

# No Rim, All Hoop

By Donna Rodrigues

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*Donna Rodrigues is a program director at Jobs for the Future, where she brings to our partners her experience as founder of the University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts. Widely lauded by educators and the media—including The Christian Science Monitor, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and CNN—UPCS is “an oasis of hope and opportunity” in its own community. Worcester’s Main South neighborhood, where students must live to attend UPCS, is one of the most economically disadvantaged sections in the city, characterized by boarded-up buildings and low-income living conditions. Yet the school sends a powerful message of possibility to urban schools across the nation: academic achievement for all students is within reach.*

*Ms. Rodrigues delivered the opening speech at Exceeding Expectations, a May 2004 meeting of the partners and schools in the Early College High School Initiative. With over \$50 million in investments from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the initiative is creating some 150 schools in this decade. Early College High Schools blend secondary and college education, putting students on an accelerated route to earning both a high school diploma and two years of college credit within five years. They demonstrate better ways to serve the intellectual and developmental needs of young people who now fail to complete high school or drop out in the first years of college.*

I am living proof that you can take the woman out of the school, but not the school out of the woman.

This morning I’d like to tell you a little bit of why University Park Campus School represents the good news about our efforts in the Early College High School Initiative to redefine educational opportunities for the youth in our schools and the encouraging work of our partners.

University Park serves an example of what can happen when every adult in a school, every family member, and every school partner believe that all students can make it, can achieve, regardless of entry data. It’s the story of:

- Students who would be named underserved;
- A neighborhood with a desperately high poverty level;
- Students who enter three to four years behind grade level in English and math;
- A high English language learner population; and
- A great mix of ethnicities.

It is also an example of success for:

- A non-exam school with public lottery admissions; and
- A district school that accomplished great results with the same per pupil spending as all other schools, and in a building with no bells and whistles.

It’s an example of a small, start-from-scratch school that partnered with a university (Clark) to change the picture for every student who entered.

And it’s a story that says, if you have the incredible opportunity to start a new school—*Start a new school.*

Whenever I spoke with families and their son/daughter about the school, the mission of preparing *every* student for college jumped off the page and into my heart and became my promise to them. I told them that this school would be different.

I had a clear picture of what “different” would look like from two perspectives. One was as a practitioner after 28 years of teaching in large, comprehensive high schools: different for students, different for teachers and

different for families. And the other perspective was as an avid reader of educational research and journals—publications that not only informed my practice but kept me current with educational reform efforts. This research also kept me well aware of what it means for young people to be underprepared, underserved, underrepresented (or whatever the newest term is), and the tremendous commitment that it takes to change that picture.

When I was selected for the job of planning this new school, it was a dream come true; it was a chance to plan a school, to get things right, and from that moment on every decision I made was explicit and focused on making sure that all students would succeed in this school and be prepared to continue succeeding in college. I had had a long time to see what would *not* happen in this new, small school:

- *The staff* would not feel voiceless. They would not feel unsupported or isolated. They would not work alone. And they would not teach without learning as an objective.
- *Families* would not think they were unwelcome at school. They would not believe their input was not valuable. They would not feel unsupported. And they would not be overwhelmed by the college process.
- *The students* would not fall through the cracks. They would not be threatened or bullied in school. They would neither show disrespect nor be disrespected. And they would not feel that they could not succeed.

I also promised that I would never enter a room apologizing for the students in this school—they're really great kids, but they can't pass a test; they are excellent role models, but they don't have the ability to take an AP class or test or a class at the university level. I told everyone that promise, including the kids and their families. No apologies—it was our job to ensure this success.

Everyone within the range of my voice—staff, families, students, community leaders and partners—knew how I felt. That was non-negotiable.

University Park is the story of a school with Clark University as a partner—a partner that offers free tuition to students accepted.

It is *not* the story of a charismatic leader.

Or of an island of excellence.

I knew when the first class entered its junior year that it was time for me to leave, but I waited for them to graduate. When I could answer my own research questions that I posed during the planning year—questions about how to validate that UP would work—I wanted to join an initiative that would seek to take on the challenge of improving education for underserved youth on a larger scale. I needed to be around people who had that passion and dedication to change. I found that place at Jobs for the Future, where I have met the most dedicated and passionate professionals I have ever known.

And by then I was sure about the efficacy of the school through qualitative and quantitative data:

- Our students were outscoring affluent areas on the state MCAS exam, with every class outperforming the class that preceded them and encouraged to do so by that same class; we are currently the fifth of 350 schools in the state in math and eighth in English;
- We began to score well on AP exams.
- Our students did well in classes at Clark University.
- Our students were all accepted to colleges across the country.

University Park was determined the highest-performing high school in Massachusetts. Qualitatively, the students believed in themselves and one another; they became the heroes in a very difficult neighborhood—the camp

counselors, the volunteers in homes for the elderly, tutors in elementary schools, interns with political officials, in hospitals, with the Red Cross.

And when the students questioned me about their friends in other schools not graduating, not passing the test, they had no idea that they themselves were the “they” others talked about.

That is the idea of the Early College High School Initiative: never to let the kids who we target believe or be given any messages that they will not succeed, not only in high school but in college. We are taking President’s Clinton’s initiative “Think College Early” and making it “Do College Early.”

As I look out to our initiative partners in the audience and think of their work, I know the obstacles you have, the negotiations you face—some of you come from national initiatives that cross state boundaries and involve different policy implications; there are charter schools in the initiative, district charter schools, state charter schools, district schools, union discussions, college partners; you are breaking barriers, creating opportunities; and it’s all for the kids—because we are the story of dedicated adults who want to change the *reality* of schooling for 100 percent of the students.

I purposely choose the word “reality,” because we are talking about a cultural change, a cultural revolution if we have to, to change the way education happens for our students. We have to think “within the box” in the beginning, with the box being school. What goes on in the box, what happens with the students—instruction, curriculum, assessment—influences their future.

We have come to realize that students have to understand everything that goes on in the box—how to monitor their own progress, understand their own learning, understand difficult concepts, and to question what they do not understand and get help before they can move on.

We see personalization in a broad sense: How does what we know, our advice and guidance, make students stronger? How do we translate what we know—how do we use that information?

We have to think of how our personalization strategies will follow them to college, will effect their success there, their acculturation curve to that new learning experience. What do those strategies look like?

For many students, the realization of their own progress, the gift of academic success, creates strength and confidence that is transferable to the college campus, but it does not imply that the advising role is over for us. To move personalization to the academic piece, we need individual student data to inform instruction; we need a culture of teachers who know how to use and analyze these data to plan their classes, to inform instruction.

We know that some students will need intense academic acceleration to succeed and feel confident in their college classes; how do we teach in untracked classes and ensure quality, and accelerated instruction? We need to know what that professional development looks like in this new picture.

This new schooling reality is one where the students come first; where administrators take the utmost care to attract the kind of staff that works in this new school, people who enthusiastically welcome a chance to make a difference, who contribute to the culture that shows students every day in many ways that they will make it: the school team.

Collectively, the school team tells families that their involvement is crucial to the school’s mission, and it creates opportunities for families to be involved in their child’s education: the good phone calls, the two-week updates, the syllabi that spell out the organization of the class; the “scaffolding” of help sessions; the open door policy for family to come and talk or for us to go to them and nurture those vital relationships.

This same school team works collaboratively to set high expectations, to plan interdisciplinary lessons, to discuss student work, to learn from one another and to model peer learning for the students. This school team can

become the leadership team of the school to work, hand and hand with the administrator, to ensure ownership in the culture they are co-creating.

The next step for this reality is the college/university piece. What does this school team have to know to ensure student success? With whom do they need to be connected? How can their syllabi mirror college syllabi? They need to think of expectations that mirror college expectations and then talk about those collectively, in a circle of collegiality.

These are not the schools of the future; this is what is happening right now across the Early College High School Initiative. This conference is a tribute to this kind of new reality—the strategies, the approaches, the advice, the peer learning, our circle of collegiality. No matter what room you enter during this conference, you will learn and contribute something valuable, something new.

You will see, across the initiative, how people have solved problems, reached consensus, ensured the integrity of the mission.

I will conclude with this comment:

I purposely eliminate the use of shock data when I speak (dropouts, crime, jail). I think some people in those audiences who constantly hear those numbers shrug their shoulders and think, “How can I change that picture?”

You can help to write a different chapter in the story of our students. You can change the ending of the book for them. If you will allow me, I will give you an excerpt from the chapter on Damian, who was featured in CCN’s report on University Park.

Soon after Damian was accepted to Brown University, he entered my office and said, “I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“How does a kid like me, from this neighborhood, from what I have been through, go to Brown?”

I answered in my usual tone, very easily. “Pack your things, go to Providence, find the dorm room that was issued to you, and work as hard as you have here.”

“Do you think I can do it?”

“Do you?”

He thought for a minute and said, “I know I can do it, right?”

I said, “I know you can do it, too. Remember, Damian, Brown did not give that spot, you earned it.”

He stopped at the door, and said, “No apologies, right?”

I said, “None necessary.”

He said, “No rim, all hoop, right?”

“Swish, all hoop.”

I use University Park data now, and I will wait until your early college high schools grow up to use your data to show the “good news” in this country for kids who, right now, have too many labels that begin with the word “under.” It is our responsibility to change that under prefix to “over.”