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Cultivating Success Begins with Cultivating Belonging

Moving from Surviving Systems to Reshaping Them

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This companion resource accompanies the 30-minute conference session and provides the full depth of student stories, framework details, and pedagogical context that time constraints required us to condense. Inside you will find the authentic voices of College Unbound students, the complete Big 10 competency framework, details on how AI-guided reflection works in practice, and the honest questions we are still wrestling with.

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Student Voices

The Power of Reflection

At the heart of College Unbound's mission is the belief that every student carries wisdom worth honoring. The reflections below represent real journeys of transformation, from uncertainty to clarity, from surviving institutions to reshaping them. These are not edited for grammar or polished for publication; they are presented in the students' authentic voices.

College Unbound Student (*anonymous*)

Student Parent → Leader → Systems Change Advocate

“

I grew into leadership the way some people grow into their own name—slowly at first, almost by accident, and then all at once with clarity.

What I noticed from the first PLP until now is that I grew into leadership the way some people grow into their own name slowly at first, almost by accident, and then all at once with clarity. What began as surviving systems not built for me became a practice of reshaping them. Each challenge I faced—motherhood, caregiving, navigating institutions, and returning to school—taught me to respond with intention instead of reaction. Over time, I learned to lead from my lived experience, turning reflection into a strategy and storytelling into a tool for change.

The most transformative part was realizing that I don't have to shrink or apologize for the life I've lived. My story is not a barrier; it's the blueprint for the work I'm called to do. CU didn't just educate me; it gave me validation, community, and the confidence to build programs, advocate for families, and step into graduate school with purpose.

My CU journey transformed not just how I learn, but how I see myself. I entered CU as a student parent fighting for stability, carrying the weight of caregiving, work, and survival. I am leaving as a leader with a clear vision for systems change, someone who knows her worth, trusts her voice, and understands the power of her lived experience.

As I stepped deeper into advocacy and organizational work, my leadership shifted from personal resilience to collective transformation. I began creating structures that help others feel seen, supported, and empowered to lead. My voice strengthened, my vision sharpened, and my purpose expanded. Now my leadership is not just about what I've overcome, it's about the systems I am redesigning, the communities I am nurturing, and the future I am building with courage, clarity, and care.

Renaldo Hudson

Final Exhibition Reflection

“

I stopped measuring people by credentials alone and started meeting them at the level of shared humanity and accountability.

— Renaldo Hudson

Before I came to College Unbound, I was already doing the work. I had lived through 37 years of incarceration. I had built programs inside prison walls. I had learned how to lead in environments where survival and transformation had to exist in the same breath. I came in with lived experience, discipline, and a clear sense of purpose. But if I'm honest, I also came in with a wall up when it came to academia. I didn't fully trust it. I often saw it as disconnected from what I would have called “toxic intellectualism”—a space that didn't always honor where I came from or what I knew to be true.

What changed me at College Unbound was not just the content, it was the contact. I learned how to show up not as a title, not as a director, not as a formerly incarcerated person carrying a story but as a peer. That shift didn't come easy. Sitting eyeball to eyeball with people in rooms where everyone's voice mattered forced me to reframe how I see others and how I allow others to see me. Respect became active, not assumed. I stopped measuring people by credentials alone and started meeting them at the level of shared humanity and accountability.

My biggest accomplishment is simple, but it carries weight: I got to the point of graduation. That might sound small to some, but for me, that represents discipline at the desk. It represents trusting others. It represents staying committed to something that

requires me to stretch beyond my comfort zone. I didn't just arrive, I stayed, I worked, and I completed. That matters.

What was transformative for me was learning how to reframe failure not just for myself, but for everyone I come into contact with. I've always known failure as something you survive. Now I understand it as something you can study, shape, and use as a tool. That shift changes how I lead, how I teach, and how I build programs. Failure is no longer a dead end, it's part of the curriculum.

Another transformation was how I see education itself. I had to confront my own language. Calling people "toxic intellectuals" was a reflection of my own distance from that world. Now, I see that lived experience and learned experience are not in competition; they belong on the same stage. Education, when done right, is not about hierarchy, it's about integration. It's about honoring the wisdom of the streets, the cell, and the classroom equally. That shift matters because it changes how I show up in rooms, how I build partnerships, and how I teach others to navigate these spaces without losing themselves.

Professionally, my title didn't change. I was already the Director of Education. But my approach did. College Unbound made me more intentional. More thoughtful. More precise. It sharpened how I communicate, how I structure ideas, and how I build curriculum. It strengthened my ability to lead not just from experience, but from reflection and strategy.

The work I'm doing now and the work I will continue to do is deeper because of it. It also strengthened my work as a creator. As someone developing a documentary and leading national conversations, I now move with a stronger foundation in ethical communication and research. I understand the responsibility that comes with telling stories, especially stories that come from pain, from systems, and from people who are often unheard. That will shape every project I touch moving forward.

So when I think about my next chapter, I don't see a departure, I see an expansion. College Unbound didn't change my direction. It strengthened my foundation. It gave me tools to be more effective in the work I was already called to do. It taught me how to trust collaboration, how to honor different forms of knowledge, and how to stay disciplined in my growth.

What changes now that I have my BA is not just what I know, it's how I move. I walk into rooms differently. I engage differently. I build differently. I lead differently. And most importantly, I carry this forward not just for myself, but for every person who has

ever been told that their lived experience didn't count as knowledge. Now I know and I show that it does.

Student Voice: PLP Reflection

From Surviving to Moving with Purpose

“

basically went from just trying to survive school to actually knowing what im doing and moving with purpose.

— College Unbound Student

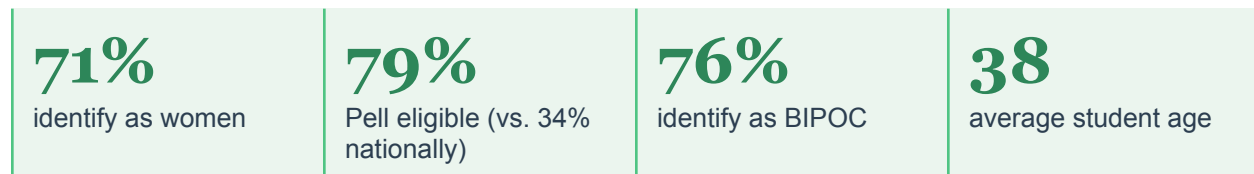
“Looking back at my plps you can see it clear in the beginning i was overwhelmed... then it shifts a little, i start getting more on track... towards the end it's way more locked in. i'm tracking what's approved, what's left, planning next steps and graduation. not just reacting anymore, actually in control of it. basically went from just trying to survive school to actually knowing what im doing and moving with purpose.”

Note the absence of capitals, the grammar, the rawness. This is genuine reflective capacity. This student was not prompted by AI. This is what belonging produces.

College Unbound

Context & Community

College Unbound serves a student population that is profoundly different from the “traditional” college student. Understanding who these students are is essential to understanding why belonging, and the systems that support it, matter so much.



Who Our Students Are

- Parents and caregivers balancing family responsibilities with education
- Working full-time while pursuing their degrees
- First-generation college students navigating unfamiliar systems
- Predominantly women building new pathways
- Students with previous college experience returning to finish what they started

Geographic Reach

College Unbound serves students across Rhode Island, the Delaware Valley, Chicago, South Carolina, Greenville, and Seattle, meeting students where they are, not where traditional institutions expect them to be.

For these students, “belonging” is often the difference between staying and dropping out. The goal is transforming lived experience into academic credit, recognizing that the wisdom students carry is not a deficit to overcome but a foundation to build upon.

The Big 10 Competency Framework

How CU Measures Learning Beyond Grades

College Unbound measures student growth through ten core competencies that go far beyond traditional GPA metrics. Together, these form a student's unique "learning fingerprint", a holistic map of where they are strong and where they are growing. The AI doesn't grade students on these competencies; it helps them see their own patterns.

1. Accountability

Upholding personal and communal expectations. Taking ownership of commitments and understanding how individual actions affect the larger community.

2. Critical Thinking

Investigating ideas with rigor and curiosity. Examining assumptions, evaluating evidence, and forming reasoned judgments.

3. Advocacy & Agency

Using your own power and building power with others. Speaking up for yourself and your community while navigating complex systems.

4. Equity & Justice

Navigating systems of power. Recognizing how structures create advantage and disadvantage, and working toward fairness.

5. Collaboration

Facilitating teamwork. Building trust, sharing leadership, and working effectively across differences.

6. Well-Being

Changing the world starts with ourselves. Attending to physical, emotional, and mental health as a foundation for all other growth.

7. Communication

Relating your ideas to others. Expressing thoughts clearly and listening deeply across contexts and audiences.

8. Lifelong Learning

Grasping the power of continued growth. Cultivating curiosity and the discipline to keep learning beyond formal education.

9. Creativity

Thinking like an artist. Approaching problems with imagination, experimentation, and a willingness to take risks.

10. Resilience

Carving your path through uncertainty. Persisting through setbacks and adapting when circumstances change.

The Challenge of Scale

How Do We Make This Possible for Every Student?

Faculty can have deep reflective conversations with students, but she can't have them with everyone, at any hour, at every transition point. The magic of 1-on-1 reflection is transformative but it doesn't scale without losing its soul.

The question CU asked was not: *"What can AI do?"*

The question was: *"What do we value and can AI serve that?"*

Faculty love deep reflection but don't have the hours to do it 1-on-1 with every student every week. For students whose average journey is approximately 2.2 years, every semester matters. A missed signal in semester 1 can't be recovered if there is no semester 6.

AI-Guided Reflection

How It Works

Why Purpose-Built Matters

Digication isn't a generic AI chatbot. It's an AI reflection framework designed specifically for how students learn.

- **Guided reflection, not open-ended chat.** The framework leads students through structured reflection connected to institutional competencies without feeling like a form.
- **Built-in analytics.** Faculty see patterns across student reflections in real time: depth levels, emerging competencies, growth over time. No spreadsheets, no manual coding.
- **The plumbing is already done.** Institutions don't need to build prompts from scratch. Digication has done the design work so faculty can focus on teaching.

The Reflection Loop

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Student Reflects	AI Identifies Patterns	Faculty See Signal	Course Correction
In their own words, guided by Digication's AI coach	Competencies, depth, growth are mapped to institutional frameworks	Real-time analytics dashboard, not end-of-semester surprises	Mid-semester intervention becomes possible

From Scores to Learning Fingerprints

Traditional Rubric Scores	Digication's AI Analysis
Did they meet the standard?	<p>How is this student actually growing?</p> <p>What language does this student use to describe their own growth?</p> <p>Which competencies are emerging organically vs. which need support?</p> <p>Is this student's reflective capacity deepening over time?</p>

This is not about replacing faculty judgment. It's about giving faculty a richer signal.

The Prompt Is the Pedagogy

Most AI tools fail students not because the technology is broken but because they were designed for efficiency, not for belonging. Your AI tool is only as good as the question it asks.

The design question is always: **What do we want the student to discover about themselves?**

Digication's AI-guided reflection tools:

- Positioning AI as a **coach**, not an evaluator
- **Mirroring** students' own language back to them
- Connecting to institutional competencies **without jargon**

Case Study: Stacy Archibald

A Case Study in Authentic Reflection

Stacy Archibald gave her consent to be named and her reflection shared publicly.

“

I have no idea where to start.

— Stacy, beginning of session

Stacy represents a student archetype that every institution serves but rarely designs for: someone with deep wisdom and life experience who is paralyzed by the academic blank page. She didn't lack insight. She lacked a bridge between her lived knowledge and the institutional framework that would recognize it.

This is where the AI enters, not as an author, but as a listener. Through guided reflection, the AI helped Stacy translate her natural language into the Big 10 competency framework in real time. The AI asked questions like: *“How does your caregiving experience relate to Resilience?”* And Stacy's response was the breakthrough moment: *“Oh, that's what that is!”*

“

Can I come back to this? I have more to say.

— Stacy, end of session

That shift from *“I have no idea where to start”* to *“Can I come back to this? I have more to say”* is the belonging story. Stacy moved from feeling like an outsider to feeling like an expert of her own experience. Technology didn't create that transformation. Technology made the space for it.

Questions for Reflection

- What do you notice about Stacy's shift?
- What did AI make possible that a form or survey couldn't?
- What would a student from your institution bring to this kind of experience?

The Capstone Moment

Language, Identity & Power

Translating Lives into Academic Language

In a recent capstone class, students used generative AI to translate their Big 10 portfolios into “traditional higher ed speak” the kind of language that grants, graduate programs, and employers recognize.

What emerged wasn't just a writing exercise. It sparked a deeper conversation about power, identity, and whose voice gets heard in academic spaces:

- **Who decides what “academic” sounds like?** The exercise surfaced assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and expression.
- **Code-switching, voice, and the weight of whitewashed language.** Students confronted the tension between being understood by institutional gatekeepers and preserving the authenticity of their voices.
- **Audre Lorde's challenge:** *“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”* This provocation became a touchstone for discussing whether AI tools designed within existing academic frameworks can truly serve liberatory education.
- **Renaldo**, formerly on death row, now a prison reform advocate, brought a perspective that challenged every assumption in the room about what counts as knowledge.

This moment illustrates why CU's approach to AI matters: the technology is not neutral. How we design the prompts, what we ask students to reflect on, and whose framework we use are all pedagogical decisions with real consequences for belonging.

The Faculty Signal

Analytics & Intervention

The analytics dashboard gives faculty something they've never had before: a real-time signal into student growth that goes beyond grades and attendance.

What Faculty See

- **Depth levels:** Is this student reflecting superficially or engaging deeply?
- **Emerging competencies:** Which Big 10 areas are showing up organically in student reflections?
- **Growth patterns:** Is reflective capacity deepening over time?
- **Intervention signals:** Which students are struggling before it shows up in grades?

From Guessing to Intervening

The dashboard transforms the faculty role from end-of-semester grading to mid-semester coaching. Instead of discovering a student was struggling after the fact, faculty can see signals in real time and reach out with targeted, human support exactly when it matters most.

For students whose average journey at CU is approximately 2.2 years, every semester matters. A missed signal in semester 1 can't be recovered if there is no semester 6.

Honest Limitations

What We're Still Learning

We don't have all the answers yet and we think that's worth saying out loud. Here are the questions we are actively wrestling with:

Early data. We're sharing what we have, not waiting for perfection. The results are promising but preliminary.

Consent and data ethics. Who owns the reflection? How is it stored? These are not just compliance questions. They are questions about student agency.

Risk of AI mimicry vs. genuine reflection. How do we ensure that students are using AI as a mirror rather than a ghostwriter? Distinguishing authentic student voice from AI-influenced language remains an active challenge.

Equity in access. Not all students have reliable devices or privacy. A tool that requires technology access must grapple with who gets left out.

Faculty adoption. This only works if instructors see value and have time. The best tool in the world fails if it adds burden without clear benefit.

We prioritize student agency over AI efficiency.

Connect With Us

Continue the Conversation

We believe this work is better when it's shared. If anything in this resource resonated, if you see possibilities for your students, your faculty, or your institution, we'd love to hear from you.

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*Technology didn't create the belonging.
Technology made the space.*

What are you making space for?