



Aligning Higher Education to the Changing World of Work



The Workforce Imperative

The economic crisis of the past year has resulted in a period of labor market disruption and talent migration unrivaled in United States history since the first wave of the Industrial Revolution. More than 10 million workers are still unemployed or have stopped looking for work completely. Millions more face the daunting task of retooling for new and entirely unfamiliar industries as the economy inches closer to a full reopening and the availability of COVID-19 vaccines increases.

At the same time, despite record-low labor force participation, employers published more than six million job postings in January 2020, according to [analysis](#) from the labor market analytics firm Emsi.

Workers are at the crossroads of difficult career and educational decisions. Rather than return to higher education for two or four years, many are increasingly focused on rapid reskilling and upskilling through short-term programs that can enable them to make occupational leaps at a substantially lower cost. “As we’ve seen throughout the pandemic, it is clear that learners need access to affordable bursts of learning now more than ever,” says Paul LeBlanc, president and CEO of Southern New Hampshire University.

But what’s less clear is how well-positioned higher education is, writ large, to address the challenges of today’s labor market. There is a growing disconnect between the skills that graduates possess and those that employers need. That challenge compounds many of the longstanding business, operational, and demographic challenges facing colleges and universities.

College enrollments have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, with prospective students and returning adults—many of them already saddled with student debt—nervous about footing the bill for a college credential without guaranteed employment at the end. Institutional finances are, in many places, on the brink: the sector took an estimated \$120 billion hit in financial losses from lost revenue and the cost of reopening during 2020 alone.

But the pandemic is not solely to blame for this disconnect. In fact, this phenomenon is not new. [Recent surveys](#) show one in four Americans without a degree believe that a degree will not improve their career opportunities. Over the past decade, there has been growing skepticism of the value and workforce relevance of higher education in light of rapid changes to the world of work. In just the past three years, over one-third of the skills required for jobs across

all industries [have changed](#), and in summer 2020, nearly three in five displaced workers [were not confident](#) that they could find a new job that would be a good fit for their skillset.

Failing to respond to this challenge will put American higher education at risk of further enrollment and budgetary decline for years, if not decades, to come—and threaten the sustainability of the academic enterprise itself. But perhaps just as importantly, this dynamic threatens the ability of colleges and universities to achieve their full promise of social and economic mobility.

The current period of labor market uncertainty presents both a challenge and an opportunity for institutions of higher education: they must find ways to align with this new world of work and build trust with the American public. Workers find themselves in a labor market with a relatively high degree of liquidity, despite the unprecedented job losses resulting from the pandemic. While they may be out of work, they can reinvent and equip themselves for new industries at a rapid pace.

Colleges and universities are undergoing a reinvention of their own, mobilizing and responding to the imperative of workforce relevance with a fierce urgency and intense

focus. If colleges seize this moment, they can serve as engines for economic recovery at a time when their students and communities are experiencing economic trauma.

But such a shift requires commitment and intentionality. Last fall, the Presidents Forum released the [Learners First framework](#) to give institutions a model for how to prioritize learners in their decision-making and operations. Building on that framework, in January 2021, the Presidents Forum convened higher education and workforce experts along with students to explore how institutions can meet the needs of their learners in the dramatically evolving world of work. This primer is the result of that discussion and offers five strategies to better align higher education and the labor market.

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“Like many Americans, students across the country are struggling with hunger, evictions, unemployment, mental health issues, societal divisions, racial injustice, issues of inequity and more— all at once,” said President Smith. “This calls for collaborative and definitive action from higher learning institutions to rethink how we meet the needs of learners.”

— Kate Smith
Interim President, Rio Salado College

FIVE STRATEGIES

FOR ALIGNING HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE WORLD OF WORK

1. TREAT EMPLOYERS AS CUSTOMERS, NOT END USERS.



An interest in fostering stronger relationships between colleges and industry is nothing new, but it has achieved uneven results in the history of American higher education. As such, a shift is required in the way that colleges and universities engage employers as partners.

It's also important to recognize that employers don't have all the answers. They may struggle to articulate which skills they need and find it difficult to navigate college and university curricula and bureaucracy. This is all the more reason that effective industry partnerships must be holistic, supportive and reciprocal rather than transactional.

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Engagement is more than just soliciting advice and feedback through advisory councils and one-off meetings—higher education must instead foster deeper and more sustained [relationships](#) that do not always come naturally to the world of academia. This requires a two-way dialogue between professionals in both industries to find solutions—not only repurposing existing programs to match employer demand, but in some cases creating new ones.

Dallas College has embraced the “employer as customer” model through a degree pathway [collaboration](#) with Amazon. Students who complete Amazon's 12-week mechatronics and robotics apprenticeship program and complete the remaining required coursework may earn an associate's degree from Dallas College in advanced manufacturing and mechatronics technology. The program is helping Amazon meet its goals of advancing equity and inclusion in STEM education in its major recruiting hubs while addressing regional workforce demand. The college is also retraining low- and middle-skill workers for higher-paying jobs in IT through a [Google IT Support Specialist Certificate](#) developed in partnership with the national nonprofit JFF.

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Howard engaged a national computer science education nonprofit called CodePath.org to develop an open-source [“computer science education curriculum”](#)—with curriculum created for and used by tech giants such as Uber, Facebook and Airbnb—that faculty and student groups can use for free.

Students participating in the program receive career coaching and interview prep, helping them develop differentiated and industry-relevant skills to land jobs with prestigious tech employers.

In a similar vein, Excelsior College is working to create a [pipeline](#) of skilled cybersecurity professionals as one of the lead academic partners for the U.S. Department of Defense and National Security Agency's Cybersecurity Education Diversity Initiative. The initiative is helping to expand access to cybersecurity education in underserved communities, providing a vital boost to the national intelligence and cybersecurity workforce at a time when the United States is facing a rash of emerging cyberthreats from adversaries.

Ivy Tech Community College has worked with Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana and local high schools to develop their new T4 Academy attracting diverse young talent into a blended work-and-learn experience alongside dual credit to complete career pathways resulting in technical certificates and associate degrees. Student demand for these positions has far exceeded those available in its first two years.

UMassOnline developed a strategic alliance with Mass General Brigham, the largest private employer in the state, to allow employees to earn a bachelor's degree in business administration fully online. This effort is part of Mass General Brigham's Workforce Development program. The curriculum will be tailored specifically to Mass General Brigham's employees and workforce needs in a field that is expected to grow by 14% in the next ten years.

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Importing education and training methods that employers trust is another approach that is gaining traction among forward-thinking universities and colleges. National University, a California-based non-profit university pioneering an operational strategy called "precision education," launched a new MBA program in leadership in collaboration with the university's Workforce Education Solutions team Center for Creative Leadership, an executive education nonprofit that works with major corporations and federal agencies. The degree will infuse the MBA, taught by School of Business and Management faculty, with the same leadership training methods used by Fortune 1000 companies and award students microcredentials for specific leadership competencies along the way.

2. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING BEYOND A DEGREE.



As our nation shifts to a system of lifelong learning, ranging from formal degrees and certificates to upskilling programs, work-based learning and one-off online courses, institutions need to let go of the idea of a bachelor's degree as an endpoint for learning.

Employers and education providers will continually have to collaborate in order to produce programs that drive results for learners. Institutions must focus on pathways that offer on- and off-ramps, allowing learners to earn short-term credentials that lead to workforce outcomes. Shifting institutions' mindset will unlock more opportunities for them to pursue partnerships and be responsive to learners' needs at all stages of their learning journeys. Despite higher education enrollment decreases over the past year, interest has significantly [increased](#) during the pandemic in shorter, career-aligned credentials.

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Ivy Tech Community College has increased short-term certificates by 80% in 3 years to nearly 20,000 per year with expected continued growth to meet employer demand. Many of these certificates are state scholarship-eligible through Indiana’s Next Level Jobs, high demand short term credentials prioritized by the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet. More than 6,000 credentials have been earned by adult learners at Ivy Tech since 2017. All short-term credentials are designed to be “stackable” towards an associate, bachelors, and/or advanced degrees.

Colleges will need to overcome structural barriers in order to show the value of short-term credentials, which don’t neatly translate into credit hours. “Degrees are still the coin of the realm,” said David Schejbal, the president of Excelsior College, in a [2020 interview](#) with Inside Higher Ed. “The reality is that we don’t have any kind of common medium the way we do with credit hours and degrees that allows for easy credit transfer or understanding from employers.”

The fact that learners now access higher education throughout their lives means that institutions will have to tailor their programs to the needs of working adults—and create structures and supports that help them balance busy, complicated lives.

In the aftermath of the most profound economic crisis in generations, colleges and universities are finding success by focusing even more explicitly on serving displaced workers. BYU-Pathway Worldwide is pioneering a [“certificate first”](#) approach that helps students get multiple short-term certificates while on a degree pathway, boosting employability and ensuring that all courses have a purpose and build toward either a certificate or degree.

“If you were designing [college] from scratch,” [said](#) BYU-Pathway Worldwide president Clark Gilbert in

an interview with Wired, “this is how you’d do it.” The “certificate first” approach has helped [boost](#) student retention by more than 20 percentage points.

Wake Technical Community College has implemented a similar practice, developing microcredentials that stack into and out of its applied associate’s degree programs. That expands the value chain for students and offers a more immediate return on investment.

3. GET SPECIFIC: LINK COURSEWORK AND COMPETENCIES.



The COVID-19 pandemic has decimated many industries and given new life to others, further shortening the life spans of relevant job skills. As a result, the technical skills that are most relevant at the start of a four-year degree program can be obsolete by the end.

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“There are a growing number of jobs that are going unfilled because our current hiring practices are not surfacing qualified candidates. Degrees are a signal of an individual’s capabilities and capacity for learning, but they are not perfect,” [wrote](#) Scott Pulsipher, the president of Western Governors University, in Forbes. “Just think of the intense interviewing processes to secure a job. As technology improves, so does our ability to assess individuals more accurately, and to begin to understand the precise competencies they possess.”

To adapt to this new reality, institutions must focus on preparing students with [employability skills](#) that will resonate throughout their careers as well as creating short-term credentials that focus on in-demand skills. Institutions should ensure that their curricula for such programs include industry-specific context and are taught by professors with industry experience.

Ivy Tech is partnering with local employers and the national nonprofit Education Design Lab to build new “micropathways” to help students upskill for roles in fast-growing industries such as advanced manufacturing and IT. Using [seed funding](#) from an accelerator for community colleges, the program will launch in May 2021 and help displaced workers access and complete a short-term, industry-recognized credential. This work further contemplates the intersection of credit, no-credit, industry certifications, PLA, and badging to both honor the adult student’s journey and align more effectively and efficiently to employer needs.

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Colleges and universities can also put in place new infrastructure to recognize experiences that workers are gaining on the job that can and should count toward a degree or certificate. Charter Oak State College in Connecticut, for example, created an employee education benefits program for the [American Red Cross](#), the world’s largest humanitarian network and the largest supplier of blood and blood products. Employees in the Blood Services division can receive college credit for continuing education courses taken through two internal certifications offered by the Red Cross, accelerating their path to a degree or credential.

Capella University, meanwhile, has developed another unique approach to linking its undergraduate and graduate offerings with skills needed by employers. In

2020, Capella announced a partnership with Fraser, Minnesota’s largest provider of early childhood mental health and autism support services. The relationship builds on Capella’s history of well-developed clinical mental health counseling and applied behavior analysis degree programs and preparing graduates who are ready for licensed practice. Capella serves as Fraser’s education partner, helping to upskill their staff and current employee base, while addressing a growing demand for behavioral health specialists who can help individuals with autism lead a healthy, successful and fulfilling life.

Similarly, Walden University offers single-course and certificate programs that provide opportunities for its student body of educators, health care and public services professionals to fulfill licensure requirements, which can unlock salary increases and promotion opportunities.

A focus on meeting the demands of the workforce also extends well beyond simply accepting employer input. Innovative institutions are increasingly looking for creative ways to embed workforce-relevant educational experiences into general education courses and curriculum. Wake Tech revamped its math pathways to incorporate content and emphasize how the mastery of math concepts translates to the workforce, helping students see the real-world applications of their learning.

4. BETTER SIGNALING: CREATE A SHARED VOCABULARY OF SKILLS WITH EMPLOYERS AND PEER INSTITUTIONS.



Too often, the skills gap can really be a [communications](#) gap that ultimately hurts the learner. Higher education and workforce have different ways of evaluating and

describing skills and knowledge. Employers often struggle to assess job candidates' skills during the search, interview and screening process and rely on proxies such as traditional degrees and credentials that can be outdated and exclusionary.

The challenge stems in part from an overabundance of education and training options. Workers and employers are navigating a [maze of nearly one million](#) unique credentials and lack reliable and transparent information on the value of those credentials in their labor market.

The lack of clear signals and consistent communication between employers and educators is endemic. Tackling this challenge has become the new front line for institutions that are working to create tighter linkages between their educational offerings and the world of work. Some states, systems and institutions are turning to credential registries or collaborating with employers to develop new repositories of industry-validated skills and credentials, decreasing the friction with employers that occurs during the hiring process.

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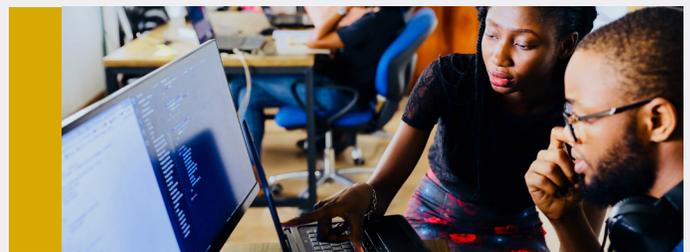
Western Governors University, one of the country's largest online universities for working adults with campuses in more than twenty states, is tackling this problem through its involvement in the [Open Skills Network](#). Launched with support from employers, education groups and technology providers, the consortium is helping to build a common language around employer-validated skills, which makes workforce training easier for job-seekers and more efficient for education providers and employers.

For institutions that serve populations such as working adults and veterans, this challenge is nothing new.

Translating the skills that adult learners bring to the table to the needs of employers is a continuous process—and increasingly ingrained in college and university policies and procedures. American Public University, where [82 percent](#) of students have a military background, provides [skills mapping](#) as a B2B service to corporate education partners, helping them pinpoint internal skills gaps and align their educational offerings with workforce demand.

Dallas College has undertaken an even more ambitious project to dissect skills and competencies and their value to employers—and empower its students and alumni with that information. Partnering with a Dallas-based blockchain startup, the college now offers learners “digital lockers” that securely store and display learners' information on a [blockchain-protected](#) digital transcript. A sort of “reverse Monster.com,” the result is a search tool where jobs go looking for candidates—not the other way around. The database of skills and competencies is searchable by employers, which helps bridge the divide between trained talent and hiring demand.

5. DESIGN FOR WORKFORCE EQUITY AND INCLUSION



The disconnect between higher education and the workforce is a major contributor to many of the skills gaps that disproportionately impact students of color and the lowest-income learners.

Institutions must do more than just recognize the issue; they must design and implement solutions that address the core issue of producing equitable outcomes. This starts by creating more inclusive and accessible opportunities for learners to enter and complete pathways to careers. A typical student

today struggles with accessing courses and campus support services, often balancing the rigors of college coursework with the demands of family care, work, and community.

Schedules and support services must be designed around the needs of these learners—even if they come at the expense or inconvenience of the institution. Mentorship [is also critical](#) to ensure that students not only have access to pathways to new careers, but also can visualize the end goal. UMGC offers a service called [CareerQuest](#) that offers adult learners career guidance and navigation and a suite of AI-enhanced tools that help students map their educational pathway to job opportunities. Ivy Tech is addressing the barriers between learning and work by offering [career coaching](#) services for its student population of working adults and part-time and first-generation students.

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Because of their diverse student populations, community colleges can play a critical role in fostering more equitable workforce outcomes. California Community Colleges, the largest higher education system in the country, is addressing the issue of equity through its [Student Equity and Achievement Program](#), which provides fiscal incentives for its member institutions to eliminate achievement gaps based on race, income and other student demographics.

“When it comes to workforce education, community colleges bring experience – and industry partners – to the table,” [writes](#) Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of California Community Colleges. “We know how to re-skill and get Americans back to work, especially since the high school diploma is no longer the gateway to a livable-wage paying job.”

Colleges and universities can also advance access and equity by focusing workforce education on underserved and often overlooked populations.

Based in Maricopa County, Arizona, one of the country’s fastest growing population centers, Rio Salado College has made workforce-relevant education a pillar of its educational offerings for working adults and online learners. In addition to degrees, certificates and other credentials built to meet workforce demand among the region’s fastest-growing employers, the college now has unique [reentry programs](#) for incarcerated learners in the Arizona Department of Corrections. This program is helping to ease the transition to employment for justice-impacted students while connecting employers with an underutilized source of talent.

SNHU’s Global Education Movement is serving another marginalized population through low-cost online offerings that enable refugees—displaced from education and work because of political, religious, or civil conflict—to earn a GED, associate’s, or bachelor’s degree. The program is helping more than 1,000 refugees in five developing countries achieve permanent settlement and economic security through academic support, career coaching and job-training services.

Countless other colleges and universities are similarly finding ways to grow their offerings while serving new populations. With the right design in place, institutions can advance their mission-critical priorities of access, equity and inclusion while also developing new pools of talent and meeting the needs of employers.

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CONCLUSION:

A Clarion Call for Higher Education

Higher education's quest to develop stronger connections to the workforce is nothing new; in fact, it dates back at least to the origins of community colleges in 19th-century America—a period of historical change that was markedly different, but no less profound, than today.

At a time when access to postsecondary education was limited to a fortunate few, the architects of early community colleges established new institutions to expand education and economic opportunity to low-income citizens. Built on the foundations of work-oriented technical and normal colleges, it was a movement born out of [Progressive Era](#) social reformers' humanitarian response to the social inequalities created by the technological, societal and economic changes of the Industrial Revolution. They found intense demand for this model in America's cities and created a movement that eventually spread nationwide.

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Today, colleges and universities of all types find themselves heirs to a similar challenge—with an equally compelling call to action. Economists have made the stunning prediction that 43% percent of all layoffs in 2020 may amount to permanent job losses. Few would have predicted the sweeping changes to the labor force brought about by the pandemic. But labor market economists have long predicted that technological changes such as artificial intelligence

and automation would eventually force sweeping changes to hiring, recruitment and talent management.

Institutions of higher education cannot afford to be bystanders during this period of profound economic uncertainty and change. Instead, they must become full and active participants in the development of talent. They can become [“workforce integrators,”](#) increasing their value and relevance to students, employers and communities.

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From navigating accreditation to building faculty teaching expertise in new skills and fields, institutions of higher education face many structural challenges to keeping up with changes. But it's increasingly clear that the limiting factor in higher education's social impact equation is its capacity to meet the demands of the workforce.

“The world of higher education and learning experiences are changing very quickly, and [so are] the skills that people are just going to need in the workforce. So how do we think differently about that?” [says](#) Gregory Fowler, the president of the University of Maryland Global Campus. “How do we create an agile organization that helps those students who may not be thinking about four-year degrees, two-year degrees or even sometimes graduate degrees but will still need new skills?”

Indeed, building new and more agile structures is the seminal question facing colleges and universities as they reassess their role in workforce development.

Just as learners are adjusting to an economy that increasingly expects upskilling and reskilling over the course of a lifetime, institutions must embrace a kind of “lifelong learning” of their own—continuously challenging themselves to find new and differentiated ways to impact the workforce. Aligning with workforce needs is not a one-time transaction. Instead, it constantly requires institutions to develop new assessments of workforce needs and find new partners and constituencies to meet workforce demands.

Institutions must be conscious of, and resist, the tendency to drift into the comfort of traditional models and methods. Instead, they should embrace the unknown and do what they do best: create new ways to advance knowledge and expand human potential. Ultimately, a quality credential is only as valuable as its relevance in the job market—today and for years to come.

“Millions of displaced workers are turning to higher education for solutions as they work to reinvent themselves for new roles—often in unfamiliar industries, as higher education works to serve an older, more diverse and heterogeneous student population, institutions should rightly feel a heightened sense of urgency to deliver more precise learning experiences that translate into career-relevant skills and a shorter-term economic payoff.”

— Dr. David Andrews
President, National University