

Transcript: [Changing Higher Ed Podcast](#) 141 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Dr. Steven Katsouros

## [Keep Students Enrolled and on Track for Higher Ed Success](#)

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Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at [changinghighered.com](http://changinghighered.com). And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

### **Drumm McNaughton** 00:31

Thank you, David. Our guest today is Dr. Steven Katsouros, President and CEO of the Come to Believe Foundation and Network in New York City. Dr. Katsouros is no stranger to higher education. He earned his doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University. Before Come to Believe, he served as the founding dean and executive director of Arrupe College at Loyola University Chicago. Arrupe is special. It's a two-year college that offers a rigorous liberal arts education in the Franciscan tradition to a diverse population, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue higher education.

Author Paul Tough said of Arrupe College in his book *The Most Important Years: How College Can Make or Break You*, "They may be doing a more impressive job of keeping its students enrolled and on track for success than any other institution I visited." Their numbers speak for themselves. The national average for obtaining a two-year Associate's degree is 13%, whereas Arrupe's rate is over 50%. Moreover, 90% of their students report completing their degree with zero debt. Steve joins us today to talk about how you, too, can achieve the great numbers he did at Arrupe.

Steve, welcome to the program.

### **Steven Katsouros** 01:53

Thank you very much, Drumm, for inviting me.

### **Drumm McNaughton** 01:56

I'm looking forward to our conversation. This is out of the ordinary for me because normally I talk about four-year institutions. But what you're doing at Arrupe College, which is part of Loyola University Chicago, is amazing. It's a two-year institution that is becoming a feeder for four-year colleges and is a great way for driving enrollment, especially with lower income students, and very inclusive with its focus on DEI. Before we get into that, if you wouldn't mind, share a little bit of your background for our listeners.

**Steven Katsouros** 02:35

Sure. Thanks again, Drumm. I am a Jesuit priest, so I'm a member of the Society of Jesus, and I have been involved in education for my entire career. I worked at the University of San Francisco as the Associate Dean of the School of Education. Then in 2014, I was invited by the president of Loyola University Chicago to consider becoming the founding dean of this new college, Arrupe. Arrupe is named after Father Pedro Arrupe. He was a Basque Jesuit who died in the early 1990s. Arrupe was a great leader of the Jesuits and very committed to people and students on the march. So, the college was very aptly named.

At the time, I thought, "Oh, this is a startup. I'm in my 50s. Do I have the energy for this?" But it was exactly what I thought we ought to be doing as Jesuits and in Jesuit education. So, I was dean at Arrupe for six years. My successor was another Jesuit, a great leader named Father Tom Neitzke. Now in New York, which is my hometown, I am the president of the Come to Believe Foundation and Network. Come to Believe is tasked with replicating the Arrupe two-year college model. We work with universities across the country that are interested in our model. We're interested in scaling it. My goal is to have 10 of these models in five years.

**Drumm McNaughton** 04:03

Those are fabulous things. But before we get into that, I just want to let our listeners know that you have the credentials from higher ed. You were not only an associate dean, but you also got your doctorate from Columbia Teachers College, correct?

**Steven Katsouros** 04:19

That's right. Yes, I did my doctoral work at Columbia. I also got my Master's from Harvard. While at Harvard, I was exposed to [Dr. Richard "Dick" Chait](#)—who I know was one of your guests recently, Drumm—and his work with boards of trustees. Now, I am currently on six or seven different boards, including the board that governs Come to Believe. It was Dick who really helped me identify the characteristics of high-performing boards. That was my dissertation topic, and it continues to be part of my research. I've done consulting for close to 300 not-for-profit profit boards, almost all of which are education based.

**Drumm McNaughton** 05:00

That's really good. We have a lot in common. Let's get back to the Come to Believe model. You've got some incredible goals that are associated with it. They really resonate with me, and I think they will with our listeners as well. Could you go through those for us, please?

**Steven Katsouros** 05:21

The goal of our model is to facilitate access to high-quality higher education as the first post-secondary ed experience for students. We do this in a way so that students feel supported, do not incur debt, and complete their Associate's degree to go onto the next best chapters of their lives, whether it's workforce or further education. It's been our experience so far that most of our students, after their successes with the Associate's degree program at Arrupe College or at the school that replicated our model so far at the University of St. Thomas' Dougherty Family College, want to go on and get their bachelor's degrees.

So our focus is students who are first-generation, Pell-eligible, undocumented, and particularly those who grades are between B- and C-. These are students who, with the appropriate supports, can flourish in a post-secondary ed environment. We want to work with those students and see them graduate in two or two-and-a-half years with little to no debt.

**Drumm McNaughton 06:36**

Those are fabulous goals to have, and you're realizing them. You have changed graduation rates. Your numbers are fabulous.

**Steven Katsouros 06:47**

When I look at the two-year college landscape across the country, I admire the work that goes into them. But we also see retention and completion rates that are not satisfactory for educational leaders. The national average for students in two-year colleges to complete their Associate's degree two years is 13%. Our focus at Arrupe and Dougherty Family College for the Coming to Believe model is to get students across the finish line. And it's been working effectively, Drumm. Our average is over 50% of students are completing their degree in two years' time.

As I said before, our goal is to have students not incur much if any debt during their two years with us, and to get their gen-ed requirements completed along with some pre-major works if they choose to do so for a four-year degree. This year, 90% of our students reported that they completed their two-year work at our colleges with no debt. So that is the story.

So, again, we're laser-focused on completion, no debt, students who often feel like they don't belong in higher ed or who look at selective universities and just write them off as being for someone else and not for them, and inculcating a sense of community and belonging. We want our students to begin experiencing success because of an extraordinary professor, an illuminating course, provocative class discussions, or being with classmates who are also intellectually curious and want to go on and get their Bachelor's degrees. We want it so, all of a sudden, they're saying, "Gosh, I like accounting." Or "I like theology." Or "I do well in psychology." Or "I'm really good at stats." Or "I like being in this college environment, so I'm going to go on and get my Bachelor's degree."

**Drumm McNaughton 08:58**

Let's keep these goals in mind as we talk about the key elements of the program. Your completion rate is 50% in two years, and 60% or 70% in three years. Those are fabulous numbers. When talking [change management](#), you obviously have to change people's mentalities. But you have to if you're going to see changes in the output. You have to change structure and process. And that's what you're doing with Arrupe and St. Thomas. So, let's go through some of those elements and key components, starting with a sense of belonging.

**Steven Katsouros 09:48**

Sure. So, our prospective students go through a rigorous application process. It involves being interviewed by faculty and participating in a summer orientation. Some of it is off campus. We have a commuter model, but this orientation is residential for a few days. The rest of the time is spent on campus. During that time, they meet their faculty and begin working with their academic advisors. And I should say that our faculty members serve as the academic advisors. In so many higher ed settings, academic advisors have hundreds and hundreds of advisees. In some cases, there are 500-plus. With our model, our faculty members have 20 to 25 advisees. So, they get a lot of personal attention. It's what we Jesuits call *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. That was really our North Star, our guide, in designing a base. So, we wanted to care for the whole person and provide rigorous orientation.

**Drumm McNaughton 11:02**

One other piece that really impressed me when we spoke a couple of days ago was the establishment of relationships between first- and second-year students that's part of the orientation process.

**Steven Katsouros** 11:17

The orientation leaders are rising sophomores for the incoming freshmen. So, immediately, there's this near-peer experience. And you're absolutely right, Drumm. So many of our students come to Loyola University Chicago, Arrupe College, or the University of St. Thomas' Dougherty Family College, and they wonder, "Do I belong here? This is a school for rich people, for white people, for smart people." Then if they're told they're going to the writing center because they need help with their writing, some students are accustomed to that. But for many of our students, this is very stigmatizing and confirms to them that they do not belong. So, my colleagues at Arrupe designed a Fellows Program where the second-year students serve as math and writing fellows for first-year students who need support in those areas. The second-year students are embedded in these first-year classes and have office hours where they can meet with the first-year students.

Well, it works because the fellows look like first-year students. They are from the same high schools and communities. They ate together. These similarities make it much more accessible and not at all stigmatizing. That was really a brilliant move by our faculty members at Arrupe College. It's been very successful in terms of creating a sense of belonging and community. And for students who are experiencing academic challenges, their challenges are addressed in a way that is positive as opposed to being a stigma.

**Drumm McNaughton** 13:00

One of the big a-ha moments for these [first-year students](#) is when they finally get that feeling like they belong here. Up until this point in time, they didn't have that sense of belonging. And when they can finally see other people who are being successful, they start to think, "Wow, maybe I can, too." It's that positive reinforcement that they get, which makes all the difference in the world. Am I right?

**Steven Katsouros** 13:29

Absolutely, Drumm. And, again, it's through community, relationships, faculty members, and a student's burgeoning sense of being academically capable, beginning to see progress, and feeling like this is absolutely what they should be doing as an 18-, 19-, or 20-year-old.

**Drumm McNaughton** 13:53

Yeah. But to do that, there's also a lot of barriers that have to be overcome. Am I right?

**Steven Katsouros** 14:01

Sure. So my colleagues and I about seven or eight years ago tried to identify what could hold students up. What was the straw that would break the camel's back? We tried to address food insecurity by offering breakfast and lunch every day. Besides addressing food insecurity, we also used that as a way of building community by having students break bread together. Again, these were commuter students. So, we gave them a place in our building to stay together, to laugh together, to eat together, and to grow together. That was extremely important.

All students received a laptop so there wasn't a technology gap. And since the beginning of the pandemic, all students also receive hotspots. So that was another way where faculty and students were working with the same style of computers.

To [address mental health issues](#), we hired social workers. And, again, they made their services very accessible. During the course of the year, I'd say about a third of the student body at Arrupe College would take advantage of this and the resources that our social workers provided. So, again, this was a way for students who—and I was just reading an article last night about students of color not taking advantage of

mental health resources—feel, “Oh, well, there's something wrong with me. I don't belong in this environment.” That's not the case at all. And the social workers, we just sort of normalized that everyone needed these resources.

Our faculty and staff really began to work with students on self-advocacy on being able to identify whenever they think, “I need help with this.” Or “this is something that's a challenge for me right now.” Or “where can I go to receive the support that I need right now?” One of those things is having a financial aid officer working with students.

So, our model is based on all students receiving the maximum amount of Pell grants and state aid, and navigating that, including FAFSA and verification. These are things that I could not do, so I marvel at the students and their families for going through this.

During my years at Arrupe, there were a number of undocumented students. In some states, they qualify for state aid but don't qualify for Pell grants. But the financial aid officer was available. But rather than sending the student to a financial aid office where they didn't know anyone and it could be kind of embarrassing if they didn't have the right papers or their parents were uncomfortable with the questions being asked, it was housed at the college, and they saw the financial aid officer every day. The officer wasn't some mysterious person.

As I said, most of our students, over 80% of them, go to a four-year institution, either continuing at Loyola or St. Thomas. But some of them go to state schools or other universities. They need help navigating the transfer process or even continuing at the host institution. So, there's a full-time college transfer counselor at Arrupe and Dougherty Family College who works with students, families, and financial aid to figure out what might be best for the student.

Then, finally, we have a graduate support coordinator. That person tracks how the students are doing after graduation from Arrupe or Dougherty Family College. Are they changing majors? Are they finding the right resources that they need at their campuses? They also track student success.

Nationally, 13% of those students who start at two-year colleges complete their bachelor's degrees in six years' time. At our schools, over 70% complete their Bachelor's degrees in five years' time or less. So, two years at the junior college, and two or three years at the senior institution.

**Drumm McNaughton 19:00**

Wow, that's fabulous. But it has required some serious structural changes to be able to give support to these kinds of students. The other thing that you had mentioned to me was the affordability. Many of the students can't afford college, and their families require them to work to help support them. The relationships you've built with local employers and the amount of time it took to accommodate student schedules is fabulous. Tell us a little bit about that, because that was amazing to me.

**Steven Katsouros 19:37**

I'd say that all of these students cannot afford college. We were working with students where a third of them had EFCs – expected family contributions – of zero. So, college was just not happening for them. Also, Loyola University Chicago and St. Thomas are private institutions with tuition that was just beyond the pale for our students. But because they received maximum Pell and state aid and due to fundraising at Arrupe and Dougherty Family College, they're able to go for little or nothing.

To get to your question, Drumm, there's an opportunity cost for these students. What do I mean by that? I'm sure your listeners understand this. Even if it's free to go to this two-year college model of ours for a family, their 18-year-old has just graduated from high school. With that high school diploma, he or she can get a full-time job. So, families are saying, "Well, your younger siblings cannot work full time yet because they're still in high school or elementary school. But you can still get a job." So, there is this kind of tug of war.

With our structure, we work with employers and identify jobs and paid internships. It was our hunch—and research has validated this—that the sweet spot for working if you're going to school full time is no more than 20 to 25 hours a week. But we found that, to many of the employers in Chicago and the Twin Cities in Minnesota, Loyola has very strong brand recognition. Everyone knows the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis / St. Paul. So, upon hearing about this new program where we work with underserved and students of color, a lot of employers say, "Okay, we'll create 2, 3 or 5 jobs for students." For those employers, there was an attractiveness that there was someone at the college who could say, "Wow, send more students like Drumm. He is really extraordinary."

**Drumm McNaughton** 21:54

Oh, you wouldn't want me. Trust me.

**Steven Katsouros** 21:56

Well, the flip would be, "Where's Steve? We haven't seen him in two weeks." The employer relations person working at Arrupe or Dougherty Family College can track Steve down, saying, "Hey, what's going on here? Do you want this job or not?" We found that those were great partnerships.

We also found that those employers became donors and financial supporters of these colleges and universities that were hosting these students. I have to say, I mentioned before about our financial model and how there's a fundraising element to this. But at Arrupe, over 50% of the donors had never given to Loyola University Chicago before. So, this was new money.

There's a national problem that students are not graduating from two-year colleges. And Loyola is trying to take on something big. We're talking about the big problem where students are not completing post-secondary credentials, and we have a big solution for it with our model.

**Drumm McNaughton** 23:09

And, obviously, there are significant startup costs for doing this. But before we get into those, you've talked about a lot of structural changes. But you've talked about them from a two-year perspective. I think, four-year schools can do this as well, although it's going to cost them more. Am I right?

**Steven Katsouros** 23:33

Yes, it's more of an investment. So, here we are at the beginning of 2023. What I hear from students and families right now—and this is certainly true since the beginning of the pandemic—is family first, family first, family first. That means, "I'm going to support my family." So, to say to a family that their daughter is going to be in school for four years, you might as well be saying she's going to be in school for 14 years. Whereas, a two-year increment—where she's got a job because the college and its employer relations officer have found a paid internship or a job for her—it's only two years. Then she'll have a credential, and an Associate's degree is very attractive from a recruitment perspective for this particular population of first-generation Gen-Xers from low-wealth backgrounds.



**Drumm McNaughton 24:25**

And that is critical because folks like these cannot afford the degree. So, to be able to support the family and get the degree at the same time? What you're doing is fabulous.

**Steven Katsouros 24:38**

I just admire our students who are balancing so much. They're commuting, they have family obligations, they're taking these classes, and they're working. But time, after time, after time, they show that they have what it takes to be very successful while balancing quite a lot.

**Drumm McNaughton 24:59**

And we're not talking "Loyola light" courses. We're talking rigorous academics, are we not?

**Steven Katsouros 25:06**

We are. At Arrupe, my colleagues and I hired 23 faculty members. Twenty of them had terminal degrees. They were clinical track professors. They were determined that this was going to be academically rigorous and very demanding of students. It was a joy for me and a privilege to visit these classes and see our students wrestling with what their counterparts at Loyola University were also facing in their first- and second-year classes.

The delivery is a little different. It's a cohort model. Students either opt for morning or afternoon classes. Sometimes that's based on commuting, family, or job schedules. Also, students are in classes that are a little bit longer, so there's a little bit more face- or seat-time in class.

A lot of community colleges begin with remedial classes that are not credit bearing. We didn't do that. All of our classes are credit bearing. Again, those writing and math fellows, the near-peer support, our talented and mission-driven faculty who are extremely available, and the students' sense of drive and determination have made it so 9 times out of 10, this has been the right formula for success.

**Drumm McNaughton 26:31**

Excellent points. So how do you do this? What's the magic formula? If you're going to start this program, how would you go about it?

**Steven Katsouros 26:41**

There are a couple of things. Come to Believe exists to really accompany institutions that are considering this. We help university leaders perform a feasibility study to, first of all, make sure that there is market demand for this and see if they have the bandwidth for this, which helps universities build consensus around the idea. Also, we help universities do their due diligence in terms of learning about the model, so that when university leaders are presenting this as a proposal for a new academic unit to the academic affairs or finance committees of their board or even the full board, they are confident that they do have the bandwidth, consensus, and have done their due diligence.

Right now, we're working with four universities around the country who are involved in our design grant program. They've explored this model and done three virtual retreats with us. One of them was on how to finance this model on their campuses, another was on the curriculum, and the last was on the wraparound support services that you and I discussed earlier in this program. They also visited Arrupe College. Myself and my colleagues here in New York and in Chicago have been very available to these four universities.

I'm happy to report that they're moving now, from exploring the model to planning. They're looking at the implementation of this model on their campuses. So, about my goal of doing 10 of these in five years, we're

moving in that direction. It's been exciting to work with these universities and to imagine what the Arrupe or Dougherty Family College model will look like on their campuses.

**Drumm McNaughton 28:37**

That is fabulous information. There are some requirements that colleges need to be able to do to pursue this. There's a significant cost because you've got to provide seed funding. You've got to hire a dean, admissions officer, and the support services. But what you're also doing at the foundation is teaching institutions best practices for enrollment and advancement, for example. So, you're helping to transform that institution, which, in turn, can transform students.

**Steven Katsouros 29:11**

You've said it succinctly, Drumm. We feel like everyone wins. So even if these participants of our design grant program end up saying, "This is not the right time for our institution to take this on," they've learned about best practices for first-generation students from low-wealth backgrounds and seen it in action this past fall at Arrupe College. If that benefits part of their population that they've already enrolled or will be enrolling, then it is mission accomplished as far as we're concerned. These institutions now have the resources, the experience, and the knowledge to meet those students more effectively and their needs.

**Drumm McNaughton 29:59**

What you're doing is changing structures and, more importantly, changing mentalities. And if you want change to stick, you have to change both.

**Steven Katsouros 30:09**

What we've seen, certainly at Arrupe College—and I was there for six years, and I'm a graduate of Loyola University as well—is that the experience for students was transformative. The experiences of Arrupe also transformed Loyola University Chicago's practices for retention, cultural competency, and, as you and I talked about before, advancement.

A very generous Arrupe supporter and his wife who are good friends of mine were so taken aback by the wraparound support services that Arrupe students benefit from. They saw how extremely important they were for getting students across the finish line that they gave a transformative gift of \$100 million to Loyola University Chicago, for all Pell and first-generation students from low-wealth backgrounds enrolled at Loyola to benefit from those same wraparound support services that we started and implemented at Arrupe College. So, Arrupe, our students, and Loyola University Chicago have benefited enormously.

**Drumm McNaughton 31:45**

What comes to mind is one never stands as tall as they do until they reach down to help someone else.

**Steven Katsouros 31:53**

When we met with students as part of the design team for our mission statement at Arrupe College, we talked a lot about accompanying students. I am a Catholic priest and Jesuit and therefore a big fan of Pope Francis who talks a lot about accompanying. For us, we're accompanying these students during their first post-secondary ed experience. We have learned so much from watching and listening to them. What are their goals? What are they curious about? We're not doing this top-down thing. What are they pursuing? That, in many ways, shaped our curriculum and how we delivered it. It was very empowering for them to be heard, and it's very empowering for the program. Our program became better because of them.



**Drumm McNaughton** 32:52

And if you want to be successful, you have to listen to who's taking the program.

**Steven Katsouros** 32:59

It's the joy of the job. And I've just learned so much. So, yes, it is.

**Drumm McNaughton** 33:03

We're getting to our three takeaways here. Who knew? This went by so fast. One of the things that I learned in the first accreditation visit that I ever did was what the principal of the high school said: "Kids don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care." And that, I think, describes in one statement your program completely.

**Steven Katsouros** 33:29

We get so involved with these students. We're interested in them. They know that they are known by us. And, again, that Jesuit expression from Latin, *cura personalis*, is care for the whole person. So, yes, of course, we care about them academically, and the goal is for them to get the degree. But we also care about how they're growing, what they're learning and pursuing, and what their other interests are. It's a mutually beneficial relationship.

**Drumm McNaughton** 33:58

Absolutely. Steve, three takeaways for your fellow presidents and boards.

**Steven Katsouros** 34:05

First, in terms of an enrollment perspective, if you're looking for a new student population that perhaps you're not enrolling or not enrolling in large numbers, consider this model.

Secondly, if you're looking for a substantive DEI program, then you should consider this model.

And, finally, if you're looking for new successful experiences, advancement, attracting new donors, and building donor support, consider this model.

**Drumm McNaughton** 34:52

Thank you. So, what's next for you? What's next for your foundation?

**Steven Katsouros** 34:57

We are working with these four institutions. I'm visiting one of them tomorrow. I'm very excited about that visit. But we're getting ready for the next cohort. We're opening up applications in the middle of this month. The application season is until the end of March. We're looking forward to working with universities that are interested in this population and those three takeaways.

I want to be very clear that this is not just a Jesuit or Catholic thing. One of the institutions in our current cohort is nonsectarian. For university leaders who are alert, and who are interested in this population, and in student and institutional transformation, we're interested in working with you and participating in the next design grant cohort.

**Drumm McNaughton** 35:50

That's great. And if you wouldn't mind giving listeners your contact information so they can reach out to you directly? That would be fabulous.

**Steven Katsouros** 35:58

Sure. So, it's a mouthful. My email address is [skatsouros@ctvnetwork.org](mailto:skatsouros@ctvnetwork.org). I was 14 before I could spell my last name.

**Drumm McNaughton** 36:26

Great. Thank you, sir. Steve, it has been a pleasure having you on the show. I wish you guys all the best, and I look forward to staying in touch.

**Steven Katsouros** 36:34

Drumm, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for the opportunity of speaking with you today.