

Show, Not Tell: Inside Pursuit's Bet on Apprenticeships

A Queens, N.Y.-based nonprofit trains adults from low-income and nontraditional backgrounds to build working AI tools for employers. The result is a hiring model where demonstrated work counts for more than a diploma.

By Ronald Barba

CHRONICLE STUDIO | Ascendium Elevating opportunity

In northern New Jersey, Natalia Sardo, chief of staff at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson, and Union Counties, was facing an operational bottleneck that no conventional nonprofit management textbook could solve. The organization delivers one-to-one mentoring to nearly a thousand children annually across three counties, but its community impact was severely constrained by a persistent demographic reality: a waitlist of over 400 young boys who urgently needed male mentors.

To find those mentors, Sardo's lone community recruiter was spending up to 48 hours every month manually hunting through local web directories, municipal calendars, neighborhood bulletin boards, and social-media pages. It was tedious, trial-and-error work – searching for local festivals, church gatherings, or civic-club meetings where male volunteers might be recruited.

A few miles north, in Queens, N.Y., Ray Thompson took on the nonprofit's challenge. Thompson is a "Builder" at Pursuit, a New York work-force organization that trains adults from low-income and nontraditional backgrounds for careers in artificial intelligence. His placement with Big Brothers Big Sisters grew out of a pilot Pursuit ran with Goldman Sachs, sponsored through the bank's Community Development Champions program: after training staff at eighteen New York-area nonprofits in basic AI literacy, Pursuit embedded trained Builders directly inside a smaller group of those organizations – Big Brothers Big Sisters among them – for six-week engagements focused on solving one specific operational problem.

The result of Thompson's collaboration with the nonprofit was "MO," the Mentor Opportunity Engine. Thompson engineered an automated AI tool that regularly scrapes local event listings across Essex, Hudson, and Union counties, evaluates those venues against the demographic needs of waitlisted youth, and ranks the top recruitment locations in under ten minutes. Operating the application costs Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson, and Union Counties less than a dollar a day.

"What used to take our recruiter 48 hours a month now takes less than ten minutes."



“What used to take our recruiter 48 hours a month now takes less than ten minutes,” Sardo said. “Ray didn’t come in with a static textbook formula. He listened to our operational needs and built a tool that freed our team up to do what humans do best: build relationships in the community.”

Thompson’s work illustrates a broader movement unfolding at the intersection of technology, work-force development, and postsecondary learning. Trainees arrive at Pursuit with an average annual income of just $18,000. Through the organization’s AI-Native Program, Pursuit equips students to design, build, and deploy functional AI applications, placing them into tech and AI roles with an entry-level salary threshold of $85,000 or higher.

$18K → $85K+

Average Annual Income of Trainees Who Arrive at Pursuit Compared to the Entry-Level Salary Threshold for Builders Who Complete the AI-Native Program

At a time when traditional four-year degrees are increasingly out of financial reach for working adults, how can postsecondary institutions adapt to deliver immediate, debt-free economic mobility without sacrificing educational depth?

The Nontraditional Learner and the "Paper Ceiling"

The traditional four-year college degree has long been celebrated as the primary engine of American social mobility. Yet for millions of post-traditional enrollees – working adults, parents, low-income individuals, immigrants, and delayed-entry students – the conventional postsecondary model is suffering from a profound structural disconnect.

A national survey conducted by the LearningWell Coalition in partnership with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Morning Consult revealed that more than one-third of current undergraduate students (36.5 percent) cite "getting a good job and advancing my career" as their primary motivation for attending college. For nontraditional enrollees, career advancement is rarely an abstract academic exercise; it's often the sole reason for pursuing postsecondary credentialing.

Concurrently, public trust in the return on investment of traditional higher education has fractured under the weight of rising tuition costs, compounding student debt, and persistent underemployment among recent graduates. In the United States today, 62 percent of adults lack a bachelor's degree, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent American Community Survey estimates. In New York City, that gap runs even starker along racial lines: 73 percent of Black New Yorkers and 80 percent of Latino New Yorkers lack a four-year degree.

62%

of Adults in the U.S. Lacking a Bachelor's Degree

Source: American Community Survey. U.S. Census Bureau.

For decades, corporate hiring software and human-resources departments have enforced an invisible "paper ceiling" – using the four-year degree as a screening mechanism that automatically filters out candidates skilled through alternative routes (STARs). Research from Opportunity@Work estimates that more than 70 million American workers are locked out of high-wage careers simply because they lack a four-year credential, despite possessing the practical talent and adaptability to perform the work.



"When a company goes to a college campus and hires a graduate with a history degree for an investment banking role, what does that degree actually prove?" asked Devika Gopal Agge, general manager of corporate growth and employer partnerships at Pursuit. "Did the history degree give them the specific tools to do investment banking? No. The underlying belief is simply that the degree checks a box to prove how smart, talented, and hungry someone is. If that's all employers are screening for, they are arbitrarily locking out millions of capable people who learned through alternative routes."

For adult learners who do attempt the traditional academic route, the financial and logistical friction can prove insurmountable.

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Kalila Green – now Pursuit's operations program manager after coming up through the organization's first AI-Native cohort as a Builder – spent two decades in corporate roles and six years as a computer science teacher and ran her own community organization for fellow domestic-violence survivors before finding Pursuit. She recalled the steep barriers of conventional schooling. "I am a firm believer in education, but higher education in its current form is not built for working parents," Green explained. "There are so many young people and working adults paying massive amounts of money for college, and then they leave without a job in their field. You get stuck in retail or low-paying survival jobs just trying to keep a roof over your head."

During her time as a Builder, Green worked on projects that drew directly on her own background: a proposal generator built for a software engineer trying to help minority-owned businesses compete for government contracts, a process that otherwise takes weeks of manual paperwork and cross-sector coordination and that her tool cut to hours; and a project with the United Federation of Teachers, where her work helped to train cohorts of public-school educators to build their own classroom tools.

Pursuit hired Green after she completed the program – a detail she treats less as a career pivot than as proof of concept for the model she now helps run.

70 Million

Workers Are Held Back by the Paper Ceiling

Source: State of the Paper Ceiling 2026. Opportunity@Work.

Ethan Davey, who earned an industrial design degree from Georgia Tech before moving to New York and working as a cashier and Spectrum customer service representative, found a similar disconnect. "When I was in college, professors would say, 'You should get an internship,' but it wasn't integrated into the core curriculum," Davey recalled. "Paying tuition without guaranteed, hands-on experience and a direct line to employment is a massive gamble." Today, Davey works as the director of IT and AI systems at Fowler Laundry Solutions.

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Modernizing the Registered Apprenticeship

As higher-education leaders search for models that combine educational depth with career security, registered apprenticeships have emerged as an essential "earn-and-learn" alternative. Long revered in European higher education as a prestigious career gateway, the apprenticeship model is undergoing a rapid modernization in the U.S., expanding beyond construction trades into cybersecurity, software engineering, and artificial intelligence.

The Progressive Policy Institute outlines the core principles of modern apprenticeship pathways: affordability without student debt, based in the workplace through paid employment, and credit for work-based learning. Under this framework, trainees earn a living wage from day one while accumulating industry-recognized competencies aligned with Department of Labor standards.

According to research from AAC&U, 81 percent of employers say they are more likely to hire candidates who completed an internship or apprenticeship, and a matching 81 percent say that industry-recognized credentials (such as microcredentials or digital badges) positively influence their hiring decisions. By embedding trainees directly into corporate workflows, registered apprenticeships

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81%

of Employers Favor Internship or Apprenticeship Experience

Source: The Agility Imperative. AAC&U, The Morning Consult.



can de-risk hiring for companies while providing adult learners with immediate financial stability. At the federal and state levels, public policy is shifting rapidly to support these models. The U.S. Department of Labor recently announced over $300 million in competitive funding to expand performance-based registered apprenticeships ($145 million announced in January and another $162 million announced in July). In October 2026, USDOL awarded Pursuit $4.7M through its Rapid Reskill Dislocated Worker Grants to fund innovative models of training and employment services that connect workers to high-growth industries. In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul established the FutureWorks Commission, selecting Pursuit as a primary lead for the statewide AI Prep for Jobs initiative across New York City, Buffalo, and Syracuse.

That AI apprenticeship category is still being built in real time, even by Pursuit's own leadership. "None of us know what an AI apprenticeship looks like, exactly," said Pursuit CEO Nick Simmons. "Registered apprenticeship means one thing to government, another thing to the private sector, another thing to the nonprofit sector. But let's take the features of a registered apprenticeship – a thousand hours on the job, a journey guide, incrementally increasing responsibility, learning and earning at the same time, technical support – and build from there." It's a candid admission that captures the experimental spirit driving Pursuit's approach: rather than waiting for a settled definition of what an AI apprenticeship should be, the organization is constructing one alongside its employer and government partners, cohort by cohort.

"Show, Not Tell": Demonstrable Skills Over Paper Credentials

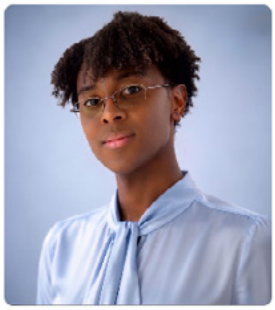
At the core of Pursuit's methodology is demonstrable proof of work – Pursuit requires trainees to showcase functional software products, active GitHub code repositories, and interactive applications.

To bridge the gap between nontraditional talent and corporate hiring managers, Pursuit engineered a "Lookbook" – an interactive digital platform where prospective employers can inspect, test, and evaluate functioning AI applications built by trainees.

"Traditional hiring platforms like LinkedIn rely on static text entries, where candidates list job titles or majors," said Pursuit cofounder and chief product officer Dave Yang. "You can't show a hiring manager what you built on the side. That's why we built Lookbook. Every profile features a direct link to a candidate's GitHub repository ... allowing an employer to look straight at the underlying code. Employers constantly tell us, 'Just show me your GitHub; I'll know exactly how this person thinks and how they code.' Lookbook turns that proof of work into an active resume that bypasses arbitrary HR filters."

Avni Nahar, head of job outcomes at Pursuit, emphasized that this "building in public" model fundamentally changes the dynamic during employer interviews. "Many of our Builders come from backgrounds that traditional automated screening software automatically rejects – former retail workers, delivery drivers, or individuals without college degrees," said Nahar. "But when a candidate presents a live project portfolio, demonstrates how they engineered a solution under client constraints, and explains how their nontraditional background gives them unique domain expertise, employer hesitancy melts away."

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BEATRICE MACKENZIE ALEXANDER

AI-Native Builder, Security-focused Software Engineer & Ethical Hacker

Highlights

- Full-stack software engineer
- Cybersecurity researcher and ethical hacker
- AI engineer
- Project management
- DevSecOps
- Built Nuestro Corazón Dorado for Golden Rose Employment Agency: a bilingual operations dashboard on Google Cloud

Bio & Credentials

Beatrice Mackenzie Alexander is a security researcher, a software engineer, and a musician. She believes that code should have a conscience and that technology should serve the benefit of humankind, never the other way around. Since beginning the Pursuit AI-Native Program, Beatrice has built a large number of software products where security is the foundation and not the afterthought. Key builds include Comp/ndium (community platform with self-hosting option), Charlotte (local-AI pentest assistant), and Bashcamp.cloud (interactive Linux lab for CompTIA Linux+ prep).

Select Projects

Golden Rose Employment Agency
Bilingual operations dashboard for a NYC employment agency.
Learn More →

Atlas
AI-Powered Civic Engagement Intelligence Dashboard.
Learn More →

Experience & Education

AI-Native Fellowship
Pursuit
September 2025 - June 2026

Cybersecurity & Systems Administration
Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC)
April 2026 - July 2026

Cybersecurity
Per Scholas
May 2025 - September 2025

Skills

- Python
- JavaScript
- React
- Node.js
- FastAPI
- PyTorch
- LLMs
- Computer Programming
- TypeScript
- Next.js
- Flask
- Software Architecture
- Machine Learning
- Offensive & Defensive Security

Industry Expertise

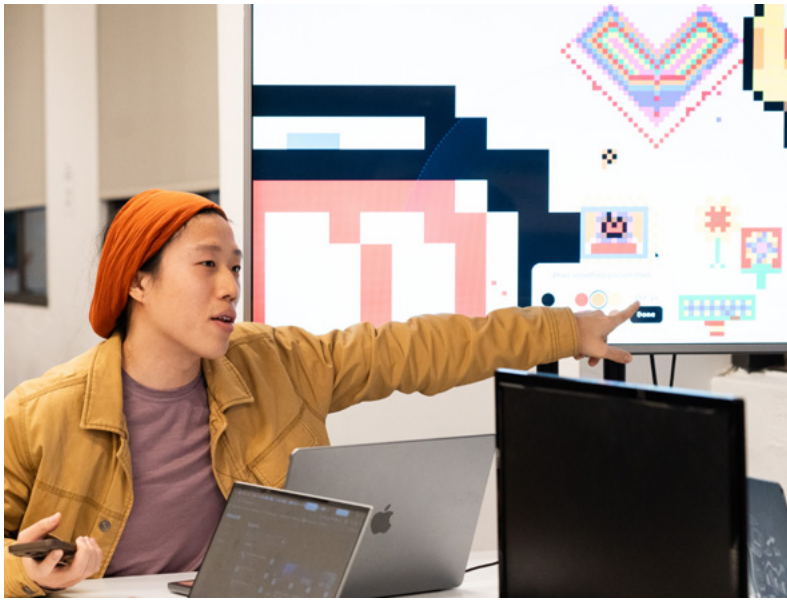
AI · CYBERSECURITY · IT OPERATIONS · SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT · ENTERTAINMENT

“When a candidate presents a live project portfolio, demonstrates how they engineered a solution under client constraints, and explains how their nontraditional background gives them unique domain expertise, employer hesitancy melts away.”

That philosophy is easy to state and harder to prove. Its real test comes when Builders must demonstrate that their skills meet an employer’s technical requirements or solve an organization’s practical challenges. Pursuit’s recent enterprise partnerships and its nonprofit pilot with Goldman Sachs offer two examples of how that proof of work translates into opportunity.

Meeting Enterprise Technical Standards

When a financial-services company sought to build a pipeline for AI talent, company leadership partnered with Pursuit to co-create a specialized six-month AI apprenticeship, creating an opportunity for Builders to apply their skills in an enterprise setting. With a recent successful run of the apprenticeship program, Pursuit plans to use the learnings as evidence to create the framework for a registered apprenticeship program in 2027, said Guilherme Barros, senior director of partnerships and business development at Pursuit.



The initial hurdle was confronting legacy hiring norms. The company worked with the Pursuit team to adapt its standard, entry-level AI and machine-learning job description to one that was better suited for junior candidates and created an interview process that enabled candidates to showcase AI-assisted, agentic workflow skills.

Pursuit also insisted on an open, neutral selection process, submitting a candidate pool evaluated solely on project portfolios. According to Pursuit, this partnership illustrates how candidates from nontraditional backgrounds can demonstrate the technical skills required for AI or machine-learning professional roles.



The company interviewed eight candidates and selected three AI-Native Builders, including Ariel Chen, a former fashion technical designer who had spent five years in the apparel industry before deciding to pivot to technology. Chen was selected after passing the financial firm's technical interview.

"I studied fashion ever since high school and worked as a technical designer," Chen said.

"Switching to tech was intimidating. Friends and family told me I shouldn't do it because I had a creative background rather than a math or logic background. But through Pursuit, I built functional tools like 'Floor IQ' – an application that analyzes floor plans, pulls local real estate pricing, and evaluates spatial value. Winning the apprenticeship boosted my confidence and proved that I belonged in this field."

Social Sector Capacity: The Goldman Sachs Nonprofit Pilot

That enterprise partnership tested whether "show, not tell" could meet an employer's technical hiring standards. Pursuit's partnership with Goldman Sachs explored another application of demonstrated skills: helping nonprofits with limited technical capacity address practical operational needs.

While major financial institutions have the capital to invest in enterprise AI transformation, community-based nonprofits – a key sector of New York's social infrastructure – face a widening sector gap. A survey by Robin Hood revealed that while 85 percent of nonprofits wanted to explore AI to streamline their operations, fewer than 15 percent had ever engaged in any formal AI learning, constrained by tight budgets and a lack of in-house technical staff.

To bridge this divide, Pursuit partnered with Goldman Sachs to design an innovative two-stage nonprofit AI pilot – the same initiative that placed Ray Thompson with Big Brothers Big Sisters. The initiative began with a hands-on AI literacy workshop bringing together thirty-six staff members from eighteen Goldman Sachs Community Development Champions across the New York-New Jersey region – spanning legal aid, housing, youth mentorship, and public libraries. Rather than delivering slide-heavy lectures, Pursuit brought AI-Native Builders directly into the room to work side-by-side with nonprofit leaders, helping them translate their daily operational bottlenecks into structured Product Requirements Documents (PRDs).

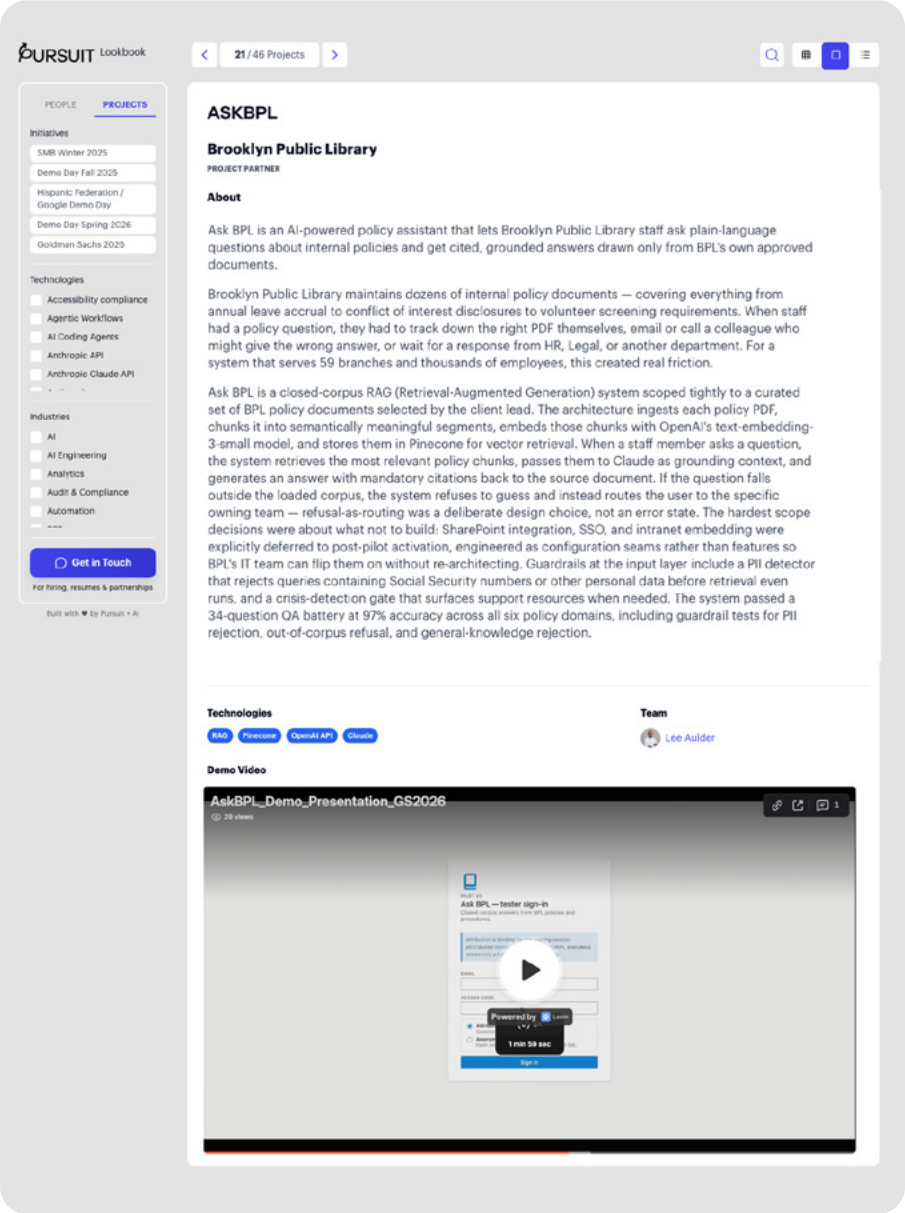


Recognizing that literacy workshops alone do not create lasting organizational capacity, Pursuit and Goldman Sachs expanded the pilot to embed AI-Native Builders directly inside participating nonprofits as paid forward-deployed engineers for six-week sprints.

These embedded deployments yielded immediate operational breakthroughs across the civic ecosystem, impact organizations like:

- **Brooklyn Public Library**: AI-Native Builder Lee Aulder engineered "Ask BPL" – a natural-language policy and procedure chatbot that enables library staff to instantly query complex internal administrative guidelines and receive cited, human-readable answers without combing through lengthy manuals.
- **Food Education Fund**: AI-Native Builder Ethan Davey consolidated five disconnected, manual Google Sheets tracking high-school culinary internships, attendance, and student performance into a unified, user-friendly web application dashboard for educators.
- **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson & Union Counties**: AI-Native Builder Ray Thompson created the "MO" recruitment engine, cutting monthly volunteer event search time from 48 hours down to under ten minutes.

"AI deployment is human work," Gopal Agge emphasized. "Large enterprises can afford dedicated transformation teams, but small businesses and nonprofits need this capacity too. By placing our Builders inside these community organizations, nonprofits gain custom software tools that make them more efficient, while our adult learners gain paid, real-world experience, client-facing portfolios, and a direct pipeline into the AI economy."



Inside Pursuit's AI-Native Engine: Speed, Flexibility, and Wraparound Triage

While traditional academic institutions struggle with multi-year curriculum approvals and departmental governance, Pursuit operates with the speed and iteration cycles of a technology startup. In early 2025, recognizing that AI was rapidly transforming entry-level software development, Pursuit's leadership made the decision to completely overhaul its existing coding curriculum and rebuild as an AI-native organization.

"If you look at our logo, the 'P' in Pursuit is designed as a looped arrow," said Simmons. "It symbolizes our core ethos: Adapt to the market over and over again. We are obsessed with job outcomes. If a software tool built four months ago becomes obsolete today, we discard it. We cannot let institutional pride stand in the way of getting our Builders $85,000-plus jobs."

That ethos extends to how Pursuit runs itself. "A lot of what we're doing is building the airplane while we're flying it," said chief operating officer Joanna Patterson. "We like to think about doing things in a way that is hypothesis-driven and structured, but that allows us to learn at the same time as we do." Rather than waiting for certainty about what AI-economy jobs will look like in five years, Pursuit's leadership treats every cohort, curriculum revision, and employer partnership as a live experiment

"When I think about Pursuit, I think about my mom. She didn't have the credentials, but she had incredible skill."

– one where the data comes back fast enough to double down or pivot within months, not years. Builders experience that same culture of experimentation from the other side of the classroom.

Michelle Brooks spent two decades in New York's print industry, producing catalogs and glossy inserts for retailers and fashion magazines before digital publishing hollowed out the business in the city. She enrolled in Pursuit's very first AI-Native pilot cohort before the organization had even finished designing the curriculum. "Nobody had a clue what they wanted when we started this," Brooks said. "It's continually changing so fast that saying, 'they won't hire me because I don't know something,' is not relevant." The disruption that ended her career in print, she said, is precisely why she felt at home learning a field with no settled rules yet.



To maintain this adaptability, Pursuit instituted an "Everyone Builds" culture across its entire staff. Yang demonstrated this culture by spending two months using AI tools to custom-build an end-to-end event management platform for Pursuit's 400-person gala, replacing six third-party software subscriptions.

Yang's motivation is deeply personal. Born in Korea, he immigrated to Queens at age three. His mother, who arrived in the U.S. with no college degree, learned a trade as a textile artist hand-painting clothing designs. When computer-design software and Photoshop emerged in the 1990s, her manual trade was upended, costing her her job and forcing her through years of employment instability.

"When I think about Pursuit, I think about my mom," Yang reflected. "She didn't have the credentials, but she had incredible skill. When technology disrupted her industry, she didn't have a safety net or a way to upskill. What we are building at Pursuit is a way to ensure that as technology accelerates, people in our community are equipped with durable skills so they aren't left behind."

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High-Tech Pedagogy Paired With Flexible, High-Touch Support

Pursuit uses an LLM-powered "AI Coach" to deliver personalized technical instruction and answer student questions around the clock, accommodating the flexible schedules of working adults who are balancing jobs, families, and independent project work. At the same time, leadership maintains that technology alone cannot transform lives without comprehensive wraparound support.

Stefano Barros, a career coach at Pursuit, explained that technical learning can only occur after personal life crises are stabilized and basic needs are met.

"Our Builders are attending classes and working on projects during evenings and weekends after working grueling survival jobs," Barros observed. "They are dealing with housing court, transit fare hikes, childcare, and food insecurity. If a Builder is worried about paying rent or feeding their children, they cannot absorb concepts like AI orchestration. My job is to triage those crises, connect them to emergency financial stipends, and provide the wraparound support that allows them to stay in the program."

Barros observed that when Builders got paid for their product deployments, he immediately saw improvements in academic performance. Builders who had previously struggled to meet project deadlines were suddenly on track because the immediate burden of groceries and transportation costs had been lifted.

"If a Builder is worried about paying rent or feeding their children, they cannot absorb concepts like AI orchestration."



Afiya Augustine, an AI facilitator and coach at Pursuit, emphasized that empathy is the organization's most critical support mechanism. "When builders walk in, they are often carrying immense imposter syndrome," Augustine said. "They wonder, 'Can I actually do this?' My job is to make sure they feel seen and heard. We provide laptops, software accounts, and technical guidance, but above all, we build a supportive environment where they know we will not give up on them."

For Lee Aulder, a builder of trans experience who completed the program, the supportive community was transformative. "My experience at Pursuit was not just about AI; it was fundamentally a human experience," Aulder shared. "It was the very first time in my life where I was accepted authentically without judgment. When you enter an environment where people believe in your potential, it gives you the confidence to drive the technology rather than fear it."

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Actionable Blueprint for Higher-Education Leaders

As higher-ed leaders navigate declining enrollments, rising cost pressures, and public calls for career alignment, Pursuit's model demonstrates that work-force preparation and academic rigor are not mutually exclusive. Forward-thinking universities and community colleges are finding that partnering with agile work-force models allows them to inject modern technical training directly into degree programs without waiting years for institutional overhauls.

Andrew Tein, head of external affairs at Pursuit, pointed to the collaboration happening at LaGuardia Community College (CUNY), directly across the street from Pursuit's headquarters. "We are delivering a free, 42-hour applied AI Fundamentals course on campus for LaGuardia students," Tein explained. "Higher-education institutions possess incredible reach, community trust, and foundational academic instruction. By pairing that with Pursuit's agile, employer-aligned AI training, we can create co-curricular pathways that lead directly to $85,000-plus jobs while helping colleges fulfill their core promise of economic mobility."

In addition, Pursuit partnered with the United Federation of Teachers to train 50 NYC public school educators as "AI Ambassadors," equipping teachers to build custom AI learning tools for their classrooms and translate tech literacy to K-12 students.

Most recently, Pursuit launched the $10 million, publicly-funded AI Jobs Institute in Queens. Designed as a regional hub bringing together talent, employers, educators, industry partners, and policymakers, the institute will scale Pursuit training and job-placement programs.

Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education

The debate surrounding the future of postsecondary education is too often framed as a stark conflict between the intellectual tradition of liberal learning and the practical demands of work-force preparation. Yet as AI automates routine technical tasks, the human capabilities historically nurtured by higher education – critical thinking, ethical evaluation, persuasive communication, and adaptability – have become the most urgent workplace requirements of all.

By embracing registered apprenticeships, partnering with agile work-force models, providing comprehensive wraparound support, and adopting "Show, Not Tell" competency standards, higher-education leaders can dismantle the arbitrary paper ceiling that has limited opportunity for generations of nontraditional learners. In doing so, colleges and universities can fulfill their foundational commitment: serving as reliable engines of lifelong learning, human dignity, and equitable economic mobility.



Strategic Recommendations for Postsecondary Decision-Makers

For university presidents, provosts, deans, and work-force directors seeking to adapt their institutions for the AI economy, Pursuit's work suggests four concrete principles:

1. **Shift Assessment from Inputs to Demonstrable Proof-of-Work.** Augment traditional credit hours, blue-book exams, and theoretical papers with portfolio-based evaluations. Require students across technical and non-technical disciplines to build functional capstone projects and maintain active digital portfolios that can be demonstrated directly to regional employers.

2. **Establish Short-Loop Advisory Coalitions With Employers.** Traditional academic department reviews that require two to four years to revise a syllabus cannot keep pace with technological change. Institutions should form agile employer advisory councils that review and update technical course competencies on a quarterly basis, ensuring student training remains aligned with market demand.

3. **Integrate Work-Based Learning Into Core Degree Requirements.** Treat apprenticeships and client-facing projects as central components of the postsecondary experience rather than optional extracurriculars. Partner with regional nonprofits, municipal agencies, and businesses to embed paid, forward-deployed student projects into the curriculum, allowing enrollees to earn income and academic credit simultaneously.

4. **Provide Comprehensive Wraparound Support to Drive Completion.** Academic persistence is inseparable from personal financial stability. Postsecondary institutions serving non-traditional enrollees must invest in proactive wraparound support – including emergency transit micro-grants, childcare assistance, and dedicated triage coaching – to ensure real-life financial shocks do not force talented students to drop out.

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