



California Community Colleges

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast Episode 17 – Adam and Jaye Fenderson

Eloy: Welcome everyone. This is Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley and you're tuning into another edition of the "Chancellor's Office" podcast.

Today, I have the pleasure of being joined by two very special guests. Adam and Jaye Fenderson, directors of the soon to be released documentary, "Unlikely." Welcome, Adam and Jaye.

Adam: Thank you very much, we're excited to be here.

Jaye: Thanks. Love talking to you, Eloy.

Eloy: So, we are gonna be talking about a very special film that's coming out titled, "Unlikely," and a little bit about your journey as filmmakers, and what motivated you to make this film about the college completion crisis in the United States. And feel free and talk about some of the stories that you highlight, some of the guests that you have in the film.

And just for the sake of viewers, if you're interested in learning more about the film, for those of you who are listening, you're welcome to go on to unlikelyfilm.com where you can see the trailer. And also, if you're in the Sacramento area, on November 20th, our office, the Chancellor's Office is gonna host a screening of "Unlikely" at the Crest Theater in Sacramento at 6 p.m. If anyone in the Sacramento area is interested in attending, you can R.S.V.P. at rspv@ccco.edu, that's rspv@ccco.edu. It'll be a great time, it's a great film. I courage anybody in the Sacramento area to come by and view it.

So, with that, let me get back to our special guests, Adam and Jaye. Can you two give us a little bit of a sense as to how you came to do this film? You know, what motivated you, and who are you trying to reach?

Jaye: Sure. Thanks, Eloy. Well, a few years ago, you might recall we made a film called "First Generation" which followed the stories of four California high school students who were trying to be first in their families to go to college. And we spent a few years screening that film around the country and we honestly thought that was going to be our last film because it was a labor of love, a work of heart, but you know, it's tough to make a documentary. But in the process of traveling around, we realized that the story of "First

Generation" was all about getting to college, but we started hearing from a lot of students, a lot of educators, policymakers, that the real issue facing America was once students got in they weren't completing at a rate that we would like to see in the U.S. So just, for example, about 50% of students who start college never finish. And that stat really sat with us and we realized that you know, there's another film if you will, a sequel in some sense to "First Generation."

And so we decided to get our cameras and really examine the story. And we wanted to tell the story of students who, I guess, sort of debunk the idea of you know, who are today's students? They're not just 18 to 22-year-olds who are going off to a 4-year college which is kind of the idea and the American psyche of what a college student is.

So we set off to film and spend time with students who were working adults, who were single parents, who were maybe going back to school after having stopped out for a while, as well as opportunity youth who are disconnected to the workforce and education. So really trying to get a sense of you know, who is going to school today, who's going to post-secondary today, and what are the challenges that they face?

And with the goal of trying to reach the 35 million-plus Americans who have, at some point, started a post-secondary pathway but haven't completed. And we hope that the film really inspires people to finish what they start, encourages people that it's never too late to go to school, and also to raise awareness among policymakers in higher education about what we need to do to make sure that students can be successful once they get to college.

Eloy: Thanks for that background, Jaye. You know, I watched your first documentary, "First Generation," and I've watched it several times and I've shown it to many audiences. And it really touches educators very deeply. I've seen people in tears, my own staff in tears as they watched that documentary. And the way that you shaped it around student stories I think really was effective. You use a very similar approach in "Unlikely." Can you tell us about how you decided to pick these students stories and how you came across them?

Adam: Yeah, absolutely. I think that what we realize is that you know, we hear stats and statistics, especially in education you hear these things all the time, but the human story is something that I think we often miss. And one of the things that we hear often from educators is that when we do a film like "First Generation," the student story resonates with so many people that you know, facts, and figures, and charts are not as touching and don't sit with people the same way. So we really wanna focus on that and in every film that we do we wanna make sure that we're looking at the real lives of the real people.

And I think something that people don't understand is that most college students today are not the 18 to 22-year-olds, right. So everybody assumes the idea is you know, you graduate from high school, you go off to college, you spend four to five years there and then you get a degree and you graduate and your life is better. But so many of the students in the world right now and in our country are going to school at different ages.

And so we wanted to look at that and look at the struggles that all the different types of students are facing.

So in our film, we have working mothers, we have opportunity youth, we have returning adults, we do have a traditionally aged student. We also look at the lives of some younger kids that are getting ready to go to college later in their life. And so we really wanted to focus on all the different ages of students so that we can talk about the issues in so many different ways, and if you just focus on one type of student, you're really only going to see, you know, the issues that those students face. And so we hopefully, could explore more stories and more experiences looking at different types of students.

Eloy: Right. Well, I find it terrific the way that you follow these stories through and obviously, it takes a lot of time and a lot of passion. You guys have done a remarkable job. Now, Jaye, you're featured in this film and you're experienced as an admissions officer, can you talk a little bit about how you took this on from your own personal experience, and what does this film mean to you?

Jaye: Sure, Eloy. So, my first job out of college I was an admissions officer at Columbia University which is where I attended. And I sort of was very bright-eyed and hopeful that I would be able to impact, you know, a lot of low-income students. I felt very strongly about that, that was my background. I was raised by a single mother, went to a large public high school and really saw education and getting a degree as the pathway to success.

And so, I kind of wanted to make sure that I could pass that on to give other people that opportunity. And so it was sort of a eye-opening experience for me when I did work behind the doors of an admissions office and realized that you know, we weren't admitting as many low-income students as I thought we could and we didn't have as much of an impact, you know, in terms of outreach to public schools to traditionally marginalized students. And it really bothered me. I felt like, you know, an institution that has so much influence in American society, that we really should be doing more to level inequality in the country and create an opportunity for more students.

So, this is something that has sat with me for years and I think it's seen many iterations in my career in terms of the work that I've done. And so I feel like this is sort of the culmination of something I've been thinking about and that has sat heavy with me for a long time. And I feel like anyone who has had the opportunity, you know, where education has transformed their life, I think that we all feel like, you know, if we don't do something with the opportunities that we've been given to empower others and provide opportunities for others that we feel like we're missing out you know, on a chance to make a difference.

And so, hopefully, I mean, this film is very personal, but I hope that you know, it does have an impact and we can change the conversation around what is college, who are students, and how do we evaluate what is a good school and what is success when it comes to achieving higher education?

Eloy: Oh, I couldn't agree with you more. And it will be interesting from the point of view of admissions officers which you may not have considered that they would be watching this film, but I got to imagine that some of them will look at this film and think about your experience and reflect on their own experiences because it must be tough having to deny admission to so many, many capable students. So, it'll be interesting to see how the admissions officers react to this film. Have you gotten any feedback yet?

Jaye: Yeah, we have gotten. So far, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. And I was really nervous, having worked in admissions and you know, when you're critiquing your own industry in which you've played a role. Obviously, the admissions and the university plays a critical role in advancing student success but I think that there's definitely some room for improvement. And it's always tough to be a critic and then hear other people's responses. But so far so good.

I hope what we do is we create a fruitful dialogue and a place to really talk about some of the issues and challenges that have plagued higher education for a long time and some of the stigma surrounding some of the measurements that we use to rank institutions and to frame the conversation around where people should be going to school and how students and parents make choices about how to spend their money on education and what is a good pathway after high school.

Eloy: Right. So, there are a lot of guest personalities that are featured in your film. And I won't give away all of them, but there is one that certainly stands out, particularly if you're a sports fan or if you're a Laker fan these days, and that's LeBron James. He has a very strong voice for education in this film. How did you land on working with LeBron and how did he become such a big part of your film? And I guess my last question would be, are you going to ask him to show the film at an upcoming Laker game?

Adam: I love that. We actually loved working with LeBron and his foundation. It was a very awesome opportunity. We decided to work in Akron. Akron, Ohio is where LeBron is from because Akron had been doing some really, really great work about increasing post-secondary and college degrees among its citizens.

And so, before we knew much about LeBron's foundation, we had already been focused on Akron. And then what we realized is he started a foundation there in Akron when he joined the NBA, I think he was like 17-18. And he didn't really know what he wanted to do with that, and so he started with one-off biker funds and he was doing great work for the community. And as he played more and he worked longer with his foundation, and the team behind his foundation, Michelle Campbell, who is the executive director there is in the film and she's just fantastic. And she and him basically got together and said, "We need to do more for these students."

Now, LeBron didn't even go to college, he dropped right out of high school. And so he knows that he is the exception. And he looks at these students throughout his town and he realizes that he could have been any one of them. And he sees the struggles that

they're going through. And so they made a decision pretty early on that they were going to shift gears and not just do the biker funds but really influence education the best they could in Akron, in his hometown.

This started years ago before we were involved with them, but as we were researching Akron, we learned about the incredible work that he's doing there and how his foundation is continuing to grow. And you know, at a certain point, it was helping students who were falling behind in reading at early ages, you know, getting them back, getting them some tutoring. And that just expanded, and expanded, and expanded.

And many people know he just opened a new elementary school that is for his students that is focused on getting kids all the way through high school into college, and he is supporting students all the way through their college journey. And it's kind of incredible to see somebody with such great influence in sports in a completely different field be able to give back to his community. And so when we got the chance to work with him and his foundation, we were just thrilled.

And the truth is he is a big face and name for his hometown. And that is where their focus is right now, it's in Akron. And so when he shows up to events, when he does things for the students, it's a big deal. And his face, and name, and his influence on pushing education and making sure that that is an important thing in their community has spread throughout the community. Along with all these are the great things that they're doing in that community, his support is really driving a lot of leadership and a lot of community organizations and foundations to put money and put time behind educating the students and making sure that every person in Akron has a chance to go back and get a college degree.

I think that what he's doing is actually a model that a lot of celebrities and big-name voices could do if they put their energy and their efforts behind education in the communities that they came from. I think that it could make a big impact because you know, people follow that and people look to that as leadership. So I think it's great what he's doing. And it was it was it was really cool working with him.

Eloy: Yeah, I bet. And you're right, I think it's a great example for other celebrities to really engage personally, in the lives of the communities that they came from. And I think it's a great testament to LeBron James. For those who didn't know how much LeBron has committed to Akron, Ohio, they know now after watching this film.

So, you know, given all the work that you've done on "First Generation" and now, "Unlikely." You've done a lot of research, you've looked at a lot of trends, you've looked at community colleges, you've looked at other higher education institutions. From your perspective as filmmakers, as people who are really just genuinely interested in higher education doing better by students, what do you think we need to do as a country to better support students, and what role do you think community colleges have in particular in this area?

Jaye: I think between these two films, we are very aware that support across the board for students, whether it's high school counselors at the secondary level or college counselors when students are actually in post-secondary, students need support at every level. And I think the assumption that we see is that students come into post-secondary institutions and they have all the tools that they need to succeed when, in fact, they don't. They come in and they may not have the financial support, parental support or just this general knowledge about, you know, how college works, how to sign up for classes.

One of the things that we've talked about in our conversations, Eloy, is about remediation. And a lot of students don't realize... You know, they think they've done everything to prepare in high school, and then when they get to college they're told that they have to retake these classes, and then they don't count for course credit and they're using up their financial aid dollars. And so, these are things that I think are a disconnect between the way we communicate to students and their own expectations.

And so, certainly, you know, as filmmakers, we're not the experts by any means, but I think overall, institutions can do a better job of meeting students where they're at. And you have this wonderful line in the film, it's one of my favorites, and you say that a student doesn't come to college expecting that they're going to fail. They come to college expecting that they're going to finish. And so, you know, it's up to institutions to help students finish.

And I think if we can do a much better job between the personal support as well as utilizing technology, I think that you know, we can do a better job. And there are institutions that are you know, proving the fact that that is possible.

And I think with community colleges, in particular, getting out into the community and helping the public understand what opportunities are available and really making clear the pathways to get there, I think some of the work that you're doing here in California is such a model for the rest of the nation in terms of getting rid of some of those obstacles to taking the tests, the ECT, the SAT, taking their remedial courses, making sure that the math, the statistics, you know, counts towards college credit and counts towards those requirements. I think those are things that can really be helpful and help students not feel like they're facing setbacks as soon as they start.

Adam: Yeah, community colleges are on the front line. And so, I think that we need the community colleges across the country to really step up and say, "We know that we are the people that are going to be serving the majority of these students. We know that you know, most students, when they're looking to go back to college, especially if they've, you know, stopped out, if they're looking to find a way back in the community college is the first place they go. Right, they don't go, "Maybe I could apply to you know, Harvard or Columbia" or something that. They say, "Now, okay, what's right around me? What can I do easily?" And it's either that or a for-profit institution which is a whole another conversation.

But with the community colleges, they're the ones that need to step up and say, "Yes, we're here to support you. We're here to help you finish, and get you back in the workforce." Because the fact is we're falling short. Eloy, as a nation, we're not doing great, right. And so we point to this in the film. With 50% of students dropping out of school and not finishing their degree, we are one of the worst countries in the industrialized world. And so, we need to make sure that if students think, "Yes, I need to go back to school." Which a lot of people do. We need more post-secondary degrees to fit the economic need that we have in this country and we know that we have to work on that.

And so, if students are ready and willing and trying to get back and get into a livable wage job, they need that post-secondary degree and they're gonna go to the community colleges. And if they go to a community college and the community college says, "Great, sign up right here. Take whatever classes you want and good luck. High five," and they're out the door, we've got a big problem. We need to make sure that when they show up they know what they're there for, they need someone that can walk them through and get them the right tools they need.

And if they're working and living you know, with kids at home and they aren't able to be in the classroom every day, then we need special support for those students. We need to make sure that we are taking away every barrier to make sure that every student can come back can get to a community college and finish a degree or get to a point where they're transferring to get even further their education so that they're not just getting a few credits, a handful of credits, and then often walking away with more debt without a degree which is you know, a huge problem.

So yeah, I think the community colleges are the frontline and they need to step up the strongest.

Eloy: Well, I agree. So, let's start wrapping up and let's focus on the release of "Unlikely." Tell us what the plans are for the release of "Unlikely" and for those who are interested in coming to the Napa Valley Film Festival, tell us about the plans there as well.

Adam: Yeah, we are very, very excited. The film is coming out November 9th, that is the big official world premiere at the Napa Valley Film Festival. And I've heard very good things because you are going to be there as well on the 9th, which is very cool. So we're gonna have an incredible screening in Yawn [SP] Ville at the Napa Valley Film Festival that we also have a screening on the 10th at the Napa Valley Film festival. So there's two screenings, two opportunities to see the film. We encourage everyone in the area to come out, see the film, the very first time you can see it.

And then directly following that, we are opening it up to allow people to do their own screenings of the film. And we have a lot of organizations and a lot of foundations that are excited about getting the film out to the people that they're working with. We're working with some of our funders and partners on trying to do more screenings across the country that are going to be free and open to the public. We're gonna be in Washington DC on

November 29th. We're also planning a Chicago screening, we're planning a New York screening. Both of these are open to the public.

Right after the film festival, we're actually headed right back to Akron, Ohio where we're doing a large screening with LeBron James Family Foundation and with the educational foundations in the area. The GAR Foundation really stepped up and helped us put this together. It's going to be a large screening where we're inviting the whole entire community to come out. That's happening the week after the festivals.

And then, of course, the Sacramento screening on November 20th with you and with the Chancellor's Office. We're very excited about that. Again, it's another event where we want to encourage students and adults that are looking to go back to college to come out to learn about it and get a chance to hear directly from you and from other people that are working in the space at a local level and spread the word, not just about the film, but about the topics that are in the film and that we wanna give people tools to be able to get back to college and finish their degree and be successful.

So it's spreading wide. We encourage you to go to unlikelyfilm.com. That's a little plug. Check out the trailer, learn more, you can see where all the screenings are. Sign up for the ones that are free and open to the public. So yeah, we're really excited about the release.

Eloy: Great. Well, I really appreciate the two of you joining me on this podcast. I know you've got a lot going on right now with the film. We're excited for you. So, thank you for being with us.

Jaye: Thanks, Eloy.

Adam: It's been a pleasure, Eloy. Thank you very much.

Jaye: We're looking forward to seeing you in a few weeks.

Eloy: So, just to repeat. Those of you who are in the Sacramento area, we are going to screen the film, "Unlikely," on Nov 20th at the Crest Theater in Sacramento at 6 p.m. If you're interested in attending please R.S.V.P. at rsvp@ccco.edu.

You've been listening to my two very special guests, Jaye and Adam Fenderson who are releasing a new documentary, "Unlikely." And this has been another edition of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's podcast. Thanks for joining me and we look forward to the next time and our next guest. So thanks for joining me.

Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast.

This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.