

# The Big Picture College

## A model high school program graduates

JAMIE E. SCURRY AND DENNIS LITTKY

**P**icture this: 100 African-American students sitting in ninth-grade classrooms. Four years later, only 40 have graduated. The next fall, 20 enter college. Five years later, just four have earned degrees. What happened to the other 96?

Statistics show there are more African-American males in jail than in college. Many others languish at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, unemployed or underemployed. Some think the problem is the students. It is not. The problem is the system.

Some blame high schools for failing to prepare our most challenging students for the rigors of college-level academics. In truth, many urban high schools face massive struggles just to keep their students in school until graduation day. While the overall U.S. high school graduation rate is 68 percent, less than half of students in high-poverty, racially segregated and urban districts complete high school. But inadequate preparation is only part of the picture.

Those who do go on to higher education face a serious disconnect. The traditional university model serves white, upper middle-class students. Seventy-four percent of the students in the 146 most selective universities come from the top socioeconomic quartile, according to the Century Foundation. First-generation college students confront an array of insurmountable obstacles along the traditional path to postsecondary achievement. Less than 10 percent of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile graduate with a four-year degree, according to noted higher education analyst Thomas Mortenson. Clearly, the nation's colleges and universities have misread the high school landscape. They have failed to understand the problem or develop a solution so that their graduation rates align with their enrollments.

Consider that by 2020, Asians, African-Americans and Hispanics will make up 30 percent of the U.S. workforce. At the same time, our economy will demand a more highly educated workforce. As Charles Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, observed: "As our need for educated workers grows, the American workforce is going to come increasingly from the ethnic groups that have been least well served at all levels of American education. Unless we improve our performance in educating minority students, the average education level of the American workforce in 2020 will actually be lower than it is today." We cannot afford to leave so many of our young citizens behind.

We at the Big Picture Company believe it's time for a new paradigm in higher education—one that not only attracts low-income students and students of color but also empowers them to be successful in college and

in life. While our program will primarily serve low-income students and students of color, the teaching and learning style will also attract high-potential individuals who may be uninspired in a traditional college setting—mavericks, perhaps the next Steve Jobs or Bill Gates.

### Template for Success

Our philosophy is rooted in Providence, Rhode Island, where the Big Picture Company took on the task of redesigning large urban high schools more than a decade ago. In 1995, the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center opened its doors to some of the city's most academically at-risk adolescents. Today, the Met School, as it is called, serves 720 students in grades 9 through 12, primarily low-income Hispanic, African-American, white and Asian students. Our outcomes resemble those of affluent suburban communities. Virtually all Met School graduates go on to college.

How has the Met School helped low-income, urban students become academic successes? Not by tweaking established formulas here or adding some advanced placement classes there. We started from scratch in Providence and 20 other cities by asking a very fundamental question: *How do adolescents learn?* Examining existing research on motivational psychology and brain science, the Big Picture Company developed a model that stresses three new Rs: Relationships, Relevance and Rigor.

In practice, this means all students are assigned to an "advisory"—a small cohort of 15 students and one advisor that they stay with for all four years. Big Picture's advisory system allows at least one adult to really know each student and make a small school smaller. Big Picture students work with advisors, parents and mentors to build a personalized curriculum around their individual needs and interests. The personalized curriculum allows students to create projects and select internships that are relevant to their lives and aligned with their passions. Students work at internships two full days per week and are "in school" the remaining three days. These academically integrated internships take students out into the community to do real work around their learning plans in closely accountable relationships with professional mentors. A student may learn math skills by selling a house or physics by building a boat. These projects demonstrate real proficiency in those skill areas and create a culture where students take pride in their work and internalize high standards. On non-internship days, students are back at school, working with their advisors to build and reinforce the skills and knowledge needed to complete their internship projects.

Students also meet with math and literacy specialists to gain necessary knowledge and skills in these subject areas. There are no formal classes or tests. Students are evaluated through portfolio assessments and

quarterly, dissertation-style defenses before a panel of teachers, parents, mentors and peers. Written narratives by a student's advisor take the place of letter or number grades.

The results have been astounding. While Providence public schools post a 73 percent graduation rate, the Met School boasts a 95 percent rate—one of the highest in the state. And on many other significant education indicators, the Met School and its students meet or exceed the state and federal standards and the community's expectations.

With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we have developed 40 more schools using this student-centered design in cities such as Chicago, Denver, Detroit and Oakland.

The time has come for the Big Picture Company to move forward—into postsecondary education. We made this decision after years of seeing many students who were extremely successful in high school fail to graduate from college. The impersonal, lecture-based format of many traditional colleges simply has not been working for many underserved students.

### **Yesterday's Curricula**

Higher education has been slow to change. Year after year, decade after decade, colleges and universities deliver the same curricula in the same basic format. They have resisted new technology and failed to adapt to a new generation of college students.

While pockets of innovation exist throughout American higher education, most professors teach as they traditionally have, confident that what worked in the past will continue to in the future. Despite their grounding as researchers, many in higher education ignore the accumulating body of research suggesting that methods which actively engage students in the learning process are more effective than conventional methods in teaching critical thinking and problem-solving. As former Harvard President Derek Bok says, "In essence, colleges don't do what they say and don't let anyone look too closely."

A handful of institutions have begun to take baby steps out of the box. Brown University, for example, allows individual students to design their own curriculum, with no general course requirements. At Alverno College, students are required not only to master course content, but also to demonstrate mastery of skills such as problem-solving and communication. Instead of grades, they complete rigorous written assessments. Classes almost never exceed 20 students, the teaching component is highly interactive, and students constantly take part in group discussions and group projects. Despite such innovative programs, dropout rates remain high.

### **Redesigning College**

The Big Picture Company's experiences with at-risk high school students make it uniquely qualified to take on the challenge of redesigning college.

As we did at the Met School, the Big Picture Company will build its college on a foundation of research on how adolescents and adults learn. And the Big Picture College will be built around today's student—not the student of 50 years ago.

Our curricula will emphasize students' interests, uniting personal motivation and discipline with progressive coursework and real-world learning. Starting their freshman year, students will work in companies alongside mentors who will help evaluate their performance. Groups of 15 students will live together and take part in team projects guided by a faculty advisor. In addition, we will weave in international experiences and internships abroad to enrich our students' understanding of other cultures and the global economy. At select points during the program, students will be grouped into teams that work together on real-life, collaborative projects.

Unlike most colleges and universities, ours will support students emotionally and academically. Each student will have an individual study/work plan as well as a personal tutor. The personalized group and individual work will enable students to learn deeply and become liberally educated adults, well prepared to meet 21st century challenges. Students will be evaluated through formal exhibitions of their work. Panelists will include college faculty, professionals from the business and international community, as well as local community members and other students. Panelists will assess academic rigor, personal growth and evidence of progress toward mastery of set learning outcomes. Our outcomes will not only be proficiency in the core academics of sciences, arts and English, but also the development of a strong work ethic and problem-solving skills.

Our students will thrive in this environment. More importantly, they will be prepared for life and work after college. We will produce students who can get things done.

The Big Picture College will enroll a large number of first-generation and underrepresented students. Our admissions policy will be based on students' past school work, abilities and commitment as demonstrated through their high school portfolios, interviews, recommendations and an intensive candidate weekend, not on SAT scores and class rank.

We do not undertake this journey lightly. As we did for our high schools, we will launch an in-depth longitudinal study to determine what factors and programs ensure our students' achievement from graduation day to middle age. We will convene an advisory committee of college people and business leaders to guide the business model and strategic plan. We will open The Big Picture College in September 2009, either as a free-standing institution, or as a college within a college.

The time is right. We must not be afraid to discard the old formulas that are failing our low-income students and students of color. Colleges must change, and we are ready to lead the way.

---

**Jamie E. Scurry** is director of the Teacher Education/Residency Program at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (*The Met*) in Providence, R.I. Email: [jscurry@metcenter.org](mailto:jscurry@metcenter.org).

**Dennis Littky** is co-director and co-founder of *The Met* and *The Big Picture Company*. Email: [dlittky@metcenter.org](mailto:dlittky@metcenter.org).