

The Philadelphia Inquirer

College Unbound, a nonprofit with Philly ties, wants to help adults with some college education complete their degree.
by Kristen A. Graham

Millions of adults have some college but no degree. This Philly-area group wants to change that.

“I call it reparations — to repair a lot of the damage that higher ed has caused,” Wendell Pritchett, the Penn law professor, said of College Unbound, where he’s chair of the board.



Mimi Gravley, a community relations liaison at Strawberry Mansion High, talks to Amaya Estevez, a senior at Strawberry Mansion High School. Gravley is earning her bachelor’s degree through College Unbound, a program with Philly ties that helps adult learners from underserved ... [Read more](#)

Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

MiMi Gravley works full-time, as a community relations liaison at Strawberry Mansion High. She’s also a full-time college student and juggles raising her own kids and making ends meet.

Gravley is smart and motivated; she wanted to earn a college degree, but life and bills got in the way. She left college once because the price tag was too high.

“You want the degree, but if you don’t have the money, you don’t have the money,” said Gravley, who grew up in Philadelphia and attended culinary school after graduating from Central High. She earned an associate’s degree at Community College of Philadelphia during the pandemic, then enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program at Eastern University before halting classes because of the expense.

This time, Gravley, 36, is on a surer route to her bachelor’s degree.

She’s enrolled at College Unbound, a college with local ties that gives adult learners from underserved communities affordable paths to graduation, with low tuition, strong supports baked in, credit for relevant life experience, a cohort model that helps keep students engaged, and impressive early results.

‘Democratize access to credits’

College Unbound began in 2009 in Rhode Island, when Dennis Littky, a founder of the educational nonprofit Big Picture Learning, joined with Adam Bush, a jazz historian with experience in higher education.

The idea, said Bush, was to “democratize access to credits. Learning isn’t something that’s only happening when you’re in a classroom, when you’re paying for it.”

Bush sees College Unbound as a “degree completion” school — most of its students have some college under their belt, though that’s not a requirement for enrollment. Its average student is 38; most are women of color. Many are caregivers and many have experience with the prison system, either themselves or via a family member.

Philly Residents With Some College, But No Degree

More than 150,000 Philadelphia residents, or 15% of adults 25 or older, have attended college but have not earned a degree. Among Black adults, that share rises to 20%, nearly equal to the percentage who have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.

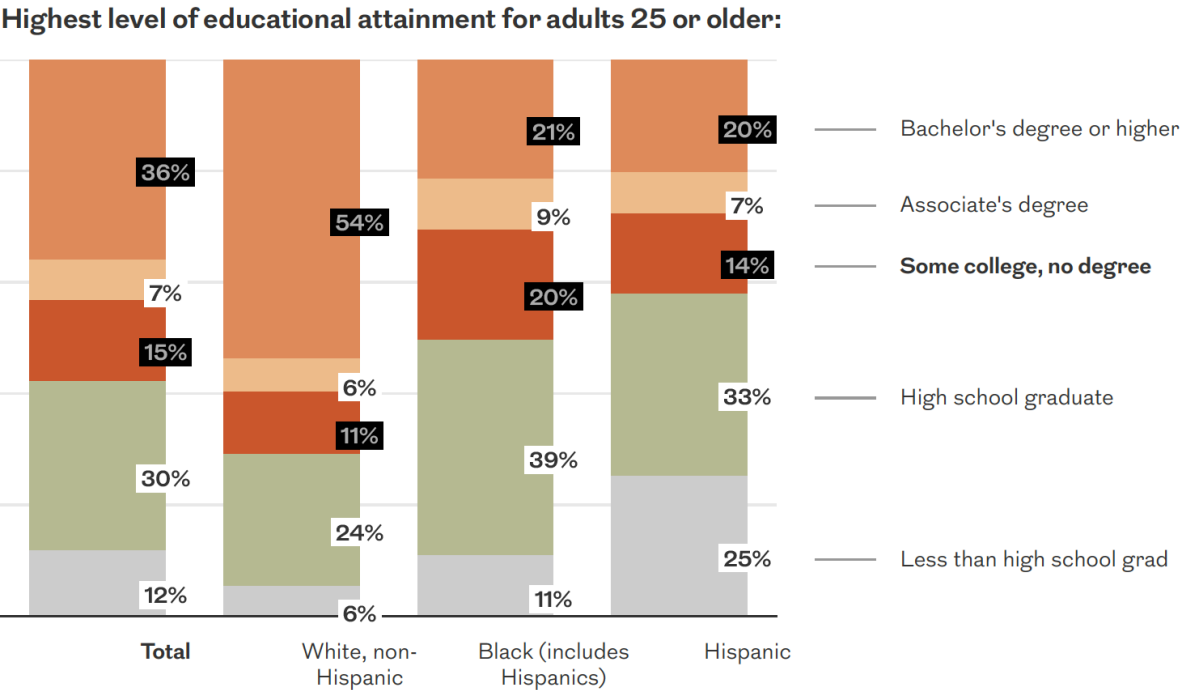


Chart: John Duchneskie / Staff Artist • Source: U.S. Census Bureau

College Unbound costs about \$11,000 per year, and most of its students qualify for Pell grants, which pay \$7,395 of that bill. About 80% of local students attend at no cost to them, officials said.

The college owns no buildings; all classes are online or held in spaces owned by other organizations, typically with supports like food and babysitting provided. All faculty are adjunct. Students earn a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership and change, most in under 2 1/2 years.

At first, College Unbound operated with partner institutions; in 2015, it became accredited to grant its own degrees. It currently has 500 students enrolled in Rhode Island, Philadelphia, Camden, Wilmington, Del., and Washington state, and has graduated about 500 students.

Millions of possible students

College Unbound's Philadelphia roots date back more than a decade. David Bromley, then the director of Big Picture Philadelphia, had a conversation with Wendell Pritchett, then a member of the School Reform Commission, about Big Picture's concept — personalized learning, real-world experiences — and what that might look like at the college level. (Pritchett is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's law school, and Penn's former provost and interim president.)

The idea fascinated Pritchett, who's now chair of College Unbound's board.



Wendell Pritchett is chair of College Unbound's board. He's also a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's law school and a former Penn provost and interim president.

TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

"There are 50 million people who started college and didn't finish," said Pritchett. "We in higher ed should be embarrassed by that and we're not. I call it reparations — to repair a lot of the damage that higher ed has caused."

In the Philadelphia area, 157,055 adults have some college courses under their belt, but have not earned a degree, according to U.S. Census data. Most of them are Black or Hispanic.

Bromley left Big Picture Philadelphia in 2021 to bring College Unbound to the area. To date, it's had 153 students enroll through partnerships with the Philadelphia School District, ASPIRA, Philadelphia Housing Authority, and Public Health Management Corporation.

"We're really trying to find our space in the Delaware Valley, not to compete with 73 institutions of higher education. It's to serve this niche group, this population in a super supportive flexible way that also benefits the partner," said Bromley. More partnerships are forthcoming, he said.



David Bromley brought College Unbound to Philadelphia. Bromley, the former CEO of Big Picture Philadelphia, is shown in this 2017 file photo at Vaux Big Picture High School.

MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

‘It built my resilience’

A group of College Unbound students gathered digitally on a winter weeknight. It was a big day — final presentations.

College Unbound structures its curriculum around student interests and the work they are doing in real life. The students, all paraprofessionals in the Philadelphia school system enrolled in College Unbound through its “Para Pathways” program that seeks to build the teaching pipeline by helping paraprofessionals earn credentials, talked about projects they had undertaken at their schools.

Danette Swindle, who works at Sullivan Elementary in Frankford, created an after-school basketball program. Her why, she said, was the death of her cousin, killed walking to a corner store in 2021. More resources are needed for youth, she said. It wasn’t easy, but Swindle learned a lot, she said.

“While I was building my after-school program, it built my resilience,” said Swindle. “I wanted to give people resources and help them navigate their daily challenges.”

College Unbound students move through their classes in small cohorts, and those groups provide built-in supports. Classes run on eight or 16 week cycles, might run synchronously or asynchronously, and every class begins with a one-on-one meeting with a student and professor.

Michael Atwell, a paraprofessional at Hancock Elementary in the Northeast, asked Swindle about lessons she learned, challenges she faced during her project.

“The message is don’t give up,” Atwell said. “A denial is a delay. Revisit it.”



MiMi Gravley, who works as a community relations liaison at Strawberry Mansion High, is earning her bachelor's degree through College Unbound via the Philadelphia School District's paraprofessional pathway program.

Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

Gravley, the Strawberry Mansion paraprofessional, said College Unbound professors appreciate the layered responsibilities their students have, and know their students' — and their stories — well.

"There might be an assignment that's late, but everybody understands that life happens, and they won't give you a zero for no reason," said Gravley.

But when Gravley sets a goal, she "can get tunnel vision," she said — she has all As in College Unbound, and though the program set a graduation date of 2026 for her, she's hopeful she can finish sooner.

Her path feels like lesson for her students, and for her own kids, she said.

"I told them, 'You have to have your piece of paper, and it's no shame getting it done in your 30s. Kudos to those who can get it earlier, but I couldn't do it,'" she said.

College Unbound Delaware Valley is "still a baby," Bromley said, but has a retention rate of about 95%. Nationally, students report an average salary increase of about \$15,000 within three years of earning College Unbound degrees, but more importantly to Bush, 84% of alumni say they are better advocates for others and 90% believe in themselves more.

Hearing from students is a revelation, said Pritchett.

"They'll say, 'I thought I was bad at college, but I realize that I wasn't bad at college, I just didn't have the supports I needed to be successful,'" he said.

Graphics editor John Duchneskie contributed to this report.