

# UNLIKELY



**IN PURSUIT OF A BETTER U**  
DISCUSSION GUIDE

≡ **THREE FRAME MEDIA** [UNLIKELYFILM.COM](http://UNLIKELYFILM.COM)

# FILM SYNOPSIS

In the US, less than 50% of students who start college ever finish, making America's college completion rates among the worst in the world. Now there are more than 35 million Americans who started college but never finished, leaving them saddled with debt, and behind their peers in earning power.

**35  
MILLION**  
AMERICANS  
STARTED COLLEGE &  
NEVER FINISHED

Featuring interviews with LeBron James, Howard Schultz, and our nation's leading voices in education, this penetrating and personal new film investigates America's college completion crisis through the lives of five diverse students as they fight for a second chance at opportunity and highlights the innovators reimagining higher education for the 21st century.



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Although I'd always dreamed of becoming a filmmaker, my first job out of college was an admissions officer at my alma mater, Columbia University. It was in this position that my eyes were opened to the enormous inequality and segregation that exists within higher education, and I realized just how lucky I was to have ended up at Columbia despite my family's poverty and educational background.

After moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career in film and television, I met my husband Adam, and together we decided to make **FIRST GENERATION** - a feature documentary about students who were trying to be first in their families to go to college.



We were so grateful for the enthusiastic response and praise **FIRST GENERATION** received, but as we traveled across the country speaking to students, educators, parents and policy makers we realized that getting into college was only half the battle; their next challenge would be completing a degree. And for the students who don't cross that finish line, they often find themselves worse off than if they had never gone to college in the first place.

So we realized there was another story to tell.

A narrative of students who struggle to navigate a system that was never designed to serve them. The seemingly insurmountable obstacles they face in their fight for a second chance at opportunity. And the unsung heroes in higher education working to ensure that zip code doesn't determine destiny.

Our hope is that **UNLIKELY** inspires you to advocate for higher education reform, take action in your community or share your own unlikely story.

Jaye and Adam Fenderson



# FILM SUBJECTS

## CLARISSA AKRON, OH

Clarissa, a struggling mother of three returns to college at the University of Akron but is disappointed to learn upon enrollment that her previous credits earned at a for-profit institution do not transfer. While a college degree promises better opportunities, the road is long and paved with obstacles. Will she make it through her first year or will she quit school and return to working a minimum-wage job?



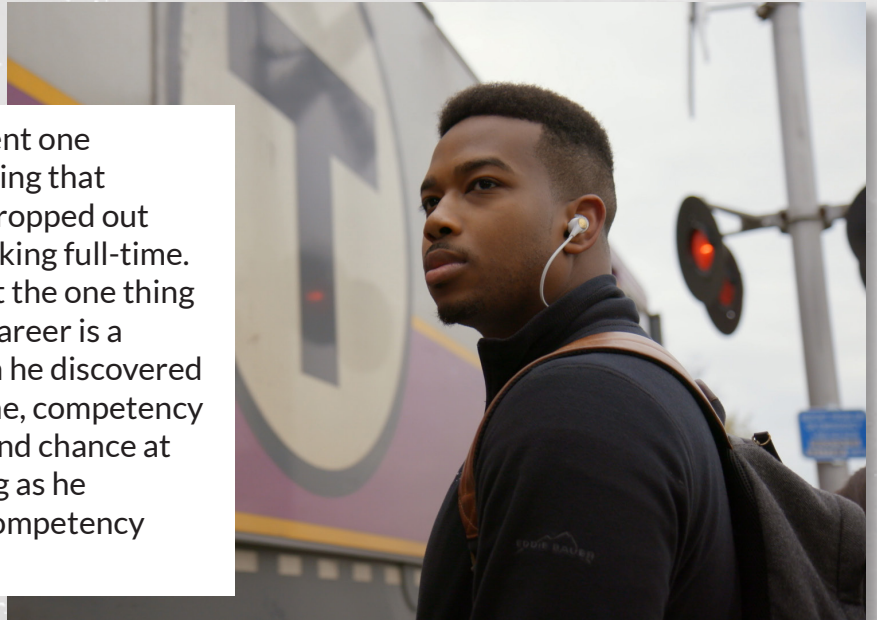
## TANIA LOS ANGELES, CA

Tania, a refugee from the Iranian Revolution, would be the first in her family to graduate from college, but in her freshman year she quit school to help her family run their small business and take care of her ailing father. Now, a mother of two and working full-time at Starbucks, Tania has decided to take advantage of the company's tuition reimbursement plan and fulfill her once abandoned dream of graduating from college.



## JALEN BOSTON, MA

A native of Boston's southside, Jalen spent one semester at UMass Boston before realizing that traditional college was not for him. He dropped out with nearly \$20K in debt and began working full-time. However, it soon becomes apparent that the one thing standing in the way of moving up in his career is a post-secondary degree. And that's when he discovered College for America, an affordable, online, competency based degree program. Now with a second chance at furthering his education, Jalen is thriving as he navigates the flexible, at-his-ownpace competency program with real-world applications.



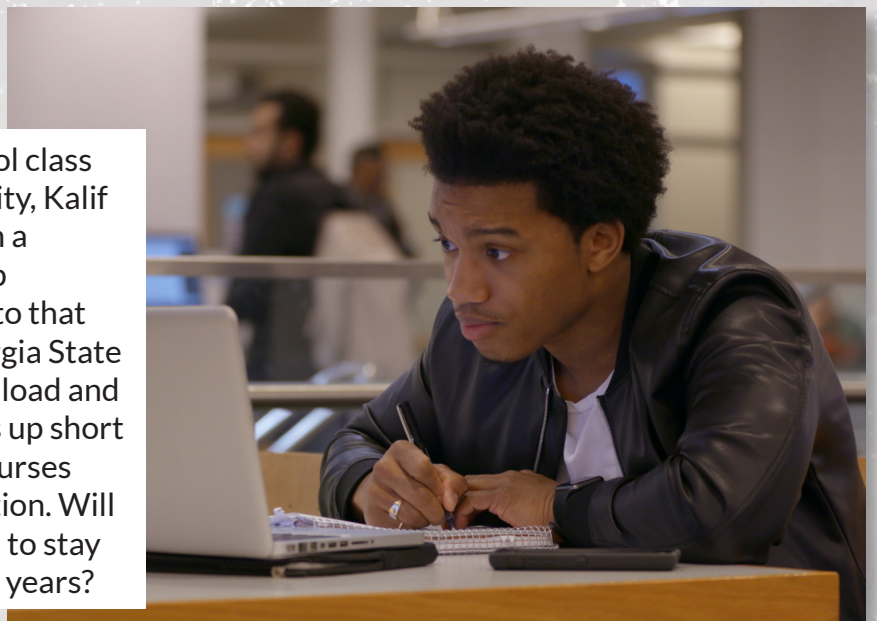
## JUAN LOS ANGELES, CA

In Los Angeles, Juan grew up in a gang-plagued neighborhood and during his second year of community college, his cousin was shot and killed by a local gang. This weighed heavily on Juan, and he ended up dropping out of college and working the nightshift at the local Walmart. Then in the summer of 2016, Year Up, a program designed to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment, launches at West LA Community College and Juan decides to take a second chance on higher education.



## KALIF ATLANTA, GA

Graduating from the top of his high school class and with his sights set on Emory University, Kalif aspires to be the first in his family to earn a college degree. But the Hope Scholarship recipient is ultimately denied admission to that elite school and decides to enroll at Georgia State University where he juggles a full course load and part-time job. In his senior year, he winds up short of the money he needs to enroll in the courses that would keep him on track for graduation. Will he find the funding and support he needs to stay enrolled in college and graduate within 4 years?



# EXPERTS FEATURED IN THE FILM



**FREEMAN HRABOWSKI**  
PRESIDENT,  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND  
BALTIMORE COUNTY



**ELOY ORTIZ OAKLEY**  
CHANCELLOR,  
CALIFORNIA  
COMMUNITY COLLEGES



**HOWARD SCHULTZ**  
FORMER CEO AND  
EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN,  
STARBUCKS



**MICHAEL CROW**  
PRESIDENT,  
ARIZONA STATE  
UNIVERSITY



**BRIDGET BURNS**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
UNIVERSITY INNOVATION  
ALLIANCE



**SARA GOLDRICK-RAB**  
PROFESSOR,  
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY



**GERALD CHERTAVIAN**  
FOUNDER AND CEO,  
YEAR UP



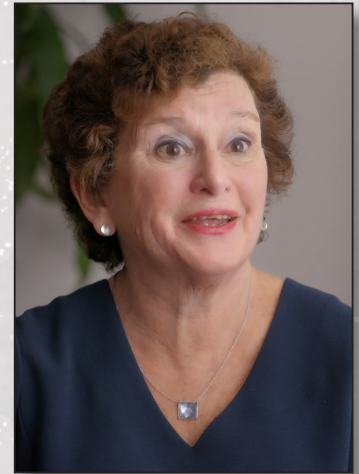
**RAS BARAKA**  
MAYOR OF NEWARK,  
NEW JERSEY



**PAUL LEBLANC**  
PRESIDENT,  
SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE  
UNIVERSITY



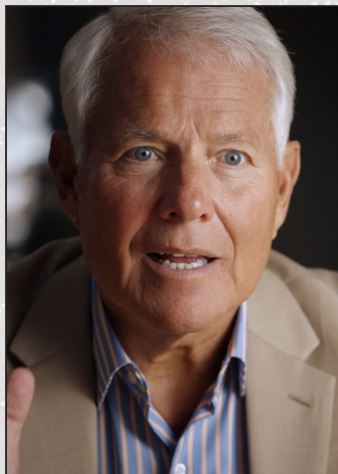
**TIMOTHY RENICK**  
VICE PRESIDENT FOR  
ENROLLMENT SERVICES  
AND STUDENTSUCCESS /  
VICE PROVOST, GEORGIA  
STATE UNIVERSITY



**NANCY CANTOR**  
CHANCELLOR,  
RUTGERS  
UNIVERSITY-NEWARK



**MICHELE CAMPBELL**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
LEBRON JAMES FAMILY  
FOUNDATION



**DON PLUSQUELLIC**  
FORMER MAYOR OF  
AKRON, OHIO



**LEBRON JAMES**  
FOUNDER,  
LEBRON JAMES FAMILY  
FOUNDATION

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Clarissa states early on in the film that she feels “like you can’t get a good job without school. You almost have to go to college to work at a fast food place these days.” How do you feel about Clarissa’s thoughts? Do you agree or disagree with her statement based on your personal experience with school and the job market?
2. When you were in middle school or high school, did you picture yourself going to college? What was your vision like - did you see yourself going to college right after graduating from high school? What kind of college? How does your current experience correspond to your initial thoughts about going to college?
3. If you went to college or are currently enrolled, when you arrived on your college campus as a first year student, did your school provide an orientation program and an introduction to your academic advisor? If you did have an orientation, what was it like? What did you talk about, and what did you learn? Did you feel prepared to begin your college career after your orientation?
4. How do you feel when you hear that only 46% of individuals who begin college in the United States graduate? Based on your own experience with school, do you have any suggestions for how to bring that number up so more people graduate from college in this country?
5. Jalen uses the phrase “stereotypical college mold” to describe how he didn’t feel like he fit in with his classmates. What do you think of when you hear this phrase? What kind of person do you picture, and how does that picture compare to the various subjects you spend time with during the film?
6. As shown in the film, companies like Starbucks are encouraging their employees to continue and complete their education through college achievement programs. If you are currently employed, does your employer provide any resources or incentives to help you with schooling? If not, what can they do?  
  
If you are an employer, what are viable ways in which you can encourage your employees to continue and complete college? How can you help them balance both their job and school?
7. Akron, Ohio, is a prime example of a town coming together to develop and foster college-going environment. How did the community create this culture? Can you think of ways your own local community, businesses, schools, foundations - can work together to promote education?  
  
If you work in local government, how do you or can you take steps to foster an environment like this and increase graduation rates?
8. If you are an educator: programs like College for America flip the traditional model of education by stressing a constant of learning and a variable of time. What are other ways we can re-think any preconceived notions of higher education?
9. Can you think of any programs or organizations not featured in the film that work to provide equal opportunity, support students, and encourage college completion? How did you find out about them? Do you participate in or work for them, or how can you continue to support them?
10. There is a section in the film where we see Clarissa, Tania, Juan, and Jalen all balancing different aspects of their lives while also going to school. If you are a student or thinking about enrolling in a program, what responsibilities or commitments have made school more challenging. How can institutions provide better support to address those challenges?