

STUDENTS

Meet Higher Education's Newest Players: 'Education Sherpas'

By Goldie Blumenstyk | AUGUST 16, 2016 PREMIUM

DENVER



Chronicle photo by Goldie Blumenstyk

Young adults at the nonprofit Prodigy Coffee, in Denver, get barista training along with a mentor and a shot of self-direction skills to help them navigate the career process. The mentor model exemplifies a new kind of player emerging on the higher-education scene: the "education sherpa."

Alice Kemokai pulls a decaf shot from a gleaming new espresso machine and hands it off to Dalia Garcia, who pours steamed milk tentatively into a tilted cup, drawing a leaf design in froth. Steps away in this airy space that was once an oil-change garage, Frankie Rodarte stands at the iPad cash register and role-plays serving customers, describing the kind of "spiritual hospitality" she plans to offer in two weeks when Prodigy Coffee opens for business for real.

The scene isn't just about twenty-something apprentices mastering the

perfect latte in a funky new cafe. Prodigy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching self-direction skills to out-of-work young adults along with the barista training. Apprentices like Ms. Roadarte, 20, who is interested in building on her GED to study small-business management, will be expected to set personal goals for themselves and record self-reflections on video at their end of each shift. They'll receive financial-literacy training, career guidance, and directed activities designed to

improve their skills of communication, creativity, and collaboration. Prodigy will also assign the apprentices a local "mobility mentor" to connect them to the next steps in their lives.

It's an example of a new kind of player emerging on the higher-education scene: a learner advocate or, as some proponents of the concept call it, an "education sherpa."

Much in the way professional patient advocates help sick people navigate the often-confusing medical system, the idea behind the education sherpa is that many students, particularly those from low-income households or who are the first in their families to attend college, need better guidance to make their way through the higher-ed maze or even to first identify and gain access to the right educational resources they need for their careers. Today barely half of all students who start college graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years. And increasingly, students' paths toward their degrees are far from linear; more than a third of students transfer at least once during their college years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. Of those, nearly half change institutions more than once.

The need is compounded, advocates say, as the options for postsecondary education continue to expand — with the rise of competency-based degrees, MOOCs, microdegree offerings, and courses and degrees from alternative providers.

For students "who are really motivated" and understand their options, the flexibility and alternatives in the system are an opportunity, says Harrison Keller, who coordinates academic innovation at the University of Texas at Austin. But, he adds, "we have not put commensurate energy into support structures." In June Mr. Keller was one of several higher-education leaders who attended a Department of Education "innovation summit" in Washington, D.C., where he and others raised the idea that new forms of student support were needed.

"There's this romantic idea that all these options are available, and students are going to be able to navigate DIY education," he says. But without more supports, the new options could just as easily exacerbate inequality because "the students with more resources at their disposal and more of a safety net will have an easier time."

When students don't graduate or take longer than necessary to do so, that can also add to their student debt and become costly for taxpayers, so much so that some education reformers have started talking about changing the student-aid systems so that needy students could use federal or state dollars to pay for an education sherpa to advise them.

As one group that promotes the idea, Education Design Lab, puts it, such education guides could help future students be "untethered from any one institution over the course of their learning journey" to plot their path toward a degree or career."

Tapping Existing Funding

Education sherpas are a fundamental component of the experimental new model for education being explored by an organization based here, the Donnell-Kay Foundation. Known as ReSchool Colorado, the four-year-old project would create a completely new kind of publicly funded education system that would operate alongside traditional preschools, elementary and secondary schools, and colleges. The foundation has been testing prototypes of the system for the past year and hopes to get the idea of its alternative education system on a statewide ballot, possibly as early as the fall of 2018.

Under the model ReSchool envisions, students and families could use existing government funding streams — including Pell Grants and a proportionate share of state appropriations for schools and colleges — to choose from an array of educational opportunities "across a landscape of providers." At the postsecondary level, that could mean traditional colleges, but it might also include programs offered by museums or another nontraditional learning provider.

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The sherpas would be part of the system's publicly funded "learner advocate network" that students and families would consult to help them find and evaluate learning partners and help shape their educational pathways. "We knew early in the design that the learner advocate was essential," says Colleen Broderick, Donnell-Kay's chief learning designer.

That's where places like Prodigy Coffee could come in. Although it began operations separately from the foundation — the brainchild of a teacher-turned-social entrepreneur named Stephanie Frances — Prodigy is one of five local organizations serving low-

income 17-to-21-year-olds that Donnell-Kay is studying this summer to see how it might fit within the ReSchool model.

The ReSchool experiment is in many ways a model of the unbundled education environment that many reformers predict will be the future of postsecondary learning — a future where education sherpas would by necessity play a key role.

Meanwhile, some advocates of the sherpa idea have already raised it with the U.S. Department of Education. One of them is Richard A. DeMillo, executive director of the Center for 21st Century Universities at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who has proposed new Education Savings Accounts that low-income students could use to pay for advising if, for example, they attend a high school where counseling is ineffective. In the proposal he sent to the department, Mr. DeMillo calls these education sherpas "a new category of educational general practitioners not beholden

to any specific institution." Or, innovative colleges might take on the role of advising students on how to connect their own offerings with outside offerings, he adds.

"This could become a specialty" Mr. DeMillo says in an interview. He says he has no single model in mind, except that the "the overarching idea is, don't take this kind of funding and pour it all into tuition."

Education Department officials have not publicly commented on Mr. DeMillo's idea and did not respond directly to a question about the idea of using federal funds for this sort of advising service. But in a written response, Ted Mitchell, the under secretary, noted that a study has shown that "institutions with high completion rates for Pell-eligible students are also institutions that have developed strong systems of student support." The department could also try out the idea using its experimental program called EQUIP, but creating a new spending program would be something that requires action by Congress.

'Overwhelmingly Receptive' Students

As it turns out, variations on the education-sherpa idea already exist.

Just a few miles from Mr. Keller's campus in Austin, Texas, for example, a nonprofit organization called PelotonU provides face-to-face coaching and advising to 50 local students who are employed in the Austin area and enrolled in competency-based degree programs offered by such institutions as Western Governors and Southern New Hampshire Universities.

PelotonU, which is largely funded by grants and donations, has recently begun asking its clients who receive Pell Grants to allocate some of that money toward PelotonU's costs.

"Students have been overwhelmingly receptive," says Hudson Baird, a cofounder of the organization. The coaching by PelotonU's education sherpas is a key factor in the 87-percent persistence rate PelotonU has seen with its students, says Mr. Baird. The average age of PelotonU's students is 29 and the majority of them tried college previously but never finished. Pell Grants were originally designed to promote access to college, Mr. Baird notes, but with growing concerns about the "broken promises" of the system, he says the idea of using federal funds to pay education sherpas who help students persist and graduate is well worth considering.

And here in Denver, a couple of miles from Prodigy Coffee, is an education venture with a similar strategy. Guild Education is a start-up company that helps working students navigate through college in collaboration with their employers and their tuition-assistance programs. Students enrolled through Guild get a mentor who advises them on both their educational options and career-advancement opportunities, as well as special tuition prices from Guild's education partners. As a student, you get "one point of contact who has your back as you advance in higher education," says Rachel Romer Carlson, a cofounder of Guild.

According to Guild, one of the highest predictors of a student's success in college is having the phone number of a trusted mentor. "It's so true, and so obvious, and so missing," says Ms. Romer. It's also the reason she'd like to see the rules for Pell Grants rewritten so students could more easily use the money to pay for advising and mentoring, not just course credits. "We're in a world where there's great content anywhere," she says, "What students need is the rest."

Of course what constitutes "the rest" — and who or what kind of organization should provide it — are just a couple of the unanswered questions about the future of education sherpas.

While better advising could actually save the government money, many groups are bound to oppose the additional spending required for the idea and the additional bureaucracy it could spawn.

And who would decide what amounts to a quality education adviser?

As the University of Texas' Mr. Keller observes, the sherpas would need to understand the various pathways students might take: "You don't want just more well-intentioned but uninformed advice."

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