

Higher Education: A Powerful Lever in Philadelphia's Poverty Disruption Engine

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Philadelphia is a city juxtaposed. Her arms are buoyed, lifted by interminable possibilities. She is, after all, the sixth largest city in the country. In 2016, she boasted a job growth of 2.2 percent compared to a 1.7 percent national average, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts' "Philadelphia 2017" report¹. She is known as the city of "eds and meds" -- home to more than one hundred higher education institutions and a vigorous healthcare industry. By most accounts, she is well equipped to house, educate, employ, entertain, transport, and provide for many of her residents' needs and much of their wants. But not all.

Her ankles are weighed by her ever-present, challenging, inequitable realities. Accordingly, she struggles to find her footing. Her unemployment rate in October 2017 was 5.6 percent, according to Philadelphia Works,² while the national average was 4.1 percent, as reported by the National Conference of State Legislatures.³ Though her college degree attainment rate is increasing, her high

school graduation rate requires work, as does her ability to equip adults with baseline skills to live well and compete for quality jobs. Her most pronounced problem is her dizzying poverty rate. At 25.7 percent, it is the highest amongst the country's largest cities and, as shown in a 2017 Pew Charitable Trusts report, has continuously risen over the past few years (10.3 percent) while, comparatively, the nation's poverty rate has steadied at 12.7 percent.⁴

Philadelphia's body parts -- arms, legs, feet, and mind -- are stretched between two worlds and realities. She is, by all accounts, a tale of two disparate cities. But the good news is -- she has much of what is required to reconcile her disconnects in order to become a more equitable, centered city.

Her promise begins with a mayor who has prioritized addressing the city's poverty issue with a multitude of levers -- intentional investments, education, workforce development, and a focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity. That promise continues with the growing attention from cross-sector leaders and organizations who have embraced their respective roles in addressing poverty more directly. And although, arguably, the poverty issue is both vast and steep and proposed solutions are at times widely imperfect, Philadelphia is a city determined to tackle her greatest challenge.

Today, Philadelphia no longer wonders *if* she should

confront poverty with a deep sense of urgency. She wonders about the *how* of it. She is fully aware that doing so is critical to her survival.

The *how* of it requires unprecedented investment: commitment, brainpower, resources, and the power of unfettered partnership. It requires the abandonment of myopic and oftentimes inequitable, disconnected initiatives. Arriving at a state of reconciliation requires the understanding that no one sector, company, initiative or individual can singularly solve her colossal problem. Every sector, every organization, every leader, has a substantial role to play. And we must play those roles without being saddled by conventional thinking. Academia is no different.

Higher education can be a powerful lever in the disruption of poverty. Its most obvious play is to educate and work collaboratively with employers. Together, we can accomplish positive outcomes through career exposure opportunities (i.e. internships and co-ops) and the informing of curriculum through employer-advised boards. Higher education can also make an impact through its most salient output -- the conferring of degrees and equipping of our workforce with relevant credentials and the critical competencies required to perform in the workplace. This is academia's most fundamental place in our society. But, in an economy like Philadelphia's, in a city where poverty arrests more than 400,000 of our residents' potential, where there is a 23.4

percent poverty rate among adults 18-64 according to Pew Charitable Trusts,⁴ academia's role must be radically adjusted. We must embrace our role as the developers of the workforce, at a more practical level, and approach our work more holistically.

At [Peirce College](#), Philadelphia's premier college for diverse, working adult learners, we have been working with unwavering earnest to disrupt mindsets about higher education. We have partnered with numerous players -- from city hall leaders, to C-suite occupants in corporate headquarters, to non-profit thought leaders, to advocates in public forums -- to do just this. As a private non-profit that serves approximately 2,300 students, we recognize our footprint may not be as expansive as that of larger institutions but with laser focus on the poverty issue and by leveraging the power of intentional partnerships, our reach can be scaled.

We are not new to this approach. As a 152-year-old institution, Peirce has played a role in the cradle to career continuum, focusing primarily on adult learners, for some time. Although disrupting poverty may not have been an explicit, stated priority for the College in the past, economic mobility has always been at the heart of what we do. It was this concept that undergirded our thinking when we opened our doors to returning war veterans and to women in 1865. Providing equitable academic access mattered then and matters, still, today. As an institution that is open to all who seek an education, in today's

expression of access, Peirce largely serves under-employed, under-credentialed, first generation college, black men and women seeking not just a job but a career path. Our work is timely and relevant. In 2016, Philadelphia's poverty rate among black residents was second lowest among the poorest large cities, according to a Pew Charitable Trusts study⁴.

How do we do it? We think holistically about our students' needs and leverage the power of intentional partnerships. An example of our mindset is our five-year-old relationship with Year Up, a nonprofit committed to narrowing the opportunity divide for disconnected 18-24-year-old urban youth. Together, we have served more than 300 students who were, through varied circumstances, standing at the sidelines of Philadelphia's post-secondary and workforce opportunities.

Another example of our holistic approach to education is our more recent partnership with Comcast's Internet Essentials. Launched in the fall of 2017, this program enables us to work jointly with Comcast in its goal of narrowing the digital divide. The digital gap is most pronounced in low-income homes. By ensuring Peirce students have access to affordable computers and low-cost internet service, we are not only strengthening their ability to perform academically but we are also underscoring the importance of digital access and promoting effective navigation in their homes.

This spring, Peirce will also launch a 12-week entry level workforce training program in non-clinical healthcare for city residents. With an investment from United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, this program will target Philadelphia's under-credentialed and under-employed.

Each initiative, albeit a departure from the traditional conventions of academia, is still predicated on the importance of learning and gaining workforce-relevant skills and credentials. However, it amplifies academia's role. By adjusting our mindset and expanding not what we do but how we do it, higher education can partner with Philadelphia in reconciling her differences and making her a more educated, economically prosperous, equitable, and inclusive city with the strain and stain of poverty at her formidable back.

Works Cited

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