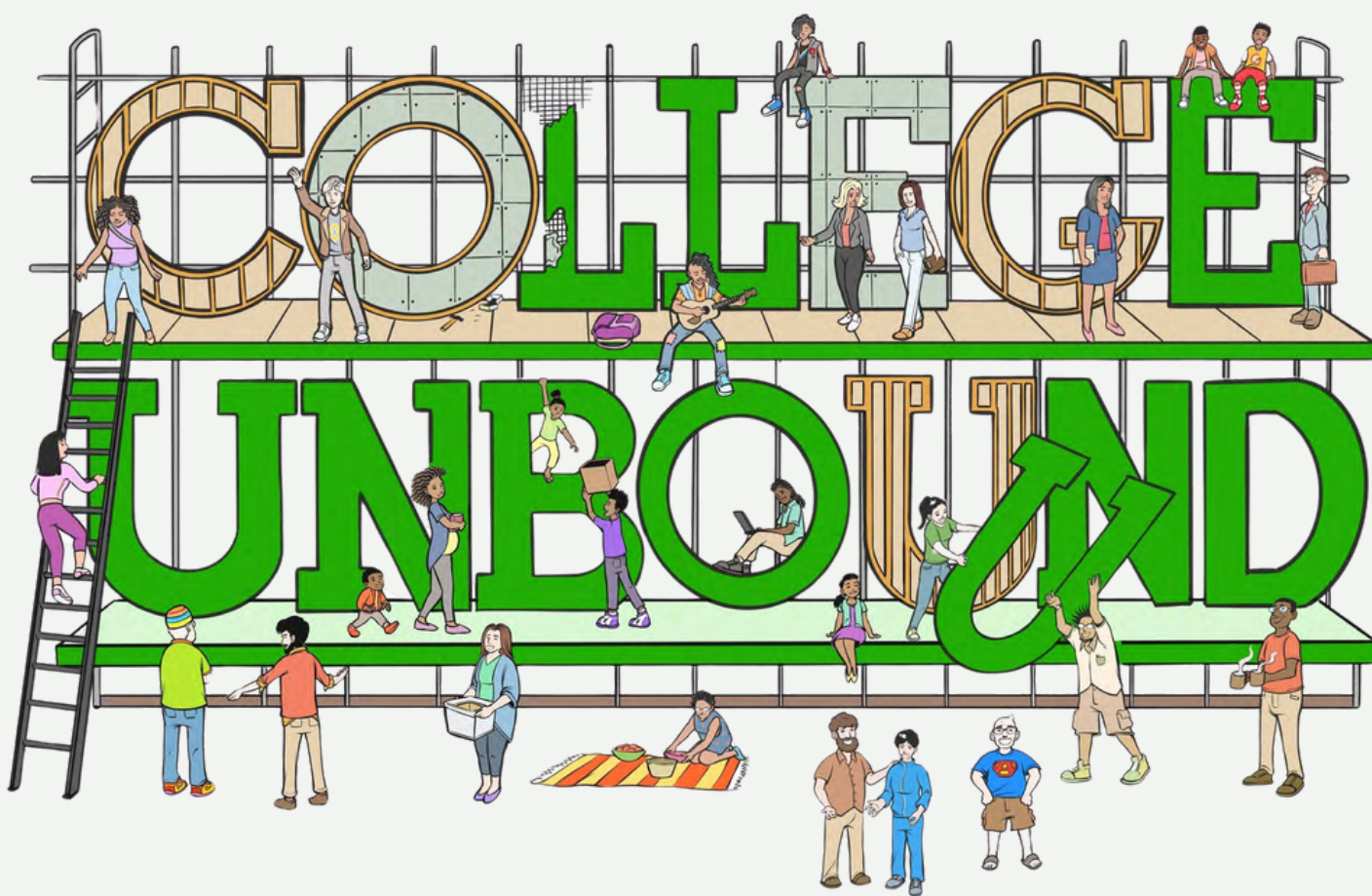


COLLEGE UNBOUND

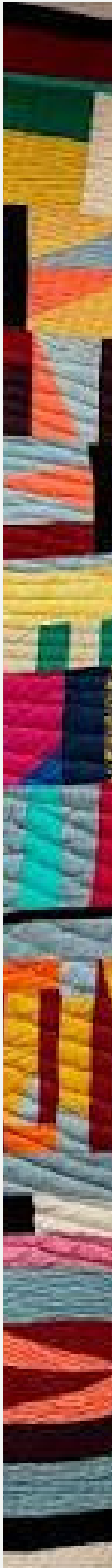
Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027

H i g h l i g h t s



College Unbound models the possibilities of higher education for adults where lifelong learning is valued and enables people to be fuller participants in creating the lives to which they aspire.

**This is a condensed version of College Unbound's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan. For a full version, please visit collegeunbound.edu/strategicplan2027*



2022-2027 Strategic Plan Reflection and the Path Ahead

Over the past several years, College Unbound has experienced significant **growth and transformation**. As we reflect on the conclusion of this strategic plan cycle, we recognize both the accomplishments achieved and the **intentional work required to grow while remaining grounded in our mission, values, and commitment to students**. This plan has served as more than a roadmap; it has been a **living tool that helped us clarify who we are, align our structures and resources, and guide decisions during a period of significant institutional change**.

When this strategic plan was developed, CU was at a moment of **evolution**. Unlike our first strategic plan, which served as an important milestone in our institutional development, this plan became a meaningful process of reflection, alignment, and action. It helped us define our values, strengthen our organizational structure, develop shared language, and create a clearer understanding of how our work connects across the institution. Throughout implementation, we learned that strategy is not only about planning for what we know—it is about building the clarity, relationships, and adaptability needed to navigate what we cannot yet see.

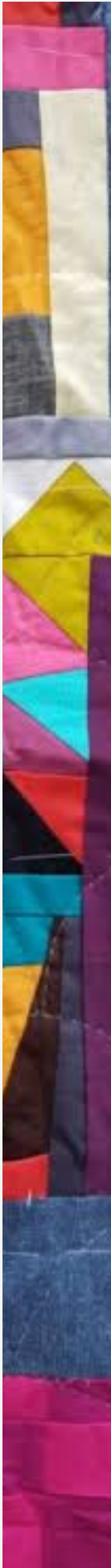
Equity has remained central throughout this work. From the beginning, we recognized that higher education has not historically been designed equitably. Equity was never intended to be one goal among many—it is embedded across every aspect of this strategic plan and shapes how we approach student success, institutional sustainability, storytelling and assessment, growth, and lifelong learning. This commitment requires continued reflection, accountability, and a willingness to evolve.

This strategic plan has also helped CU gain greater clarity about what makes our model distinctive and what must remain central as we grow. **Through our growth strategy work, we identified six core components that define the College Unbound experience:**

Six Core Components

- An accelerated pathway to a bachelor's degree
- A high-touch approach grounded in an ethic of care
- Wraparound supports that serve the whole student
- Recognition of knowledge gained through learning in public
- An affordable tuition model
- A cohort-driven liberal arts academic experience

These components serve as both a reflection of what has made CU successful in expanding access and supporting student success and a guide for maintaining alignment with our mission as we continue to grow.



As we prepare for CU's next chapter, the newly launched Vision and Core Values Council will play an important role in helping us continue this work. The Council will create space for collective reflection and dialogue around the core values and vision that drive us, deepen our understanding of how our strategic priorities depend on one another, and explore how our structures can best support our future. Through this process, we will work to ensure that our goals and values remain transparent, accessible, and reflective of the voices and experiences of our community.

This next phase of planning is not a starting point, but an opportunity to build on what we have learned, strengthen what is working, and imagine what is possible for CU's future.

We have a stronger understanding of who we are, what makes CU unique, and the practices we must protect as we grow. The work ahead is about strengthening the connections between our people, programs, regions, and communities—creating an institution that functions less like a collection of separate parts and more like a tapestry, woven together by shared values, relationships, and a common purpose.

The four goals of the 2022-2027 strategic plan

- Institutional and Student Sustainability
- Storytelling and Assessment
- Growth, Adaptation, Innovation
- Lifelong Learning

The four goals of the 2022-2027 strategic plan represent the interconnected work required to advance CU's mission. While we celebrate the significant progress and milestones achieved, we also recognize that strategic planning is not about reaching a final destination.

There are areas where we have more work to do, questions we are still exploring, and opportunities to continue pushing ourselves toward greater impact. Our commitment is to remain aspirational—to continuously examine our practices, listen to our communities, and imagine what is possible for our students and for the future of higher education.

The accomplishments highlighted in this document represent meaningful milestones in CU's evolution, while also providing the foundation from which we will continue to grow. As we adapt and innovate, we remain committed to strengthening the systems that support our students and communities, making decisions grounded in our values, and ensuring that our future reflects the transformative possibilities at the heart of College Unbound.

Strategic Goal One

College Unbound will foster an environment of lifelong learning and capacity building for its extensive community of learners and collaborators.

FRAMING THE WORK

Flames of Change

Fire is a life-altering element that has the ability to change the condition of all that it touches. Engaging with fire often leads to a radical shift in perspective and ways of being.



Lifelong Learning is the eternal flame which gives us the **capacity** to shape and sculpt our lives over time. For this goal, we commit to the following values:

- **Inquiry** - asking questions, making discoveries, and testing those discoveries in the search for new understanding.
- **Purpose** - supporting the creation of meaning and a sense of direction at the individual, organizational or collective level.
- **Sovereignty** - centering individuals and communities as self-determinate.

“No one is born fully-formed: it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.”

-Paulo Freire

What questions informed the design of this plan 5 years ago?

question I

In what ways are alumni engaged in College Unbound?
How are we providing space for alumni to shape what these post-graduation engagements look and feel like?

question II

Within our College Unbound environment, what elements must be present so that the concepts of “lifelong learning” and “capacity building” can be fully explored and made possible?

question III

How do we define “community”?
How are the various facets of our community impacted by our work?
How are they helping to shape the work?

question IV

How do we back students, faculty, and staff in their roles of knowledge creators?

High Level Strategies

1. A Publicly Engaged Curriculum with Value

Build a Student-Led Curriculum Audit Across the Three Ways of Earning Credit

Develop a Coherent Strategy of Course/Credit Leading to Enhanced Value for Student, Family, & Community

Implement a Delivery and Assessment Feedback Audit to define and understand “value”

2. Professional Development

Cultivate a Faculty and Staff Culture that Facilitates Full Participation

Develop An Onboarding, Training, and Programming Plan that Integrates CU Culture and Pedagogy

Support Peer Mentorship Opportunities for Faculty & Staff

3. Family and Community Engagement

Create Wrap-Around Support for Parenting and Formerly Incarcerated Students

Become a National Leader in Curriculum that Honors the Work of Learning & Caregiving

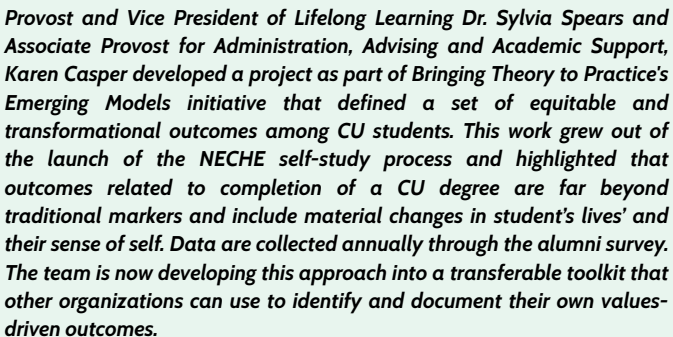
Initiate Admissions & Enrollment Policy Changes to Encourage Multigenerational Engagement with CU

What we have done
What we have learned

Transformed Academic Affairs into Lifelong Learning to better reflect the breadth of our work and our commitment to supporting learners beyond traditional academic functions. This shift brings together curriculum, faculty development, applied learning, and student growth under a model that aligns with our mission of empowering learners to develop the knowledge, skills, and agency to lead meaningful change throughout their lives.

Expanded the capacity of the Learning in Public (LIP) Office to support students in documenting and receiving credit for the knowledge and skills gained through lived and professional experiences. More than 1,200 Big 10 assessments were evaluated and posted to transcripts, and more than 1,200 LIP portfolios were submitted and supported, reinforcing CU's commitment to recognizing applied learning and the expertise students bring with them.

Developed Transformational Teaching and Learning Competencies to create a shared framework for faculty and strengthen our distinctive approach to education. These competencies define the practices and commitments that support effective, relationship-centered, applied, and transformative teaching across the CU model.



Launched alumni mentor and alumni teaching fellow programs to create pathways for graduates to continue contributing as educators and leaders within the CU community. These programs prepare alumni to serve as lab faculty, strengthening teaching skills while ensuring CU's unique approach to learning is carried forward by those who have experienced it firsthand.



Word Cloud of collection of the words and phrases the alums shared during their interviews

- **Cultivate a culture of transformational teaching and learning** by establishing a Center for Teaching and Learning, expanding faculty development opportunities, clarifying the role of full-time faculty, and deepening the shared practices that define the College Unbound learning experience.
- **Design seamless pathways for every learner to thrive** by aligning the major, curriculum, advising, and career development while weaving stronger connections between the Career Constellation, Core Projects, and each student's long-term aspirations.
- **Reimagine lifelong learning as a continuum** by advancing the next generation of Learning in Practice, embracing multi-modal approaches that achieve shared learning outcomes, and embedding opportunities for continued learning throughout employer and community partnerships.

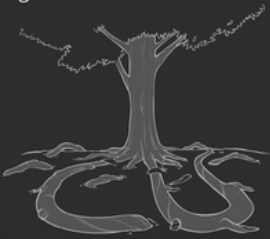
Strategic Goal Two

College Unbound will root its sustainability in a culture of equity and student success.

FRAMING THE WORK

Roots of Sustainability

A tree can only grow as big and as strong as its roots below the surface. As College Unbound begins to expand its reach, it is critical to nurture our depth just as much as our breadth and to care for the internal structures that ground us in who we are.



For for the goal of a **sustainable institution with systems that foster equity and student success**, we offer a tree and commit to the following values:

- **Relationality** - learning and growing in the context of kinship and community
- **Social Justice** - advancing human rights, access, participation, and equity
- **Accountability** - holding ourselves responsible for understanding and transforming behaviors that do not advance individual and community well-being.

"Can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about the appropriate care of the world's resources, but is also about the creation of meaning -- the making of lives that we feel are worth living?"

-Belonging, bell hooks

What questions informed the design of this plan 5 years ago?

question I

What resources do we need to be a sustainable institution? How do we garner resources from entities who are aligned with our values?

question II

Which funding partnerships advance equity and which inadvertently perpetuate inequity?

question III

How do we work with students, alum, and community collaborators to better understand what "equity" and "student success" look like overtime?

question IV

If we see "people" as resources, how do our notions of "sustainability" shift? What does intersectional investment in people look like?

High Level Strategies

1. Financial Model that Responds to Evolving Student and National Conditions

Develop a Diversified Revenue Model

Reduce Financial Risk for Students; Protecting Those who do not Complete and Limiting Debt for Those who Finish their Degree

A Part-time Model Designed for True and Lasting Relationships Between Faculty and Institution

2. Succession Planning for Board and Senior Leadership

Develop a Public Transition Plan for Senior Leadership of the College and for the Institution's Evolution

Build Pathways for Board and Senior Leadership of the College to be Composed of CU Alumni and Those who Share their Experiences

Implement a Fellowship Program to Support Future Leaders of Higher Education and CU Specifically

3. Faculty and Alumni Pathways to and through the Institution

Facilitate Successful Movement from Student to Alumni to Faculty

Develop a Mentorship and Professional Development Model for Faculty and Staff that Positions them for Roles Outside of the Institution

Publish Case Studies that Demonstrate Our Definitions of High Performance and Reward

STRATEGIC GOAL TWO: INSTITUTIONAL AND STUDENT SUSTAINABILITY

What we have done What we have learned

Community Care's Team

Established community care coordinators and aligned admissions with student support under community and belonging to create a more seamless continuum of care for students. This integration strengthens coordination between community ambassadors and the community care team, providing relationship-centered support that addresses students' academic and non-academic needs from recruitment through graduation.

Community Ambassador Role

Evolved the recruitment role into a community ambassador model rooted in relationship-based enrollment and community connection. Many community ambassadors are CU alumni with deep ties to the communities we serve, guiding prospective students through the admissions journey while building trust and strengthening connections from inquiry through enrollment. This model enhances collaboration across Admissions, Lifelong Learning, and Student Success to support students' transition into CU.

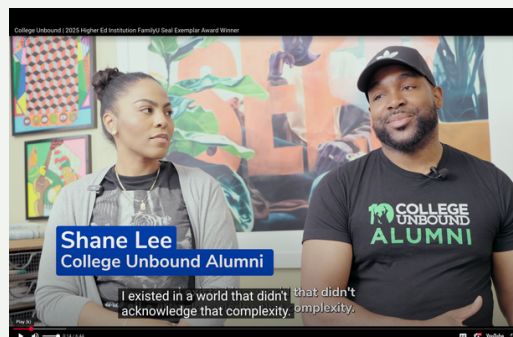


"I think college unbound brings us into a space where we start to recognize ourselves again. And there's a mirror reflection of this wholeness of who we are and the value of who we really, really are. Where the world has tried to tell us we are not. And so I take that acronym really seriously."

-CU Alumni and Community Ambassador

Pell for Students in Prison

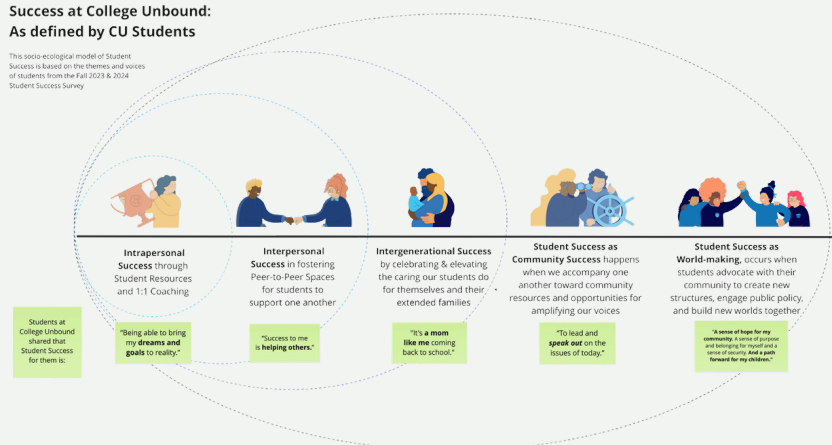
Secured Pell Grant eligibility for students in our prison education programs, removing a significant barrier to access for incarcerated learners. This milestone expanded enrollment within the Rhode Island prison system and created a foundation for future partnerships with correctional systems in other states, advancing CU's commitment to increasing access to transformative higher education opportunities.



College Unbound was awarded the FamilyU Seal by Generation Hope. This seal and accompanying film affirm that our collective work is being nationally recognized, and that we are creating a space where student parents are seen and valued.

Our Model for Student Success at College Unbound: As defined by CU Students

This socio-ecological model of Student Success is based on the themes and voices of students from the Fall 2023 & 2024 Student Success Survey



See What We Are Weaving Into The Next Strategic Plan

- **Ensure every learner can access and afford a College Unbound education** by expanding financial aid capacity, increasing scholarship and tuition support, strengthening employer and philanthropic partnerships, and ensuring equitable access to resources across every region.
- **Create lifelong pathways into and beyond College Unbound** by expanding partnerships with higher education institutions, welcoming stopped-out students back to complete their degrees, and cultivating alumni as mentors, leaders, advocates, and lifelong members of the CU community.
- **Build a resilient institution positioned for generations of impact** by advancing a comprehensive \$40 million fundraising strategy, deepening financial stewardship through participatory budgeting, and using data to strengthen enrollment, retention, and student success.

Strategic Goal Three

College Unbound will capture evidence of transformational and equitable outcomes that results in the enhanced well-being of our students, their families, and their communities.

FRAMING THE WORK

Ripples of Possibility

One rain drop can have a staggering impact on the water and life around it. At College Unbound, we understand that "our" work is not ours alone. We have been and continue to be influenced by the currents made by so many before us, and we hope to contribute our own ripples of possibility as well.



For the goal of **capturing evidence of transformational and equitable outcomes**, we offer "water ripples" as evidence of impact for individual, family, and community & commit to the following values:

- **Voice/Story** - creating pathways for individual story, collective meaning making, and the construction of community knowledge.
- **Embeddedness** - Fostering connectedness, deep belonging and sense of community and place.
- **Representation** - ensuring individuals and communities are seen and valued through all aspects of our work.

"Maybe stories are just data with a soul"

-Brene Brown

What questions informed the design of this plan 5 years ago?

question I

What CU practices maximize student transformation and learning outcomes? How do these practices enhance the well-being of our students, their families, and their communities?

question II

How does the college's commitment to intention a reflection, on both the student and institutional level, enable us to better capture evidence of transformational and equitable outcomes?

question III

What is the trend in operational expenses per FTE, and what organizational decisions explain the trend?

question IV

How do we co-create a non-exploitative approach to sharing what we learn from students?

High Level Strategies

1. Systemic & Iterative Assessment

Implement Student Driven Measures of Individual, Family, and Community Transformation

Build Staff and Faculty Capacity for Iterative Assessment & Codify Storytelling for Institutional Memory and Evolution of Processes

Develop Continuous Improvement System Based on Student Outcomes

2. Action Research

Ensure a Commitment to Students and Alumni Being Involved in Action Research Projects Across the Institution

Develop an Artist in Residence and Scholar in Residence Program to Develop Storytelling and Documentation Practices of Adult Learners

Publish and Present Findings in Our Communities & Beyond

3. Advocacy

Raise Up and Nurture Public Advocacy Initiatives Led by CU Students

Develop the Center for Equity & Restorative Justice to Support and Challenge the Institution's Action Research Agenda through Public Programming

Build Relationships with State and Federal Orgs around Higher Education Opportunities

STRATEGIC GOAL THREE: STORYTELLING AND ASSESSMENT

What we have done
What we have learned

NECHE 2025 Self-Study

Successfully completed its 2025 NECHE self-study, providing a comprehensive reflection on our growth, progress, and commitment to continuous improvement since our last accreditation review. The process affirmed the strength of our institutional practices and educational model, resulting in a 10-year accreditation cycle—the longest review period available—and demonstrating increased confidence in CU's stability, sustainability, and academic quality.

Developed a framework for Institutional Storytelling

Developed an institutional storytelling framework to strengthen how we capture, interpret, and share the stories that define our community and advance our mission. Through intentional practices of story collection, analysis, curation, and advocacy, the framework connects individual experiences to collective meaning-making, deepens belonging, and communicates the impact of CU's educational model.

Developed a Reflective Practice group

Established a reflective practice cross-team to strengthen a culture of learning, reflection, and continuous improvement across the institution. This work supports students, faculty, and staff in evaluating progress, refining practices, and reimagining approaches to advance CU's strategic and transformational goals. By shifting from an assessment-driven model toward learner-centered reflection, CU continues to center learner agency, honor diverse ways of knowing, and deepen our understanding of how learning transforms individuals and communities.

College Unbound
Celebrated 10 years!
We hosted a celebration
of the students,
graduates, and partners
who have helped to
shape College Unbound
over the past decade, and
a look ahead at what's
still to come.

Unbound Possibilities:
Celebrating Our Big 10



NECHE Team and CU Staff November 2025

It was really a feat of collaboration and of like deep care and a process that I'll speak from like institutional memory a decade ago was something we were like stepping forward on faith, but not necessarily with the ground beneath us so steady. And everything we wrote in that document and more we own. And it was so clear to the team how confident and comfortable we feel in the work we're doing and how much we believe in it."

-President Adam Bush



CU's Reflective Practice Approach



See What We Are Weaving Into The Next Strategic Plan

- Tell the story of College Unbound through the voices of our community by capturing and sharing experiences that reflect the full breadth of the CU journey—from relationships formed across regions to the transformative impact of applied learning and the diverse communities we serve.
- Cultivate a connected community that transcends geography by creating virtual, hybrid, and in-person experiences that deepen relationships, humanize digital spaces, and foster a lasting sense of belonging across College Unbound.
- Harness the power of storytelling to inspire learning, influence, and change by building a more intentional storytelling ecosystem that connects local and national narratives, demonstrates our impact through stories and research, and transforms individual experiences into collective insight and advocacy.

Strategic Goal Four

College Unbound will grow, adapt, and innovate with a commitment to equity, place, and purpose.

FRAMING THE WORK

Constellations of Change

When we zoom out, we remember that we are one of many stars in the night sky. Like CU, entities throughout the world are engaging in this life shifting work, each bringing its on unique light and perspective to the conversation.

For the goal of **growing, adapting, and innovating**, we offer "constellations" and commit to the following values:

- **Transformation** - Moving beyond the push for an improved state to a transformed way of being and doing.
- **Adaption** - Being responsive to an ever changing environment.
- **Creativity** - Using the imagination to generate ideas, alternatives, and possibilities that support transformation.



"I am talking about the combination of adaptation with intention, wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. this is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing"

-adrienne marie brown, 2017

What questions informed the design of this plan 5 years ago?

question I

How can CU become a model of growth that challenges the notion that more is always better? What methods do we employ to grow responsibly and in alignment with the communities most impacted by this work?

question II

How will we assess the impact of our growth and center community voice in the process?

question III

What does reciprocity within our community context look like? How do we complement existing resources?

question IV

How do we know when it is time to grow, adapt and innovate? How do we do this in a way that always centers on community voice, desire, and imagination?

High Level Strategies

1. Steady and sustainable growth plan

Develop an Operating Plan that Defines Technology, Staffing, Capacity Building & Relationship Needs for Thousands of Students

Invest in Learning Management, Student Information Systems, and HR Capabilities to Support Growth for Thousands of Students

Research and Support the Future Needs of our Growing Student Body

2. Institutional model that adapts to local needs and characters.

Assess PA Expansion Cost Model and Outcomes towards a Simplified Startup Process for 3-5 New Sites.

Adapt the CU Model based on the Challenges & Successes of Localized Partnerships in Person and Online

Continue to Develop a Purposeful & Place-Based Presence in Providence, RI

3. Innovative practices to support, inform, and imagine a changing world.

Support Avenues for Influence Outside of Higher Education

Provide Formal and Informal Coaching for Postsecondary Institutions

Deepen Collaborations with National Postsecondary Orgs

STRATEGIC GOAL FOUR: GROWTH, ADAPTATION, AND INNOVATION

What we have done What we have learned

Growth Strategy Development

Partnered with external consultants to develop a five-year growth strategy that clarified our path forward and identified the core elements that make CU unique. Through this process, we articulated six defining components of our model and established a framework for national and regional infrastructure to support sustainable growth while remaining grounded in our mission, values, and relationships.

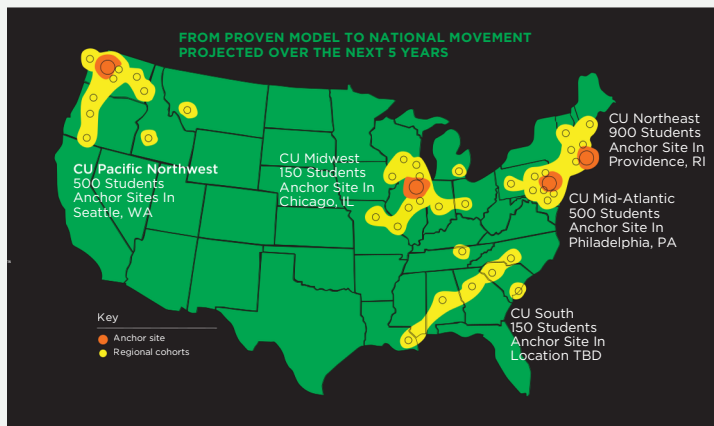
Reorganization of Organization to Align with Goals

At the beginning of the strategic plan, College Unbound undertook an organizational redesign to better align our structure, leadership, and resources with our strategic priorities and growth goals. This work clarified responsibilities, strengthened collaboration, and expanded our capacity to serve students. As part of this growth, CU's staff and faculty community grew to 273 members, building the infrastructure needed to advance our mission and support long-term sustainability.

Regional Advisories and Board Commissions

Expanded into new regions, we established regional advisory boards to support regional directors through local partnerships, resource development, funding opportunities, and enrollment pipelines. In parallel, board commissions were created to support the national board of trustees with future-focused and strategic thinking. Together, these structures strengthen community engagement, expand leadership pathways, and create opportunities for regional leaders and partners to contribute to CU's governance and future direction.

What happened at CU Institutional story



Campus Compact Hope, Institution Building & Possibilities for Civic Love



"How might hope and love guide our civic lives? In this plenary session, President Adam Bush, explores the Civic Love framework designed by the National Public Housing Museum with Stanley Howard and Renaldo Hudson. Both Stanley and Renaldo survived death row in Illinois and are now on the cusp of graduating from college. They explore how hope is sustained in places designed to extinguish it, where love appears under extreme conditions, and how education reshaped their understanding of themselves, their futures, and their responsibility to others."



We held graduations across all 5 regions of the college!



See What We Are Weaving Into The Next Strategic Plan

- Grow College Unbound's impact with intention and fidelity by expanding student and faculty communities across the West Coast, rural communities, and priority regions while developing the infrastructure, staffing models, and growth indicators that ensure expansion remains aligned with our mission, institutional capacity, and community needs.
- Build the systems that allow innovation to flourish by strengthening collaboration across sites, developing meaningful metrics, mapping institutional and student impact, and using data to guide thoughtful decisions about investments, hiring, and future growth.
- Extend College Unbound's influence beyond our classrooms by cultivating alumni leadership and organizing, deepening student community and belonging, strengthening storytelling across regions, and launching CU Academy to share our practices and contribute to the future of higher education.



"Grandma Strips," 2009, a quilt by Mary Lee Bendolph (American, b. 1935). Cotton, 75 x 77 inches. Collection of Mary Lee Bendolph, courtesy of Rubin Bendolph Jr.

This quilt, named *Grandma Strips*, was made by Mary Lee Bendolph, a member of the Gee's Bend quilting collective in Alabama. For generations, descendants of enslaved people have passed down an indigenous tradition of quilting, piecing together geometric patterns from the materials at hand—old cornmeal sacks, hand-me-down pants and suits, leftover kitchen towels, and other everyday remnants—to make robust quilts that warm their families while creating abstract, syncopated designs of extraordinary beauty and vitality.

In many ways, College Unbound is a collective quilting together of so many shared and particular life stories and lifelong learnings.

Our quilting together is a continual act of recognizing one another's patterns, experiences, and ways of knowing, stitching them into a tapestry that is larger, more complex, and more beautiful than any one of us could make alone.

The work of College Unbound is, in this sense, not about smoothing out our differences, but about bringing them together—finding the patterns and possibilities that emerge when our lives and learnings are joined.

The close of this strategic plan review with a quilt from Gee's Bend is not simply a metaphor. As we reflect on how our work together over these past years has been woven into something beautiful, complex, and warming, we are also beginning to extend College Unbound's relationships and community-building into new places. We are imagining how our approach to learning can take root in the American South through communities of practice, care, and storytelling—communities that are as vibrant, distinctive, improvisational, and deeply grounded in place as the work of Gee's Bend's artists.

President Adam Bush