

# TRANSCRIPT

## Learning Unboxed



Episode #289

Jefferson Pestronk:

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### **Jefferson Pestronk:**

For the students who want the experience of moving through with some other learners, we're trying to figure out what it looks like to make that connection, so that they have some other peers in the course, they can run ideas off them if they're moving through at the same pace, or just whenever they happen to get to the place in the course that they happen to get to, there are going to be other learners who are at that same spot too, even if they haven't gotten there in the same way.

### **Annalies Corbin:**

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we're going to be talking about early college, access to college, as a positive disruptor in how we think about the concept of, what is school and why does it matter. And joining us today is Jefferson Pestronk, Executive Director at Modern States. So, Jefferson, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

### **Jefferson Pestronk:**

Thanks, Annalies. Excited to be here.

### **Annalies Corbin:**

We are excited as well. And let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started today. Modern States is a national nonprofit that helps any learner anywhere take college-level courses and earn college credit for free by combining MOOC-style courses with the CLEP, the C-L-E-P, exams from College Board. So, anyone can create a free account on [modernstates.org](https://modernstates.org). And if they complete one of the Modern States courses, the organization will provide them with a voucher to take the relevant CLEP exam for free. Earn a passing score on the CLEP exam and learners can receive credit at nearly 3000 public and private colleges and universities nationwide.

So, Jefferson, first and foremost, this bottom line is about access, which is an amazing thing because it's so desperately needed. So, let's start at the sort of hundred thousand foot view and talk to us about the origin of Modern States, the sort of the why and the why now.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah. So, we're about an eight-year-old non-profit in the form that we take now, but the story of the organization and sort of how we landed doing what we're doing extends a little bit further back. We were founded by a guy named Steve Klinsky. Steve has been a longtime education philanthropist, education reformer, has been involved in a range of efforts. And in the mid-2000s, he got interested in this question of why college was getting so expensive. He works in the business space, and so he was seeing information technology drive down the costs of knowledge acquisition in the industries where he works, but wasn't seeing it in the higher ed space, and so dug into it a little bit.

And that sort of digging was happening right about the time that the first wave of MOOCs were coming out. For folks who are listening, if the MOOC acronym isn't familiar, it's Massively Open Online Courses. They're largely internet-delivered courses that are designed to serve thousands of students at a time. And the first ones of these were somebody filming a class at Harvard or Stanford or somewhere like that from the back of the room. And so, you'd have students sitting in the room and a professor on stage talking about whatever subject they were teaching and the courses would get filmed and published. So, you could quasi sit in on a class.

**Annalies Corbin:**

It's a fancy way to audit, right?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah, that's right. That's right. And Steve looked at that and said, "Huh, what if we didn't have to audit? What if the people who were sitting in virtually could get college credit the same way that folks who were sitting in the classroom could?" And that was sort of the germ of the idea.

The original thought was that Modern States would actually accredit those courses. So, Modern States would become an organization that could say, "This course is worth X credit hours," and award those credits, so folks could take them with them for lots of reasons that proved largely impossible. But the model we are now is basically flipping that, right? So, rather than us awarding the credits using courses that already exist, we now build the courses ourselves, but we build them backwards mapped from the CLEP exams, which for folks who don't know them, which is most folks in the education space, they're basically AP exams that don't have courses with them. They

function largely the same way. And so, we build the courses that let anybody who wants to put in the time and effort earn college credit.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Which is a remarkable thing because it's a difficult thing to attain in some places, right? So, some of it's a money issue. Some of it is an experience and a confidence issue. And some of it is a direct access issue. And Modern States actually tackles all of those.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah, that's right. And we sort of tackle them in pretty different ways. So, I think your access point breaks down into a couple of different barriers that exist for learners. And I very intentionally use the word learners rather than students generally when I'm talking because we serve people who are as young as 13 all the way up into their 80s.

And so, in your opening, you talked about this as sort of an early college opportunity, which it absolutely is, but it's also a second college opportunity or an accelerate-through-college opportunity. And the model that we use where we're building these MOOC courses means that once we have developed the course itself, which takes time and costs some money, it costs us almost nothing for another incremental learner or another marginal learner to take the course.

And so, at that point, our interest is in ensuring access, we host the courses, we make it easy for people to sign up. And on the learner side, at that point, their interest is in signing up and seeing what resonates with them, rather than having the opportunity to take a college level course sort of metered out to them or alternatively neither sort of positive nor negative, having somebody else decide whether they are college course material.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Exactly.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

You think about the students in a school that has one AP class, and if there are 25 seats in that class and you're the 26th student, you're kind of out of luck because somebody else decided that the other 25 students are in front of you in that line. An online course doesn't suffer from that challenge.

But I think your second point there about sort of confidence and willingness to engage is just as important in an online environment. Again, for good and bad, nobody's looking over your shoulder, right? You are taking the course at your pace in the way that makes the most sense for you. It also means that there is less support than in a traditional course, right? Not everybody who's using Modern States has

access to an educator or somebody who's helping them get unstuck or coach them through it. We're working on some solutions there on the technology side, but if they sign up and it's not right for them, that's okay. They haven't paid up front. They're not losing any money. They don't end up with a failing grade on their transcript. All of the things that might lead people not to opt into something are by and large not issues.

And then, for the folks who take it and find out that they love a subject or find out that they can do it, all of a sudden, they've gone from maybe "I'm not somebody who does college" to, "Hey, I just did college. And now, I can pay off that experience in a more traditional college environment.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. And that's one of the things that I really love about the opportunity because so often – and I do appreciate you bringing us back from just early college. Many of our listeners obviously are in the k-12 space, so we talk about that all the time. But the reality is we have an awful lot of folks that have graduated maybe yesterday, maybe 20 years ago who entered into the world of work, who for a variety of reasons want to try something different or just want to expand their knowledge as a human.

It could be any of those pieces and parts who, oftentimes, may or may not have really had any sort of experience or exposure or felt like they had the potential for success in a post high school sort of environment, right? And so, it does in fact create this really – it's almost like a low threat, right? Because lots of new things can be scary for lots of people for a variety of different reasons but the barriers, because they're so equalized, I guess, they're not eliminated. Our barriers are real because they're all so individualized. So, I don't want to imply that, but the reality of it is that so many of these barriers have been reduced or minimized to a point that it's easy for us to try a thing we might not have otherwise tried before.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah, yeah, I agree with all of that. And there are I think two other groups of learners that are a little bit outside of the ones you just mentioned that I think really capture that powerfully. So, one of the groups of learners that we see some of anecdotally, but we're really excited to figure out how to serve more is college comebackers, right? So, these are folks who went to college at one point in time, and for any of the range of reasons, life happens to people while they're in college, they left college before they earned a degree and haven't gone back and earned a degree somewhere else.

And so, they're sort of in this limbo state that's the worst of all possible worlds. They put money and time into college, but they haven't gotten that credential that's the thing that lets you get a better job, or make more money, or tell your kid that they should go to college because you have a college degree. And the estimates in this

population are huge. It's 36, 37 million people in the US. And so, that's an example of people who thought college was for them at one point in time, and for whatever reason it didn't work out. And those confidence barriers, those trust in the system barriers are particularly profound for folks like that.

And then, the other really interesting group, when folks sign up, we ask them, are you currently enrolled in a K 12 or higher ed environment? Are you homeschooled or are you not enrolled in an education environment right now? And we do that because it then lets us ask some further questions to understand the institutions where people are enrolled and understand who we're serving. About 35% of our learners are in high school. About 45% of our learners are in college right now.

And so, they are already in college. They're using Modern States alongside their more traditional college experience, either to fulfill a distribution requirement that they need to fill or give themselves a little bit of breathing room. Maybe they take a slightly lighter load because they've got to work or something and this is a way that they can put classes and credit into time that they otherwise have.

And then, the other 20% are learners who are outside the traditional sort of P20 system. But we found huge audiences across all of these different folks and the flexibility of the model means they can use it in the way that works best for them.

**Annalies Corbin:**

I love that. And that's the key, right? Because if it's not going to work for a learner, you're not going to persist. And we want people to persist. Okay, . So, two big giant questions I know everybody that's listening is thinking about. So, the first one is, okay, I can sign up, and I can get an account and free, and I can go and I can take the course, but somehow somebody's paying for something. So, at what point is there a cost involved? That's question number one.

And question number two, I'm going to ask them both and you can just sort of weave them together. Question number two is, so I take these courses, I pass the test, I have some sort of credit attainment, how do either the university I'm in or the university I'm thinking about going to, how do I actually get credit that is towards a degree at the institution that I will ultimately graduate from?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah. So, I'll answer the second question first because it's a little quicker and simpler. The AP analogy works again here, right? I think when people think about AP exams, they think you were in college credit from an AP exam, which is close enough. But what you actually get is an AP score that when you then enroll in college, you bring that AP score to the registrar or whatever part of your institution confers credit by exam, and they then put that credit on your transcript.

CLEP works the same way. You bring a CLEP score to the relevant record-keeping office at your institution or if you're not in college yet, we have a tool, College Board has a tool that lets you look up which colleges accept which CLEP exams and at what score or what score you have to achieve in order to get credit, and that can help you determine either which exams you wanna take because you know what school you want to go to, so you can see which ones it accepts, or what school you want to go to if you know what exams you want to take and you want to make sure that you get as much credit as possible for it.

One of the very interesting little nuances of the work that we do, there are 3000 colleges and universities, give or take, that take CLEP, we're putting in a fair amount of time and effort working with College Board, working with hired institutions to figure out ways to keep those CLEP acceptance scores more current and more accurate and sort of more informative for learners because there are all sorts of nuances. CLEP is scored on a 20 to 80 scale, so it's not quite as simple as AP where generally, a three is a passing score and you get credit. Even that's less simple now. Lots of institutions are drawing the cut at four.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Or not taking it at all.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah, that's right.

**Annalies Corbin:**

That's a trend, right? Not taking it at all.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

That's right.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Yeah.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

We're working on figuring out how to sort of minimize the burden on everybody to build the sort of publicly available database of which institutions take which CLEP scores. So, from a learner perspective, there isn't a point in that journey where they incur financial cost. There's time cost, and there's sort of opportunity cost and various non-financial costs, but you don't get to a certain point and then we say to you before you can move forward, you gotta insert your money here. We're fully philanthropically funded and that supports the development of our courses. And then, that has sustained our ability to award the vouchers to learners when they complete our courses.

So, it's an interesting model in that once we build the courses, there's very little cost in offering them to learners. There is a cost in giving them the voucher. A CLEP exam costs \$97. But only learners who have put in the work to sort of take and complete a course get to the point where they're eligible for that voucher and they've passed the assessments that are embedded in our courses to earn the voucher. And at that point they're a pretty good bet to pass the CLEP exam. And so, it's a really good investment.

As we grow we're having to figure out okay, what does it look like to be able to sustain that commitment? And there are a few different things that we've been exploring and thinking about. One is just broader and broader philanthropic support, working with more national and local foundations, working with more individuals who are looking for a way to make an impact on people's lives and continue to recognize that a college degree is an essential enabler for so many people.

The second is working with corporate partners who can see this as part of an education benefits package. And so, when we think about, okay, how do we find high school students? How do we find college students while you go to the high school or the college? When the question is, how do you find adults who need opportunity? One of the natural ways is you go to the places where they're working now. Most companies of any size have some sort of educational benefits, but those are quite expensive for corporations, especially if they're doing, sort of, upfront tuition payment. They put a fair amount of money and they don't know what the outcomes are going to be.

And so, a program like ours where you're paying for the folks who have put in the work on the backend we think is a really appealing proposition and it's a way for employers to offer these benefits to employees who might otherwise have to work somewhere for several years before they sort of "earn this benefit." If the cost doesn't come until you get to the exam, then it's a little bit easier for an employer to offer coverage.

The third strategy is putting CLEP on equal footing as the range of other early college or sort of accelerated post-secondary opportunities. Most states provide funding for AP exams or dual enrollment or a range of other pathways. There are a handful of states, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia, that do the same right now with CLEP for low-income high school students. We think that the model makes so much sense and it is an important complement to those other programs because students who would otherwise be closed out can get access through a program like ours, but it also means that people who have left high school, working adults, or folks who are otherwise thinking about going back to college can also gain some of those benefits in a cost-effective way. So, that's the sort of now how it works and what we're building towards as we grow how it works.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Let's transition now and talk a little bit about you mentioned Ohio. And so let's talk a little bit about the Ohio Implementation Network and sort of the what and how. What do you have going on here? And then, what is the potential for it to be something that turns up other places as well?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

So, we originally started sort of exploring and working in Ohio a little over a year ago. And when I came into this role about two years ago, one of the things I looked at was the types of policies that exist state by state, not consistently but sort of variably, that create a welcoming sort of policy environment for the type of program that we offer.

And there were really three things that popped out to me. More than this, but the three big ones are whether there's clarity in a state about what CLEP exams are attempted and where you can use them. The second is whether CLEP exams are tied into accountability systems in ways that mean they're on equal footing as some other things like AP or dual enrollment. And the third is whether there is some local funding available to help sort of get the work off the ground.

And Ohio had two of those three pieces in place. Ohio has a statewide CLEP acceptance policy that all of the state's public colleges and universities have agreed to, and they use identical cut scores for each one of the exams. You know, that cut score then leads to slightly different things at each institution because they have different courses and they have different majors and things like that, but it means that if you're a student or a learner in Ohio and you're sitting trying to figure out, "Okay, which exams can I use where?" it's a much easier calculation than it is in some other states where every institution has their own cut scores.

The second piece, Ohio had some funding in the state budget to cover the cost of CLEP exams for low-income high school students. And that said to us, okay, there are at least some folks thinking about this as a pathway in Ohio. And so we started doing some work, raising visibility of CLEP, because in Ohio, elsewhere, most people still think of it as something that is for adult learners. That's historically who has taken CLEP.

And so, there's a fair amount of awareness building and sort of education that we need to do as folks say, "Oh, well, we already got AP. Why would we do this?" or "Our students do dual enrollment. Why would we do that?" And found enough folks at sort of all levels that were interested in exploring this path that we said, "Okay, let's see if we can work through some of the intermediary organizations in Ohio to get something off the ground."

And so, have been working for the past year with institutions like the Education Service Centers, that then themselves, they carry some sort of relational trust and relational weight with the schools and districts they serve. That's helpful for us because they can help facilitate some of those introductions and conversations. We're no longer so much a non-profit coming in from the outside as we are somebody working with networks that that schools already know.

And then, the third piece, the thing that was really interesting to me and emerged over the past year was that high schools were really feeling like because CLEP didn't count towards Ohio's state accountability calculations, if a school was using CLEP to give students early college opportunities, they were sort of giving something up on the accountability side, right? They weren't getting credit on a set of metrics that matter to them. And love accountability or hate accountability, it's an incentive or something that drives behavior.

And so, we started having conversations with folks in the legislature and elsewhere to say, "Was this an intentional exclusion or is there some openness here to putting it on the same footing?" And we found that there was a lot of openness, right? At the end of the day, what people are trying to do with these policies is ensure that students can get a headstart on college. And CLEP was doing that. And so, we were able to find folks who introduced some changes that put CLEP on equal footing for accountability purposes and diploma seals and things like that.

And so, that just happened within the last couple of months. We're optimistic that that now tackles one more institutional barrier to use in Ohio. And so we're continuing to convene these networks of high schools and secondary schools, but also colleges and other organizations that are trying to figure out how they support student success in different ways.

**Annalies Corbin:**

I love that. And hopefully, we will see those same sort of strategies you know emerging in other places that don't quite have policies yet. I know it's going to be a slow roll process. Policy work is tough work but important work as you've pointed out because it does make a difference. And oftentimes, policies are written in such a way that's because the individuals involved in crafting the policy to begin with were looking at a singular piece, right? And so, sometimes, yes, it's work, but it doesn't take much to say, "Well, what about? Could we?" to your point. So, I love that you spent the time, energy, and effort to make those things possible.

Let's talk just briefly as we get ready to wrap here about the sort of support piece. Because the other thing that I can imagine that lots of folks would be wondering about is if I'm new to the world of post-secondary, whether I'm in high school, I've never been before, or I'm returning after many years, it's not easy to do that. And the

business of doing college, whatever that happens to mean, it's tough. It's a lot of work. It takes a lot of emotional tolls. Sometimes I might not be very good at it. I don't have the skills that I need to stay organized, especially in a largely self-directed sort of learning environment. So, how do I do that successfully?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

We see a lot of ways that people use Modern States, but at the highest level, the distinction is sort of between the people who are taking courses on their own, they're taking them as individuals versus the people who are taking them as part of an institution, whether they're in high school or college or wherever.

Taking that second group first, high schools and colleges have developed a whole lot of support models for implementing Modern States. We're doing some work now to catalog those and socialize them, so people don't have to design their own models or start from square one when they're using it. But they range from just a guidance counselor knowing that we exist and for students who are academically prepared and academically motivated and are really looking to take a course that the school can't offer or looking to broaden their course load, it's just about somebody pointing it out to them and saying, "Hey, I think you can do this, right?" That bit of external confidence matters a lot to students.

And it goes all the way to the sort of other extreme where schools are really embedding Modern States content into what they do during the school day. And just to make that really concrete, one of my favorite examples that comes from a high school here in New York City, I'm based in Brooklyn, the school has taken our Intro to Psychology course and mapped it against their high school psychology elective. And so, they figured out, "Okay, when are we covering concepts in our high school class that align with deeper coverage or more sort of extensions in the Modern States course?" And they share that information with the students in the class. Different places will embed it in their LMS or embed it in other places where students access content.

But what I love most about the model is what it means is if you have a class of 30 students taking this elective, maybe you have 10 students who know they want to major in psychology in college. You've got 10 students who don't really know what they want to do. And you've got 10 students who are taking that class just because they need a social sciences elective in high school. And each of those groups of students can use Modern States in the ways that make sense to them, right?

The 10 who want to get a head start can study, they can get support from the teacher, they can do work in sort of a flip classroom style where they're watching our videos and working with our content at home, and then coming back and getting support from the teacher. The students who are just getting the high school credit don't need

to engage at all. And then, those students in the middle are sort of sorting themselves in the direction that they want to go.

And so, you have a high school class where a decent share of the class is sort of bootstrapping a dual enrollment experience for themselves within the existing time and space and place of the high school and with the support of the teacher who very likely can provide the types of academic support and coaching that they would need because all of our classes are really freshman level or gen ed classes. And so, it's a great way for schools to do that support on their own.

For individual learners, we are increasingly looking at, really, two different things. Like everybody, we're looking at AI, right? So, the ability of an individual learner to ask an embedded tutor that has been trained on our courses, explain this to me in a different way or help me get unstuck or I didn't understand this particular concept, can you connect it to something that I know? But again, because the courses are sort of freshman level courses, I'm pretty confident that the types of AI tools that now exist can do a pretty good job of that and can unstick a lot of the students who are otherwise just gonna find themselves in a rut at some point in the course with no way out of it.

The other one is figuring out how to do sort of virtual cohorts of learners who use our courses. So, some of our courses have tens of thousands of students a year who are signing up, which means in any given week or month, there are hundreds of students engaging. And so, for the students who want the experience of moving through with some other learners, we're trying to figure out what it looks like to make that connection, so that they have some other peers in the course they can run ideas off them if they're moving through at the same pace, or just whenever they happen to get to the place in the course that they happen to get to, there are going to be other learners who are at that same spot too, even if they haven't gotten there in the same way.

And so, those types of supports that, sort of, leverage the fact that we are delivering using technology and that our scale is such that there are lots of likely similarly situated students give me a lot of hope in figuring out how to support these individual learners better.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Yeah, absolutely. And I love all of those suggestions, right, because they just make sense. And that's one of the things that I like about the program that it's highly adaptable to the circumstance and the situation that a learner finds themselves in. And that is the beauty of modern learning, right?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

None of these ideas are like brilliant ideas that we had.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Or new, right? We just don't tap into them.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

That's right. We have some affordances that people who are doing this work in a traditional bricks and mortar space or with older platforms or things like that just don't have. And so, we do our best to take advantage of them and figure out what works and then share that back out. And we're hoping to do more of that so that really it's not just Modern States that's benefiting from what we're trying and what we're learning but other folks who might want to use a similar approach or might want to take advantage of some of the policy levers that we're helping get into place to improve access for lots more students than we can serve.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely, absolutely. Jefferson, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk with us, to share about what's happening with Modern States, explain it, let our listeners sort of really get a feel for what's possible. As we close out here, if folks really want to know more, get involved, try to sign up, encourage a student that they know or a learner, old or young, along the way, what's the best route for folks to get engaged?

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

So, our website is [modernstates.org](https://modernstates.org). And if you go there you'll see little green sign-up buttons plastered all over the site. You click that sign-up button, it'll bring you to our registration. There are a bunch of demographic and other questions that we ask. Folks who see that should know none of that has anything to do with whether you're going to get in or be allowed to participate. That's just all so that we know who we're serving and can figure out for whom the program is working and for whom we need to make it work better. But it takes about five minutes. And then you're in, and you can immediately access the library of 32 courses.

And then, the other thing I'd say to folks who have questions or are curious, on our website also there's a category called Success Stories. And those stories are short videos with Modern States learners from a variety of different backgrounds and needs and ages and sort of all sorts of different cuts where they're talking about what they got out of Modern States and why it worked for them. Obviously, I'm gonna sit here and tell you it's great but it makes a big difference to us when folks who have used it talk about how it made a difference for them, so that other people can hopefully see that and hear that and experience that for themselves.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. Again, thank you so much, Jefferson. Listeners, please reach out. We would love for you to connect with Modern States. It's a wonderful resource. Thank you so much for the work that you do and for taking time to talk with us today.

**Jefferson Pestronk:**

Yeah, thanks so much, Annalies

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely.

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.