



**JOHN P
McNULTY
PRIZE**

LEADERSHIP CASE **BRAVEN**

We all know the maxim: Put the work in, and you'll reap the rewards: Success. Social mobility. Economic freedom. Narratives like these help us frame and make sense of the world.

Yet, Aimée Eubanks Davis sensed something amiss in the tale spun for college students. The general advice was the same from every counselor, teacher, preacher, and parent: "Keep your head down, do the work, get a college degree, and you'll be successful."

But Aimée repeatedly saw students who had done the work fail to

rise. Something about the popular story, for some students, didn't hold up. There was a gap in the narrative.

Aimée had led groundbreaking work in talent management during her tenure as Executive Vice President at Teach For America, and she received her first warning about this gap from recruitment efforts on college campuses.

"We always had first-generation and low-income students top of mind," Aimée says. "And our recruiters would tell us, 'They are not able to compete as strongly. Beyond academics, there's this other set of skills and mindsets and networks that they may not have been introduced to.'"

Aimée began to understand the nature of the gap better. Some students were systemically primed to succeed; others weren't. There was a broader gap that went beyond education and into the realm of societal structures, including disproportionate access to resources and opportunities for wealthier students, like exposure to parents or others in professional settings who are able to offer advice, or modes of networking. What wasn't clear to Aimée was what she might do about it. As part of her Pahara Fellowship at the Aspen Institute, she was asked to come up with a social impact 'venture'—a way to stretch herself beyond her day-to-day role. She decided to write a white paper on the challenges college graduates face. This is when she realized the problem was not on the order of thousands of students but millions. A research effort didn't feel like enough. She wanted concrete action. She wanted a solution.

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Looking back, she credits her Pahara experience with helping her discover the path toward a solution that might close the gap: "It was that time in the seminar room with my fellowship cohort that gave me the ability to step back and reflect on what 'the good society' might look like," she says.

ABOUT AIMÉE

2011 Camelback Fellow

2013 Founded **Braven**

2023 Winner of the McNulty Prize

Taught 6th grade in New Orleans with Teach For America

2002 Joined the executive team at Teach For America

2012 Fellow of the **Pahara Institute & Aspen Global Leadership Network**

2019 Obama Foundation Fellow

Aimée began speaking about the concept — How do we help young people bridge the gap between education and the workforce? — with her cohort, and someone mentioned a couple who had given heavily to education in the Bay and Newark, who might be interested in working with her to test pilots and develop a fundable concept. They became the first donors to what would become Braven.

Braven's goal of helping young people to shatter economic sound barriers by coaching them to navigate the path between graduation and job placement began to take shape. Recruiters at Teach For America, where she still worked, told Aimée that some candidates faltered in the job market due to gaps in skills, confidence, and networking. Braven participants receive training, coaching, and leadership and career-planning advice to help them develop those missing pieces.

"The need was clear, as was the lack of anyone doing anything about it," Aimée says. "I realized there was no one in this space thinking about this group of students. There were no funders focused on the moment of college to career."

THE URGENCY TO GET GOING

Feeling the urgency to act, Aimée and her team devised a pilot to serve those most affected: first-generation, low-income students and students of color getting ready to enter the job market.

"We had nothing," Aimée says of their first pilot plan, "not even a valid website, but we brought in a few cohorts of college students. We gave them each a coach from the professional workforce to help them. And we got all these students to just sign up for something that really didn't exist yet."

The demand and eagerness of the response to that first pilot told Aimée she was on to something.

ABOUT BRAVEN

- Founded in 2013, Braven works in deep partnership with institutions of higher education to empower first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color with the skills, networks, confidence, and experience needed to land a strong first job.
- Braven has coached 10,000 students across eight colleges and universities with 100 employer partners.
- In 2023, Braven's graduates outpaced their peers of color nationally in strong job attainment within six months of graduation by 17 percentage points.
- 76% of Braven graduates are already out-earning their parents at the same age in their first job out of college.
- For every 1,000 students in the Braven program, professionals contribute 17,000 volunteer hours toward their experience.

At the time, Braven had three other pilots running, focused on different age groups of students from middle school to college, to test the hypothesis.

But now Aimée faced a choice: Continue pursuing all four pilots, or focus their efforts on just one? While she had previously believed middle school would be the most important moment of intervention, the data was telling a different story. And she listened. It is a mark of her strength as a leader that she was willing to abandon the initial plan when the data proved her first hypothesis wrong.

The team made the crucial decision to focus their energy on college-aged students, where they saw the most gains could be made. It was a portion of the population no one was focused on. Everyone had made the assumption that if you had a college degree, you'd be set.

Aimée and team also believed large, public state schools and colleges offered the most potential for a change in economic mobility for Americans. Hoping to help more students achieve their personal version of the American Dream, Braven offered classes to students in an unofficial capacity, not via the university's curriculum. Because they were working with adults, Braven didn't need to secure buy-in from universities at first; they simply marketed to their target students to attend weekend classes.

The students were eager, but some dropped out of the training.

"We would interview all of the students and say, 'Why are you dropping out?'" Aimée says. "And students would say, 'I don't want to, I love this. I feel like this is one of the biggest things that I need. But I can't fit it in. I work, I go to school, I can't fit it into my life yet.'"

At San José State University in California, students told professors about the Braven experience, and soon Aimée received a call from an associate dean who wanted to learn more. A group of deans, who



were all women, mentioned they had an underperforming course geared toward success for transfer students.

Dr. Elaine Collins, Associate Dean of the College of Science, invited the Braven team to partner with her in designing and delivering a new version of the course.

"We were under her supervision, and we partnered with her," Aimée says, "and that's where the co-collaboration with faculty really started. We knew students needed these coaches in a different way than they needed professors. Professors are critically important. But students need outside people to help build their social capital."

CREATING A WIN-WIN-WIN VALUE PROPOSITION

Braven's model created value for three distinct groups of stakeholders. The first were the students receiving training with an aim to help them navigate the post-college journey and realize the American Dream.

The second were university administrators and faculty, whom Braven worked with closely to complement their offerings to students, and over time, secure stronger post-university career and graduate school placement metrics.

A third stakeholder group emerged: employers and their employees—volunteers from diverse corporate and professional settings providing the coaching. At first, these folks weren't expected to receive value from Braven. They were providing value in the form of generously sharing their time and expertise. However, it became clear volunteers also received something tangible: introductions to diverse, eager job-seekers who might join their firms and invaluable learning on how to become stronger, more inclusive leaders. They spent a lot of time together since each student received 15 weeks of dedicated volunteer support. Now, not only did college students have better job prospects, but employers began to fill talent gaps with diverse, driven, high-potential talent.

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The university partnership tapped into a system that enabled Braven to reach more students at under-resourced institutions. The volunteer relationships helped serve them with knowledge and expertise. And the employer partners worked with Braven to solve long-term talent development and recruitment gaps. The model — a networked but localized model of scale — is sustainable because it adds value to all. Aimée had once again chosen the right leverage point.

"One of the core tenets of Braven has been, 'Go slow to go fast,'" Aimée says. "Relationships take time. If you build deep and meaningful relationships, and you do work together that proves what's possible and produces results, then people trust you. The Deans said to us, 'Braven is the real deal. You all are here as partners with us and our students.'"

PROXIMATE EXPERIENCE HELPS GROUND THE WORK

Braven is rooted in the ideal of the American Dream — that anyone, from any background, deserves equal opportunity to succeed. As a young Black girl, Aimée saw her mother struggle and succeed in achieving economic mobility for her family after being on the brink of financial ruin. But she also saw little representation in the workforce from people who looked like her. The experience of this reality helps Aimée anticipate the needs and experiences of the students they serve.

That lived experience is reflected across the Braven team, too.

"Our team is made up of a lot of people who share the backgrounds of our students in those ways," Aimée says. "And one reason Braven has succeeded is that it's an all-American team, in the sense that we also have a number of people who come from high-income backgrounds who believe that, in this country, we have a founding ideal around equality of opportunity."

The opportunity is quantifiable. Braven helps students shatter the economic barriers within five semesters of taking their Accelerator course. Recent Braven graduates are outpacing their peers nationally in quality opportunity attainment by 17 percentage points (60% vs 43%) within six months of graduation.

But Braven's work extends beyond guaranteeing individual college graduates a more successful future. It helps rewrite a larger socio-economic story, too.

"There's a narrative that there is a school-to-prison pipeline," Aimée says. "If you are not reading by third grade or fourth grade, and you are poor and Black or Brown, there are equations for how many prison cells get built on your inability to read. And I felt like that narrative, which is factual and very important, didn't have a counter-narrative that was as strong. There should also be a pipeline of promise, and we just needed to put a touchstone on what the promise could be and what the promise of the American Dream could be."

With higher education and employer partners, Braven students have become that countervailing narrative, showing that students who come from modest beginnings can without a doubt forge paths to success.

As Braven's impact has grown, Aimée has strategically focused on building this more optimistic pipeline. Experts speculate there are 90,000 people in the so-called school-to-prison pipeline. Aimée, wanting to eclipse that number, envisions filling a sports arena with Braven grads. With the largest American stadiums holding over 100,000 people, the goal felt far off during their pilots of just a handful of students. But that number is now in sight. As of 2024, nearly 10,000 students have become Braven Fellows.

GOING SLOW TO GO FAST

A founding precept of Braven has been taking careful strategic steps that they can back up with data. Data-driven decisions helped them navigate at many inflection points of the journey and Aimée is a vocal proponent of this approach, even when stakeholders encourage her to move quickly.

This hasn't always been easy, since saying a strong yes means saying no to other attractive opportunities. But narrowing the focus, like cutting from four pilots to one, allows them to amplify their efforts. By being slow and methodical about decisions — going slow to go fast — they are able to create a story aligned with their mission.

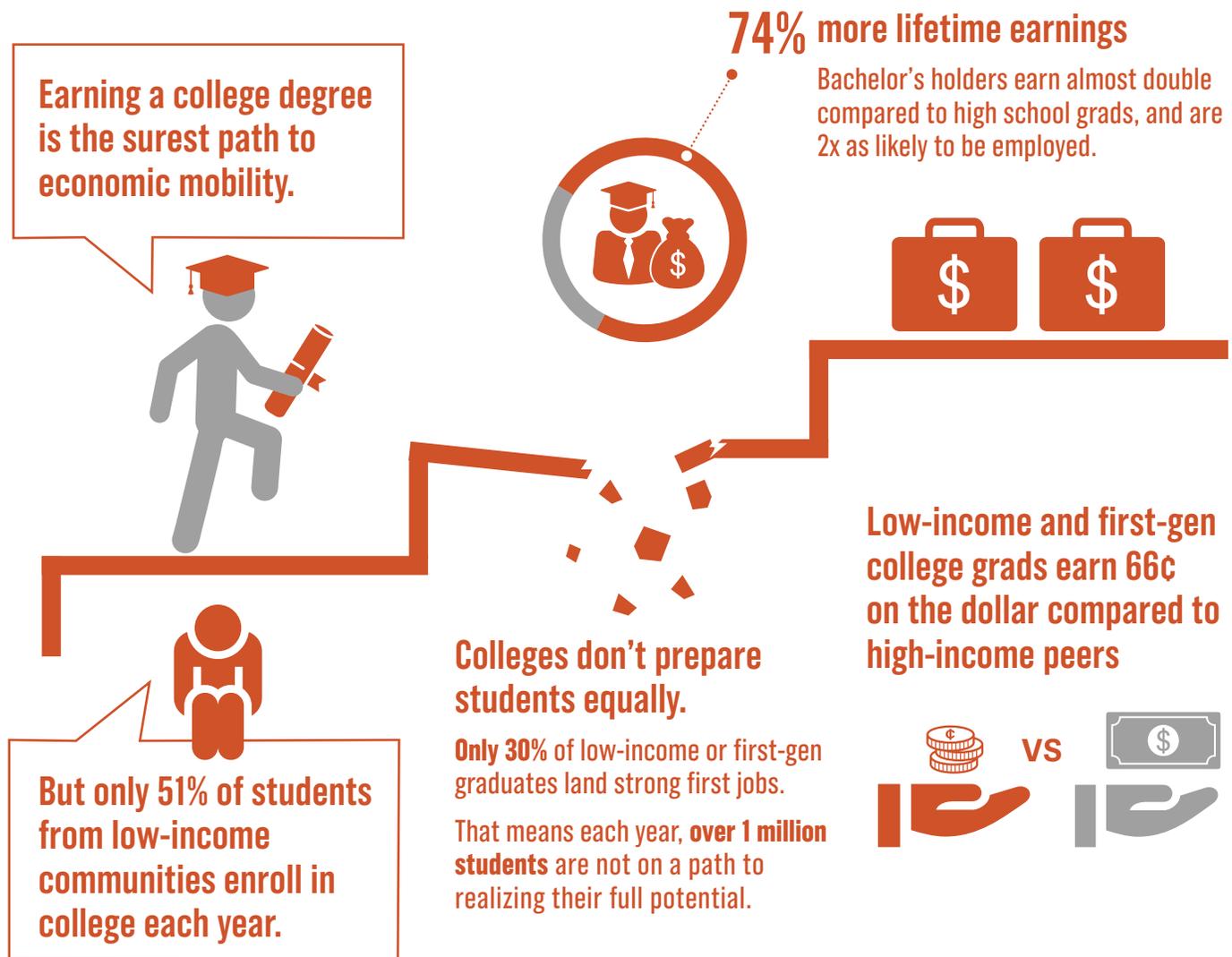
Staying true to their mission has other positive effects. Braven's

steadfastness inspires students to mirror that behavior, and even though college success is not Braven's primary focus, 91% of Braven Fellows graduate on time, compared with 70% for their peers. The students Aimée set out to help — those from low-income families and first-generation college-goers — have begun to reap their promised rewards. By focusing on the new narrative of hope, they also seem to drive their own forward momentum.

"A lot of people believe that you cannot create social capital, and you actually can," Aimée says. "And what we've seen is that the coach-and-cohort model creates a fly-wheel effect. We can see it on LinkedIn because their networks literally grow and flourish and thrive.

"Who you know matters," says Aimée, "but who knows you matters more."

HIGHER EDUCATION & ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN THE US



Sources: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce: "What Works: Ten Education, Training, and Work-Based Pathway Changes That Lead to Good Jobs" (2023) Brookings Institution: "College enrollment gaps: How academic preparation influences opportunity" (2023) Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce: "The College Payoff" (2011) National Center for Education Statistics (2021, 2019)