

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Tim Jones

Dionissi Aliprantis

This is Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the Program on Economic Inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. In our program, we aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn about what it takes for more people to participate more fully in the economy.

For students to advance into productive careers, they need to first build skills through education and experiences that adequately prepare them for the industries in which they want to work. Career and Technical Education is one path to that learning. This sort of training can be helpful to many students, but especially those who don't intend to go to college. In a recent conversation with Professor Shaun Daugherty, we learned that students get Career and Technical Education on a continuum, with some exposed to just a class or two in their traditional high school, while others experience full immersion in a career-oriented curriculum.

Davis Aerospace & Maritime High, which part of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, sits on the full immersion side of that continuum. It represents an innovative and replicable model for public-private partnerships to support high schools focused on Career and Technical Education in high-poverty districts. I recently spoke with Tim Jones, the founding principal of Davis A&M, about the opportunities he aims to provide to his students, and the approaches the school takes to partnerships with local non-profits and private companies to make those opportunities possible.

Before we get started, I should mention that the views expressed here are those of the participants, and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland or the Federal Reserve System.

And now, here's my conversation with Tim Jones.

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I'm curious if you could tell me a little bit about Davis A&M and maybe even just how did the idea for the high school start?

Tim Jones

Davis A&M started in 2017. I opened the school, but it was actually that was the result of about a five year process or maybe even longer between the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and a nonprofit organization called PHASTAR. And in 2012 Cleveland in a response to some struggles that the school district was having, implemented what was called the Cleveland Plan. And the Cleveland Plan was a plan and outline of how they were going to turn the district around and it was a collaboration between the district and the teachers union. And one of the tenets of the plan was to take a look at some of the larger high schools that were not performing the way that we needed them to, to serve the kids that we have.

Closing them and then reopening a number of smaller schools with a theme. So there are STEM elementary schools and there are schools for leadership and innovation and there're schools for the arts, et cetera. And so the goal with that portfolio strategy is to give families options so that if a

comprehensive traditional high school isn't right for every family, some kids might want to focus more on the arts and there should be an option for them. Some kids might want to focus less on that and focus more on architecture or some interests like that, and Cleveland wanted there to be an option for those families. So at the time that Cleveland was taking this new approach, an organization in Cleveland called PHASTAR approached the district.

PHASTAR was a public health organization and the founder of the organization his name is Drew Ferguson, he's my partner here at the school. And he's a helicopter pilot and a boat captain, and is heavily involved in public health. And he flew the helicopters and ran Metro's Life Flight program and with his pursuit to improve the wellbeing of the citizens of Cleveland. It was pretty clear, especially when we're talking to local industry, that education and intervening with kids was really the way to do it and get the most results. So he and his team brought the idea of an aerospace and maritime school to the district. And we are right here on Lake Erie, Cuyahoga River runs right through the middle of the city. There are two airports here, the Cleveland airport system's the largest employer in the city. Many of the workers in those industries are aging and there is a gap, it's not evenly distributed these ages. And so very soon, and it's happening already, those industries expect a shortage. And so there's some interest in the industries to support the school and push and help us get it off the ground because of the professional need for employees. And then there was an interest in the school because it matched the portfolio approach with kids could get excited about math and science if they're studying boats and building propellers and testing airplane airfoils, and schools should be doing that. So the approach in Davis has always been finding compelling context for kids to be exploring whether that be specific to the theme aerospace, maritime, or really the third pillar now is engineering. We have a very strong engineering program, specifically it's just where the beginnings of our CTE, career technical education, program lie. But even in the English class and the history class, teachers are looking for things that kids are going to latch onto that they're naturally interested in, that they can see connected to their own lives because in the end, that's what engages kids, gets them excited about school and gets them excited about college and whatever else they choose. But if you're not excited about that stuff, then school can be a drag unfortunately. It can be boring [inaudible 00:11:12].

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So I'm curious about the students that you serve, I'm curious to know what students get into Davis A&M.

Tim Jones

I'll tell you a little bit about my students. Davis A&M is a public school, part of the public school district in Cleveland. Well, Cleveland has the highest child poverty rate in the country. Our kids typically do not come from means or 100% free lunch school. Most of them do not come with the resources that a kid of the surrounding suburbs may take advantage of. So they also don't come to us really with any knowledge or real experience in these areas. They're not spending summers on their uncle's boat and they're not flying all over the country going on vacations. And they don't have a ton of experience in the airport, most of them, some of them of course do, but we do have kids that think it's cool. They envision themselves being pilots, they think fixing engines would be awesome. They think that boats are cool. They love to design them and build them and drive them and operate them.

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How do you, as the principal, define success for them?

Tim Jones

I define success actually in a number of ways here at Davis and it depends on who I'm talking to and who's trying to be successful. We have what we call a profile of a graduate and the profile of a graduate here, we want our kids to be courageous, critical thinkers, self advocates, clear communicators and positive contributors. And the first one there is courageous and we recognize from the beginning that kids are going to be experiencing things here that they won't experience anywhere else. And we want that to be exciting to them, we want them to I've never done that, but I'm excited to try. Most of our kids come here and they don't know how to swim. And we have a swim program that we incorporate for all of our ninth graders and teach all of our ninth graders how to swim. Obviously, if you want to be on a boat, we need to be water safe.

But if you're a 15 years old freshman in high school and you don't know how to swim, that can be intimidating, but we want kids to be excited to do that.

All of our kids apply to college before they graduate as seniors. So I want my kids to be college ready. So there's success there of course SATs and graduation tests. While it's not always about the tests, if a kid can't pass their graduation test in mathematics, they're not going to be prepared for those jobs. So it's not just about passing the test, it's about teaching them enough math and science and English and all the other subjects, so that they're successful in their careers.

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when you think maybe more generally or more broadly about students and how they progress through the school system, what kinds of needs do you see Davis A&M meeting?

Tim Jones

I also see us as a springboard, if you will, working with local companies and local industry to provide a handoff so that they have employees as the ones that they currently have start to retire. Or as startups come and businesses expand and best case scenario people aren't retiring, but we're still growing companies and growing industry in Cleveland and improving our local economy because of the hard work that my students are doing as young adults.

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Can you elaborate on that? So I think that's a really fascinating part of your model. you have these partnerships with local businesses that seem pretty unique to me. I'd like to hear about how you make that happen and why it seems to me that it's a little bit more than just the businesses writing a check, they seem to be a little bit more invested. I'm wondering if you could tell me about that.

Tim Jones

Yeah. The success of our school and the approach of our school is made possible through a set of partnerships that really far surpasses anything I've seen at any other school. I mentioned earlier that I opened the school alongside a nonprofit PHASTAR and PHASTAR has a number of full-time employees who work at the school to support the school and support the model. And they work with our engineering teachers and our maritime teachers to plan curriculum. And our aviation teachers learning how to fly through our partnership with PHASTAR. They do professional development for the rest of our teachers and they own an expanding fleet of boats.

Having PHASTAR be able to step up and support these families with employment opportunities for their kids to keep them engaged in school was huge. They're our primary partner. But in addition, we partner through PHASTAR with United Airlines. And United Airlines reached out to us a couple years because one of our students, her name was Sid Marie Flowers.

She was our first student to fly an airplane solo and she did it down in Tuskegee, Alabama. And our school is named after Benjamin O. Davis famous Tuskegee Airmen, World War II, general, who was from Cleveland. And so having her do that solo flight down in Tuskegee, it was really meaningful for our community, for the local chapter Tuskegee Airmen here anyway. United Airlines found out about that, they reached out and United Airlines has their own initiative trying to expand their pilots. And they have a new flight school that they're opening in Arizona and they're looking to support schools with aviation programs, and it was a perfect match.

So again, though, when a school and many schools thematic or not are supported by organizations and might get a check for \$5,000 or \$50,000 or more maybe periodically. And my goal when talking to organizations about partnering with our school is not just to get a check. And the reason is because I'm trying to build sustainability. And I also know that what I can do with that money as a principal is much less impactful than what that company could do with that investment of time or their own resources. I'm not United Airlines. My kids could come to me and I could spend \$50,000 on something, but if they went to United Airlines and had an internship with them or interacted with actual company, it's a much more authentic experience. So-

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And opening up access to opportunity in ways that just money can't. It's beyond just money.

Tim Jones

Exactly. And they're putting these experiences on their college applications. I'm a principal, I'm not an aviator. So if I'm trying to make an authentic experience for my kids, I'm not going to take them in planes myself. So I have to be tapped into these organizations and a school also, I can't buy a boat. A school can't own a boat with taxpayer money, it's too big of a liability. I don't have the expertise to maintain it, but PHASTAR does. And they own airplanes and have a flight school embedded in their program and with their expertise and with their relationships with industry, they facilitate all these opportunities for the kids.

So talking with United Airlines, they said how can we support your school? And we proposed in three ways that they support our flight training program, that they support us with internships for kids, and that they support it, well, four ways. That they support us in our engineering program. And then we asked them if they would put one of their executives on the PHASTAR board to help us ensure that the direction of the school and our partnership with PHASTAR was relevant to the industry needs. So now that's what we-

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And I'm just wondering, okay, United Airlines with Davis A&M, it seems like this just hand in glove, but I'm just wondering about other companies and other groups or non-profits that are thinking about trying to support public schools, how should they be thinking about that? How should they be approaching that? Do you have any lessons from your experience?

Tim Jones

So when employees have been working for United Airlines for 30 plus years and are going to retire, they get the plaque thanking them for their service. And what United Airlines used to do is buy that plaque from some plaque vendor and present that at their retirement dinner. But now what they do is they order one of three options from the Davis students. And our kids produce those in a Fab Lab, and we have a 3D printer and a laser cutter and a CNC machine.

By purchasing it from our students, it fulfills a need. It gives our kids something authentic to do, it gives them experience running a business, learning accounting, obviously producing the goods themselves. And so what that does is the support that they give to us and the agreement that money is not just a donation, they're buying something from us. They get something in return. When they support our flight training program, they get something in return, pilots.

When they support our internship program, our seniors go down to the United Airlines hangar at Hopkins Airport each afternoon, and work in their stores department and learn how to manage an inventory and learn how to track spare parts and learn when the landing gear on the 737 is repaired. Our kids are right there, they're not doing critical work because they're 737s but they're right there seeing what it's like. And the best of our kids they have relationships right there and are potential employees right there for United Airlines. So when a company asks us, "Hey, how can we help?" What we try to do is say, well, I'll take a check if you want to write one, don't get me wrong. But what I'd like to do is-

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There's nothing wrong with that.

Tim Jones

Right. But I'd like to take it further and find a way where this relationship can be mutually beneficial. And we want to make sure that our kids are competitive on day one when they get there. And I think having those authentic experiences with those organizations is really the way to help. Don't write the check, invite the kids into your company, provide a mentor, teach them, help the students or help a teacher design a project that's a simplified version of what your company does, something like that.

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it was interesting to me hearing how much of the goals you have for your students that sound like they're really focused on that citizen piece and really the kind of person that you are and how you approach the world. And even the things that you just said about critical thinking and these skills that I think will serve you no matter what kind of labor market is out there. And so I'm curious if you could maybe speak to that almost, I don't know, a little bit of a trade off between trying to think about something that's very practical versus these kind of, I don't know, I don't want to call them more basic skills, but maybe more timeless or that might be more applicable across different types of labor markets.

Tim Jones

Right. So there is often a question when we're talking about what to focus on in school. Do we want to focus on a kid's skills and standards and math facts and ability to write an essay, or do we want to focus on their ability to work in groups and problem solve and treat each other nicely and their social emotional competencies? And what I believe is that those two go hand in hand and that students cannot be their best in an academic environment unless they have their social, emotional needs met. If

they're enthusiastic about working in groups and problem solving conflict with their peers and trying something that's challenging that they've never done before.

If they can't do those things, then they're not going to be able to meet some engineering challenge in their AP physics class as well. They're also not going to be as desirable an employee. And so those two really do go hand in hand. When people are interviewing for a job, many employers look for the person more than the experience. And if I can get the right person on my team, I can mold them and teach them whatever skills they need when they get there. But if they're resistant or hesitant or shy or-

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Not open or curious.

Tim Jones

Yeah. All those things. Whatever that might be, if they don't fit in with the group, it's going to be tough for them to be successful there.

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I'm curious taking a step back from Davis A&M and it seems to me that you are very focused actually on college readiness. And I'm curious what share of your students end up going on to college completing college, but I'm curious how you also think about more generally just the entire education system. And what I really am getting from your comments is that you're trying to think of really smoothing this path from the education system to the workforce. That whether it's thinking about skills, whether it's about networks, all these things, you're trying to make this path much clearer and cleaner for the students and that's very refreshing and very cool. But I'm curious if you think about more broadly thinking about career and technical education, what's the role of the education system? How can we move it more in that direction the same way that you are trying to push things in a broader, more general way?

Tim Jones

So I think there's a lot of talk everywhere these days about is college the right choice for every kid, and should we be pushing everyone to college or should we really be pushing kids the alternative pathways? there are plenty of corners of the economy, if you will, that a college degree is not necessary. The ability to problem solve, it doesn't necessarily mean that the caliber of employee is less, but the experience of going to college is not a prerequisite. So if you want to run a manufacturing operation here that is difficult, there is a ton to keep track of multitasking and modeling various things-

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You have to be sharp. You have to be very sharp.

Tim Jones

You have to be very sharp. And someone who's that sharp is definitely sharp enough to be successful in college. The question is, does the four years of training in college better to get that individual ready than four years of experience in that plant itself being groomed for that specific role. And so I think the fallacy comes when you're saying is college the right choice for everybody is that, or the thing we need to be careful of is that if the answer is, no, it doesn't necessarily mean we're lowering our expectations for that individual or that we're saying that they're less than. The question is really about a match between the college experience and the workforce.

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One of the things that I'm hearing from you is just this importance of giving people real world experience and getting skills that are valued by employers and are transferable. And I'm wondering how much the actual employers themselves can help with that and how much that's about being intentional on the part of the schools and education systems.

Tim Jones

Yeah, it's a good question. So running a school with traditional programs I will say is complicated enough. And so we were lucky here at Davis because the school opened in 2017, 5 years ago leveraging these partnerships was part of the model from the beginning. So it was always, and I put my efforts there, but we don't have a football team. And I put my efforts there, but we don't have an orchestra or band. So that's where my priorities lie. And I think districts and schools have inertia and they have programs and limited resources. And I think sometimes taking on a new initiative or implementing some new program on top of everything else can be daunting. I think for a school who decides that this is a priority though, or for a district that decides this is a priority. One thing that's really working for me is that I have PHASTAR.

And PHASTAR they're a primary partner and provide some resources directly, but they also facilitate a whole slew of other sub partnerships, if you will. So when United reaches out, I have PHASTAR manage that relationship. And when they're deciding what the internship program should be, PHASTAR can facilitate that. And I think I'm lucky I have that relationship with that group, if there were some grants or some structures in place to get other nonprofits built that could help schools in a similar way with a similar mission. I think that would be great. They are an organization fully designed to support a public school by leveraging access to some private resources. It's not a charter school, they don't run the entire school. I run the school. They provide the resources for the experiences that I need, but they don't run the school-

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Are you aware of that kind of arrangement happening anywhere else?

Tim Jones

No. And that's what I'm saying is that this is a unique setup, but it's also not impossible to replicate. There are organizations, charter organizations support schools. It's just they're a charter because of the funding are allocated in a structure that makes it a charter. It's a similar set up in a sense is that it's an outside organization that has funding from somewhere that's supporting a school, but the work itself might not be that different so to speak. Another option could be a department within the district, maybe a district that's large enough has a partnerships department that has a few employees that help... So those resources could be allocated to the district or they could be allocated directly to the organization the way that resources are allocated to PHASTAR through their fundraising and the way that they get their resources to help in a model that's more like mine.

What I think is working at my school is that PHASTAR know and will help me design the school from the ground up. So they know what my priorities are, they're not fitting it into the structure that works for the 10 schools that they support. They're creating the structure that's going to work for the model of my school, which needs support in aviation, maritime and engineering. I would say if there was an art school or a school with a different focus or a magnet school, if you will, that was going to leverage a community partner like that or create a community partnership like that, having that partner fully dedicated to that school, know that school inside and out, that would be the way to go.

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To wrap up then, what should I have asked you that I did not?

Tim Jones

So one thing that's really the reason my school works in the district that it's in is because a huge part of the district priorities. And there was a trend almost two decades ago now in New York City, giving schools more autonomy in exchange for accountability. And so some of the things that were managed or decisions that were made at the district level were given to the principal to make autonomously, but then the results had to follow. And so I'm lucky in Cleveland that I'm given a whole bunch of autonomy really to create my model.

The central office encourages me, "Hey, this might not be happening anywhere, but go for it, try to make it work." I can't change a graduation requirement and I can't change some rule about credit accumulation, but there are flexibilities embedded into some of the state laws there and we have a district that is encouraging me to do that. And I think any structures within a district or strategies within a district that give schools the autonomy to explore some of these alternate approaches, I think is huge. Be that CTE or whatever other innovative approach a school might want to take, because without that some principals' hands are tied.

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