

CASE STUDY #1

WELLSPRING INITIATIVE PHASE II

# BRIDGING THE GAP

MAPPING THE LIBERAL ARTS  
TO REAL WORLD JOBS

# PROJECT REPORT

Wellspring is a multi-year initiative of the [1EdTech Foundation](#) and [IMS Global Learning Consortium](#) aiming to accelerate the adoption of an education-to-work ecosystem based on open technology standards. Wellspring envisions an environment where educators and employers can collaborate on education curricula focused on skills, learners control their skills-based achievements through secure and verifiable [digital credentials](#), and employers can find highly qualified talent based on their verifiable credentials. The initiative establishes proof points through research, practice, and demonstration as a roadmap for talent ecosystem stakeholders to achieve digital transformation based upon proven open standards. See the [Wellspring Initiative](#) for more information.

This case study shares the practical experiences of the Wellspring Phase II Project's College Unbound-led team, and their efforts to update the liberal arts curriculum to meet the real-world needs of diverse learners and align to the requests of employer partners from Providence Community Health Center (PCHC) and United Way of Rhode Island. The competency framework deliverables serve as the foundation for modifications to the College Big 10, a unique set of competencies demonstrated for graduation and instrumental to learner flourishing and workplace professional behaviors.

## THE LIBERAL ARTS LANDSCAPE: EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE AND PREPARING FOR JOB ROLES

Liberal arts colleges and programs have been under significant pressure during the last decade to respond to both graduate employment placement and talent gaps identified by businesses.

While bachelor's degrees from private liberal arts colleges are reported to have a higher ROI 40 years after completion, community colleges and certificate programs note a quicker higher return and more immediate payout for graduates, as reported by [Carnevale, Cheah, and Van Der Werf](#) (2021).

Exacerbated by the pandemic, enrollment is down, costs are up, and less than half of small businesses can find the right

workers for the jobs. Despite the widespread call for the in-demand foundational, 21st-century skills in new and existing employees—skills often touted as integral to liberal arts programs—the gaps in expectations versus existing skills continue to grow.

Academic organizations have instituted several strategies to respond to this dilemma, such as internships and apprenticeships, integration of industry certifications and digital credentials, and the introduction of liberal arts career pathways ([Brookings, 2021](#)).

The apparent linkage between what is learned in an academic experience (graduation

requirements) and the demonstration of these skills in employment (job roles) becomes critical to recognize the total value of general and liberal arts outcomes.

Competency frameworks, describing what an individual knows and can do, both upon completion of an academic credential and in a job role, serve as the foundation for communication, validation, and connection.

## An Example: The College Unbound Big 10

A coordinating organization on this Wellspring Project team, [College Unbound](#), intentionally attends to an adult learner population, who for a variety of reasons, have faced barriers to college attendance. Their recently accredited, innovative, personalized, interest/project-based curriculum model focuses on a variety of techniques to make learning meaningful, relevant, high-quality, and responsive, both to learner and employer needs.

College Unbound identified “the skills and capacities necessary for today’s leaders and change agents” as their Big 10 Competencies nearly a decade ago, using the [AAC&U Value Rubrics](#) as a basis for design. Students’ skills are validated and credit awarded based upon self-reflection and validation of artifacts by faculty. The Big 10 ([Figure 1](#)) are a significant element of the College Unbound experience and learning identity.

- Big 10 Competencies**

  - Communication
  - Accountability
  - Advocacy for Self and Others
  - Collaboration
  - Creativity
  - Critical Thinking
  - Intercultural Engagement
  - Problem Solving
  - Reflection
  - Resilience

Figure 1. 2021 Revised Big 10 Competencies  
College Unbound

College Unbound saw participation in the Wellspring project as a catalyst to modernize, adjust from an “academic” orientation to a more workforce-aligned perspective, and cultivate and document broad-based knowledge. A diverse and creative team of alumni, students, administrators, business partners, and community members analyzed the existing Big 10 competencies against job descriptions for front line leadership roles within two partner organizations: Providence Community Health Centers and the United Way of Rhode Island.

The [T-Profile tool](#), designed and facilitated by Education Design Lab, but adapted to align with the Big 10 competencies, was noted as being extremely useful to the team in identifying critical 21st century and technical skill competencies that were necessary to be included within the designed competency frameworks.

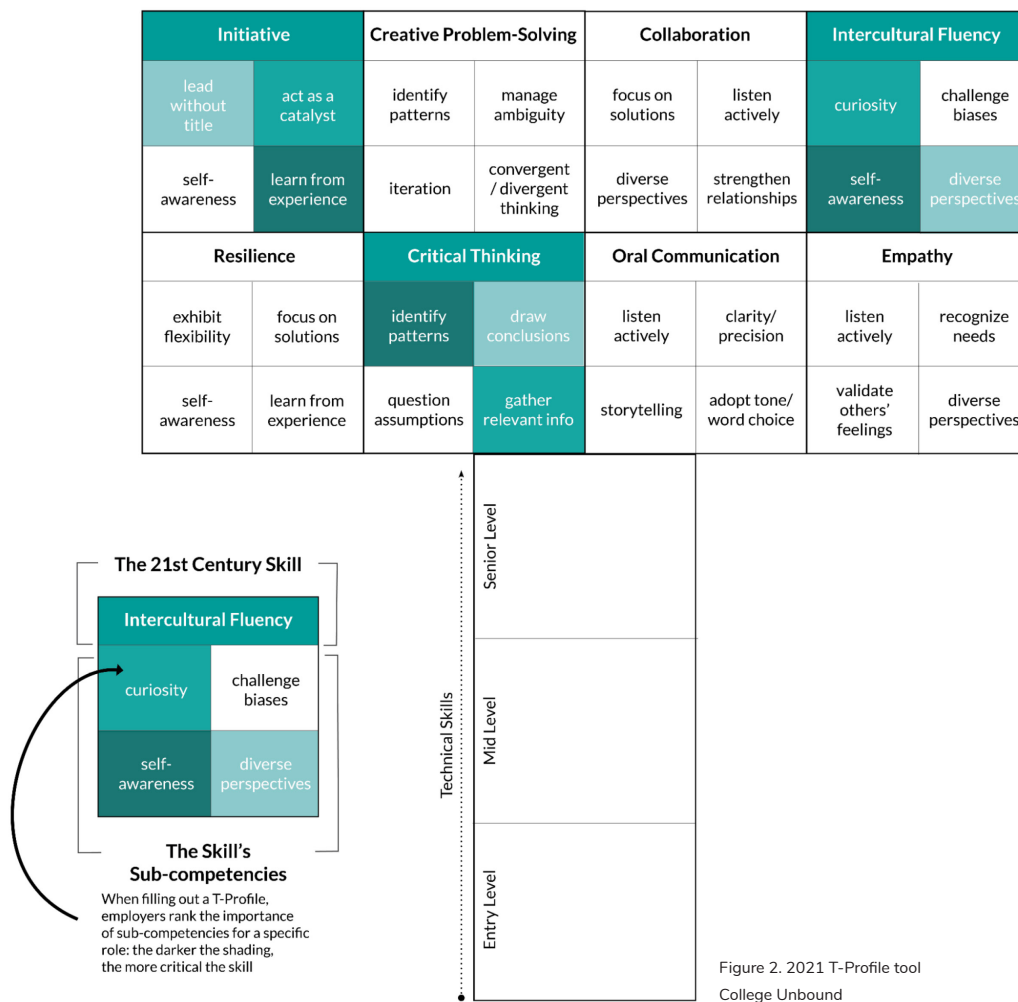
The team co-crafted [frameworks](#), which were then validated through survey work with alumni, who represented a range of job roles. Through the rigorous, engaging, and multi-perspective process, the final competency framework that emerged to represent the Big 10 were found to be relevant. Feedback that was garnered encouraged the use of industry language and assessment based on skill rather than the “school” process [emphasizing demonstrated skill over classroom behaviors].

A key finding from the validation stage is the suggestion to find “opportunities for strengthening the curriculum, particularly around career support, and point to opportunities to better understand the goals of current and potential CU students”.

The competencies became the basis of shared language between all members of the College Unbound team, bridging “education speak” with the vocabulary of work. This then fostered the transition from broad institutional learning outcomes to the adaptation of competency statements that were tangible and connected to the work-place. Modifications to the foundational, cross discipline, cross program outcomes then made it possible to link directly to job roles of partnering employers.

The project relationships between the participating organizations were more substantial and sustainable given the impact of the newly designed competency frameworks, for not only the College Unbound Big 10, but also the participating employers’ job role competencies used in the hiring, performance review, and advancement process.

## T-Profile Tool



## Considerations for Academic Institutions, Employers, and Learners

- The integration of industry and business representatives into the design and validation of liberal arts and general education competency frameworks contextualizes learning, increases relevance, and enhances workplace skill outcomes
- Competency frameworks can be utilized to scale, replicate, and document skill achievements, institutional learning outcomes, and student completion for accreditation, state reporting, and learning records
- Employers can leverage relationships with academic partners along with their own competency frameworks to integrate into the curriculum high priority technical and transferable skills, improving the hiring process for those job roles that are the most difficult to successfully fill.
- Employer frameworks, inclusive of skills like those identified in the Big 10, can provide pathways for advancement and upskilling. The frameworks connect employee hiring, performance evaluation, and promotion to the skills that matter the most.
- Establishing intentional, explicit competency statements in academic programs, but specifically in liberal arts learning, can communicate the relevance, meaning, and value of skills in the workplace. Lessons from employer partners can assist learners in connecting the dots to the “why” it is necessary to learn and demonstrate these skills.
- Engaging learners in the process of developing the competency framework empowers and encourages them to be co-designers, champions, and self-advocates in the skills hiring marketplace.

Based on the experiences of the educators and their business partners in the project, collaboration on the development of competency frameworks and the shared design process can support fundamental change to the liberal arts curricular design and lead to clearly connected pathways from academic knowledge to workplace practice.

“ We are looking for a more effective way to assess our employees’ performance. We want to anchor the annual review in competencies and develop a checklist for interviewing incoming employees and existing employees who apply for internal opportunities. Getting something that represents both 21st-century skills and PCC is important to us.”

**Brenda Ketner**

Providence Community Health (PCC)  
and College Unbound Alumni

## About 1EdTech Foundation

[1EdTech Foundation](#) facilitates cooperative investment catalyzing a connected ecosystem of innovative educational products and digital credentials that together accelerate teaching and learning innovation enabling every individual to achieve without limits.

For more information visit <https://www.1edtech.org>.

1EdTech Foundation acknowledges the generous financial support for this work from the Charles Koch Foundation and Walmart Foundation.



## About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global Learning Consortium is a non-profit organization that advances technology to scale and improve educational participation and attainment affordably. IMS members are leading suppliers, higher education institutions, K-12 districts and schools, and government organizations that enable better teaching and learning by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors the annual [Learning Impact](#) program to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality while developing the leadership and ideas to help shape the future of educational technology.

Learn more at <https://www.imsglobal.org>.

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<sup>1</sup> Navarre Cleary, M. (2021). A Review of College Unbound's Big 10 Leadership & Change Competencies..

<sup>2</sup> Navarre Cleary, M. (2021). A Review of College Unbound's Big 10 Leadership & Change Competencies.