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## Bringing a charter-school approach to college



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

**James Normil (left), earns credit for his degree by demonstrating skills through self-paced online projects that are then graded.**

**By Amy Crawford** | MARCH 26, 2015

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THERE ARE, generally, three main reasons that students drop out of college. The first is financial. Even in-state annual tuition and fees at public universities averaged nearly \$11,000 this school year, and if a funding source dries up, the bill can seem insurmountable. Another is inadequate preparation, especially when it requires enrollment in no-credit remedial courses, which can be both expensive and demoralizing. Yet the most common reason people cite for leaving school is that life — a job, family obligations, illness, pregnancy — got in the way.

That's what happened to James Normil. After he graduated from Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in 2003, he enrolled at Bunker Hill Community College. "I was a knucklehead at that time in my life," he confesses. "I went to Bunker Hill two semesters, then I ended up getting a job in retail and it was hard to keep up my classes." Soon he was working up to 70 hours a week as a floor manager, and his college dreams fell by the wayside. He made two more attempts, first at Cambridge College, then at UMass Boston, each time dropping out before he had earned enough credits for a degree.

But Normil is hoping the fourth time is the charm. Last summer, he enrolled in a new program called Match Beyond, which combines the low-cost flexibility of an online education with the one-on-one tutoring approach of Match Education, a public K-12 charter school organization in Boston. It's a combination, backers say, that could better serve students like Normil, move the needle on college completion rates, and give many more people a route to the middle class. But the approach also has some who study higher education policy worried that providing a bargain route to a college degree could actually increase inequality — and in the process, cheapen higher education itself.

IN MASSACHUSETTS, fewer than 16 percent of students who enroll in a public associate's degree program will graduate within three years. For public college students aiming at a bachelor's degree, which could be the key to a middle-class job, the graduation rate is just over 58 percent in six years, and the numbers are lower for people of color. Low college completion is a nationwide problem, acknowledged by political leaders all the way up to President Obama, but while graduation rates have inched up a little over the past several years, experts say the number of people earning degrees is still far below what a growing economy requires.

As an alumni coach for Match Education, Bob Hill spent his days driving across Massachusetts in a pickup truck, visiting more than 200 recent high school graduates at their college campuses. It was his job to help them work through personal issues, manage their time, and stay on track to graduate. Many of the students he met with were thriving in college, but others were struggling, and for some there was little he could do to help.

“College wasn’t always a good fit,” Hill says. “The Monday through Friday, the set schedule. That got me thinking, what are our other options? Is there a way to be more flexible?”

His research led him to College for America, a now three-year-old online arm of Southern New Hampshire University, which takes an approach that has become increasingly popular in the past several years. So-called competency-based education does away with the credit-hour, grades, professors, and even classes. Instead, degrees are granted to people who demonstrate their skills through a series of self-paced online projects that are judged by academic reviewers.

Although it has been around since 1997, competency-based education has been getting more attention since 2013, when the Department of Education said students attending such programs would be eligible for Pell grants and federal loans.

“The competency-based approach can be really sharply targeted,” says Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, which is working to increase college attendance and graduation for low-income Bostonians and has supported Match and other local charter schools in the past (but is not involved with the current venture). “It gets you to a degree potentially much quicker. We don’t know if that’s going to work yet — it’s brand new — but it’s of particular interest given the cost of higher education and the opportunity cost of young people spending years obtaining a degree that they might have obtained in a much shorter time.”

In the spring of 2014, after Hill had helped a few Match graduates sign up for College for America, the two institutions began discussing a formal partnership. They recruited a pilot class of 47 students, not only from among Match alumni but through schools and social service organizations throughout the city. The current group is more than 80 percent people of color, and 95 percent have a low enough income to qualify for a Pell grant to fully cover the \$5,000, annual tuition and fees. Three have dropped out, but four have already

completed an associate's degree in general studies and begun working on bachelor's degrees, and the rest are on track to do so within 18 months of starting the program. Organizers hope to expand it to about 500 students within a few years.

Match Education's contribution to the project is to provide coaches that keep students on track. That has meant showing them how to manage their time or deal with stress, providing them with resources like a mobile Wi-Fi hot spot or a T pass, calling and texting day and night to encourage them to complete their projects, and helping them find post-graduation jobs. These services, as well as a sleek office suite in the Financial District where coaches and students can meet, are partly covered by students' fees but currently subsidized by philanthropy.

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but independently managed, have been controversial for a number of reasons, and Match itself has drawn scrutiny for underpaying tutors. But Match is widely considered a success story, with much higher proportions of students passing their statewide tests than in Boston Public Schools as a whole. Match officials chalk up much of that to their emphasis on one-on-one tutoring, and they are confident that it will translate to higher education.

"It's very tailored and individualized, and this is a very big counterpoint to conventional colleges — the phone calls in the morning, the problem-solving around their lives," says Stig Leschly, Match's chief executive officer, who describes Match Beyond as a proof of concept that officials hope will convince other schools and community groups to partner with universities that provide competency-based programs. "We're going to grow this thing in Boston, but the big systemic way that this matters to the country is [the question of] is there a way to prove a kind of hybrid model like this? If that works, it could replicate very, very quickly."

AT MATCH BEYOND, the words "jobs," "career," and "path to the middle class" make up a constant refrain among officials, coaches, and students themselves. But some scholars who study higher education say that in all this talk about economics, something else is in danger of getting lost: education.

"The whole premise of College for America is bargain education," says Amy Slaton, a Drexel University history professor who has been a vocal critic of the model. "Instead of saying, 'We're going to help everyone reach the best of the best,' we're saying, 'Here's the generic,

no-frills version for you.’ It pegs the value of the education to what you’re able to pay, instead of helping everyone to achieve the richest, most varied education they can. Why aren’t we asking about how we can bring more classroom time, more expert teaching to everyone?”

While she praises Match Beyond’s coaching element, Slaton sees competency-based education as a poor substitute for classroom learning — one that she worries will become more popular as the price of college rises and public investment in higher education, especially for chronically underfunded community colleges, declines.

Johann Neem, a history professor at Western Washington University who is working on a book about American public education, shares Slaton’s concerns. While programs like Match Beyond aim to help low-income people increase their earning power, Neem argues that the approach could actually increase inequality between those who can afford to attend four-year colleges with leafy campuses, erudite professors, and well-stocked libraries, and those for whom low cost is, by economic necessity, their primary criterion for choosing a school. Cheaper alternatives like Match Beyond and College for America might not be able to compete with Harvard or MIT, but they could chip away at state and community colleges, leaving a two-tiered system with a sharper delineation between the haves and have-nots.

“There will be some people who get access to high-quality faculty, to high-quality classes, to the arts and sciences, and the cultural and economic authority and the intellectual insights those bring,” Neem says. “Other people will be trained narrowly with a few sets of skills defined by employers and will actually not receive a college education. I find that offensive. It’s insulting to the students and to the idea of college.”

College might not be a good fit for everyone, Neem submits, but he suggests the United States should invest in other forms of post-secondary education — trade schools and certification programs, for example — rather than simply changing the definition of “college.”

Of course, Neem and Slaton, both professors teaching history at traditional universities, have a personal and professional stake in preserving the status quo — after all, competency-based education has no need for highly paid tenure-track professors, especially those who

teach liberal arts. But college is not just about earning credentials that will unlock a higher-paying job; it's also about scholarship and research, conceiving new ideas and passing on knowledge to the next generation.

“If this is seen as the future of the university,” Neem says, “it will ultimately weaken the American academy.”

How competency-based education and Match Beyond fit into the landscape of American higher education is yet to be determined, but the fate of the American academy is far removed from James Normil's immediate concerns. He harbors no regrets about not attending a four-year residential college — “I'd probably just have gotten lost in the culture, the fraternities and parties, and not gone to class,” he says with a laugh.

He's completed 70 percent of the requirements for his associate's degree, and he hopes to wrap the program up soon. Recently married and with a baby on the way, he has a job with a youth-focused nonprofit in Dorchester that has promised him a raise when he graduates.

“With a degree, I'll be able to make more money, and it will also open more doors,” he says. “A traditional college could be ideal for some, but for me, this is a better system. And I believe it's the same case for anyone who's worried about debt and time.”

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