



ODYSSEY CHANGES LIVES.

"The Odyssey Project helped me unwrap my gifts and rewrite the story of my life."

Since 2003, the award-winning, multigenerational UW Odyssey Project has empowered families living at the poverty level to overcome adversity and achieve dreams through higher education. New evaluation results document Odyssey's major impact on its students:

- Greater likelihood of continuing in college and earning degrees
- Improved economic stability
- Increased skills in writing, reading comprehension, and speaking
- Heightened sense of hope, fulfillment, and civic engagement
- Profound influence on their children, family, and friends

WHAT IS THE UW ODYSSEY PROJECT?

THE ODYSSEY PROJECT INCLUDES THREE CORE PROGRAMS:

ODYSSEY COURSE Each year, 30 low-income adults enroll in a two-semester, six-credit UW English course to explore literature, philosophy, history, art, music, and writing; all students receive free tuition, textbooks, and dinner.

ONWARD ODYSSEY Odyssey supports its graduates through advising, tutoring, targeted courses, and financial resources as they pursue college degrees and other dreams.

ODYSSEY JUNIOR Through a weekly literacy and arts enrichment program for children and grandchildren of Odyssey students, Odyssey Junior gets the next generation excited about learning and more hopeful about their futures.

WHO ARE ODYSSEY STUDENTS?

To qualify for Odyssey, students must demonstrate severe economic barriers to higher education. Many Odyssey students are overcoming the obstacles of single parenthood, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, depression, and domestic abuse. Most (94%) are from ethnic minorities and are parents (75%). Students' median age is early 30s but has ranged from 18 to 71.

"When the whole world counts us out and reminds us of our different levels of poverty and the color of our skin, Odyssey doesn't. We become one big happy family."

HOW DOES ODYSSEY TRANSFORM LIVES?

MANY ODYSSEY STUDENTS DESCRIBE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM AS A TURNING POINT IN THEIR LIVES.

To better understand the effect Odyssey has on its students, the Odyssey Project hired UW–Madison’s LEAD Center—a nationally recognized higher education research group—to undertake an independent third-party evaluation of Odyssey’s alumni. The evaluation demonstrated that Odyssey students progress from a newfound sense of hope and belonging to the achievement of college degrees and personal goals. These impacts then have a ripple effect on a student’s family, friends, and community. See back page for more about the evaluation methodology.



HOPE

“Odyssey has given me hope. I look forward to a never-ending journey of education to better myself as a man and father.”

Odyssey begins with an acceptance letter and call from Director Emily Auerbach that instills pride and hope even before class starts. New students gain hope for the future through visits from Odyssey alumni who have overcome many obstacles, access to new college advisors, and progress through the curriculum. Odyssey students reported increased hope for educational achievement, career potential, and each family’s future.

BELONGING

“Odyssey turned my life around. For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged and had something valuable to bring to the world.”

Odyssey fosters a sense of belonging within the classroom, within UW–Madison, and within the community. Before Odyssey, many students had been told they were “not college material.” Odyssey’s team of faculty, staff, and alumni helps each new class of 30 students to feel that they do belong in college. The LEAD evaluators found that students “formed lasting bonds with classmates and program staff, which created a sense of belonging in the community.”

VOICE

“Odyssey has given me the courage to be myself and voice my opinions.”

The Odyssey Project empowers students to find their voices and build their confidence in speaking up—advocating for themselves, for their children, and for our community. The LEAD evaluation found that many students said their “confidence to speak up in groups and communicate with others has increased” because of Odyssey.

Madison police officer and Odyssey alum Corey Saffold (pictured above) was encouraged to write a letter to the editor as an Odyssey student. His letter—on the disproportionate incarceration rate of black men—was published in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. Corey often speaks about this as a pivotal moment for him, saying, “I realized that this voice to speak, this voice to be bold, and to be confident in the issues that are so near to my heart, it was the voice that I found in the Odyssey Project. All it takes is for one person to say, ‘I see the greatness in you, and I’m going to help pull the greatness out of you, and you are going to be somebody. You are going to change this world.’”

Corey has since received an associate’s degree in criminal justice, is working toward his bachelor’s degree, and speaks around the state on behalf of the Wisconsin Humanities Council about his experiences as a black police officer.

SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

“After reading out loud in class, I felt powerful, like I can do anything.”

Odyssey students are more ready for college and career success by strengthening both their skills and confidence. Students reported that Odyssey improved their skills in writing, reading comprehension, speaking, critical thinking, and setting personal goals. Odyssey also strengthens students’ confidence in education. This ensures a better future for themselves and their families, increasing their chances for a rewarding career.

100%

of students believed their writing skills improved.

99%

felt more confident to pursue further education.

98%

felt more academically prepared for college.



DEGREES AND DREAMS

"Like Martin Luther King, I too have a dream: that a girl born in the projects will be able to get an education and a college degree."

75%

of Odyssey students continue enrolling in college coursework.

24%

of Odyssey students have by now earned a degree or certificate; many more are on their way.

Many students also continue their education outside of degree programs, including professional certifications, workplace professional development, and programs focused on public speaking, teaching, counseling, nursing, logistics, and web design. On the whole, students consider themselves lifelong learners.

ODYSSEY JUNIOR CREATES A PIPELINE TO COLLEGE

Odyssey has always offered free childcare, serving mostly younger children. Recognizing that breaking the cycle of generational poverty involves whole families, Odyssey Junior was created in 2015 to help the children and grandchildren of Odyssey students to build their confidence in self-discovery and expression through reading, writing, and speaking.

UW's Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) has been evaluating this new program since 2016. They have found that Odyssey Junior:

- Strengthens participants' writing ability and their interest in reading
- Supports participants' ability to express themselves and explore who they are and what they care about
- Helps participants to develop their educational goals.

"Odyssey Junior helped motivate, organize, and prepare me for my college experience."

FINANCIAL STABILITY

*"When I was accepted into the Odyssey Project, I was a homeless single mom with no income or sense of purpose. Now I have a UW bachelor's degree and stability through employment and I'm starting my own businesses rooted in passion and purpose. Upward progress rooted in this love for learning! Thanks to Odyssey and Odyssey Junior, my sons talk about **when**—not **if**—they will go to college."*

Odyssey students are achieving greater financial stability since completing the program. Some graduates have moved from homelessness to UW-Madison degrees, and others have gone from incarceration to meaningful work in the community.

- Odyssey students' household incomes have risen \$18,000 on average (adjusted for inflation; average time since completing Odyssey is seven years).
- Students reported that Odyssey expanded their awareness of career opportunities, which helped their job prospects.
- Students also reported increased satisfaction with their living, financial, and career situations.

LIFELONG LEARNING

"I want to learn more, read more, see more."

Odyssey graduates' exposure to a curriculum that includes literature, philosophy, history, and art changes their outlook on the world and their place in it. Learning about the humanities enriches their lives and encourages them to read new books and authors, see new works of art, and participate in their communities in ways they never knew possible. One student wrote, "What I loved most was Plato's Allegory of the Cave. That was when the lightbulb turned on in my life. I have never been the same." Students share this love of learning and knowledge with their families and friends.



LEGACY

"The more educated I become, the brighter my future. It's a great example to my children and grandchildren alike. My hope for my family and our future is in orbit!"

Whole families have been changed as a result of one student's journey through the Odyssey Project. Students become role models and advocates for their families, friends, and community.

67%

believe their experience in Odyssey heightened their children's interest in attending college.

97%

said Odyssey affected their ability to support their children in school.

98%

said they modeled the importance of education to their family and friends.

One Odyssey alum said, "Before Odyssey my children knew about college but didn't say things about going one day. Now my children are eager about one day attending college because they've seen it, they know where it is, and they know what it looks like. Driving past a university is totally different than actually going inside one, being invited, and knowing people who both study and teach there. I think my children are proud of me and want me to be proud of them."

Odyssey students are also more civically engaged. After Odyssey 97% felt they were more aware of current events, and 89% turned that into action by voting more in local and national elections. Students also reported increased volunteerism and engagement in social justice issues.



"We now are the gadflies, like Socrates, and must awaken the hopeless with the contagious desire to learn."

WHAT IS NEXT FOR ODYSSEY?

Odyssey clearly has transformed lives, but much more can be done. With over 400 adult and 160 junior alumni, Odyssey remains focused on helping students achieve their dreams and earn college degrees. Key next steps include:

- Strengthening partnerships to help students overcome persistent barriers to their pursuit of college degrees
- Sharing the Odyssey Project model with other colleges and universities in Wisconsin and beyond
- Expanding Onward Odyssey, including course offerings, mentoring, and counseling for alumni
- Expanding Odyssey Junior, continuing to increase our multigenerational impact
- Expanding the Odyssey Behind Bars pilot, offering courses for credit in Wisconsin's prison system

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

The Odyssey Project contracted with the LEAD Center (Learning, Evaluation, Adaptation, Dissemination) within UW-Madison's Wisconsin Center for Education Research. The survey was distributed to 354 alumni from the classes of 2004 through 2016. More than 190 alumni completed the survey—a 55% response rate.

TO SUPPORT

There are many ways to support Odyssey families:

- Your gift to the *Odyssey College Fund* helps Odyssey students start college and continue their education by funding tuition, textbooks, and expenses
- Your gift to the *Friends of Odyssey Family Fund* supports Odyssey Junior, assists families with basic living expenses and unanticipated emergencies, and supports Odyssey's greatest needs
- You can volunteer to provide meals, tutor, mentor, and more

Learn more about giving and volunteering at odyssey.wisc.edu/donate or contact Colleen Johnson at 608-262-4579 or colleen.johnson@wisc.edu.

TO LEARN MORE

Visit odyssey.wisc.edu/impact to view both the adult alumni and Odyssey Junior evaluation summaries. Contact Emily Auerbach, Odyssey Project Director, at emily.auerbach@wisc.edu or 608-262-3733.