was the goal—College Unbound looked outside of the Big Picture community to recruit students in year two, working through community organizations and personal contacts. While the leadership stayed constant with Littky, Scurry and Bush still at the helm, the remainder of the College Unbound staff turned over, giving College Unbound the opportunity to refine its approach.

Yet even with these changes, College Unbound started its second year short of its target number of students. And, those students who did join the second cohort had many of the same challenges faced by the first cohort. Jason, even after choosing College Unbound, faced initial discomfort with the model, as compared to more traditional higher education:

The system's so simple in a normal college. You know whether or not you're okay at any given time. You can ping out in the world, and say, "Well, that's my

GPA, I'm doing great; or, I'm not, I didn't hand in this work." You have this really simple way of knowing "Am I good or not?"

Launching the Adult-Learner Model

After two years, Littky concluded that the traditional-aged residential model was not sustainable, for a number of reasons: providing housing and living expenses to students was too expensive, College Unbound did not have the expertise and resources to adequately manage the psychosocial needs of traditional-aged residential college students, and the model would be difficult to bring to scale at a manageable cost given its high-touch approach to working with students.

Scurry noted that the economic landscape had changed dramatically following the economic collapse in 2008, making the financial calculation for College Unbound quite different:

We started this, and there was lots of money, even in foundations, and then all of a sudden there was no money literally overnight. Foundations became less focused on entrepreneurial, innovative ideas and wanted to fund tried and true, and really if you look at the landscape, it was less about wanting to be customized and individualized and more about what I'd call an old industrial model, a "how do we get 50,000 people through" kind of deal. I think that was really hard.

Compounding this, Scurry explained, College Unbound had made a financial commitment to fully funding the educational costs and living expenses of its full-time students, filling any funding gap that was not covered by other entities.

The tuition was \$11,000 a year because they paid continuing studies rates even though they were given a day student model. Roger Williams came in and gave them a \$5000 scholarship. They gave them a book award, \$500 a semester, and they were eligible for their full Pell. We had many students who were on the full financial aid, so they had a zero or they had a several hundred dollar contribution. Some of them didn't. They owed a couple of thousand dollars, and that was with subsidized and unsubsidized loans. If they had already signed for a loan as part of their financial aid, College Unbound came in and paid their outstanding balance. We had our own work-study program. Students worked for us. We provided a food allowance, gave them \$50 a week, bought them whatever incidentals students needed when they were in a bind.

Littky noted early on that it would take scale for the College Unbound program to work from a financial perspective, and he was not sure that the residential model would accommodate this:

It's got to be more cost effective. Our scaling up will probably not be with dorms. I know we're not going to get anybody to keep supporting 7 kids, twenty kids, thirty kids financially.

Scurry agreed that going to scale was an important part of funding the work in the long term:

If I was a funder I would not give somebody a quarter of a million dollars and have that organization put in \$750,000 or a million dollars to educate nine students. That's not an efficient use. It wasn't efficient because of our model. It

wasn't efficient because of the choices we made with dollars. People fund innovation and good ideas when they're scalable, sustainable. It wasn't.

Despite the financial and programmatic challenges facing College Unbound, Littky and other College Unbound staff saw potential in delivering a similar academic experience to working adults, based on his success with the handful of working adults who had been part of the initial cohorts, and growing interest from adult learners in the community who were looking for a way to earn a college degree. In May 2011, College Unbound began recruiting students for a cohort of adult learners that would begin in September.

These students would carry a full-time course load while also continuing to work full time, by integrating their full-time jobs into their learning experiences, rather than seeking outside internships. Designed as a college completion program, nearly all full-time students would bring existing college credits to their programs, enabling most to earn a bachelors degree in just two or three years. While some students would take traditional and online courses as part of their programs, the one constant in the adult program is a once-per-week evening seminar that all students attend.

Bush noted a remarkable difference right away between the challenges of recruiting residential students, as compared to pulling together the first cohort of adult learners:

We put out two Facebook announcements saying we're having an open house for our College Unbound third cohort, and around 60 students showed up that first time and another 40 the next time. We ended up with a cohort of 25 who were

ready and willing and excited to jump in. That was cool. We didn't really have to do recruitment.

While traditional-aged college students have many preconceptions about college, adult learners had more straightforward interests from a college program, but interests that seemed impossible to find outside of College Unbound. Nearly all of the adult students I spoke to indicated that they would not have been in school if not for College Unbound – they did not see other college programs, even those designed for adult learners, as viable options.

John: [I chose College Unbound] because they would accept the credits that I had, my prior credits. And, it was more convenient for me because I work two jobs and I have a newborn baby. It fit my schedule. I couldn't work full-time and go to [another] school full-time. It's just not possible. And take care of my daughter.

Doug: No other college, I mean, appealed to me. I wasn't even thinking about higher education or nothing like that. I did, but it was more like ... I knew I couldn't go to no URI or PC or nothing like that, so I wasn't thinking about college, not at all.

Patricia, a member of the teaching staff, talked about the strong fit between the experiential model and the needs of working adults, a fit that felt comfortable right away, in contrast to the challenges that the traditional-aged students experienced:

This opens up the door to higher ed in a way that feels authentic to them, to their experience as professionals. I think that the program honors the experiences that they have had in their lives as learners and recognizes that those experiences are

valuable, and acknowledges that a degree can be helpful in developing your career path.

College Unbound staff worked closely with the adult students to ensure that financial roadblocks were minimized:

Celeste: After 10 years of not doing taxes or something, or from 2008 or so, I got money back, and that's how I bought the computer for class. Everything really was met; they pushed me. Sometimes it felt like I couldn't do it, it was things like filling out a FAFSA Application, I don't know if I'm jinxed or something, but every time I try to deal with it, or when I was trying to get in touch with the IRS, often if I had just someone encouraging me, I got through it.

Greater Ability to Leverage Community Partnerships

College Unbound also worked closely with their community partners to bring in adult students, and build close partnerships with community organizations. College Unbound first partnered with a non-violence organization in Providence, offering their staff street workers the opportunity to earn a degree through College Unbound. Later, Bush would develop a partnership with an arts organization in New Orleans, bringing the College Unbound model to their performers.

Joyce, the director of this arts organization, began partnering with College Unbound out of concern that her constituents faced professional roadblocks because they did not have college degrees.

There was this concern that I had about this wide range of younger people who are fabulous workers, brilliant, and leading really masterfully in the world in the work that they're doing, who are un-degreed and are consequently exempted from certain kinds of leadership positions with institutions. I guess they'd have to be Langston Hughes or Frederick Douglas or somebody.

For Sheldon, director of the non-violence organization in Providence, College Unbound represented an unprecedented opportunity for his staff to obtain college degrees, many who have failed in traditional higher education. The director describes the challenge his employees face:

About half have been involved in gangs and in crime and come from very tough backgrounds. Some have tried community college, and owed money after a class or two because they were badly prepared and not ready for that environment. So they feel they can never go back to college, since they owe money and it wasn't the greatest experience, but they also see around them that with the criminal record and no education and no credential, they're hitting a complete wall in terms of their future. Now they have families, and they're really hard workers. They contribute a lot to the safety of our state, and yet they really are stuck and that's the only job they have. They cannot do anything else. It's almost like they still have shackles over them.

Despite these challenges, partnering with College Unbound has allowed these workers to pursue a college degree, Sheldon explains:

The program is more flexible than a traditional learning environment. It works with them. It's much more friendly. It's inspirational. It works at their pace. They work as a cohort, and really see the fruits of their labor.

By creating cohorts of students at community organizations, College Unbound has been able to use examples of student successes to encourage more students from these organizations to enroll. This has enhanced the individual participants, as well as the community organization. Sheldon continued:

The first person that [enrolled in College Unbound] from our staff is graduating now. He literally finished his classes last week, and he's going to be awarded a degree. He came back as a mature, thoughtful community organizer, so this credential is going to help him. So that's a fantastic success. We have the director of our [outreach] program, who we hired when he was 23 and now he's 31, who absolutely wouldn't even read a flyer and now allows learning and reflecting and is curious and confident and has become a lot deeper and kind of an intellectual, which he was the furthest from. Morale has gone up significantly among the staff, particularly of those who participate. They see a future. They see a purpose. They feel confident about articulating in our discussions.

Both of these partner organizations see those graduating as a promise of what might happen in the future. Joyce talks about the transformation she has seen:

These are people who two years ago weren't even thinking about going to school, or if they were, they were longing for the opportunity to go to school. They didn't have a plan on how they were going to manage to do it. Two years later, they are

going to be walking on a stage here and a stage in Providence and getting a degree. That is a powerful testimony to the potential for anything to happen if you brace yourself to be ready for it.

Financing the Adult-Learner Model: Some Advantages, Continued Challenges

Even though the financial model of the part time program is more reasonable, without the costs of housing, and less time and resources spent on some of the specific challenges faced by traditional-aged students, the College Unbound model is still an expensive, high touch program. Further, College Unbound has not seen the same kind of success accessing grant funding for the adult-learner program.

Limited funding has forced College Unbound to operate on a shoestring budget, often at the expense of the teaching staff. Scurry noted the discomfort that caused her and others.

We paid people \$12,000 to work half time when they were really working [significantly more]. There was no way you could [teach] in the night program and academic liaison with 12 students, do your job well, and do it within the timeframe that we gave with the money that we gave you.

One source of revenue that College Unbound does ask from its students is moderate tuition payments—in contrast to the full-ride it provided in the residential program—often leading students to take out modest loans to complete the program. One student, Celeste, was concerned that this would be a roadblock for others:

You know it was shocking to me when I had to take out loans, but it's all going to be all right. I think that's one of the biggest challenges, so I just wish there was an idea that higher learning could exist for everybody. You know what I'm saying?"

Sheldon, as a vested community partner, also voiced concern over the ability of College Unbound to continue to fund its work in the long-term.

I'm actually worried that [College Unbound] doesn't have enough resources. It depends, still, a lot on personalities, that are very dedicated and unique. I think it's not well-resourced, and it's fragile. It's still in a very pioneering mode. I'm not sure that it's been thought through well how it just goes to scale. I would like to make sure it's stable and it happens. Anyhow, we all take risks. I like the risk they've taken, and for us, it's meant a lot. It turned out to be so good, and I want to make sure it continues.

College Unbound at Southern New Hampshire University

Even as Littky, Scurry, and Bush were launching College Unbound in Providence, they were in discussion with Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) to launch a College Unbound cohort on SNHU's residential campus (the creation of this partnership is discussed in more depth in the next chapter).

Unlike the relatively quick launch of College Unbound in Providence, where the partnership with Roger Williams University was formed in a number of months, College Unbound SNHU was planned over three years, launching in Fall 2011, just at the Providence College Unbound was abandoning its residential model. While the setup of College Unbound SNHU was somewhat different—students lived with other SNHU

students on campus, and had full access to campus services and activities—the challenges they faced proved similar, and reinforce that many of these challenges may be due to the College Unbound model, and not the manner in which it was initially implemented.

Led by SNHU faculty member, and ultimately SNHU College Unbound director, Beth Sheehan, the first cohort of students recruited heavily from Big Picture high schools, following the same path as the first Providence cohort. And, students largely reacted in the same unenthusiastic manner. Ashleigh, a College Unbound SNHU student who attended a Big Picture high school, noted that she “was one of very few students in [her] school that was interested in it,” in part because it appeared to be too similar to her Big Picture high school, and not enough like how college was portrayed in the media and popular culture.

Still, with more access to institutional resources, there was greater hope that the program would eventually be sustainable, as they proved their value and ramped up their student population. At the time, Sheehan explained:

I think we will reach sustainability in the next few years once we get consistent cohorts coming in of 12. Once we eliminate some of the scholarship dollars that we offered—we did some special scholarshipping to get the program off the ground—the human resource investment isn’t quite as large. The program actually has fewer fixed costs and more variable costs based on the number of students we do bring in.

Eventually, that optimism would start to fade, as the true cost of execution became clearer, and it became difficult to recruit students without extraordinary financial aid.

Scurry explained, “We’re exploring ways to iterate [College Unbound at SNHU]. It’s a finance thing. They can’t afford to keep offering full rides to students. It comes down to cost and execution.”

Scurry encouraged Sheehan to identify more students for College Unbound who did not require such significant financial aid.

I’m encouraging them to sort of iterate a little bit and to look at students who are on academic probation at their own institution or students who are thinking of leaving because it’s not the right fit and saying maybe College Unbound is a right fit for them. How do you get other students who maybe say, ‘I don’t want to be in college now, but I’d like to take a College Unbound course,’ if you will. So we’re talking about and exploring ways for her to iterate.

Ultimately, this approach proved untenable, and College Unbound at SNHU was overly-reliant on funding from the university. “It’s not grant funded it’s truly the university’s investment.” Eventually, SNHU would decide not to continue this investment. The wind-down of College Unbound at SNHU, the only remaining residential version of the program, will be completed in 2015. SNHU has shifted significant resources to its College for America program, which shares features with College Unbound’s adult learner program such as a competency-based model, delivering degrees to working adults, partnering with employers, assigning a advisor (called a learning coach) and offering flexible pacing.

Next Steps: Expanding Markets, Continuing to Iterate

Even after launching the adult learner program in Providence, the only thing that seemed clear to some staff was that that College Unbound would continue to iterate its model.

Patricia said this about the future of College Unbound:

I think the program has not fully answered that question [who it is going to serve] and that's part of why at Southern New Hampshire, at Roger Williams, there [have been such] different cohorts. We say "adult learners" but even in the next iteration of the program it sounds to me like there are going to be different cohorts of students.

Ultimately, Patricia believes, it may be this willingness toward flexibility that defines the future direction of College Unbound.

It seems to me that the program, it bounces around, so depending on what particular community it's embedded in, whether that's a university or a particular cohort of learners that the program is working with, it changes. Each iteration is different from the next. Where is it going? My guess is that with each new community that it's serving, or each new university or college that it's affiliated with, that that version of the program will be its own version. I think it will keep growing and being flexible, so that they can partner with different institutions and work with different communities.

To this end, in 2015 College Unbound launched two new initiatives targeted at specific target markets that are not well served by traditional higher education. The first initiative partners College Unbound with Native American tribes, identifying leaders in Native

American communities to serve as advising faculty for the degree program. The second initiative draws on College Unbound's existing experience working with formerly incarcerated populations, and brings College Unbound's work into prisons. In 2015, College Unbound began offering pre-degree programs in Rhode Island prisons, with a goal of eventually offering credit-bearing coursework to incarcerated people.

Summary

One common characteristic of disruptive organizations is having a enough structural flexibility to respond to changing market and environmental needs (Christensen, 1997). In some cases, these changes impact the fundamental work of the organization (Christensen, 1997). At College Unbound, the primary pivot was a shift in the organization's target population, from full-time traditional-aged college students in the first three years of the program, to the current model of educating adult learners. This transition occurred in response to both the external market, and to tighten the alignment between College Unbound's staff and internal resources.

When Littky and Scurry launched College Unbound as a three year, intensive residential college, there was a sense that given the need to find better ways to educate first-generation students and students of color, these students would flock to College Unbound, which was, after all, intentionally designed to meet their needs. This could not have been further from the truth. From the start, College Unbound would face significant challenges bringing traditional college-aged students into its residential program. These challenges would be mirrored at SNHU, where their College Unbound program would also face challenges recruiting full-time residential students without offering outsized financial aid packages.

Since College Unbound had not made a significant investment in housing in Providence, it was able to reimagine itself with an adult learner model, without incurring a significant financial hit. What seemed like an early disappointment may have ultimately helped the organization adapt. While still finding its footing from a programmatic and financial perspective, College Unbound has managed to find far greater success in attracting and addressing the needs of the adult learner population. College Unbound has continued to build on its adult learner model by expanding its reach through partnership.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how questions of quality and legitimacy have influenced the development of College Unbound. In the final chapter, I will then look at how both of these themes—quality and target market—fit within the construct of disruptive innovation, how these findings support and refute the idea that College Unbound may be a disruptive innovator, and the implications for this on future research, policy, and practice.

CHAPTER SIX

Signaling Legitimacy and Redefining Quality

A primary, but often surprising characteristic of a disruptive innovation is that initial quality is almost always lower than the mainstream alternative, especially when viewed from the perspective of the existing market (Christensen, 1997). In highly regulated markets, concerns about quality often hinder the disruptive potential of an innovation. As the literature on disruptive innovation in higher education has grown, this quality concern has surfaced most dramatically as it relates to how quality in higher education is perceived and measured by government agencies and accrediting organizations (Christensen et al. 2011).

These questions have been central to the development and ongoing evolution of College Unbound as well, as the organization's leadership has struggled to show its value to both prospective and current students, as well as outside actors, notably accrediting agencies and partner organizations. College Unbound, with values and learning goals significantly different than mainstream higher education, approaches measurement and accountability differently than do traditional colleges.

While College Unbound was founded with the goal of disrupting traditional higher education, Littky still placed great importance on the ability to offer the bachelor's degree to College Unbound graduates, both because he believed it is necessary to attract students in a marketplace where the degree is an indicator of quality and legitimacy, and because of the value of a bachelor's degree in developing long-term earnings potential, a key quality metric in the marketplace.

Students agree on the importance of the bachelor's degree as a credential, repeatedly citing it as their most important goal in participating in College Unbound.

Celeste: [My friend] asked me questions, like, "And so will these credits transfer to other universities?" She has all these questions. I'm like, "Yeah, we're going to have a real degree." She's like, "This is so good." She's very encouraging in the process, but I see it's a new idea for her. She's definitely used to a different kind of model.

Rich: I saw it as a clear path that would be a lot shorter time to get the bachelor's and the fact that I was actually learning what I wanted to learn.

John: I think there's a disparity between opportunities. It's not that people can't do the work, it's just that they can't afford to go to school, or it doesn't fit their schedules. What College Unbound does is I think it gave me an opportunity, and it's given a lot of people an opportunity to be able to compete in the work world. You need a degree nowadays, just to find adequate paying employment.

Partnership as a Pathway to Granting Bachelor's Degrees

The tension between moving quickly to launch College Unbound, and finding a way to offer an accredited bachelor's degree would prove challenging. Still, Littky was unwilling to wait, crediting much of his past success as an innovator to his ability to launch and then iterate his model from there.

I'm a ready-fire-aim guy – the only way I think you can work. When you get an idea, you got to start because you don't know stuff until you work stuff. We could

have sat around for another year and planned but we wouldn't have had it. Right?
You could plan it forever.

To be able to move quickly and still grant a bachelor's degree, College Unbound pursued a strategy of partnering with an existing, accredited institution that would be able to grant degrees to their students. Finding the right institution to partner with, however, proved less than straightforward. Littky describes the experience of meeting and negotiating with potential partners:

Each of those deals takes ten meetings, 20 docs and it's back and forth and talking and visits and what works and then getting down to the real thing and then people not calling back. [These schools were] too concerned about their SAT scores and didn't want to have freshmen. [College A], where we have a friend that's president, was like, "Done deal, Dennis!" Jamie went up there a couple times. He never did his work right with his particular faculty, so that started to fall through. Another college in Boston was all for it and was excited about it. When they knew we were taking low-income students of color, they were worried that it would ruin their standing in the *U.S. News and World Report*—where they had just gotten [into the top] 100—so they said, "We'll take the kids [as] sophomores." I said, "No, thank you."

Bush also spoke at length about the complexity of finding a college to act as their initial partner:

We were officially going to have a partnership with [College A], in January 2009 when we accepted our students. We accepted them to College Unbound. We

accepted them to what we were calling [College A] College Unbound. That was what their letter of acceptance said. Earlier than that we [thought we] had a pretty solid partnership with [University B], and before that we [thought we] had a partnership with [College C], which fell apart for various reasons. In one case it was about personality and about ownership of the idea. The other was really about a change in student demographic and how the university was going to be able to fit to that.

Having already accepted students, promising them a degree granting program, the College Unbound leadership pursued multiple strategies in an effort to move forward with its first class, including pursuing approval from Rhode Island Board of Regents to operate independent of a partner institution. Littky accounts:

We tried to go through the State of Rhode Island. I had lunch with the [Rhode Island chancellor of higher education]; my friend that's got the most pull around here, and basically said, "Hey, we should be going through the state and there's no reason that the state won't take a look at your data here." So, then we had to do this giant document that Jamie worked [like] crazy on and we delivered it. I even put a bow on it.

College Unbound's first attempt at independent state recognition was unsuccessful. The team continued to meet with prospective partner schools in an effort to fulfill its promise to its incoming class of students. After many meetings, Scurry notes, a partnership with Roger Williams University finally fell into place:

We were all over the place. [Dennis] went up to [University B]. I actually refused to go up because I said, “[University B] isn’t going to partner with you. They do exactly what they do, and I’m sorry; I’m just not going up there to listen to the bull.” So he went up, came back, and said, “Oh, well. You were really right.” We were all over the place. We almost partnered with [College C]. We almost partnered with, I think, [University D] at one point. We were meeting with [College E]. We met with [College F]. [College C] fell apart. [University D] I didn’t want to partner with. Roger Williams was sort of a late entry, if you will. I didn’t think that it would work out, but it did.

Challenges of the Roger Williams Partnership: The Legacy of a Shotgun Marriage

College Unbound formalized its partnership with Roger Williams University just months ahead of students starting, working closely with the University’s continuing education division. The partnership was unique in the way it assigned responsibilities and mapped the College Unbound experience onto a Roger Williams degree. The College Unbound students participated as a group in a twice-weekly seminar, where their internship experience would be unpacked through various academic lenses, such as sociology and human rights. Also, skills such as public speaking were added to the mix, in response to needs articulated by students and their professional advisors at their internship sites.

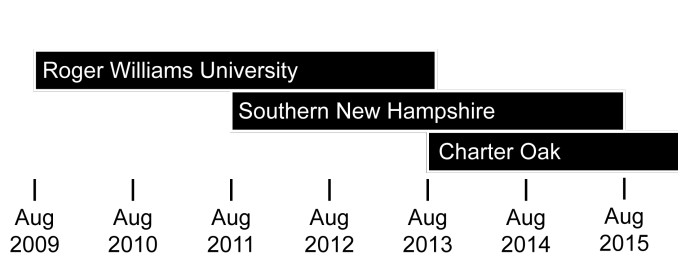


Figure 1. Timeline of College Unbound degree-granting partnerships

Similar to the Big Picture high school model, students worked with the academic staff to create individualized learning plans centered on a core internship experience, translating their projects into course equivalents that would be accepted by Roger Williams.

Early in the relationship with Roger Williams, Littky was enthused about the possibilities, noting, “Roger Williams is fantastic because they give prior learning experience credit and take [existing] college credit. We graduate three people after one year - which is fantastic.” This enthusiasm would be quickly tested, however.

According to Scurry, this tension of disrupting the mainstream market while partnering with a mainstream university seems to have been exacerbated by the fast approach to developing the partnership, necessitating skipping some steps. Scurry outlines this dynamic:

Because we were moving so quickly, we did things that were very much rounding the corner, yet it was anchored in academic quality and integrity. Still, this created a lot of tension. In order for new institutions to be fully embraced, people need a chance to kick the tires and look under the hood to have to full institutional buy in.

Even in the first year of the Roger Williams partnership, Bush had similar concerns about partnering with a mainstream institution, and worried about the implications for the long-term development of College Unbound:

Partnering with Roger Williams University, I think it's going to be trickier than what we are ready for right now. I think there have been real challenges in partnering with a school that is very credit based, and very traditional. And those problems have sort of come up in little baby steps [in the first] year, but I think will come up to a larger degree in future years.

While she acknowledged the need to launch quickly, Scurry wonders if a more measured timeline would have ultimately yielded more potential for disruption:

Now had we come here and gone through the front door and not shoved the square peg through the round hole then maybe we would've had a chance to be a disruptor. We would've been being pure, we would've been being transparent, and we would've had a different pricing structure and a different model. We would bring people in who weren't participating in that market, and then once that model was proven it could be replicated and replicated cheaper.

The End of the Roger Williams Partnership

This partnership with Roger Williams would be tested further, amid transitions in the university's leadership. New leaders, without a connection to College Unbound, would ultimately question the impact of the work, using mainstream metrics that have little relevance to what College Unbound works to deliver. At the same time, in 2011, Scurry was offered the opportunity to join Roger Williams as the Dean of Continuing Studies.

While this might have been a positive turn for College Unbound, it moved the person who was experienced at managing the relationship with Roger Williams out of College Unbound, ultimately weakening the relationship.

Bush describes the changes in leadership at Roger Williams:

At Roger Williams University, we were an initiative by one president who was fired a year later and then an interim president came and then the third president came in, and that's allowed us to be autonomous in a kind of awesome way as well as hasn't ... has meant that people have gone to no-work program on a very surface level and not the depths of it at the university. There's always been a changing agenda there.

Scurry agrees that leadership transitions contributed to a questioning of the College Unbound partnership:

As the program was beginning to iterate, Roger Williams got a new president and a new provost. The provost asked some tough questions, but I thank God that he did because he was asking the right questions.

Bush commented that the challenges College Unbound faces are due to a lack of understanding of—and perhaps a lack of willingness to understand—the model.

I think there's real concrete ways that [our value] can be seen from someone that comes here. I think the hard part is when someone doesn't come here. I think what we have struggled with is how to translate that. We don't do that well. We never have done that well. I think that's hurt us. I think that that's actually a larger

thing about higher education. Higher education sees public scholarship and public practice, the value behind community partnerships, as extracurricular. Even in tenure politics, it's research or teaching, never service. I think that that gets passed down to the students. I think that that's something that we've struggled with how the program gets translated to the university, or how the universities are willing to see what we're doing. That's what I mean. I think we've tried to do it well and I think the universities, in some ways, don't look at that.

Littky describes a transformational experience that is impossible to understand using traditional higher education metrics, and contrasts this with traditional thoughts about learning.

In six weeks, we've changed all these people's lives. What does that count [for]? If you don't care that we made them better learners, we made them ... do they know as much content as they should after six weeks? No.

Patricia, a teaching staff member in Providence, agrees with Littky's assessment of the model's value:

I think that actually that kind of personal growth and emotional growth is tremendous, and my experience has been that that type of growth is completely undervalued in higher ed. I actually think that that's like the biggest, most important thing that College Unbound is doing.

Sheldon, a community partner, also sees evidence of this hard-to-quantify outcome, and the tension this can create:

The things that are really radical and different are very often also controversial. And often the social things are hard to measure. It's hard to quantify the spirit that College Unbound has created among our people. And very often they want impact and research and best practices. Well, really we support often the programs that are very organized, can write well about themselves, but really they screen.

College Unbound students also articulate a sense of their education that transcended what happens at traditional colleges. Two students note:

Rich: I've learned more about myself in the three-month semester than I did after years of traditional college where you just kind of ... I don't want to say you can just float through but you can just do the requirements on the syllabus and get through and you may not internalize the learning. You may study enough to get a good grade on the test and then go on, but here everything is about, you know you are taking it all to heart, it's so personal.

Doug: A lot of people might think that College Unbound, it might be a program that they easily just hand you a piece of paper, but it truly is something that you have to work hard for to get.

Littky acknowledges that this dynamic is not about Roger Williams, but instead is about the challenges of transforming higher education.

The same thing, it's not picking on Roger Williams. It's everywhere. They've been great, but [College Unbound] doesn't fit the university model. I'm arguing with the writing prompt that was built 10 years ago for 18-year-old white kids. I've got 40-year-old working people with families.

Partnering with Southern New Hampshire University: A More Measured Approach

Scurry compares the hurried approach with Roger Williams to the more measured approach taken by the Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) team, which was led by Beth Sheehan, a faculty member at SNHU who ultimately became the full-time director of College Unbound at SNHU. Scurry describes the multi-year process they went through before launching College Unbound SNHU in 2011:

They were smart. They came down here, spent a year with us doing work. I spent a whole planning year where I think I was up there two days a week actually working on their curriculum, and they were great. I went to their curriculum committee meetings. I went to their advisory meetings. We prepped them for their board. I was there at every single turn, and that program was completely vetted, completely supported, and completely endorsed by the faculty. They went through the front door.

Sheehan explains the extensive process needed to get approval for the College Unbound program at SNHU:

We went all the way to the Board of Trustees for approval. Our executive committee, with all the deans, had to approve it. We brought it to the university curriculum committee. I met with financial aid. I had to meet with the registrar. I had to meet with admission and work that piece out. It was really a collective group of people all representing the related constituencies that would have a hand in the actual operations of the program.

The more deliberate approach at SNHU also led to less process iteration over time, likely because the program had to meet the clear, formal commitments it had agreed to up front. Michael Reeves, a College Unbound Providence graduate who now works at College Unbound SNHU explains:

Our program is different from Dennis's program now, and from the adult learner's program, as our students have formal seminar time and seat time. I think [students in Providence] still only meet once per week; I don't know [how] we would be able to make that work.

Reeves talks about the ongoing importance of showing the rigor of College Unbound SNHU within the context of the university, to help maintain their standing:

We really pay attention to assessment ... I think we do a good job of making sure that there is academic rigor in our program, in that students are not just walking in and just doing whatever comes to mind, but that we're guiding them through the process. The line is a little blurry sometimes where it's like, okay, you really want to be student-driven, and you really want them to be in control. Sometimes we do have to take the reins a little bit to say, "here's what we want you to do" yet still try to make that connection to their interests and things like that. I think we do a good job of keeping academic rigor.

In its first years, this effort paid off for College Unbound SNHU, as the program developed a strong reputation within the rest of the university. Ashleigh, a College Unbound SNHU student notes:

There are people on campus that I know that are regular SNHU students that are inside the clubs that I'm in or people that I just speak to on campus, and they're like, "I'm almost positive that the students in College Unbound work harder than we do." I'm positive of that.

Partnering with Community Organizations

In contrast to the difficulty translating the College Unbound approach to traditional higher education, College Unbound's community partners seemed to understand and value the student-centered approach from the start. Sheldon, director of an anti-violence organization that partners with College Unbound, notes the value of this beyond the traditional learning goals of higher education:

Most colleges screen and take people in who are ready to do and will do well and can pay. Here [at College Unbound] you're really helping people who are [at risk]. The benefit to society and their kids not getting involved in the cycle of violence and being completely poor with destitute parents, the return to society is immense.

In addition to measuring learning outcomes in a broader and more student-centered way, Bush sees a different set of values driving approach to and measurement of College Unbound's work.

It honors the work that people are doing as knowledge-making and understands that on those terms, on their terms, and then it complements that with curricular structures. That help individuals whether adults or students already or organizations or businesses build capacity to do that work better differently

deeper in ways that connects it to a history, in legacy that work, and imagines how it could be different moving forward. I was thinking about it in terms of honoring the networks of which students are a part and honoring the knowledge-making capabilities. Recognizing the epistemology of daily life and collaboratively building a curriculum that uses that as a starting point and is always at its core, both actionable and reciprocal. Those are the things [with which we are] continually experimenting.

College Unbound has leveraged these community partnerships, offering a vital service customized to each organization, while using the resources of each organization to recruit adult students who have a built in support network

Different Values, Different Goals, Different Processes for Measuring Quality

While planning and financial resources are certainly part of the story of College Unbound's failed partnership attempts with traditional higher education, Littky, Scurry and Bush also see a mismatch in how these traditional partners measure quality of higher education, and cite this as part of the tension in their work.

It has long been established—and indeed, it may be a defining feature of American higher education—that there is no national consensus regarding the purpose of higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). While flexibility within the standard for college-level learning might suggest opportunity for an organization to have flexibility in designing its own outcomes standards, College Unbound has nonetheless experienced challenges in its attempt to rethink what a College education might look like, due to this lack of national consensus.

Without clear goals for higher education, the established metric for measuring completion of college-level work is currently time, measured by the credit hour. Using time to indicate progress toward a degree is in conflict with College Unbound's approach, which does not have formal class structures, and gives credit for prior learning. Littky asserts that because this time-in-seat accountability model for higher is familiar to external audiences and easy to measure, his approach—which is less straightforward and more subjective—is seen with skepticism.

In contrast to the time-in-seat accountability metric used by traditional colleges, College Unbound offers a competency-based approach to measuring learning. Littky points to the “big ten” life-long learning competencies he uses to measure student growth: integrated and applied learning, critical thinking, problem solving, communication (written, oral, and visual), accountability, collaboration, creativity, reflection, resilience, and advocacy for self and others. Adam Bush, College Unbound's Provost and founding Director of Curriculum believes that the College Unbound model has the potential to be a more effective measure of learning, in a way that is profoundly different than the prevailing model.

A traditional college really does just give credit for being in [a specific] course. [At College Unbound], we are working to build a model that gives a holistic credit: credit based on outcomes, learning and on real sorts of experiences outside of the classroom. I think that is pretty meaningful and amazing. It's not just about creating an internship to create, in a sense, that real world learning; that simplifies it too much. But in a way it's that the work that people are already doing in daily life, you know, to make a living. This work that they've been doing, College

Unbound is recognizing that work as scholarship, as real, important, theoretical stuff that we have to grapple and think about.

Littky also thinks that College Unbound measures his students' preparation for careers better than the credit hour model. He explains:

We always knew that getting a B.A. didn't really mean anything. It just meant you were smart enough to be accepted some place; you did some work for four years but we had no idea really what you know versus what I know versus what my buddy knows. It's not just about having a syllabus and learning this content, and people are coming around because no one is prepared for jobs and there aren't a whole lot of jobs. My 10 skills are the skills people need for jobs, as well as the technical skills that go along with that.

Jamie Scurry, former co-director of College Unbound, talks about the College Unbound approach to measuring student work as moving from institution-centered to student-centered.

I believe colleges need to be student ready. I saw it as a way to democratize education. I saw it as a way to put teaching and learning at the core of what institutions do. I saw it as a way to remove some of the barriers that students face because we think about education and then input the base student. Everything turns off of credits, faculty load, registration, financial aid, as opposed to thinking off competencies, and I wanted to get away from the model of that. I wanted to be very different.

Even in the earliest days of the College Unbound partnership with Roger Williams University, the challenges facing a potential disruptor partnering with a more traditional university were evident. Scurry talks about how the partnership altered College Unbound's approach to the educational process:

What was always the tension, and what I think made it really difficult for College Unbound to ever be a true disruptor, was if we wanted to be a disruptor we never would've partnered with an academic institution. We would've educated our students. We would've done it exactly how we wanted. We would've given them certification. That certification would've created value in the market when we [achieved] a critical mass.

Adapting Process and Values to Traditional Measures of Quality and Accountability

One of the challenges for College Unbound is translating a model of education that is integrated and holistic into something that makes sense on a traditional university transcript. Bush describes one example of how typical College Unbound learning blurs boundaries of both organizations and coursework:

[One of my students] took part in a community workshop on Tuesdays that I have run for the past two years in collaboration with Providence College called "The City and its Storytellers." It was a course that met every Tuesday night, although it really wasn't seen as a course. There're about 30 people that would come and there're three of us who were thought of as professors but really we're just community practitioners, in different ways, of narrative and social change and

qualitative research techniques and documentation. There were about 10 students who enrolled at Providence College, getting credit for the class. There were about 15 students that were College Unbound students that have this as a part of what their learning plan was and it was a course equivalent at Roger Williams University. There were some students that were taking the class as a school of continuing studies course at Roger Williams University and there were high school students from the Met High School that were interested in exploring these issues and were coming. There were artists from AS220 who were attending because they were interested in exploring other documentation practices.

In their partnership both with Roger Williams and SNHU, students and teaching staff worked together to map their learning goals and projects to course equivalents, using syllabi from Roger Williams and other colleges. Patricia describes the process of how College Unbound students accumulate course equivalents at Roger Williams, and how these are translated into a bachelor's degree:

Our students come into the program and they have all these credits that are transferred, or don't transfer, or whatever; and they are on certain tracks. Their concentration is in community development, or the concentration is in humanities, or they have an individualized major, whatever. The university has already charted what the requirements are for those concentrations. Similarly the university has already charted what the requirements are for general liberal arts courses, and so obviously, yeah, we are subject to all of those requirements, I mean our students are.

Scurry notes her discomfort with assigning course equivalents to College Unbound's relatively unstructured approach, and her desire to skip this process altogether:

Credits put us in a box. We could've broken out of that box, but it was at a time when people were tiptoeing around. We've come a long way in four years. We really have, and I remember sitting at meetings and saying we've got to move in this direction, but there was a real strong desire by Dennis to just get off the ground. I was the point person here for Roger Williams, so we would have to then look ahead and say, "Okay, what are the year twos taking for fall? What are the year-ones taking?" Develop all the syllabi; develop all those learning plans.

Sheehan acknowledged similar challenges at SNHU, as they tried to fit College Unbound into the SNHU structure:

The [partnership] model, in some ways we've learned, can hinder the student because we do have to attach grades and that's a tricky thing. [In College Unbound] we're about not where you finish any semester but where you are headed. [The idea is that] you're demonstrating progress each semester, with an eye toward reaching goals after three years. But we have to assign letter grades each semester, for financial aid purposes, for transcript purposes and for course equivalents.

This process has at times proved confusing for students, who would hear the importance of breaking out of the credit hour mold, and thinking across the program, and then be asked to map their learning to a traditional syllabus and course description. And, Bush

explains, documenting learning that happened outside of a traditional classroom and a traditional course framework also proved challenging for the College Unbound staff.

I don't think we're very good yet about how we document it, how we document work that happens outside of [the traditional environment]. And that has to happen sort of immediately with the students. That has to happen with ourselves, how we document our interaction with the students, how the students document their interactions with us, so that, in a sense, at the end of the semester, or throughout the semester, or in their digital portfolios, that's there. Like that proof is there. Because otherwise it sort of laughs in the face of the idea [of giving credit for real-world work]. Because if the only thing you're documenting well is the literature review they turn in then that's what the grade is.

The challenge of fitting into a traditional semester-based calendar has also constrained College Unbound's ability to innovate their model. Bush discusses the importance of breaking out of the compartmentalized, semester-based approach:

This is about playing the long game with these students. I'm not looking at a student to be done with X requirement come December because December's the end of the semester and we'll never return to it. That's cool that we're starting at that point where the student is able to start and student's first semester if they can finish that semester, excited for the second, connected deeply to the reading and the work and the history and the literature that they are doing through their project and starting to build a network of support and faculty around them and reflecting

upon that practice, I think that lays an amazing groundwork for what two semesters, four semesters, six semesters, eight can allow.

College Unbound staff have a clear preference for pushing the boundaries of the traditional system, even as they attempt to work within it. Bush describes his thought process:

I care a lot about pushing the boundaries of that semester, that [our program is] more than just “here’s what we assigned and agreed to.” It’s really about students developing meaningful relationships and meaningful contributions. I care about creating a learning environment that allows that to happen, regardless of how that fits or doesn’t fit into a semester model.

In making this work, Bush has used some creative approaches.

In my winter session course, half of the students have incompletes right now. I told them at the start I wasn’t giving a grade by default at the end of the section. They were asked to do projects that weren’t going to be bounded by the three weeks of the winter session. Actually, it would have been inappropriate for me to ask them to do that, because [the course] was about exploring the city and making connections and doing a collaborative project.

Even while working to break out of the traditional model, Bush acknowledges that there are times when it makes sense to draw upon these constructs, when student needs dictate.

I don't feel like defaulting to formal classes as classes are but there are some students that need that stuff and so an individualized program is about creating that infrastructure. I think our faculty now understands that.

Managing Faculty Perceptions of Quality

Even as College Unbound struggled to build stable degree-granting partnerships with traditional higher education institutions, it also struggled from the start to find staff that understood its vision, and an appropriate structure to support its staff.

With Littky, Scurry and Bush in place as the organization's leadership team, Bush worked to bring in faculty members who the team believed would be best positioned to support their students. Acknowledging that an all-white leadership team was recruiting first-generation students primarily of color, it was important to them to bring in staff of color to reflect the diversity of the student population.

Bush, who was a doctoral student at the time, pursued hiring through his academic channels. They ultimately hired three faculty members of color through these channels, all from traditional academic backgrounds, and all committed to the idea of building an educational program that met the needs of first generation students of color. As Bush notes, however, the broad goal of improving the lives of their students was not enough to get the first group of staff on the same page, and there were real concerns about what College Unbound was offering to its students:

The first faculty had all been educated through a traditional college system. I had gotten really excited about [College Unbound] adopting a teaching fellows model. Unfortunately, this quickly evolved into a dynamic that was sort of an us versus

them: those of us who had a strong sense of the original vision for how College Unbound would work—how we would teach and mentor first generation college students and students of color—and those, rightly, who did not want any student coming in to go to a program that was “less than.”

Although the College Unbound model was different, Bush had initially believed that faculty with experience in traditional higher education would be able to relate their experiences to their work at College Unbound.

I think you can find an equivalent of one-on-one meetings in office hours that professors at universities have. Office hours are kind of scary and are not required and it's up to the student to seek them out. This is a program built on that being built into what a semester design is. In some ways it feels much more like graduate school for undergrads than it does anything else.

Bush had also hoped that staff would collectively build College Unbound, eventually sharing a common vision.

With the staff getting things done, it's wanting to, at first, to take care of very concrete things, and at the end of the first semester, you've kind of seen them take on different initiatives that they are connected to. In a lot of ways, we want them to design the jobs that they want to inhabit. This program should be flexible enough and open enough to [accommodate] that.

Scurry, Littky and Bush were never able to bring the first group of teaching staff along with their vision. Scurry quickly assumed responsibility for teaching seminar and leading the academic experience on a day-to-day basis. By the end of the academic year, there

was a complete turnover of the staff. In some ways, Bush notes, the language and structure of faculty was never a perfect fit for College Unbound.

The universities force us ... not force us, but ask us to use language of faculty. In some way, it's how do we see those people as part of the faculty team for each student as well as bringing others that could be part of the faculty that the student doesn't know. It's not just saying, "That's great. You know three good people. Let's hire them as faculty." It's really seeing the people that you know and are connected to and are learning from in kind of awesome ways, and bringing in others and other resources to really build this network that can help a student advance towards a degree.

At the same time, the small, inexperienced academic staff was not fully prepared to address the complex needs of first-generation students.

I think it's really hard to do remedial work in the midst of doing other work. I don't think that it's impossible; I just think it's hard. I think we didn't strategically have a plan of how to deal with individual student needs at the beginning. And because of that, the first semester period fed into the second semester, and those assessments never got dealt with, or unpacked, or understood.

In year two, now with two residential cohorts (sixteen total students), the staff turnover was an opportunity to reset. Littky brought in a colleague from a Big Picture high school to be lead faculty member, thinking that someone with this background was more likely to understand his vision. He hired a residential staff person to manage the learning community (house), giving her only limited academic responsibilities. Due to personal

reasons, the lead faculty member left shortly after the start of the academic year, and Scurry took over lead faculty responsibilities.

As College Unbound developed, and following Scurry's departure to work full-time at Roger Williams, Bush and Littky came to the conclusion that a traditional staffing model with faculty who had gone through the traditional higher education system was not going to work for College Unbound. In the third year, coinciding with the move to adult learners, they began hiring full and part-time academic staff without traditional credentials for teaching at the college level, and who had not previously considered the possibility of teaching in higher education. Bush explains:

Higher education is new to all of them. In fact ... I used the term faculty. Maybe I shouldn't say faculty. We call them academic liaisons. The way I describe the model to someone in [traditional] higher education is that I am hired as the faculty of record at Roger Williams University to teach a class that a student is enrolled in and that's on their transcript. These academic liaisons are the on-the-ground teaching assistants that are working with students and directing sections. I think some of them are going to be pursuing master's degrees, but certainly, without College Unbound, right now they would not be in the world of higher education.

Each of these academic liaisons was responsible for working with a small cohort of adult learners to build individualized learning plans. Even with a very different group of academic staff, there were still challenges matching the skill sets and interests of the staff with the aspirations of the organization, ranging from field of expertise to providing specialized support. Patricia, a member of the academic staff explains:

In terms of skill set I would say ... and I'm thinking about the academic disciplines, I think that we were very much a humanities heavy staff, so in my mind, that's a weakness, that's a deficit.

Scurry, who had left for Roger Williams by this time, acknowledged the challenge to find teaching staff who ascribed to College Unbound's values, but was also adamant about the importance of broader expertise, especially when working with a student population that has distinct learning needs:

You can't be offering programs where English is a second language and you don't have a comprehensive ESL program and the right staff and support and tutoring support. It just doesn't work. You can't keep bringing in folks who are testing below a seventh grade level, when you have no system for doing developmental work. You have to have one.

Ultimately, the challenges with staff came back not only to fit and configuration, but a question of overall resources. As a small startup, College Unbound could not match the level of resources that larger institutions had, and this was sometimes a point of frustration with staff. Nick, another member of the academic staff notes:

I think that the program would better serve students if there were more resources. Some of that has to do with faculty, and some of that has to do with physical resources like space, and having a computer lab and having a building where the students have access and can study, have meetings with their peers, and read, etc. I think that when you think about universities and the kind of faculty that they

have that are committed and that are resources to the institution and therefore to the students.

For Scurry, this challenge comes back to unrealistic resource expectations:

There was no way you could [teach] in the night program as an academic liaison with 12 students, do your job well, and do it within the timeframe that we gave with the money that we gave you.

Bush has responded to the challenges faced by a non-traditional staff not by retreating, but by further blurring the lines of what it means to be part of the teaching staff, and finding creative ways to include everyone involved with College Unbound in the teaching and advising effort:

I want everyone to be teaching staff. [Nearly] everyone has [taught or advised] even if it's just one or two students. That is an important part, for me, of what it means to be a staff member at College Unbound, because you don't and can't speak for the program—understand the program—unless you're actually working with students struggling through those things.

Resisting Definition: Finding Quality in Structure and Flexibility

As College Unbound has developed, the organization has resisted definition and driven toward a more adaptive, evolving model. This constant change has played into the questions of quality that College Unbound continues to face, as measuring impact over time has been stymied by changing targets.

At its core, College Unbound is a place that is striving to be more, and that is reflected in the constant change and self-revision. Bush sees this not just a characteristic of an emerging organization, but core to College Unbound's approach to their work:

I think we're just always going to be [evolving] and I think that's actually pretty great. I want to always feel like this. I want to always have a program that is willing and interested in being different. Not for the sake of being different, but certainly for the sake of saying the status quo is not good enough. We should keep trying and we're certainly not perfect. I like that at its core it's an unwillingness to accept things as they are, both how other people do it and how we do it. I think that's really kind of healthy and great. That's one of the things I really respect about Dennis. I think some people see that as restlessness, but it's more than that.

At the same time, Bush sees the flexibility of College Unbound's model as an appropriate way to push students to be self-directed in their learning:

It's an organization that really values people taking initiative in running with something. That's what we want from our students: self-directed learning and ownership over your learning. Every student that approaches me with, "Can I do X," the answer is always going to be yes. If they want to put the time and effort into X, that's cool. Let's run with where that takes us and I can sort of piece in things around that and suggest readings and resources.

Bush also sees flexibility as the answer to concerns about variability in student preparedness for college, and a need to meet students where they are:

It needs to be a curricular model that's flexible enough [so that a] student in [his] first semester that's doing work up to X level is [able to achieve] college level work, however we're defining it, and that might be something different from another student. It's a curricular program that again honors the student and the networks they're a part of. That honoring and valuing, I think, opens the door for this kind of amazing process of transformation. Not to overly romanticize it, but I really believe that and I really see that. In a lot of ways, this is a student body—and not to overgeneralize—but it's a student body that's had traumatic experiences in higher education.

College Unbound's flexible approach is also driven by the personalities and style of the leadership. Part of what keeps College Unbound interesting to Bush is a constantly evolving set of initiatives and responsibilities, constant adapting to the needs of the students.

It's an organization where everyone's doing 12 things and that works for some people. I really love that. That's just how my mind works. Some people need very clear job responsibilities and this infuriates them. For me, I purposely have an obscure job title with flexible job responsibilities. It's a catchall position. This is the fourth year and it's the fourth year wherein different ways some things have [gone wrong]. That means you have to respond to those in different ways and that's cool challenge but it's also important to have a flexible job to be able to do that well.

College Unbound's push to become increasingly flexible in its processes and organization was influenced by staff changes. While Bush gained organizational influence and pushed for more flexibility, Scurry, even after departing for Roger Williams, raised concerns about how students perceived the flexibility inherent in College Unbound's approach:

Students don't understand their course equivalents. Students don't understand the learning goals they're [accountable for]. Students can't define how their internship is different from their work. They can't define from project to hours.

From the start, to achieve some measure of structure in the face of resistance from Bush and Littky, Scurry used the relationship with Roger Williams as a foil:

It was where I could leverage here, where I could say, "We have to have these for Roger Williams. I have to give these to Roger Williams. We have to have syllabi and learning plans. We need to give them outcomes." What started to happen was as folks started to see them, whether it be whoever it was, that was the thing they gravitated to and said, "Wow, that's really good." So whether Dennis valued it or not, he knew it had currency. When I shared the materials at Roger Williams, the provost at the time brought me in and said, "Let me show you what we're doing in outcomes-based learning. It took us two years to get to these seven goals. You're so far ahead of us, and what you did is remarkable." That was sort of very affirming because in my world, in Big Picture, that wasn't valued.

Scurry also pushed back by adding a more traditional structure to her work on her own. She describes her approach:

By January I think being able to come in and sit down I created more structured seminar time. I actually created a master syllabus for each student that integrated liberal arts. I created this master document that was probably a 30-page syllabus that explained what the goals of the course were, explained what the distribution was, talked about each one of the learning goals, gave background for it, gave all the readings, and then I plugged in all the readings that were for each one of those things, all the assignments. Then what I did was I worked with each student for them to contextualize it around their project so that everybody had a common base, which is why it was a master syllabus, but then it was personalized for each student's project and goal, and it worked. We did a lit review. We tried to integrate it. It worked because it gave them grounding. It wasn't like, "Do your learning plan." It was, "Let's sit down. Let's talk. Let's ask questions. Here's what I've done. Now you go and add to it and add to it."

By the third year, with Scurry gone, new staff struggled to understand the vision of the organization and how structure related to that vision. Patricia, a member of the teaching staff in the adult program, describes her frustration:

There is an unwillingness to commit to a structure, and I think that is really problematic for students. I know that students crave structure, and when we started over the summer and in the fall, while we are trying to work through it my assumption was that we were going to come to an understanding where: ah-ah, this is the structure that we are going to try. At least let's try it. The program never got to a point where we committed fully to saying, "Okay, this is the structure that we are going to try," and for me that was very frustrating. The way that I dealt

with it was by creating structures for my students that I thought would serve them even though those structures were not being used by everybody.

What felt like a sense of optimistic possibility to the Littky and Bush, ended up feeling like confusion on the ground, with the teaching staff. Patricia describes her feelings:

I think it's really important for students to have ... sorry, this sounds like a broken record, but for students to have clarity about the expectations, and I think it would benefit the program enormously to really clarify what the expectations are and not, at least at every level, that is at a broad level, in stepping into the program. This is roughly your timeline until you graduate; these are the milestones along the way. To specific learning rules; what are the expectations for the semester, what are the objectives of this learning goal? What are the outcomes of this learning goal? What is expected of me as a student to meet this learning goal? For each learning goal that they take on, and that is a meandering way back to my concerns about the lack of structure in the program, and my observation as an educator about the structure is really valuable for students. That it, in fact, deepen students' work rather than ... or it has the potential to deep students' work rather than stifling them and making them feel like they have to X, Y and Z and why do they have to do this. There's a balance there, obviously there has to be a balance there and the program relies on the kind of flexibility because each student is an individual learner and each student has their individual internship which is the bedrock of the whole thing, but at the same time, they're working toward these learning goals, and I think that there has to be more clarity about what that means; what it means to meet a learning goal.

Students echoed this sense of confusion. Doug notes, “there were certain classes that I didn’t know I was in until I was actually in them. They told me, ‘Oh, by the way, you’re in math class.’ I was like, ‘What? I didn’t even know.’”

Transitions in the model also impacted engagement with volunteer professional advisors. What had been a clear model when College Unbound was a residential program became less clear with working, non-traditional students. Scurry believes that these transitions impacted the professional advisor model.

The professional advisors are not as engaged like they were with the [residential] program. I don’t think they understand. I don’t think they get that they’re actually like a super mentor, almost like an adjunct faculty member who’s pushing content. I think we use the same word and expectation that we did in the day program, but I don’t think the professional advisors understand that. At least in the undergrad program, the PAs showed up for exhibitions. The PAs showed up for those kinds of things. Now we have PAs for all 60 students, but I don’t think they would understand they were a PA. I don’t think they’d understand what that means.

Not all of the teaching staff agreed with this assessment, however. Nick notes:

I think that the program uses professional advisors effectively, because the experiences that my students had at their internships were tremendous, and I think that that was the area in which they felt like they were growing the most, and learning the most, and that they were most excited about. Given that that is the bedrock of the program, I think that was tremendous.

As the teaching staff was looking for additional clarity and structure, the leadership worked to clarify—but not walk back—their belief in the importance of a flexible program. Bush explains:

I think part of what the faculty now realizes is that they were hired because of who they are and [their individual strengths]. They confuse ... what they saw as a lack of structure is actually a flexible infrastructure. You're at the same time a faculty member and a student services and an administration and a guidance counselor, and you can never just be one of those. I think that is at odds with how traditional universities are set up and how traditional scholarship is recognized.

At the same time, Bush agrees that more work can be done to better articulate how College Unbound thinks about and manages student work.

We have to build a language about what that is. What do we mean when we say creativity, right? Everyone can say they're creative in some way, but what are we really saying we want a student to develop competency in in terms of creativity or a reflection practice or what does the advocacy mean. That means very different things for different students coming from different walks of life.

Perseverance and Moving on: Charter Oak State College Partnership and Beyond

The partnerships College Unbound had forged with Roger Williams University and Southern New Hampshire University would ultimately break down. The relationship with Roger Williams was severed in 2013, and the program at SNHU ended in 2015. Still, this did not stop College Unbound from moving ahead. Even with the challenges

and stresses, there was a belief among students that College Unbound was a valuable program and should continue. Ashleigh commented:

Certain people thinking that the program itself is just ... not worth having. We're still going to push forward, we're still going to push for this kind of different, unique, innovative kind of way of learning in higher education and that's not going to stop us.

In 2013, facing the dissolution of their partnerships with Roger Williams University and Southern New Hampshire University, College Unbound formed a new partnership with Charter Oak State College, an online, public college based in Connecticut. In this iteration of College Unbound, the boundaries between organizations are more clearly defined. Charter Oak delivers coursework online, and College Unbound provides formalized support services to students. While College Unbound staff can—and do—teach classes, they do so as Charter Oak employees. College Unbound, for their part, provides supplemental support services to students, helping them navigate the college process and advising them on project-based work. Students graduate with a degree from Charter Oak State College.

Even as it leverages this partnership to continue helping adult learners earn accredited bachelor's degrees, Bush does not see this as the final configuration of College Unbound. In April 2015, College Unbound submitted an application to the State of Rhode Island to operate as an independent college. Bush explains the reason for this:

Ultimately, to fully enact our vision, we need to operate on our own. For this reason, we have already started in on a multi-year plan that will hopefully give us

the ability to grant bachelor's degrees without a degree-granting partner organization.

Summary

Like most organizations attempting to disrupt a highly regulated market, College Unbound has faced significant barriers to success, related to concerns about quality. While many of these barriers come from the external environment—largely centered around the need to either be accredited or partner with an accredited institution capable of granting bachelors degrees—College Unbound also faced significant challenges from within, as staff pushed back against College Unbound's values and processes, especially as they relate to quality.

Through this, College Unbound has continued to adapt by changing its internal configuration, and its external partners and relationship to the external environment. While still in flux, it appear that College Unbound continues to weather these challenges, growing in its resolve to disrupt traditional higher education.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion and Implications

This study began with the desire to understand the development of a new, innovative college, and how internal and external factors might have supported and hindered the organization's goal of disrupting higher education to meet the needs of underserved consumers. This chapter will summarize my findings in this area, and further analyze these findings in the context of my primary research question and disruptive innovation theory. Then, I will discuss the implications of this work for existing and emergent institutions of higher education, as well as for those funding and accrediting colleges and universities. Next, I will review the limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research that builds on this and other studies about disruptive innovation in higher education. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts about disruptive innovation and higher education.

Summary of Findings and Further Analysis

To better understand the process of disruptive innovation in higher education, I asked this primary research question: In an emerging disruptive higher education organization, how do the characteristics of the organization and its relationship to the external environment affect the potential capacity of the organization to disrupt the field of higher education? To ensure a comprehensive approach to understanding this, I looked internally at sub-questions of resources (e.g. people, finances), processes, and values. In College Unbound's relationship to the external environment, I examined both market forces and non-market forces (e.g. funding, accreditation systems).

In this effort, I found two primary themes that resonated at the intersection of College Unbound's organizational characteristics and external forces, and offer significant explanatory power regarding the development of College Unbound: Finding a Market, and Signaling Legitimacy and Redefining Quality.

Finding a Market

College Unbound initially set out to disrupt the market and meet the needs of traditional-aged, first-generation and underrepresented college students with a three year, full-time residential model. Examining this goal through the lens of disruptive innovation, College Unbound saw first-generation students as outside the market for traditional higher education (non-consumers of traditional higher education) and was trying to provide access to higher education by disrupting the traditional model.

In practice, College Unbound found it a challenge to recruit even the very small (8-10 students) cohorts it had planned for in its early years. This proved to be the case both in Providence and in New Hampshire. While Littky and the College Unbound leadership may see the needs of this population as different from mainstream higher education, these students simply did not materialize for College Unbound. Based on peer feedback from those students who did attend College Unbound, students that were interested in the highly experiential and integrative approach to college were not ready to give up the traditional trappings of college (e.g. campus, social opportunities) that were missing from College Unbound in Providence. Even those students who were interested in the College Unbound model eventually asked for more structure than was initially provided, finding the experimental nature of the College incompatible with the support

needed developmentally by traditional-aged students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renin, 2010).

Why this failure? While first-generation students are underserved by the traditional college model, they are not fully outside the mainstream market for higher education. Put another way, they are not quite non-consumers. Because of this, they perceive a choice of where to attend, and the traditional model of higher education is still winning. Disruptive innovation theory describes this as choosing the wrong foothold market (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004). Although first-generation students may eventually benefit from a disruption created by College Unbound, cultivating the disruption requires finding a target market that allows the disruption to find a foothold.

At Southern New Hampshire University, where students did live amongst other students in the dorms and have full access to a traditional college setting and the related resources and support, the model proved too expensive to sustain. While the university was willing to provide full financial support for the early cohorts, it was not able to recruit a class without these incentives, and could not afford to continue meeting full need with institutional grants.

Why this failure? This example helps explain why disruptive organizations must provide a simpler, less expensive model than the mainstream in order to be successful (Christensen & Raynor, 2003). College Unbound's model of providing individualized learning opportunities and support for experiential, project-based work is difficult to scale, and thus expensive to provide. While College Unbound was funded by successful organizations like SNHU and Big Picture Learning, as well as by seed funding from

foundations, it was briefly able to sustain a residential model. When this initial funding went away, the residential model similarly went away.

Many disruptive organizations simplify their offerings and reduce cost by unbundling features, breaking them apart into separate services and reducing the services offered. This dynamic has also been seen and promoted in higher education (Craig, 2015; Selingo, 2013). College Unbound did this in some respects – by not providing a traditional faculty structure with expensive research support – but did initially bundle their academic offering with their residential program. Ultimately, providing housing proved too costly, and providing the required social and extracurricular programming proved too complex given College Unbound’s resources and expertise.

To address these challenges, College Unbound pivoted, discontinuing the residential program, and launching an offering for adult learners. College Unbound moved to looking at adult learners as a group that is often unnerved by traditional higher education (non-consumers of traditional higher education), and for those who have engaged in traditional higher education, are no longer willing to shoulder the expense of complex traditional programs with lots of offerings and services (overserved by traditional higher education).

While College Unbound’s residential students expressed a strong desire for a more traditional college experience (at least from a social perspective), the adult learners expressed a much different desire: the ability to obtain a bachelor’s degree without jumping through the perceived hoops of traditional higher education. As Levine &

Nidiffer (1996) suggest, and College Unbound's students confirm, adult learners want a much more flexible program that does not get in the way of their multiple life obligations.

College Unbound achieved this high level of flexibility by keeping their approach of centering learning around student projects, but allowed those working full time to use their own work setting as the project site, and minimized mandatory on-site work to one in-person seminar per week, held in the evening. This high level of convenience and flexibility is an example of the kind of benefit that is difficult to offer in a traditional higher education program, and one reason that mainstream programs are often inaccessible to adult populations. This convenience factor has previously been seen as a feature of other disruptive innovations (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004), and is likely to be a factor not just in College Unbound's ability to sustain itself, but to be disruptive.

While the academic offering of College Unbound's adult learner program is nearly identical to that of the previous residential program, eliminating the need to provide housing and related residential programming and support make it significantly easier for College Unbound to fund its operations within a narrow cost structure, in line with available federal aid for students. Assuming that federal aid programs continue with their current requirements and at current levels, it is possible that the adult learner program is financially sustainable for both College Unbound and its adult students. Again, this narrower cost model puts College Unbound in line with disruptive innovation theory (Christensen & Raynor, 2003).

By leveraging both community partnerships and the workplaces of its students as project sites, College Unbound also addresses the question of how to sustain sites for these projects at no additional cost for the organization, without relying on its ability to build a roster of volunteers to support this effort, which was time intensive and thus costly for the organization. This partnership model, in some ways, is outsourcing the experiential piece of the College Unbound model. This form of unbundling reduces costs both through outsourcing functions, but also by reducing the expense of highly coordinating these functions (Selingo, 2013).

Legitimacy and Quality

Even as colleges and universities attempt to innovate, they are bound by the norms that the broader environment defines. Concerns about legitimacy are a key issue for organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

The way that different types of colleges and universities signal quality and legitimacy is as diverse as the types of institutions: from ivy-covered granite facades to state-of-the-art libraries and laboratories, from average starting salary post-graduation to number of alumni who are Supreme Court justices, there are countless signals. While emergent and lower-prestige institutions cannot match the signals sent by more established and more elite institutions, nearly all colleges and universities share one marker: the ability to grant an accredited degree (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Without a storied history or campus, or a cadre of successful graduates, offering the bachelor's degree was initially College Unbound's only way to signal legitimacy to the marketplace. While some organizations that are attempting to disrupt higher

education have bypassed traditional degrees, these organizations generally focus on delivering technical training and certification. Schools that offer critical thinking and developmental skills building rather than a route to a narrow career path have, overwhelmingly, continued to offer the degrees that hold value with employers. (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). As Scurry indicates, it is this tension between signaling legitimacy to the traditional employment market by offering an accredited degree, and meeting the needs of unserved consumers by disrupting, that creates the dynamic College Unbound faces.

Initially, College Unbound approached the State of Rhode Island for permission to operate an independent degree-granting institution, but was turned down. Littky attributed this to Rhode Island's cautious approach to these proposals. College Unbound pushed forward by looking for a partner organization that would grant the degree on College Unbound's behalf. College Unbound would ultimately partner with three degree-granting institutions: Roger Williams University, Southern New Hampshire University, and Charter Oak State College. In May, 2015, College Unbound was recognized by the State of Rhode Island as an independent degree-granting institution, ending its need to partner with other institutions. College Unbound then began the process of applying for regional accreditation.

The disruptive innovation literature cautions of the difficulty to disrupt within the confines of an existing mainstream organization such as the partner institutions that College Unbound has worked with (Macher & Richman, 2004; Walsh et al. 2002). Discontinuous innovations are most often created by new, stand-alone entrants (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Christensen & Bower, 1996; Tushman & Anderson, 1986).

The position of College Unbound's partner organizations within the lower tier of mainstream higher education is worth noting. While College Unbound did have initial conversations with higher prestige institutions, it was only at the margins of the mainstream where it found institutions willing to partner.

With Roger Williams University, the partnership initially looked promising, as College Unbound was initially given a significant amount of autonomy through its relationship with the University's continuing education program. Raynor (2011) argues that disruption can happen within mainstream organizations, when the disruptive unit is set aside and given autonomy in regard to processes and values. In studies of established businesses where disruption has occurred, nearly all had set up autonomous units to develop the new market (Chesbrough, 2001; King & Tucci, 2002).

Also promising was situating College Unbound within the continuing education division at Roger Williams. Archer et al. (1999) have identified continuing education programs as likely sources of disruption, given their relatively flexible structure and market-orientation. Yet structural requirements of the relationship with Roger Williams, such as the approach to course equivalency and evaluation, and the need to adhere to a semester and credit-based model, would ultimately strain the relationship.

Christensen (2006) notes that these types of structured routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982) often stand in the way of disruptive innovations being fully adopted into a mainstream organization, and ultimately limit the development of a disruptive innovation. This would prove to be the case at Roger Williams, as College Unbound's demands for greater flexibility tested a relationship where full buy-in had never been established.

Ultimately, Roger Williams questioned and dissolved the partnership with College Unbound. It is unclear if this relationship could have worked with more attention to initial buy-in, or if the differing values and goals of the education made this break-up inevitable.

In the case of Southern New Hampshire University, a university with a leadership more focused on disrupting the mainstream market, the relationship was on solid footing academically, but would ultimately fail because the sponsoring university did not see a natural audience for College Unbound, and found recruiting students into the residential program to be prohibitively expensive. In short, SNHU was open to a more disruptive approach, but because they were focused on the residential model and were not in a position to pivot to adult learners (being in a less populated area), they found the model non-viable from a scale and financial perspective.

College Unbound's third degree-granting partner, Charter Oak State College, was similarly misaligned. While interested in disruptive models of education, the primarily online approach taken by Charter Oak was not a strong fit for College Unbound's high-touch model.

In all three cases, the existing models of education at the partner institutions, and the rigidity of the organization's structure and resources (Henderson & Clark, 1990), predicted the tension with the College Unbound partnership, and its ultimate failure.

Still, College Unbound's partnership phase allowed the organization to prove, at some level, their ability to provide an effective bachelor's education, and give the

organization time to build up some credibility toward becoming an autonomous degree-granting institution, which was granted by the State of Rhode Island in May 2015.

Limitations of the Study

While a case study analysis offers a limited ability to generalize across other organizations, it does offer the ability to generalize to theory that may be of value to other organizations (Yin, 2004). In an effort toward this, I offer the following implications of this study both for the future work of College Unbound, and for others interested in creating disruptive innovations in the higher education marketplace. I lead with the caveat that these recommendations should be understood as contextually-specific to College Unbound, and thus may offer varying degrees of applicability to other institutions, based on the situational context of each organization and its work.

The findings in this specific case are particularly limited, because College Unbound is still an emerging organization, and has yet to prove (or disprove) its ability to disrupt. As it is still emerging, College Unbound is not yet either a success or a failure. Still, the alignment between the experience of College Unbound and the existing work in disruptive innovation theory provide some evidence that the experience of College Unbound is generalizable to a base of theory that is more broadly useful.

Any study of an organization within a market is limited by the researcher's ability to fully understand the perspective of consumers in that market. This study used interviews with College Unbound students to understand their perspective on the organization, but did not take the next step of collecting data from similar individuals

who did not choose to attend College Unbound. This approach limits, to some extent, the ability to fully understand the market that College Unbound is operating within.

This study is also limited by its primary theoretical construct, disruptive innovation theory. While this theory offers important value to the study of higher education, as described in chapters two and three of this dissertation, it also emphasizes market-based and technology-based components of the external environment, to the loss of other macro elements in the environment, including cultural forces. This theory offers particular value at a moment of increased interest in College access, but it is important to acknowledge that this is just one theoretical perspective, impacting the emphasis and direction of these findings.

Kirst and Stevens (2015) advocate higher education research that includes both past theoretical approaches and new theories, including disruptive innovation. This study does not attempt to connect the construct of disruptive innovation to the broader construct of institutional innovation. Such an approach would have considered the relationship between College Unbound and other innovative colleges described in the institutional literature (Clark, 1970; Grant and Riesman, 1978). Clark (1970) described “Distinctive colleges” such as Reed, Antioch and Swarthmore, that were characterized as having strong cultures and well-developed institutional sagas or legends. While College Unbound may also have a strong culture and an emerging saga of its own, its creation to address market-based inequities—something that was not true of Clark’s “Distinctive Colleges,” which met the needs of mainstream—warrants analysis through a market-focused lens such as disruptive innovation theory. While not within the scope of this study, a broader analysis would allow for greater understanding of the potential role of

disruptive innovation in the broader context of the history of college reform, and thus is an important direction for future research. This type of study would also balance the market focus of disruptive innovation theory with a broader understanding of the external environment.

Implications for Application of Disruptive Innovation to Higher Education

Can Disruption be Predicted in Higher Education?

There has been some debate about the usefulness of disruptive innovation as a predictive tool (Barney, 1997; Danneels, 2004; Tellis, 2006). Christensen (2006) has argued vigorously against these criticisms from a theoretical perspective, and Raynor (2011) has put forward empirical data suggesting the ability to predict disruption. But does this apply to higher education, and more specifically to College Unbound? The answer is unclear.

Because College Unbound is still an emerging organization, it is still too early to predict long-term success or failure of College Unbound to disrupt the market for higher education. There are a number of promising signs that, when added together, leave open the door for disruption: the use of an emergent strategy and the related ability to successfully pivot the model in a short timeframe to serve the (arguably unserved or overserved) adult learner population (Christensen, Anthony & Roth, 2004), the unbundling of traditional higher education offerings such as residence halls and social programming, increased flexibility and convenience (Craig, 2015; Selingo, 2013), and the resulting reduced cost structure (Christensen & Raynor, 2003).

Yet the future of College Unbound is uncertain. The ability to operate and grant degrees independently and on stable financial footing is not, on its own, disruptive. Disruptive innovation requires the model (or organization) to scale, and ultimately disrupt or move the mainstream (Christensen, 1997). To do so, College Unbound would need to expand dramatically as an organization, or develop another approach to replicating its model. There are few signs that College Unbound is prepared to go to scale in this way, although its community organization partnerships offer some interesting models for working specifically with at-risk populations.

In the end, this dissertation falls short of demonstrating true prediction of disruptive innovation, as College Unbound has yet to demonstrate success in disrupting the higher education marketplace. It does, however, show a strong fit between the experience of College Unbound's development and the theory of disruptive innovation.

Does Disruptive Innovation Theory Make Sense For Higher Education?

Disruptive innovation in higher education is a confusing prospect at best. For years, Clayton Christensen, the originator of disruptive innovation, predicted that community colleges would be the source of disruptive innovation in higher education (Christensen et al., 2004). Then online learning was to be the great disruptor (Christensen et al., 2008). Christensen and Eyring (2011) then wrote a book on innovation in higher education that concedes that disruption has not taken root, and further, they question the desirability of disruption in higher education, seeing value in a system that has worked successfully for centuries.

The findings of this dissertation leave the door open to the possibility of disruption in higher education. College Unbound has managed to navigate challenges it has faced in its earliest stages in ways that are similar to how disruptive organizations in the literature have successfully developed and then disrupted (Raynor, 2011). This suggests that disruption may be possible even given these barriers. Further, should disruption occur within mission-driven institutions such as College Unbound and BYU-Idaho (Christensen & Eyring, 2011), it is likely that concerns about institutional quality will be addressed through the disruption process as the theory suggests (Christensen, 1997), while opening up the market for higher education to currently unserved populations.

The highly regulated nature of higher education, the significance that higher education holds in our collective cultural psyche, the lack of national consensus around the goals of higher education, and the many of types of institutions and educations provided by our colleges and universities makes navigating—let alone disrupting—this landscape a significant challenge. Yet, Kirst and Stevens (2015) argue that the changing ecology of higher education demands both holding on to past wisdom, and throwing out old assumptions by looking at higher education through new lenses, including disruptive innovation.

Market forces are an undisputed force in today's higher education landscape. The need to solve the cost issue is increasingly urgent. And, with higher education a prerequisite for a huge percentage of jobs, increasing access to higher education will continue to be a significant issue. Disruptive innovation offers a potential answer to all of these challenges, by opening up markets to new consumers at lower price points. With

examples of for-profit and non-profit organizations attempting to disrupt higher education (Craig, 2015), and multiple calls for disruption to solve higher education's challenges (Kamanetz, 2010; Selingo 2013), exploration of this idea continues to hold weight. Continuing to understand how disruptive innovations can and will impact the higher education landscape, and ensuring that these organizations do so in ways that improve higher education for all, is a worthwhile pursuit.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge the critics of disruptive innovation in deciding whether to use the model to analyze higher education. A number of critics have been broadly critical of using market-based decision making in higher education (Bok, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Washburn, 2005). While these concerns are justified, increasing focus on markets and business-based analysis within the higher education landscape (Kirst & Stevens, 2015) make ignoring market-based models akin to burying one's head in the sand.

Lepore (2014) wrote an impassioned critique noting that disruptive innovation is a theory that is based on negative impulses, motivating actors to take action based on fear and panic. There is no evidence of this at College Unbound. Rather, its leaders welcome change as an opportunity to increase access to higher education.

Viewed broadly, this study reinforces the assertion that disruptive innovation is an appropriate lens to study higher education. While College Unbound has not yet disrupted the market, the ways in which College Unbound's experience as a potential disruptor can be explained by and reflected in the theory helps strengthen the rationale to use this theory in the design of future organizations and programs, and as a tool for analysis of

market dynamics in higher education. Further, this study reinforces the public dialogue about the nature of higher education as a market, given findings about how students perceive their college choices (or lack thereof), the challenges students face bearing the high cost of higher education. This knowledge provides additional rationale for organizations that choose to use market-based theories such as disruptive innovation to drive organizational decision-making.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Willingness and Ability to Iterate the Model

Had this study stopped after the year or two of College Unbound's existence, it would have missed a key implication of their work: the ability to iterate. Disruptive Innovation theory points to the need for flexibility within an organization to create new structures and work flexibly in order to effectively disrupt the marketplace. Because leaders do not have foresight into a newly developing market, organizations that do not have both the willingness and ability to be flexible often fail at disruption (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004).

Practically, this dynamic played out in the case of College Unbound because the organization needed to iterate its target market, degree-granting mechanism, staffing model, and more. Littky calls this his "Ready, Fire, Aim" approach, and while some may be critical of his decision to launch College Unbound without a clear direction, his ability as a leader to hone and reshape the organization while in motion is essential to its continued existence.

While other emerging higher education organizations interested in disruption can learn from College Unbound's early mistakes and perhaps be somewhat more playful in their initial stages, it is unlikely they will fully anticipate the needs of their foothold market (Christensen, Anthony & Roth, 2004), and thus will need to make some significant pivots in direction. Organizations should be prepared to root out rigidity within the organization and its partnerships that may be barriers to disruptive innovation. For College Unbound, their structure of course equivalents and semester-based learning may be the rigid structures that need rethinking.

While this kind of flexibility may be possible within emerging, non-mainstream higher education, it also points to the reason why traditional institutions will face significant challenges should they wish to disrupt their own programs. While traditional higher education structures such as the tenure system and shared governance may help ensure the quality of instruction and research, they are also structural barriers that may prevent organizations from quickly shifting direction (Henderson & Clark, 1990). For example, tenure limits significant restructuring of the faculty, and shared governance limits the speed at which an organization can make decisions and effect change.

For these reasons, traditional institutions may find that partnership models, such as those employed by College Unbound and its mainstream degree-granting partners, are a reasonable alternative to creating disruption within the main organization. In these cases, it would be advised that the partnership be given significant autonomy outside of the regular structures of the University, to encourage the nimbleness required of an emerging disruptive organization.

Choosing a Market That is Ready for Disruption

When he conceived of College Unbound, Dennis Littky believed that the market for traditional-aged, residential first-generation college students was ripe for disruption, based on his own experience working with Big Picture high school students who were finding that traditional colleges did not meet their needs. In practice, this group proved to be a small minority of students that could barely sustain College Unbound's pilot programs in Providence and New Hampshire, let alone go to scale in a significant way.

Instead, College Unbound found its residential students to desire a more traditional campus experience – one that is expensive and resource intensive to provide. As the cost of this type of education continues to rise, it may eventually outpace our ability to provide a traditional residential program to the broader population. But for the moment, students are continuing to attend mainstream colleges.

Those who opt out of traditional residential colleges because of cost or other factors have other options outside of non-mainstream residential program like College Unbound, such as commuting to local (often public) colleges, attending community colleges, and studying through online degree programs (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Most of these programs, even though they are missing a key component of the traditional college experience, maintain the traditional approach of courses, semesters, and degree requirements that are familiar to prospective students.

On the other hand, adult students—especially those in vulnerable or at-risk populations such as the formerly incarcerated—were eager to try College Unbound. For these students, the model of traditional education was simply too inflexible, not

accommodating their complex schedules and other obligations such as family and work, and not providing the high level of personal support needed to navigate the system. For these students, College Unbound offered a path that would never have been attainable in a traditional college setting, residential or otherwise. The ability to complete a degree in a short timeframe, apply life and work learning toward their degree, and structure credit-bearing projects around their jobs and lives was incredibly appealing. Most students indicated that they saw no real alternative to College Unbound – the definition of an unserved consumer (Christensen & Raynor, 2003).

The lesson here is for emerging institutions to identify their foothold market (Christensen, Anthony & Roth, 2004) clearly, and ensure that they are choosing to serve a market that is truly unserved by traditional higher education. To do so, organizations that wish to disrupt the market need to ignore the easy trap of identifying students that they believe are poorly served by traditional higher education, and instead find student that are not in the current marketplace at all or in significant number, but who have the desire or perceived need for higher education.

Aligning the Values and Needs of the Market with the Organization's Values and Resources

When College Unbound launched, it learned some difficult lessons. It had hired a teaching staff with values that were more aligned with traditional higher education than with their intended model. It offered students more autonomy and less social support than students needed and wanted. It initially lined up internship opportunities that did not

interest its students, and spoke a language of entrepreneurship that did not resonate with its students.

Henderson (2006) warns that managers may fail at disruption because their views are anchored in their past experiences. This initially seemed to be the case for the leaders of College Unbound. It created a model around its own philosophy of education, rather than based on the expressed needs of its target market. This makes sense, as even among non-mainstream startup institutions, the language of business and marketing is perceived negatively (Marcus, 2006). While organizations should take care to moderate their desire to please prospective students with the obligations of their mission, in today's consumer-driven marketplace, organizations ignore a customer-mindset at their own peril (Christensen & Bower, 1996).

In some cases, College Unbound solved these initial mismatches by iterating their model, and in other cases kept their model and found a different population of students that were better suited to that model. In all cases, it would be well advised for new and emerging organizations to invest in market research early in the development process, to fully understand the needs of their target audience, and ensure as much as possible that the educational model, available resources, and pricing structure will be appealing to this audience. A number of techniques help predict how consumers will behave, as opposed to how they believe or indicate they might behave (Mohr et al. 2004; Slater and Mohr 2006). Following launch, emerging organizations will inevitably need to iterate to get the complexities of an educational offering right (Christensen, Anthony & Roth, 2004), but starting with clearer alignment should shorten the challenges of this iterative time period and reduce the costs of this startup period.

Balancing Innovation and Risk-Taking with Responsibility to Students

Littky asserts that College Unbound would never have launched if they had waited to get everything right. Teaching staff at all stages of the organization's growth have raised concerns regarding the quality of College Unbound's offerings, citing concerns about disorganization and lack of clarity in the academic requirements, lack of appropriate staffing and expertise in the residential program, lack of coordination and rigor in some of the professional advising, and too great an expectation of the teaching staff to manage large workloads.

Christensen (1997), in turn, points to an initial lack of quality in disruptive innovations, as compared to the mainstream offering. Given this, it simply may not be possible to both be disruptive, and initially offer the same level of quality. How can an organization then balance the desire to innovate while maintaining its responsibility to its students?

College Unbound has managed to ensure the success of its students—as measured by retention and graduation—by providing an extremely high-touch experience. Even those students who expressed some confusion or concern were able to address this through intervention by one of College Unbound's leaders. Because senior staff were deeply involved in the direct education of students in the first years of College Unbound (and still to this day), they served as an early warning system when quality issues arose.

Other organizations would be well served to launch a new offering with a greater number of staff in place, and designate senior leaders who are working on the ground level and available to troubleshoot issues and solve quality concerns on the fly. Those

funding and accrediting new models should similarly provide funding for and insist that organizations structure their work in ways that at least initially put senior leaders in student-facing roles, and give them time to focus on quality concerns on a student-by-student basis.

Developing a Sustainable Pricing/Cost Structure

At College Unbound's launch, they relied on startup funding from Big Picture Learning and a number of foundations. Seed funding is invaluable to give an organization time for initial planning, startup costs, and operating costs until it can achieve scale. Unfortunately for College Unbound, its well-laid plans proved untenable, in part due to shifts in the economic landscape. Certainly, the organization's plans to purchase foreclosed houses and build a residential model that brought in some income was never achieved.

Even had this approach to funding the residential model worked in Providence, it was never a replicable model for other locations, since few locations would have offered the same kind of foreclosed housing in the long term. Similarly, the initial model of hiring full-time faculty using a fellowship model may have worked initially, but in hindsight seems obvious that as College Unbound grew to scale, this would not have been a sustainable model. This is also true of the fully-volunteer professional advisor model, which works well initially but does not grow to scale well.

As College Unbound has grown, it has fixed many of these issues, and again the flexibility of the organization is a key finding here. Still, new organizations could learn from College Unbound's attempts to build a sustainable cost structure from the start.

A related issue is that of pricing. Federal financial aid has been named as a possible barrier to disruptive innovation (Christensen & Eyring, 2011), and has limited College Unbound's ability to be more innovative in its model. Much of the student tuition goes directly to the degree-granting partner, leaving College Unbound to operate with very limited funding for its own infrastructure. Exploration of other ways to fund higher education, including employer-funded programs and low-cost delivery will be imperative to the success of future disruptive innovations.

Finding Alternative Accreditation Models

Accreditation continues to play an important role in maintaining the quality and stability of higher education in the United States. In part, it is the existence of standardized, accredited degrees that let organizations like College Unbound operate with some level of credibility and understanding in the marketplace, because their degree is universally understood. Yet accreditation is also perceived to be a barrier to disruption (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Chesbrough (1999) has shown the importance of favorable regulation and licensure conditions in the development of disruptive innovations. This issue appears to be relevant in the case of College Unbound. If accrediting bodies and state governments wish to facilitate disruptive innovations that broaden access to higher education, they will need to find alternative pathways to accreditation and licensure, so that organizations like College Unbound can more readily seek initial or temporary accreditation with fewer roadblocks.

Even given the challenges College Unbound has faced with partnerships, accrediting organizations and states would be well served by looking at the kinds of partnership models that have allowed College Unbound to start up, and find ways to standardize the structure of similar partnerships to ease these relationships in the future. Perhaps a model might be developed where organizations are granted license or accreditation to offer degrees solely as a partner to new startup colleges, in a way similar to how business incubators provide startup businesses with much needed expertise and resources such as office space.

Implications and Challenges for Further Research

One of the limitations of this study is that College Unbound is not yet, by definition, disruptive to the marketplace. While this is a result of the design of this study, which deliberately looked at an organization in the emergent stage, there is now room to take the findings from this study and compare them to the experience of higher education institutions that are more mature, and show evidence of producing a disruptive innovation. As stated above, a study that integrates questions across both disruptive innovation and traditional institutional innovation theories would strengthen the connection between these literatures and offer greater insight. Given the potential of College Unbound as a disruptive innovation, further study of College Unbound may also be of value.

Verifying that the findings from this study are consistent with the experience of disruptive organizations is an important step to ensure that these findings are truly relevant to the process of disruptive innovation, and not just to College Unbound. This

research may prove challenging, as many organizations that have been disruptive or are attempting to be are for profit organizations that see their model as a competitive financial advantage, and may not be open to intense study. Even non-profit organizations doing this work are likely to perceive a market advantage to keeping their model confidential. Still, pursuing study of these organizations is important to provide greater understanding of disruptive innovation in higher education.

Also, in the goal of addressing the limitation of this study and case studies in general, an important next step is a quantitative study that takes the predictive indicators from this study, and looks at whether these have true predictive qualities, or rather if they merely have explanatory power in a qualitative sense. While this study found some trends that closely follow disruptive innovation theory, the complex, qualitative interaction of the organization and the environment may preclude accurate quantitative prediction. Despite these challenges, this would be an interesting area to pursue and of significant value to funders and policy-makers.

Finally, there is a real need for empirical research focused on the impact of disruptive innovation on the higher education landscape. While the goals of disruption to broaden the market dovetail nicely with the desire to increase access to higher education, this may come at a cost to the very nature of higher education in the United States. Understanding this dynamic will be of import to those funding innovation in higher education, and those regulating our higher education system.

Final Thoughts

The title of this dissertation promises a story about how innovative institutions can change higher education. While College Unbound and other disruptive aspirants have not yet proven an ability to disrupt the landscape of higher education, their efforts point toward a new approach to higher education that moves past innovation for the sake of prestige, and toward a vision of innovation that serves all who are able and interested.

College Unbound, like all potential disruptors, took on significant risk and challenge in choosing a mission of disrupting mainstream higher education to reach those not being served by the mainstream. Many new institutions fail, and disruption in higher education has proven to be difficult at best (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). The challenges College Unbound faced in meeting the needs of an unserved market were impossible to predict accurately (Christensen, Anthony & Roth, 2004). Given these challenges, why even attempt to disrupt higher education?

In 2007, when I first raised the idea of a study focused on disruptive innovation as a tool for increasing access in higher education, there was little public discourse on the issue. Many of the sources cited in this dissertation did not yet exist. In the ensuing years, the vision of increasing access to and reducing the cost of higher education through disruptive innovation has spawned a vigorous debate throughout the sector.

It is too soon to know if disruptive innovation will be a force for good or bad in higher education. Should organizations such as College Unbound remain as niche providers, the gap between the quality of education and outcomes available from these niche providers and from elite institutions is likely to remain significant. It is only in

disrupting the marketplace, and thus becoming part of the new mainstream, that we will see these new entrants able to provide uniformly high quality education to all students. Thus study suggests that, in time, organizations such as College Unbound can reach unserved populations with meaningful higher education, and ultimately change the nature of mainstream higher education.

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

College Unbound Staff: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Resources

1. How did you end up at College Unbound?

Prompts: How did you find out about CU? What attracted you to CU? Did any specific person recruit you? Where would you be if not at CU?

2. What do you bring to College Unbound?

Prompts: Skills? Strengths? Ideas? Perspectives? How is this unique to you? Is there work that you believe CU can only do because you are here?

3. Tell me about the College Unbound Staff.

Prompts: What is the staff particularly good at? Particular weaknesses? Give an example of a situation that the staff handled particularly well. Particularly poorly?

4. Tell me about the College Unbound Advisory Board.

Prompts: What resources does the Advisory Board bring to College Unbound?

5. Tell me about College Unbound's community partners.

Prompts: What resources do community partners bring to College Unbound?

6. Tell me about College Unbound's institutional partners.

Prompts: What resources do institutional partners bring to College Unbound?

7. Does College Unbound have the resources it needs to succeed in its mission?

Prompts: What are examples of resources that are helping you succeed? What are examples of resources you are missing? Give an example of how you take advantage of your existing resources particularly well. Give an example of how you make up for resources you don't have. Where do College Unbound's resources come from? Is there anything you haven't been able to do because of lack of resources?

Processes

1. How do you get things done at College Unbound?

Prompts: How are important decisions made? How are day-to-day concerns addressed? Do you follow any prescribed policies or procedures?

2. What does College Unbound do particularly well? Not well?

Prompts: Can you give specific examples?

Values

3. What are the core principles of College Unbound?

Prompts: How do these principles manifest themselves? Where do they show up to an outside observer? In documents? In financial decisions/budgets? Can you rank these principles in order of importance?

Environment – Market

1. Who is College Unbound designed to serve?

Prompts: Does it fill an unmet need? How? Was all of this intentional? Do you see any areas for improvement here? Lessons learned?

2. How successful has College Unbound been in recruiting and retaining students?

Prompts: Why do you think that is? Any lessons learned? Room for improvement?

Environment – Non-Market

1. Outside of student need, what outside forces have influenced the structure and design of College Unbound?

Prompts: Funding opportunities? Accreditation? Partner institutions? Regulations? Community needs? Technology?

Other

1. Where do you see the future of College Unbound? In setting the future direction for College Unbound, what is the nature of that conversation?

Prompts: Who is a part of the conversation? What are the most important concerns you are talking about? Where do you see these conversations leading?

College Unbound Institutional and Community Partners: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Resources

1. How did you get involved with College Unbound?

Prompts: How did you find out about CU? What attracted you to CU? Did any specific person recruit you?

2. What do you bring to College Unbound?

Prompts: What do you bring to the relationship? Skills? Strengths? Ideas? Perspectives? Resources? How is this unique to you? Is there work that you believe CU can only do because you are here?

3. What does College Unbound bring to you?

Prompts: Skills? Strengths? Ideas? Perspectives? Resources? Goodwill?

4. From your perspective, does College Unbound have the resources it needs to succeed in its mission?

Prompts: What are examples of resources that are helping College Unbound succeed? What are examples of resources that are missing? Give an example of how College Unbound take advantage of existing resources particularly well. Give an example of how College Unbound makes up for resources it doesn't have. Where do College Unbound's resources come from? Is there anything that College Unbound hasn't been able to do because of lack of resources?

Processes

1. Are there any policies or procedures that direct your relationship with College Unbound?

Prompts: Impacting day-to-day issues? Impacting long-term work?

2. What successes has your partnership delivered? Challenges you face?

Prompts: Can you give specific examples?

Values

1. What would you identify as the core principles of College Unbound?

Prompts: How do these principles manifest themselves? Where do they show up to an outside observer? In documents? In financial decisions/budgets? Can you rank these principles in order of importance to your organization/institution?

Environment

2. Has working with College Unbound met your expectations?

Prompts: In what ways? Can you give examples? What things have surprised you?

3. What do you see in the future for College Unbound?

Prompts: How do you see College Unbound growing? What do you see as your role in the future of College Unbound?

College Unbound Students: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Environment – Market

1. How did you end up at College Unbound?

Prompts: How did you hear about College Unbound? What was your initial impression? Did anyone in particular recruit you or encourage you to find out more?

2. What were your primary reasons for choosing College Unbound?

Prompts: Were you looking at other options? Why did you choose College Unbound over these options? Where would you be if you weren't at College Unbound right now?

3. Did you have concerns about coming to College Unbound?

Prompts: What were these concerns?

4. What reactions did other people in your life have to your decision to attend College Unbound?

Prompts: Positive reactions? Negative reactions?

5. What expectations did you have about attending College Unbound vs. a traditional college?

Prompts: did you expect College Unbound to be very different than a traditional college? In what ways? In what ways did you expect it to be the same?

6. How has College Unbound met your expectations? How has it been different than your expectations?

Prompts: Academic experience, social experience, internship experience, available opportunities, relationship with staff/faculty, relationships with other students, way you are evaluated?

Values

1. What does College Unbound stand for or care about? What does it not care about?

Prompts: In your estimation, which of those is most important to the school? What is least important to the school? Why do you think that?

Processes

1. What experiences have been particularly positive so far? Particularly negative?

Prompts: Why is that the case? What caused that situation?

Resources

1. What people have most impacted your College Unbound experience so far?

Prompts: Positive impact? Negative impact?

Other

1. At this point, would you choose College Unbound again if you could do it over?

Prompts: Why? Why not? Would you recommend College Unbound to others?

2. Where do you see College Unbound going in the future?

Prompts: What do you see as your role in this future? What do you see as the biggest challenges in achieving this future?

Appendix B: Mission Statements

Original Mission Statement (2009)

Opened in Summer 2009, College Unbound is a student-centered higher-education program in which students work with college faculty and community professionals in an active learning environment. Participants achieve learning outcomes through project-based, experiential learning and are matched with various "live learning" (internship) environments in and around Providence, Rhode Island ranging from community development non-profit organizations to local businesses. In this "life to text" model, course-credits are given to students throughout the year (not just on an academic calendar or semester basis), and students are able to receive a Bachelors of Arts degree from Roger Williams University within 3 years, nearly debt free.

Current Mission Statement and Guiding Principles (2015)

Our 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. 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.

Guiding Principles

- 1) Learners come to CU with prior experiences, knowledge, and abilities which must be recognized, honored, used, *and credited*. The multiple roles of these adult learners (workers, community members, partners, parents) must be used as assets, not barriers.
- 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.

Appendix C: Big Ten Learning Goals

We have designed a way to credential the intellectual, practical, and social skills that employers demand. We call these lifelong learning skills The Big 10. These skills aren't an add-on or byproduct of the curriculum—they are the curriculum. Our graduates are skilled at:

Integrated and Applied Learning

- Makes connections to experience.
- Makes connections across subject areas and perspectives.
- Transfers skills, theories and methods applicable to their work.
- Chooses and uses learning resources appropriate to situation.

Critical Thinking

- Accesses, analyzes, and connects information, considering its relationship to context and evidence.
- Identifies and considers the influence of bias and others' assumptions.
- Develops an informed and effective position based on relevant criteria.
- Reconstructs one's beliefs on the basis of wider experience.

Problem Solving

- Identifies and defines the problem.
- Asks the right questions.
- Identifies strategies for solving the problem.
- Proposes, evaluates and selects from among alternative solutions.
- Implements solution.
- Evaluates outcomes.

Communication (Written, Oral, Visual)

- Uses knowledge of audience and context to shape communication.
- Articulates and defends a compelling controlling idea clearly and effectively.
- Uses sources and evidence effectively.
- Demonstrates control over organization, voice, word choice, and conventions of English.

Accountability

- Demonstrates personal responsibility—acknowledges and corrects mistakes.
- Practices integrity – walks their talk.
- Effectively prioritizes and manages life and learning goals.
- Is accountable for deadlines, results, and end products.
- Seeks feedback and is open to constructive criticism.
- Demonstrates preparedness.
- Is punctual and honors meeting commitments.

Collaboration

- Engages effectively with the members of his/her Personal Learning Network.

- Ensures contributions of self and others.
- Objectively listens to dissent and alternate points of view, engaging in dialogue rather than debate.
- Negotiates and manages conflict.
- Offers and receives constructive criticism.

Creativity

- Demonstrates imagination and innovative thinking, suggesting new solutions to old problems.
- Takes risks.
- Demonstrates fluency and flexibility in brainstorming.
- Embraces contradictions.

Reflection

- Connects learning experiences and growth, acknowledging and articulating changed perspectives.
- Engages in honest self-appraisal, analyzing performance with the goal of improving.
- Displays curiosity.
- Manages impulsivity.

Resilience

- Persists in finding necessary resources to accomplish goals.
- Demonstrates flexibility and adapts readily to change.
- Develops and accesses a system of supports.
- Breaks an initially complex task into manageable steps.
- Uses humor to maintain perspective.
- Enjoys learning.

Advocacy for Self and Others

- Makes own decisions about short and long term plans.
- Practices assertive communication.
- Actively engages in multiple communities.
- Works for positive change.

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