



# The Learners First Framework

Ten Guiding Principles for  
Reinventing Postsecondary Education

America's system of higher education has long been the envy of the world because of its profound commitment to expanding opportunity and its seemingly boundless potential for innovation. But while this tradition may be our inheritance, its continuity is by no means guaranteed.

Learners today are diverse, with a range of prior experiences, current obligations and constraints, and future goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the country's ongoing reckoning with racial disparities have made clear the peril—and the necessary changes—now facing U.S. colleges and universities. They have magnified long-running issues including the broken economics of college, widening racial and economic inequality, and educational offerings that are increasingly out-of-step with the jobs of today and tomorrow—forcing our nation to redefine what it means to be a “learner.”

Dissatisfied with higher education's inability to meet the demands of a rapidly changing workforce and economy, employers are increasingly ready to take matters into their own hands. Meanwhile, colleges and universities too often operate under ossified policies that are a poor fit for the needs of modern learners—including a federal higher education law designed for a bygone era.

The traditional profile of the college student of the 1960s and notions of college itself have given way to an age of lifelong learning. Learners today are diverse, with a range of prior experiences, current obligations and constraints, and future goals. They seek learning in a variety of settings and modalities, from on-the-job training to online offerings. We must fundamentally reorient our policies, practices, and operations not only to meet the existing demands on higher education, but also to better serve all learners seeking opportunity. This needs to happen today, not in some distant future. The current economic, health, and social crises compound this imperative, as millions of Americans face unprecedented economic trauma, unemployment, and uncertain futures. As college and university leaders, we believe this is a threshold moment for reform and reinvention in higher education.



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## Why Learners First

By reimagining our approach to fit the needs of learners, all institutions can shift to a model that better responds to the demands and challenges of a changing world. Putting learners first cannot be mere rhetoric. It must become the core of both our individual institutions and our collective system of higher education. The unique challenges of the present demand that colleges and universities act with a sense of speed, alacrity, and purpose. We must hold ourselves accountable for quality, value, and outcomes that matter to each learner.

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## Guiding Principles



### FOCUS ON LEARNER OBJECTIVES

Institutions should adopt mechanisms to better understand and design for learners' goals and outcomes. This means developing flexible offerings that can meet a range of needs and recognizing that economic opportunity is the goal for many learners. With this in mind, institutions must consider how their offerings align with real-world opportunities for learners and tailor the educational experience to match learners' needs.



### EMBRACE LIFELONG LEARNING

Postsecondary learning happens both inside and outside of formal education. Institutions need to create the systems and infrastructure to not just acknowledge other forms of learning, but also complement and partner with other stakeholders (e.g., employers, certification providers, alternative training providers) to help learners achieve their objectives.



### EQUITY AND INCLUSION BY DESIGN

The pandemic has exacerbated access and achievement gaps for learners with the greatest needs. Those with the fewest resources are most likely to be further disadvantaged in today's higher education system. We must be willing to recognize the historic access and achievement gaps among underserved populations and put resources forward to solve them.



### TRANSPARENCY: OWNING OUR RESULTS

To best serve learners, institutions must make it easier to navigate entry into an institution and provide clearer pathways to completion and opportunity. Institutions should be transparent about their programs' return on investment and must ultimately be held accountable for quality, value, and meeting learners' desired outcomes. This will require a new and bold approach to quality assurance and policy.

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### SIGNALING THROUGH SKILLS

Degrees, certifications, licenses, and badges are valuable as a signal of the skills learners possess. We must help learners develop skills that matter for today's employers, as well as empower them to communicate and leverage their skills from learning and working throughout their lifetime.



### OUTCOMES-CENTRIC INNOVATION

Institutions should deploy the personalized technology and innovation that learners need to succeed in their intended pathway. Innovation should be measured based on the value it creates for learners.



### CULTURES OF SERVICE

Higher education must reorient from an institution-centered design to a learner-centered design. This includes giving learners control of the time, place, and pace of learning as well as allowing them to take advantage of personalized support systems based on their needs and objectives.



### CROSSING BOUNDARIES

To meet the needs of learners who have increasingly limited resources, institutions must work together. By uniting with employers, K-12 education, government, and other training providers, we can collectively put learners' needs first.



### END THE BROKEN ECONOMICS OF LEARNING

Higher education must rapidly update a financial model that is under intense pressure from the economic downturn while offering affordable programs that are in high demand and yield interoperable credits and credentials. Traditional higher education finance programs, including federal student aid programs, must evolve into outcomes-based funding models that both minimize the risk of bad outcomes and shift that risk from learners.



### MODERNIZE POLICY

Policymakers should develop a bold agenda to reimagine the way we invest in human potential. We need a system that is flexible, workforce-aligned, and learner-centered. Government agencies must integrate resources to better meet the needs of learners, employers, and educators.

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## Who We Are

The Presidents Forum is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization of college and university presidents and chancellors as well as leading education stakeholders committed to reinventing higher education for our diverse student population – traditional, non-traditional, and working learners. We are dedicated to the continuous reinvention of higher education and exploring transformative education models by sharing knowledge, implementing best practices, and making policy recommendations.

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