The Portmont College Story

When I was growing up in India, college was not the norm in my family. My father barely received four years of schooling and had to start working at the age of fourteen to support his family. By contrast, my mother was valedictorian of her high school class, but women of her background were not expected to go to college, and she was married off at seventeen years of age.

Despite their experiences or perhaps because of them, my parents instilled in me the importance of education. By the time I was in high school, I began to think of education as the path to a different future. With hard work and focus, I applied to and was accepted into the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology. I suddenly found myself in a rarified world that opened many doors for me and set me on a path very different from that taken by my neighborhood friends.

After college, I set my sights on a larger prize and found my way to the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where I received an MBA. This gave me the knowledge and confidence to build a career in the business world over the next fifteen years, initially working at some large companies and then becoming a technology entrepreneur—starting, building, and selling two companies, one in e-commerce and the other in enterprise software.

With success comes responsibility. After selling my second company, I had a strong desire to give back and be part of a cause bigger than myself, to help others have the opportunities that I was so fortunate to have had in my life. I thus started working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, finding ways to help farmers in Africa and Asia improve their lives through better access to information and communications technologies. These farmers, with barely a few acres, depended on the land for their livelihood; they were people very much like my grandparents in a small village in India. Their resilience inspired me, and this experience showed me yet again how education and information can transform people's lives.

I wanted to apply these experiences to address social problems here in the United States, in my own backyard. Helping to close the education gap was a natural cause to devote myself to. I have seen firsthand how education can transform lives. It is the most important doorway to opportunity in the United States and has contributed in no small part to what has made this country great. But we are also at risk of losing this edge; there is a large and growing gap between the rich and the poor in their access to education.

These were the seeds that led me to found Portmont College (http://portmont.la.edu/), a two-year, nonprofit, private college in partnership with Mount St. Mary’s, based in Los Angeles. The college offers associate's degree programs in business administration, computer science, liberal arts, and pre-health science through a blended online plus in-person curriculum. It is designed to open doors for students who have the grit and determination to succeed but who face barriers to that success today. Portmont will cost about $5,000 per year and so is an affordable option for students with financial constraints.

Portmont College has several unique characteristics that will enable it to take on the higher education challenges of broadening access, lowering costs, and maintaining the highest quality:

1. **Students with Grit.** We aim to serve students who possess the determination to succeed even if they face real barriers (financial, academic readiness, or social) to success in college. Our hypothesis is that when faced with a rigorous program combined with high levels of holistic supports, focused and driven students will apply their natural drive and energies to their academic success. We are selective, but not by academic aptitude or SAT test scores as in traditional institutions. Instead, we require a high level of grit, resilience, and tenacity, and we select our students on this basis.

2. **Connected Students.** We connect students to their campus and larger community: their peers, faculty, coaches, and the workplace they will eventually enter. One of the benefits of a high-quality education is the opportunity to build a personal network of people who are there for you to help you succeed. Though online learning can be isolating, it has the potential for even more meaningful connectivity. We place students in cohorts with a success coach in their city, with the expectation that students will support each other in real life and not just online. As we know from our own college experiences, these students will likely continue to be close friends for many years. We teach students through a curriculum that connects them to their world and gives them opportunities to meet local employers and community leaders who have also overcome obstacles. We thus see an
opportunity to blend the best of both worlds: the personalization and flexibility of online learning with the engagement and support of in-person education.

3. Core Capabilities. Our students not only receive grades in specific subjects but also develop six core capabilities (Work Ethic, Learning to Learn, Teamwork, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Effective Communication) that will prepare them for a lifetime of career success. These timeless skills not only will help them land their first job but also will help them build success over many decades, in their career and community. We know that our students will change employers on average every 4.1 years and that a majority of students now in grade school will eventually have jobs that don’t exist today. Employers want these core capabilities, but they don’t often find them in graduates from traditional colleges. As detailed by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska in Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (2010), these learning outcomes have much room for improvement. One underlying cause is the failure to teach, measure, and report on these capabilities at the individual student level. Such granularity and transparency will force improvements in our ability to deliver on these core capabilities more consistently and will enable students to demonstrate these achievements directly to employers. This is also the key to bridging the gap between the academy and employers and to addressing the dichotomy between liberal arts education and job-specific training.

4. Visible and Measured Progress. Portmont teaches a high-quality and proven curriculum transformed to the online environment from Mount St. Mary’s College in Los Angeles, our partner in this venture. But we take a further step to offer an unprecedented and transparent view into student learning at an individual level. Students’ progress will be highly visible and central to the learning experience. Students will know on a daily basis how they’re doing, where they need help, and how to focus their time to succeed. This visible view of both successes and failures allows for early intervention by a personal success network. Faculty and coaches will be able to see, through descriptive and predictive analytics, exactly when students need help as soon as they need it, not after the fact. The Portmont Student Dashboard will highlight this progress, as well as items requiring immediate attention (e.g., missing assignments), and will make it easier to help students in a tailored and timely way.

We have a number of such ideas to radically improve the cost + quality + access equation for higher education. We have a long way to go to achieve our vision, but we are off to a very good start in a relatively short time. We are honored and grateful to be a part of this new movement in American education. I am excited about the unique opportunities allowed from being able to build a college from scratch, at a time when innovations in teaching, technology, and student support can converge to create a lasting impact. I am grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their help in formulating the business plan and providing the financial support to help start MyCollege Foundation. I am proud of my terrific colleagues who have jumped in with both feet to help turn this vision into reality. And I am honored that Mount St. Mary’s College, under the leadership of Dr. Ann McElaney-Johnson, has partnered with us to create Portmont College at Mount St. Mary’s.

My hope is that the education offered by Portmont College at Mount St. Mary’s will do for motivated students across the United States what my education did for me: provide the path to a different future.

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