

Weaving a Network (2005-2020): From Graduate! Philadelphia to The Graduate! Network

By Hadass Sheffer

Abstract

Graduate! Philadelphia was the first program in the country to align regional resources inside and outside of higher education specifically to help adults return and complete a degree. Graduate! Philadelphia was created to support the 70,000+ adult residents in the City of Philadelphia who had started but never finished a two- or four-year college degree. Originating as a joint initiative of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board (PWIB) and the Greater Philadelphia Economy League, in 2006, Graduate! Philadelphia became a managed partnership of the PWIB and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania. This governance arrangement provided the structure for broad community and employer engagement. Graduate! Philadelphia's collective impact model has been replicated in many local communities across the country through The Graduate! Network. In 2011, The Graduate! Network incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization with Graduate! Philadelphia as its flagship program.

Introduction

Educational and related economic gains among marginalized populations, including Black, Latinx, and low-income working adults, have been disproportionate for decades, compared to gains among white middle-class and some Asian populations. The concern about low postsecondary educational attainment rates overall and especially among these populations rose to national awareness in the mid-2000s. With its clearly articulated educational, economic, and equity goals—and financial heft—the establishment of Lumina Foundation drove a surge of attention and funding starting in 2005. By 2019, degree attainment among adults was rising.¹

Then came COVID-19, which set in motion a massive economic and social upheaval. Postsecondary education institutions and students were negatively impacted. In 2021, more than a year into the global crisis wrought by the pandemic, we can start identifying some of the losses: A 2021 report from the National Student Clearinghouse showed an overall 2.8% loss in degree attainment among adult learners in 2020 and the first quarter of 2021.² Community colleges, where many adult learners start their journey back to school, saw 11.3% decreases in enrollment in spring 2021. Here is a short historical perspective about the value of a collective impact approach to increasing postsecondary educational attainment among adults. I hope our lessons help embolden new visions of collective impact for social good and economic development.

Graduate! Philadelphia

In 2005, Continuing Education, postsecondary programs for people who want to complete degrees they had started but not finished, was an established academic field, recognized as an important pathway to credentials and a source of revenue for many higher education institutions. Faculty and institutional administrators could find support through national associations such as the Association for Continuing Higher Education, the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, and the University Professional and Continuing Education

Association. Large, national, online national for-profit universities were relatively new, such as Strayer University and the University of Phoenix, designed to serve students who needed flexible schedules and were comfortable with asynchronous, online classes. These appealed to adults interested in completing a college degree. In all, this marketplace was estimated at 37 million returning students. However, graduation rates for returning students remained low while college debt rose. Getting adults back to—and through—college was a field that lacked both comprehensive theories and proven practices, and there was no independent, collective voice or approach calling for improving outcomes for the millions of individuals who had some college education, no degree, dashed hopes, and debt.

Graduate! Philadelphia was designed to fill this void in Philadelphia and create a platform for advocating for and supporting people who had some college credit but no degree. Co-founders Sallie Glickman (then CEO of the Philadelphia Workforce Board), David Thornburgh (then Executive Director of the Economy League), and I calculated that in Philadelphia alone, there were 70,000 such individuals and 300,000 in the region. We found that while the accepted narrative was that students were failing due to lack of motivation and focus, the most common barriers to finishing school were systemic: affordability, lack of recognition of prior academic learning among colleges, and a lack of understanding of postsecondary education as a system to be navigated by the returning students, insufficient supports and policies tailored to adult students, uneven educational quality, predatory lending practices, as well as students' need to work and have time for their families. We also found a sparse patchwork of promising interventions across the country but no theory of how to drive a regional adult degree completion intervention.

We realized that to make a real, lasting change for a population of this size—against the backdrop of the systemic issues we identified, required a broad coalition—we would have to weave together the perspectives, investment, and muscle of many organizations. We developed the early Graduate! Philadelphia concept absent other examples, simply because we couldn't find other organizations working collectively and collaboratively in the way we envisioned. Guided by our goal of creating a collective supporting adult students, and a shared commitment to collaboration and “outside of the box” thinking, we pulled in the United Way and other thought leaders from business, academia, city government, and civic organizations.

Over 18 months, we developed a shared understanding:

- Low college graduation rates are primarily a failure of the institutions serving students. There is not enough direction for choosing programs. Students suffer from poorly conveyed consequences for missing deadlines or changing majors, and there is little flexibility if students have to take time off. Federal funding programs are not designed to support adults returning to school: application deadlines are not aligned with adult student enrollment patterns and are often depleted by earlier attempts at college.
- Low college graduation rates are connected to a lack of economic and racial diversity, equity, and inclusion in colleges. Many Black and brown and lower-income students have no prior family or community knowledge of how to navigate college, even as returning students, and may not find role models or supportive resources at the college.

- A good way to support these students is by providing them with a trusted guide, someone well connected to the necessary resources within institutions but also independent of those institutions.

We then developed a theory of action, a model, a plan, and a founding partnership of colleges, employers, local government, and community organizations. We raised funds and hired staff for the “backbone” organization to drive and do the work. Graduate! Philadelphia first opened its doors at the Gallery Mall in Center City Philadelphia in early 2007, a location easily reachable by public transportation, and offered phone and email services. Hundreds of prospective students asked for help within the first few days, and we quickly understood that we had indeed tapped into a deep need.

The Graduate! framework is based on opportunity rather than deficit. Students are defined by their chance to make a “comeback” instead of being a “drop-out.” We coined the term “comebacker” for the potential to make a successful postsecondary comeback and, as David Thornburgh often reminded us, “because everyone likes a good comeback story.” We thus referred to potential students as “comebackers” rather than “drop-outs,” and we talked about their past college experience rather than lost credits.

Our theory of change reflected these principles:

- We had to center the work around the comebackers.
- Comebackers need to see a clear and direct connection between postsecondary credentials and their goals, to drive the decision to return to college and persevere to graduation.
- Comebackers need help understanding their options so they can make good choices, and they need to feel empowered in making decisions. We developed the role of the Graduate! advisors, or “navigators,” to support comebackers from the decision to return to college through to graduation. These guides should be trained to foster a sense of agency and resilience.
- Since many comebackers see education as a means to better employment, employers must be partners in any programming and messaging.
- There is value in providing independent feedback to the postsecondary education and employer systems.

We designed a framework for action:

- Message to comebackers, communities, and stakeholders about the importance of inclusion, equity, progress, and completion, and we put a dollar amount on the benefits from increased completion rates.
- Partner with stakeholders so that all parties contribute and gain.
- Develop services for comebackers, practitioners, and researchers to fill gaps, including data collection and verification tools, playbooks for leadership, and methodologies and training for advising and community engagement.
- Create strategies for short and long-term success, including professional development, a national network of practitioners, post-secondary institutions and employers, joint projects, funding resources, a reporting and accountability infrastructure.

The Graduate! Network

In 2008, while establishing metrics for success and refining our training, we started receiving requests to replicate the model in other cities with adult college completion goals. Our approach was to adapt and evolve the model. We were interested in learning how the concepts could apply in other settings, so we set up a knowledge exchange and helped design locally-attuned approaches and programming. As more of these initiatives evolved, the Graduate! Network emerged in 2010-2012 as a national collective impact initiative serving local collective impact initiatives.³

Collective impact is a framework for working across and with other organizations toward a shared goal. The Collective Impact Forum defines it as organizing around a shared agenda and creating a shared vision for a solution, establishing shared measurement, coordinating efforts to reach the end result, building trust and maintaining communications, and having a strong coordinating team, called “the backbone.”⁴ The staff of the Graduate! Network served as the backbone.

As we iterated, the importance of some of our work became more apparent, and other elements faded or remained idiosyncratically important in a particular locale. Three key components emerged: framing our work in a way that would impart its essence to multiple audiences, including comebackers, partners, and funders; the importance of having unbiased data in structures and quantities large enough to hold up to statistical analysis; and a vision for extending the benefits of our knowledge to others.

I. Framing



We framed the work around the concept of a leap of faith. As leaders, we had our own leap of faith moment when we first attempted to organize a broad array of organizations around getting adults back to and through college. At first, we had to convince funders and other stakeholders that comebackers were worth the

investment. We used the concept with the adult learners as well. We started conversations by sharing an image we called “Leap of Faith” and asked what our interlocutors saw in it. Common answers included hope, anxiety, reaching for an unknown, and leaving behind something crumbling or falling away with no way back. Some people saw evening falling, signifying the last chance; others saw a new day dawning, signifying a better future. Most commented on the gap and wondered if the person in the image would make it safely to the other side. We heard many comments on what lay below, in the chasm and whether the leap would be worth the danger of falling. Some wondered if the leaper could see what lay beyond on the other side.

Discussions of the image helped engage people’s thoughts and emotions, past experiences, and inherent goodwill toward the leaper and enriched the conversations, even among those who were already in the field of college completion.

II. Data

When we started, there was no national or local dataset on the number of individuals with some college but no degree. We wanted to have data to guide and support our work and progress and provide context and reliability to the concept of the comebacker. We pulled together data from multiple federal and other trusted sources, such as the National Student Clearinghouse and its Research Center, National Center on Education Statistics, and the American Community Survey.⁵ We added and merged data that we collected from our postsecondary partners and program participants into a dataset for research and action.⁶ Our data showed that comebackers were overwhelmingly low-income, working learners, most often people of color. 70% were female. Many were about 30-45 years old, but we found a robust presence of 50- and 60-year-olds as well. Data helped us track our progress and convey our work in a precise, replicable, and factual way. Later still, we were able to collect and add data on employer and employee practices and attitudes toward postsecondary education to inform our research, services, and policy.⁷

III. Extending the Model to Other Cities, Regions, and States

As mentioned above, in 2008, we started hearing from other cities interested in Graduate! Philadelphia and our outcomes. In response, we developed a more robust methodology, data collection and analytics, tool kits, and trainings that could all be shared with other locales. We listened and learned from our new partners as much as we taught. By 2012, we were working with five cities and realized that we needed a model for a network and revenue. We set a goal of 50 adaptations, all learning from each other, by 2025. In 2017 we helped develop the first state-wide initiative for returning students in Tennessee, called TN Reconnect.⁸ By 2020 we had activated 41 adaptations, including seven state-wide networks.

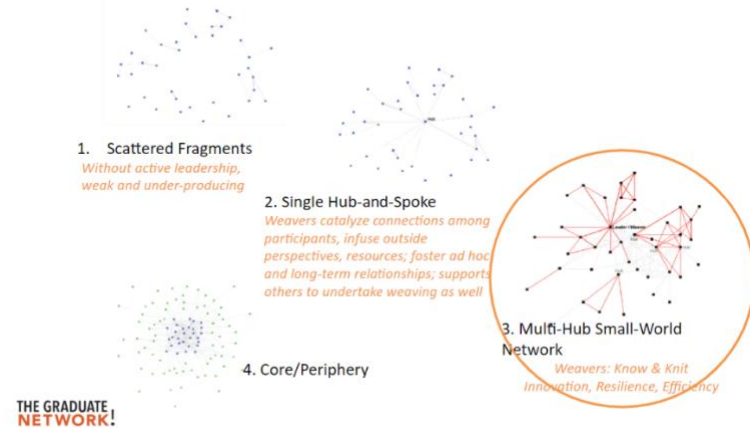
As we extended the model to other cities and states, we explained the value of experimentation and creativity at the local level. We also knew we had to show a strong proven model and maintain evidence of impact across the different network sites, especially those that were in early stages and susceptible to funding fluctuations and staff turnover. We had to ensure that our new network partners were on board with our core principles and that we had tools and funding to support the work of weaving the partners together—bringing outside perspectives and resources into the network, and encouraging all members of the network to take on the weaving work as well. Having a larger network also allowed us to recognize other patterns and issues related to postsecondary education outcomes. The backbone organization, the Graduate! Network Inc. started generating revenue to sustain our work beyond grants through events, building out new training and programs, and consulting to new and larger initiatives.

As we introduced the concept of working together as a network, we had to clarify what we meant. For us, a network approach started with recognizing the complexity of the social and economic problems we wanted to solve and that progress would require coordinated efforts by many actors and perspectives. Working in a network requires partners to be flexible and open to other mindsets. It relies less on centralized, hierarchical planning and decision-making and more on collective intelligence and shared decision-making. It requires transparency, trust, and relationship building, and platforms for open information sharing and learning. Introducing this way of working and maintaining it required training, communications, and openness, all elements that we had already adopted and adapted through our collective impact approach.

As the network grew, we considered growth and replication strategies. We considered our need for flexibility versus control and created our own hybrid model with the goal of growing a multi-hub network.

In our model, each local network (a community or state) establishes goals, learns from others, and teaches others. To nurture this kind of organic growth, we, as the backbone, had to support local adaptations at different stages of maturity.

Building The Graduate! Network



A Future For Comebackers

For at least a decade prior to COVID-19, colleges were bracing for the “demographic cliff” due to lower numbers of college-bound adolescents, projected to resemble a steep drop in college enrollment around the mid-2020s.⁹ This cliff threatened the workforce, which was understood to rely heavily on a college-educated populace. By 2019, 42 state governments had set goals of 60-65% of adults with college degrees.¹⁰ The Graduate! Network presented a validated approach to growing the number of college-educated Americans and meeting these goals.

Now, in 2021, some economists are predicting a “demographic drought,”¹¹ expounded by the number of people leaving the workforce or not finding work that pays enough to sustain themselves and their families, much less pay for college. How American higher education declines or thrives remains to be seen, but it will have to be more responsive and responsible towards students’ needs.

Reflecting on the lessons I learned leading the Graduate! Network, the following three stand out. Intentional focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion produces economic and social growth, and comebackers, with a bit of help, can reach academic outcomes similar to younger college graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds. We do best when we perfect practices and experiment with frequent, structured opportunities to share and iterate; when we have a clear vision, good partners for the long haul, and goals and strategies that are strong enough to drive to the outcomes we want, yet flexible enough to accommodate regional and other differences. Our success came from investing in a strong foundation: people, data, methodologies, and technical support—and from cultivating a culture that rewards curiosity and experimentation.

End Notes

¹ Sarah Turner, “Déjà vu All Over Again? The COVID-19 Recession and Adult Participation in Postsecondary Education,” Graduate! Philadelphia, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/d%C3%A9j%C3%A0-vu-all-over-again-the-covid-19-recession-and-adult-participation-in-postsecondary-education>.

² F. Huie, Q. Liu, M. Ryu, and D. Shapiro, “Undergraduate Degree Earners,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, January 2021, [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Undergraduate Degree Earners Report Jan2021.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Undergraduate_Degree_Earners_Report_Jan2021.pdf).

³ The Graduate! Network, accessed on June 21, 2021, <http://www.graduate-network.org>.

⁴ Collective Impact Forum, “What Is Collective Impact,” *Collective Impact Forum*, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact>.

⁵ National Student Clearing House, accessed on June 21, 2021, www.studentclearinghouse.org; U.S. Department of Education, “Data & Statistics,” accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/?src=ft>; United States Census Bureau, “American Community Survey (ACS),” accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.

⁶ Hadass Sheffer, Iris Palmer, and Annette B. Mattei, “The Comeback Story,” *The Graduate! Network*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/comeback-story/>.

⁷ The Graduate! Network, “Bridging The Talent Gap,” *Graduate Network*, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://bridgingthetalentgap.org/>; Sheffer, Hadass, Iris Palmer, and Annette B. Mattei, “The Comeback Story,” *The Graduate! Network*, August 27, 2020, <https://graduate-network.org/dtmu/>.

⁸ Tennessee Reconnect, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://tnreconnect.gov/>.

⁹ Megan Adams, “The Demographic Cliff Is Already Here—and It’s About To Get Worse,” *EAB*, May 28, 2020, <https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/enrollment/the-demographic-cliff-is-already-here-and-its-about-to-get-worse/>.

¹⁰ Paul Fain, “Look at States’ Progress on Degree-Attainment Goals,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/06/13/look-states-progress-degree-attainment-goals>.

¹¹ Ron Hetrick, Hannah Grieser, Rob Sentz, Clare Coffey, and Gwen Burrow, “Demographic Draught: How the Approaching Pandemic Will Transform the Labor Market for the Rest of Our Lives,” Emsi, 2021, <https://www.economicmodeling.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Demographic-Drought-V16.pdf>.

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About the Author

Hadass Sheffer brings 20+ years of expertise and experience to organizations seeking to understand and solve sticky, complex social problems requiring collaboration among diverse partners. She is an advocate of lifelong learning and a two-time start-up leader and growth driver of social innovations and collective impact initiatives in postsecondary education.

Her most recent experience was co-founder and president of The Graduate! Network, a first-of-its-kind national network of higher education, community, and government entities, that elevates and brings untapped talent back to and through postsecondary education and to the workforce, with a sharp focus on equity and inclusion. Her tech, higher education, non-profit, foundation, corporate, research, personal background, love of learning and collaboration, and deep commitment to equity for populations that have experienced institutional and social barriers, all inform her approach to developing inclusive, adaptive, transformational solutions.

Hadass is a trained practitioner in Adaptive Leadership, Appreciative Inquiry, Collective Impact, and various qualitative analysis methodologies. She has served as a consultant to the National Governors Association, The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, The PA Department of Education, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (developing TN Reconnect), and universities and non-profits across the country. Earlier in her career, Hadass was a program director at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, manager of linguistic data products for a tech firm, lecturer at Swarthmore College and Temple University, and translator. She completed doctoral course-work in Sociolinguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, earned an M.B.A. from Temple University with a concentration in Organizational Dynamics, and a B.A. in Linguistics from the Hebrew University (Israel).

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