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From the Philadelphia Business Journal:

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Change Agents in Education: How they're teaching us to thrive

These educators set high standards and are not afraid to take bold action to achieve their goals

Aug 30, 2018, 10:58am EDT **Updated: Aug 30, 2018, 11:07am EDT**

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Higher education is the backbone of Greater Philadelphia's economy.

That claim may sound like a bold statement in a region known for its robust contingent of life science companies and a revitalized Center City, but nearly every person who has had a hand in driving its success have one thing in common — a strong education that set them up to thrive.



ARRAY

Scores of academic institutions in the region know that their individual goals are also tied tightly to the part they, as a collective force, play in the region's economic engine.

The leaders featured in this issue of the Philadelphia Business Journal stand out because they don't just do what it takes to keep that machine running, they set lofty goals, take big risks and put their budgets where their mouths are to elevate their impact on both their students and Greater Philadelphia as a whole.

L. Joy Gates Black

President, Delaware County Community College

Take L. Joy Gates Black, for example. When she was named to lead Delaware County Community College in January 2017 — the previous president's tenure lasted 40 years — she took over in a time when a booming economy means fewer students are enrolling in community colleges and community colleges' role in the higher education landscape has become increasingly blurred, bleeding into the boundaries that previously separated secondary schools, four-year institutions and career paths.

Her arrival marked two symbolic firsts at the institution, as she simultaneously became the first African-American and the first woman to lead the school, but her drive to create change in the college and its community goes beyond symbolism and into real action.

After having dozens of conversations with college stakeholders, she created a new committee on institutional effectiveness that she tasked with improving everything that affects students outside of the actual curriculum itself.

As a result of its findings, DCCC has implemented academic planning maps to keep students on track and is pushing a "Think 30" campaign to encourage students to take at least 30 semester hours a year so there's a higher chance they complete their degrees and don't fall off course if they take a break to work or raise a family. On top of those broad changes, she's also implemented small, simple ones that can have a major impact on a student's ability to get an education, build a career and help grow Greater Philadelphia's economy, like office hours for nights and weekends to make it easier for working students to enroll and modification of the college's phone menu when you call it to make navigating its services easier.

Her efforts have had a ripple effect throughout the campus — enrollment is up about 7 percent since last year, which will likely grow since she's added late-starting courses for part-time students — but it's also gone beyond Delaware County.

Black has increased its dual enrollment programs so more students can complete their first year of college while they're still in high school, bringing a significant

cost savings. At the same time, she's increased partnerships with colleges and universities in the region to make the path toward a four-year degree easier. West Chester University now has a dedicated, physical presence on campus thanks in part to Black's persistence. During her first meeting with West Chester's President Christopher Fiorentino she brought up previously stalled attempts to bring the university to DCCC. When he described the challenges that held them back in the past, she responded, "We're going to work through those," Fiorentino told the Business Journal in March. The first group of 50-60 students in the initial West Chester at DCCC cohort will begin in January.

For career-focused students, she's made cooperating with industry partners a priority to match curriculum to employers' needs, and recently testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Policy Committee on Workforce Development.

Being a force for change in a brand new environment isn't out of the ordinary for Black. She was one of few African-American women in the Air Force when she enlisted right out of high school, but took on leadership and training responsibilities easily, for example, but the root of her tenacity dates back to when she was a young girl growing up in Dayton, Texas.

After attending a segregated elementary school until fourth grade, she spent her fifth grade year as part of the first small wave of African-American students who integrated an all-white school. It was difficult, she said, but she was supported by strong, ambitious parents. It wound up building the foundation of her approach to learning and forming relationships.

"It was not [an experience] that anyone would have wanted to be in, but it helped me grow, it helped me to focus," she said. "I knew 'I'm here, and I'm going to get this education,' I was going to study hard and take advantage of all the opportunities that were there for me because not everybody had those opportunities. I was going to make the most of it, and I did."

Now, at the helm of DCCC, she's working to make sure every student does have those opportunities, and is able to make the most of them.

Jamie Bracey

Director, Center for Inclusive Competitiveness and Director of STEM Education, Outreach & Research, Temple College of Engineering

The pursuit of science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers is a crucial part of building Philadelphia into the top-tier city it's capable of becoming, but not if the field of the next scientists and technologists don't reflect the city itself.

At Temple, Bracey leads efforts to not just ensure populations that are underrepresented in STEM fields are included but also thrive in their careers, specifically in urban sustainability industries. Her work building pre-college programs to prepare African-American, Hispanic and Latinx students to study computer science and engineering has drawn international recognition and extends beyond Temple's borders.

She's also a force in organizations focused on similar goals, sitting on the board for the City of Philadelphia Digital Literacy Alliance, the Pennsylvania Department of Education's STEM Advisory Board, the Pennsylvania Computer Science for All initiative, the state Black Women Leadership Council's Equity Investment Fund and the Governor's Advisory Council on Diversity, Inclusion and Small Business Opportunities. Even outside the country, Bracey advises the Ghana-based NGO STEMBees Girls in STEM and Nigeria-based KAD ICT Advisory Board.

Deborah Diamond

President, Campus Philly

Greater Philadelphia's scores of colleges and universities draw hundreds of thousands of students to the area every fall, but the impact on its economy doesn't mean as much if they don't stick around come graduation.

That's where organizations like Campus Philly and President Deborah Diamond come in — to push back against the "brain drain" narrative that's often pointed to as one of the reasons the region struggles to match up to similar cities. A convergence of factors has helped change that narrative in the city, especially, where affordable living and an increasing quality of life are often cited as its perks. It's Campus Philly's job, however, to make sure students from all over the region

see that side of the city and tap into all it has to offer. Not an easy job, given the number of institutions to keep an eye on, but it's one they're accomplishing.

Recent surveys have seen the percentage of students who stay in the area is going up, nearing 70 percent. We'll know more next spring when Campus Philly rolls out a new report on how growing talent in the city affects the economy, including what Diamond described as "a first-ever analysis of how Philadelphia compares to Boston in retaining talent and talent we keep versus talent we lose by industry and major." In the meantime, Diamond's thoughts on the importance of building a city infrastructure are laid out in her recent book, "For Cities to Thrive."

Dr. Benoit Dubé

Chief wellness officer, University of Pennsylvania

In an Ivy League institution, big moves and changes are commonplace. Penn President Amy Gutmann has led numerous efforts to transform the university and its place in the world, but other, smaller changes can represent a larger wave of change in higher education. The appointment of Dr. Benoit Dubé, an associate professor of clinical psychiatry, who has been at Penn for two decades, as the university's first chief wellness officer, is one of the latter.

The hiring marks the first time any Ivy League school has appointed an administrator for the sole purpose of overseeing wellness initiatives on campus. That means he'll be responsible for student wellness services that address psychological needs whether it's related to addiction, stress, mental illness, abuse, and health as a whole. It's a significant dedication of resources in a time where suicide rates among young adults is on the rise, and pressure is being put on institutions to address students' health needs proactively instead of reactively. If all goes well, Dubé's appointment will be replicated throughout the Ivy League, and beyond.

John Fry

President, Drexel University

It's impossible to ignore the changes John Fry has set into motion in University City. From inside the university to the neighborhood around it, Fry's separate but

intertwining initiatives all drive toward a wildly ambitious goal: to make Drexel the most civically engaged university in the United States. Since being named president in 2010, Fry has made bold moves. He led the university's purchase of the Academy of Natural Sciences in 2011, launched a school that solely focuses on entrepreneurship in 2013 and, the same year, oversaw a revamp of its admissions strategy that resulted in the school increasing its enrollment to a five-year high. Externally, Fry's focus on working with Drexel's neighbors has resulted in an expansion strategy that aims to improve communities from within, not erase them. The Dornsife Center for Community Partnerships, for example, has linked residents with university resources for the past four years, and the university's public-private relationships enabled the construction of \$300 million in residential and retail projects to mitigate the damage an influx of student renters can have on a neighborhood. Fry also has the city as a whole in mind as he, along with the Brandywine Realty Trust, continue development of the Schuylkill Yard project that aims to transform the area surrounding campus and 30th Street Station into a bustling commercial district, starting with the Drexel Square public park opening next quarter.

Recently, Fry also announced the launch of the Nowak Metro Finance Lab, in honor of the late investor and civic advocate Jeremy Nowak who was working on launching it before his death last month. The lab will study how to use private and civic dollars to finance the formation of an "inclusive city," a metro area that works for all of its residents.

Daniel Greenstein

Incoming chancellor, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

If being tasked with taking over an embattled state system of 14 universities that faces a nearly \$50 million deficit and tough choices on the horizon isn't a role for a change agent, it's hard to say what would be. That's the situation Daniel Greenstein is walking into as the newest chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System for Higher Education (PASSHE) starting Sept. 4.

He brings with him a prestigious résumé, having most recently led the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Postsecondary Success strategy for six years during which time he focused on economic mobility and closing the degree attainment

gap between majority and minority students in higher education. Prior to the foundation, Greenstein was a top administrator in the University of California system, including as vice provost of strategic planning, programs and accountability, and overseeing the introduction of online learning and revising its enrollment plan for the long term.

In Harrisburg, he'll oversee a redesign of PASSHE as a whole in the wake of a 2017 review that stopped short of suggesting closure of a school but did recommend significant structural overhauls. Board members praised his appointment, saying they felt his deep experience and track record of consensus building was exactly what PASSHE needed. In her remarks, Board of Governors Chairwoman Cynthia D. Shapira went so far to say Greenstein would be a "game changer" for the system.

Helen Gym

Councilmember-at-large, City of Philadelphia

Higher education doesn't exist in a vacuum. Academic institutions and their impact on the region's economy are both inextricably linked to its K-12 schools, especially in Philadelphia, where the school district's struggles are well-known and seemingly unending. Gym doesn't take that approach, having come to City Council in 2016 as a public education advocate and fan of the idea of being as noisy as possible when it comes to education. It's hard to say the collective noise hasn't had an impact. Gym, who previously co-founded Parents United for Public Education and the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, was part of City Council's move to bring the school district back under city control. This school year is now starting on a far different foot than five years ago, when class sizes reached 70, faculty and staff numbers were decimated and schools were left without nurses and counselors. Now, all schools have both, as well as instrumental programs in every elementary school, after a report found racial inequities in music education in the district. More work needs to be done on its crumbling facilities, but Gym continues to push stakeholders to realize their role in building a great city with a vibrant economy, which requires a financially well-supported school district.

The former teacher and journalist is also a politician to watch, having been awarded the Rising Star Award from EMILY's List, a national organization

supporting women in elected office, and breaking barriers as the first Asian-American woman on City Council.

Phoebe Haddon

Chancellor, Rutgers University-Camden

In 2015, Rutgers University-Camden made a bold promise. If your family made less than \$60,000 a year, your entire tuition at the school would be covered. The announcement came just a year after Chancellor Phoebe Haddon stepped into the role at the university, which was growing and changing amid its hometown's own attempts at revitalization. Three years later, both are thriving, as Camden's seen its crime rates drop and new major corporate headquarters move in. Rutgers-Camden is set to welcome its biggest freshman class ever this fall, with 7,500 incoming students. More than 200 of them have increased access to education as a result of the Bridging the Gap program, which pays the balance of a student's tuition after grants, need-based aid and scholarships.

In addition to boosting access, crucial in the still-impooverished city, Rutgers-Camden is also doubling down on the STEM field, having opened its \$62.5 million Nursing and Science Building last fall, further developing Camden's growing eds and meds corridor. All of this work comes after Haddon's prestigious legal career, having taught at Temple University's Beasley School of law for more than 25 years and serving public bodies including on Philadelphia's Board of Ethics. She's deeply involved in the region as a whole, as she serves as deputy chair of the Federal Reserve of Philadelphia, and on the board for Cooper University Health System and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others.

Ali Houshmand

President, Rowan University

What hasn't Ali Houshmand changed at Rowan University? The South Jersey university and its hometown of Glassboro is almost unrecognizable today compared to its humble origins as a sleepy school churning out teachers — and following the late Henry Rowan's famous \$100 million donation in 1992 — engineers. The school still turns out plenty of both, as Houshmand's overseen a 56 percent increase in the student body since he took on the role in 2011, its

transformation into a research university with a medical school and a rapid expansion of programs campuswide, all the while getting along with New Jersey politicians to get the jobs done.

There's no denying Housmand's predecessor laid a solid foundation for the school's rapid trajectory, but it was Housmand coming to Rowan from Drexel University that poured lighter fluid on its growing flames. Understanding his background helps explain his fiery passion for education, as well. Housmand grew up in extreme poverty in Iran before the country's free education and his family helped him attend school in London. From there, he earned degrees in mathematics and industrial engineering, and entered a career in academia. His vibrant personality is another story entirely — he recently started whipping up batches of his homemade hot sauce, in three heat levels starting with Ali's Nastylicious, to raise money for student scholarships.

Naomi Housman

Executive director, Philadelphia STEM Lab, #CS4Philly

Last December, influential leaders from across Greater Philadelphia gathered in the Mayor's Reception Room in City Hall to lay out a collective goal: making computer science education a core part of the curriculum for every student in Philadelphia. Housman, whose organization is overseeing the campaign dubbed CS4Philly, is shepherding the broad initiative through the many hoops it has to go through to result in tangible change on the other side. For the past year, that's meant its computer science working group has met monthly to figure out what the foundation of its effort should look like, and how it can work with existing computer science education initiatives in and around the school district. Much of the work now is raising awareness of and improving access to existing resources, all leading up to the second CS4Philly summit during the first week of December. Then, the big task will be getting the significant public and private investments necessary to make the CS4Philly dream a reality.

Dr. Stephen Klasko

President, Jefferson University

There's no question Dr. Stephen Klasko has shaken up health care, having tied for No. 2 with tech giants like Jeff Bezos and Tim Cook on Modern Healthcare's recent ranking of the most influential people in the field. Klasko was chosen because of his vision of transforming health care through empathy and out-of-the-box thinking. A big part of that has also meant he's transformed higher education in the region, specifically with Jefferson's merger with design-focused Philadelphia University. The idea behind combining a university focused on health care and life sciences with one with a deep history of textiles and creative design is to tap into the alchemy that can happen when two very different disciplines converge and use their similarities and differences to amplify the strengths of both.

Klasko's approached his transformation of health care and education with the goal of transforming the city as a whole given the crucial role health care plays in setting up a city's population for success. One major goal he's laid out ahead: reduce the vast disparities in life expectancy between ZIP codes in the city.

Valerie Smith

President, Swarthmore College

When Valerie Smith was named president of the elite, bucolic liberal arts college of Swarthmore in 2015, she brought with her an extensive curriculum vitae packed with equally elite honors from her previous faculty and administrative roles at Princeton University, where her academic career began as an associate professor of English and Afro-American studies and later returned to after rising through the ranks at UCLA for 12 years. She served as founding director of Princeton's Center for African American Studies prior to joining Swarthmore, where she also brought with her a goal of shaking up the status quo on campus.

Her focus has been on drawing low-income and first-generation students to Swarthmore, as well as sustainability initiatives as she regularly fields calls from the often progressive, vocal student body. Smith — who has written more than 40 articles and three books on African-American literature, culture and art — has also led efforts to expand STEM on campus with the new Biology, Engineering and Psychology building and strengthen the college's connection with Greater Philadelphia as a whole. A \$450 million capital campaign, set to end in 2020, aims to put \$150 million toward re-imagining the suburban college's campus; \$100

million toward connecting various disciplines; \$130 million towards building of an inclusive community with the bulk going to financial aid and \$70 million towards enhancing the school's social impact.

Michelle Caffrey

Reporter

Philadelphia Business Journal

