Pamela M. Donnelly, PhD

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PROFILE

Founder, Executive Director, and Board President of American Access Institute (AAI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that accelerates workforce readiness so youth facing adversity leave care with a clear, actionable plan for their future. Educator, researcher, best-selling author, speaker, and serial entrepreneur with nearly three decades in education, college access, and EdTech, including consultation for the Federal Student Aid Office, advocacy before the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Congress, and strategy and communications roles up to the presidential-campaign level. Leads trauma-informed, responsible AI for young people, transforming trauma into trajectory.

SUMMARY OF QUALIFICATIONS

- Nonprofit executive who leads the deployment of trauma-informed, responsible AI for youth facing adversity, including LLM safety guardrails built on SAMHSA's six principles of trauma-informed care
- Researcher highly trained in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods practices, including quantitative ethnography
- Fundraiser and partnership builder who raised $1.5M in venture investment, won multiple AWS Education Equity Awards, and built alliances with universities, law enforcement, and youth-serving organizations
- Expert communicator with a strong ability to write, implement, and lead teams
- Motivator known for clearly defining mission and goals, aligning people and resources, and consistently delivering results that exceed expectations
- Collaborative leader who combines theory and practice to amplify team success, with careful attention to budgets, timelines, culture, and best practices
- Cultivator of connected communities committed to diversity and inclusion while anchoring key performance standards
- Wide national network across media, publishing, philanthropy, technology, and the U.S. federal government

LEADERSHIP & ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

American Access Institute (AAI) 2022–present

Founder, Executive Director, and Board President

- Founded AAI in 2022 and lead a fully remote team that delivers the Catapult Initiative, a 24/7 career-readiness initiative for youth ages 14 to 24, including foster youth, opportunity youth, and justice-impacted young adults.
- Grew the Catapult Initiative to 382 students served through partner organizations from Nevada to Florida; moved from two years of pilots to Phase 1 partnerships that include Train the Trainers professional development, Mentor Guide deployment, and real-time data dashboards, with national scaling planned for 2027.
- Directed development of Mentor Molly, the Catapult Initiative's AI-powered mentor, whose trauma-informed guardrails include SAMHSA-aligned design with oversight from an AAI board member who leads responsible AI work at a major technology company, PII redaction, zero-data-retention agreements, FERPA and COPPA compliance, and crisis off-ramping to human support.
- Lead creation of the Catapult Initiative's Success Studio, 40 trauma-informed emotional-regulation supports that doctoral-level subject-matter experts developed, launching January 2027.
- Launched a custom mobile app that geolocates free support services for youth in 12 U.S. cities.
- Won multiple AWS Education Equity Awards that helped fund upgrades to 24/7 support technology; secured a generative-AI collaboration with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies and intern partnerships with the UNLV Department of Public Policy and the UNR Department of Social Work.
- Built a trusted partnership with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) supporting justice-involved youth in its DREAM program; led the Galactic Gala fundraiser with a committee of Las Vegas civic and business leaders including the mayor.

GATE College System Inc. 2013–2020
Founder, CEO, and Chairman of the Board of Directors

- Created the concept and built the curriculum from inception for an EdTech platform that expanded equitable access to higher education regardless of socioeconomic status; ran successful pilots in 50 high schools across 7 states.
- Raised $1.5M in investment to fund alpha (2015–2016) and beta (2017–2018) phases of platform research and development.
- Led 40 co-educators across academic content curation, curriculum video production, legal assessment, technology specifications, nonprofit partnerships, and PR/media campaigns.
- Completed full platform content in October 2019; a private buyer acquired the company under a confidentiality agreement on November 19, 2020.

Valley Prep Tutoring Services Inc. 2012–2021
Founder

- Identified the market need, led all hiring, and developed marketing materials; hosted live parent events that drove viral growth across Los Angeles public and private school networks.
- Built college-readiness intellectual property and operating procedures that sustained 14% year-over-year growth.
- Closed the company in December 2021; a private buyer acquired its intellectual property under a confidentiality agreement.

EDUCATION

Pepperdine University 2022
Ph.D., Global Leadership & Change
Dissertation: The Axis of Access: A Quantitative Ethnography of Presidential Discourse on the Construct of College Access in the United States
Malibu, CA

George Mason University 2004
Master of Arts, English, magna cum laude
Fairfax, VA

Columbia University in the City of New York 1997
Bachelor of Arts, Literature/Writing, summa cum laude; Minor in Secondary Education
New York, NY

TEACHING CAREER

San Fernando Valley Professional School, Los Angeles, CA 2008–2010
Stonewall Jackson High School (now Unity Reed High School), Manassas, VA 1997–2007
LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, New York, NY 1996–1997

Taught all levels of high school English in diverse classrooms, including grades 9–12 regular and honors, AP Literature, and AP Language. Co-designed curricula for Public Speaking & Debate and Drama. Grew student arts organizations and built thriving programs. Championed the college application process for undocumented students, students with learning differences, and others from marginalized backgrounds. Extensive experience with trauma-informed care.

CORPORATE AND FEDERAL PRESENTATIONS

Jobs for America's Graduates National Conference, Long Beach, CA 2026
Speaker: How to Supercharge Career Readiness for At-Risk Youth

Federal Student Aid Office, Washington, DC 2016–2020
Consultation: Next-Gen FAFSA project

South by Southwest Education (SXSW EDU) National Conferences, Austin, TX 2016–2019
CEO Breakout Presentations

ASU-Global Silicon Valley Conference, San Diego, CA 2019
Speaker: Breakthrough Entrepreneur Spotlight

The College Board, New York, NY 2018
Presentation to senior vice president on technology and college access

Lead India International Conference, Washington, DC 2018
Speaker: Securing Access for International Applicants

Jobs for America's Graduates National Conference, New Orleans, LA 2017
Speaker: Piloting Access for JAG.org

Educational Technology Summit, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC 2017
Industry Advocate: Every Student Succeeds Act, Digital Divide

Educational Technology Advocacy, U.S. Congress, Washington, DC 2017
Industry Advocate: E-rate, Net Neutrality, Title IV

ACADEMIC CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference, Princeton University 2020
Speaker & Paper: Online Growth Mindset Summer Bridge Programs

University Council for Educational Administration Conference, Michigan State University 2020
Speaker & Paper: Increasing College and Career Readiness for Disadvantaged Students Leveraging Conley's Four Keys Model

National Science Institute Symposium on Digital Learning, Malibu, CA 2019
Speaker: Incorporating Quantitative Ethnography as a College Access Solution

New Delhi Institute of Management International Conference, New Delhi, India 2019
Speaker: Cross-National Interests in Higher Education

Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University 2018
Speaker: Higher Education Leadership for Increased Access

PUBLICATIONS

Workforce Readiness for Youth Facing Adversity: Evidence, Responsible AI, and Scaling What Works AAI white paper Forthcoming Q4 2026

Beyond the Badge (FBI agent memoir, co-written) 2024
Las Vegas, NV

Resurrecting the American Dream (public policy book, in process) 2023
Arc Literary Management, New York, NY

The Axis of Access: A Quantitative Ethnography of Presidential Discourse on the Construct of College Access in the United States (dissertation) 2021
ProQuest: proquest.com/docview/2654371893

4 Keys to College Admissions Success 2015
Morgan James Publishing, New York, NY

SWAT Team Tactics for Getting Your Teen into College 2013
Self-published; reached #1 on Amazon in Educational Testing

LinkedIn articles: linkedin.com/in/pamelamdonnelly

HONORS & AWARDS

Social Entrepreneur Accelerator Award 2026

AWS Education Equity Awards (multiple), American Access Institute 2025

Inspiring EdTech Female Founder Award, SuperCharger Ventures 2021

Ph.D. Advisory Committee, Pepperdine University 2020–2022
Accepted nomination and served as Co-chair under Dr. June Schmieder-Ramirez

ASU+GSV Summit (Arizona State University–Global Silicon Valley) 2019
Founder finalist for Best Startup

CERTIFICATIONS

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) 2020
Social-Behavioral-Educational Certification

State-Certified Educator, English: New York, Virginia, California 1997–2008

PRO BONO COMMUNITY SERVICE

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), Las Vegas, NV 2023–present
Advocate for foster youth

Matchlighters Scholarship Program, Los Angeles, CA 2020–2023
Admissions essay coaching for students facing financial hardship

100 Black Men, Los Angeles, CA 2019–2020
African American male high school student support

Project ECHO, Los Angeles, CA 2017–2019
Mentorship for high school entrepreneurs

LEAP Foundation, Los Angeles, CA 2016–2018
Leadership mentorship for teenage girls

Bresee Foundation, Los Angeles, CA 2015–2019
Latinx high school student support

SKILLS

Outcomes & Evaluation: Program evaluation and outcomes measurement; real-time data dashboards and backend analytics for partner reporting; mixed-methods research design, including quantitative ethnography; assessment, measurement, and evaluation; human-subjects research ethics (CITI certified).

Fiscal Stewardship & Sustainability: A diversified revenue strategy across philanthropic and earned income; budget management; winning competitive awards and multi-year sustaining foundation support.

Program Design & Scaling: Trauma-informed program and curriculum design aligned with SAMHSA's six principles; moving programs from pilot to scale; building partner staff capacity through Train the Trainers professional development; developing partnerships across child welfare, law enforcement, higher education, and youth-serving organizations.

Responsible AI & Data Protection: AI governance for youth-serving technology; trauma-informed LLM guardrails and crisis-escalation design; AI safety testing (red-teaming and behavioral evaluations); student data privacy under FERPA and COPPA.

Organizational Leadership: Founding and incorporating a 501(c)(3); nonprofit governance and board leadership; leading fully remote teams; developing personnel policy; supervising interns through university partnerships; service on departmental and university committees.

Communication & Thought Leadership: Keynote and conference speaking; translating research for policymakers and practitioners; publishing across scholarly and commercial nonfiction, including collaborative ghostwriting; coalition building with civic, business, and philanthropic leaders; event-based fundraising.

Equity & Inclusion: Equity and anti-racist scholarship; social justice advocacy; asset-based, culturally responsive communication; conversant in Spanish.

Youth Advocacy: Court-appointed advocacy for foster youth; zero-cost, family-neutral program design for young people outside traditional support systems; decades of championing undocumented students, students with learning differences, and young people from marginalized communities; a career-long commitment to transforming trauma into trajectory.