



A Hard-Nosed Look at How Higher Education Can Reform from Within



The Presidents Forum is calling on higher education leaders to recognize and respond to the dramatic changes to education and work that have occurred over the past several years and accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Colleges and universities are still working to serve learners within the same policy, accreditation, and funding frameworks that have existed for decades. In the absence of structural changes to help institutions of higher education become more learner-centric and provide the supports that all learners need to thrive, institutions have little choice but to lead the charge themselves.

The Presidents Forum hosted [five convenings](#) focused on putting “learners first” that brought together over 200 university presidents, chancellors, and experts to discuss topics such as how institutions can [innovate around the learner experience](#), [align with the world of work](#), and [blaze new paths](#) forward within existing public policy. It also developed [a learners first framework](#) that includes 10 guiding principles for institutions to reorient themselves around learners.

The final convening, which took place in December 2021, focused on the culture change that is necessary for institutions to truly be innovative and make these changes in service of learners. Without significant changes in how institutions think about, interact with, and serve learners, efforts to align learning and to reorient around learners will fall short of their potential.

Based on the discussion in the final convening, this paper shares five strategies for institutional leaders to reshape their internal cultures to be more grounded in and responsive to learners’ needs. These strategies range from specific changes in institutional practice to mindset shifts that can transform all aspects of the institution. They are not intended to be all-encompassing or to summarize the literature around change management in higher education, but instead to spark conversation and fresh thinking among higher education leaders and decision-makers.

FIVE STRATEGIES

FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS TO RESHAPE THEIR INTERNAL CULTURES

1. ADAPT YOUR VALUE PROPOSITION TO RESONATE IN A SHIFTING LABOR MARKET.



Between 2019 and 2020, the shares of aspiring adult learners who believed that additional education would be worth the cost and would help them get a good job [declined](#) by 18 and 25 percentage points, respectively. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated changes in labor market demand that were already underway and forced millions of workers to change roles. The result is that there are currently [11 million open jobs](#), and [up to 25% more workers](#) than expected before the pandemic may need to change industries.

Institutions need to recognize these external shifts in the labor market and understand the opportunity in front of them to rethink their offerings to be more relevant and valuable for learners in the modern economy. That might look like partnering with employers to better understand their needs or designing new programs or delivery models to get learners from the first day of classes to stable careers more quickly and affordably.

Institutions can design [a variety of innovative programs](#) to meet this challenge, if they first change their cultures to embrace workforce alignment. One promising innovation is stackable credentials, which allow learners to enroll in a certificate program or associate's degree program, then stack those credits

toward a bachelor's degree as they progress in their careers and need additional training. Creating low-cost pathways within the institution to complete general education courses, such as Western Governors University's [WGU Academy](#), could also open up access to learners who can't afford or are wary of enrolling in a full degree program.

In some industries, standards may even be changing faster than years-long academic programs can keep up. "Skills are increasingly becoming the currency of learning and work," said Western Governors University president Scott Pulsipher. "A skills-based architecture will help create a future in which learners and employers can find better alignment between job-seeking talent and job opportunities, and make the value of degrees and other credentials more easily understood by the workforce."

To better prepare workers for these industries, institutions need to rethink the purpose and value of terminal degree programs. The best way to serve learners in this uncertain and changing labor market is to be flexible. That includes [challenging established dogmas](#) about how to measure learning and what credentials will advance graduates' careers and economic futures.

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2. FRAME PEOPLE, SYSTEMS, AND CHALLENGES AS ASSETS.



Since 1996, the number of Hispanic learners enrolled in higher education [has grown](#) by 240% and African-American enrollment has grown by 72%. And as learner populations have become more diverse, they have also taken new paths to and through higher education. As of 2020, 84% of learners commuted to college, 64% were employed while in school, 56% were first-generation college-goers, 49% were financially independent, and 34% were over the age of 25.

These demographic changes mean that some perceptions about the “typical” learner have become outdated—but they are often still reflected in institutional policies and practices. For instance, if institutions previously enrolled mostly full-time students who did not also work full-time, their course scheduling may inadvertently still leave students who do not fit this description with few options. Putting “learners first” is about ensuring that institutional policies and practices recognize and support all learners’ needs.

The concept of “learners first” is consistent with asset-based framing, a tool that [has been shown](#) to increase student success and college enrollment rates by shifting institutions’ mindsets about and approach with their learners.

“Asset-based framing is about putting the learner at the center,” explains Yolanda Watson Spiva, the president of Complete College America. “As it relates to using deficit-based language, if we say a learner is not college-ready, we’re saying they’re not good enough and they don’t belong here. We’re using language that essentially takes something away from the learner. Asset-based framing says, we are going

to make sure the institution meets its learners where they are and helps them succeed. Learners are more likely to succeed when we use that framing.”

Institutions should use asset-based framing across their student services, ranging from advising to course scheduling to financial aid. The Foundation for California Community Colleges, for example, recently supported the creation of [a series of guides](#) that help institutional leaders use guided pathways to promote equity. The seventh guide in the series [discusses](#) how to take an asset-based approach during the learner onboarding process, including by “validating students’ identities, preparation, and experience in a culturally-responsive context” and “normalizing the fact that all students will need support at different points of their educational journey.”

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Deficit-based mindsets can be particularly insidious in financial aid departments, where learners may feel inadequate for needing scholarships or loans to afford higher education and where deficit-based language may be baked into required paperwork.

Another area that is ripe for change is how institutions serve adult learners. Institutions sometimes view work experience negatively because it [can lead](#) learners to stop out or slow their education, but they should reframe it as a positive because of the skills and knowledge it confers and the benefits of having a diverse group of learners. They should also implement more supports for working learners. For instance, Purdue University Global’s [Alternative Credit Center](#) offers a pathway for learners to receive academic credit for their work experience and earn a credential more quickly.

When leaders adopt an asset-based mindset, it can help them develop policies and practices that foster a more welcoming environment for all learners.

“We’ve got to see learners as participants and collaborators in the learning process, not just recipients,” says Ed Klonoski, the president of Charter Oak State College. “And as we make that attitude clear—if they’re teaching and we’re teaching then we’re all learning – and learners see themselves as valuable contributors. That keeps them coming back.”

While asset-based framing is often used to discuss learners as a group, it can also be used in an individual context. Every learner’s journey is unique, encapsulating their motivations for enrolling and persisting in school and the barriers they face. As leaders adopt asset-based framing, the next step is recognizing learners as individuals and understanding how best to support them.

Institutions should embrace data as a tool to help them design specialized supports for learners rather than “one-size-fits-all” solutions. For example, Wake Tech Community College in North Carolina created the [Finish First NC](#) data tool to analyze learner progress. The tool shows learners which courses they should take to progress efficiently to a credential, flags for academic advisors when learners register for courses outside their fields of study, and helps learners who had stopped out of college re-enroll and complete a credential.

“Personalization and making learning more relevant sounds like mom and apple pie. It shouldn’t be revolutionary, but in many ways it is.”

— Joe May
Dallas College Chancellor Emeritus

3. DEVELOP LEARNER-CENTERED BUSINESS MODELS.



Even if institutional leaders reorient their language and thinking around learners’ individual strengths instead of perceived deficits, legacy systems may inhibit an institution’s ability to truly put learners first. For example, institutional budgets and business models often prioritize items other than what matters most for the learner experience and learner success.

“We need to build a learners first approach into our budgets because budgets are a statement of values,” says Roberto Montoya, the chief educational equity officer for the Colorado Department of Higher Education. “A tremendous amount of funds are put into capital projects, but we need the same level of intentionality and investment to support the learners who are in those buildings.”

Institutions should rethink how they allocate money for everything from financial aid to support services to ensure that their business practices reflect their commitment to learners. Those budget conversations should be specific and granular, says Amelia Parnell, the vice president for research and policy at NASPA: “I don’t think that we have done as much as we could to actually go item by item and say, ‘Are there places where we could spend differently?’ Take the whole budget and start over.”

One example of how institutions can adjust their business models to better serve learners is by revamping how they charge learners for their education. Learners are much more likely to be able to afford college and avoid taking on debt if they can pay as they go rather than up-front. Jennifer Gentry, a three-time Excelsior

College graduate who is now the Chief Clinical and Nursing Officer for Providence Health and Services - Oregon, says that Excelsior's pay-as-you-go option was a critical factor in her decision to enroll: "I really wasn't interested in going into a lot of debt to go back to school."

Ivy Tech Community College offers another blueprint for how institutions can change their business practices with learners in mind. In December 2021, it announced that it would discontinue the common practice of withholding transcripts from learners who have outstanding balances. According to [a survey](#) from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), public institutions that enroll higher percentages of Pell-eligible students are more likely to withhold transcripts for outstanding balances. This means that learners who are most in need are disproportionately affected by transcript hold policies.

"Our primary goal at Ivy Tech Community College is to prepare individuals to achieve their goals and contribute to their families and their communities through high-wage careers," says Ivy Tech president Sue Ellspermann. "This decision removes one barrier to achieving that goal and reorients our administrative services around learners, which is where they should have focused all along."

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— Ed Klonoski
President, Charter Oak State College

4. HAVE HUMILITY ABOUT NOT KNOWING ALL THE ANSWERS.



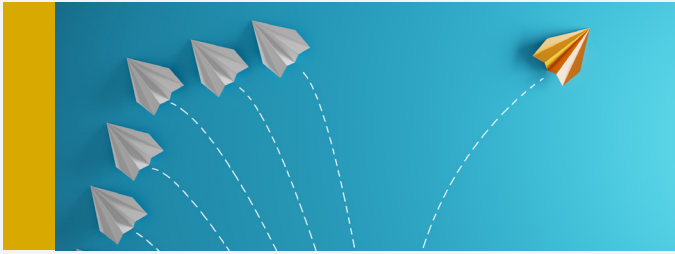
As institutions familiarize themselves with the concept of learners first, they may realize that they know less about the learner experience than they thought they did. The path forward starts by talking to learners, asking for help, and [listening intently](#) to the response.

When Charter Oak State College started offering distance learning courses nearly a quarter century ago, administrators weren't sure what term schedule was the best fit. They decided to offer some courses for five weeks, some for 8 weeks, and some for 15 weeks and then ask learners for feedback.

"The students overwhelmingly chose eight weeks as the format that they liked, even though very few people in higher ed were doing anything that wasn't 15 weeks," Klonoski says. "And we followed that. We offer eight-week classes now, all year long. So that was a case where we didn't know the answer to the question we were asking and we let our students answer it for us."

Crucially, institutions need to initiate conversations with learners, taking care to solicit input from a representative group of learners and over-sample groups of learners that would be especially impacted by the proposed changes. For example, not including adult learners in a discussion about how to support working learners would be a clear misstep. Then, institutions need to listen and use that input from learners to inform institutional decision-making.

5. LEARN, EVOLVE, AND OWN YOUR FAILURES.



It's unavoidable that institutions sometimes fail to meet their goals or best serve learners, especially when they are implementing innovative ideas and challenging the status quo. Failure is a necessary part of institutional growth, and institutions must learn from their failures and press onward with the important work of finding new and better ways to serve learners.

However, institutions often forget that recognizing and owning failure is a crucial component of innovation. For example, when learners fail or withdraw from a course, institutions often consider that to be a failure on the learners' part. Institutions should instead consider whether high failure or withdrawal rates are signals that the professor or the institution needs to make a change.

"Much of the challenge of putting learners first is being willing to put the institution second," says Jim Manning, the executive director of the Presidents Forum.

"Sometimes, ego gets in the way, and the impulse is to either chase institutional prestige or bunker down and

stick with the status quo. But what institutions will find is that, if they are brave enough to buy into the idea of elevating learners, it will actually pay off for them, too."

Rio Salado College even developed its own in-house change management process, outlined in the report "[Planning Transformational Change for Student Success within Higher Education](#)." The report offers a step-by-step plan to prepare for and implement the process. It is not just a prescriptive document, but also a tool to help leaders learn from the process of change.

Southern New Hampshire University also redesigned its organizational decision-making process to incorporate more voices rather than relying on a small group of executives. It trained facilitators, known as "meeting ninjas," to ensure that meeting attendees are regularly empowered and given space to share their opinions. And when the university established a \$5 million social justice fund, it incorporated similar principles, establishing three groups of about 20 people each with the expertise and passion to best determine how to spend the fund.

As institutions experiment with ways to elevate learners, they must not view failures as stop signs. Good leadership recognizes that sticking with a status quo that serves no one is the biggest failure of all, and that a program or policy not working as intended is just a signal to try again.

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CONCLUSION:

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The sweeping changes that higher education has experienced over the past several years, from shifts in enrollment patterns to the rise of alternative credentials, have created favorable conditions for colleges and universities to reinvent themselves to better serve learners. But institutions' ability to actually implement and sustain innovative ideas often comes down to the strength of their change management processes and the will of their leadership.

To some extent, most institutions embrace change: According to [a study](#) commissioned by the Georgia Institute of Technology and the American Council on Education in 2019, most institutions (57%) were planning ahead even before the pandemic. Nearly half (48%) of leaders said that change management was present in some areas of their institution.

But institutions can initiate change for any number of reasons, and too often in higher education, institutions do not place learners at the forefront of their decision-making process. This is where strong leadership can make all the difference in fostering a culture that supports a learners first approach and isn't afraid to experiment.

"Leadership matters, not so much in getting out and doing the work, but in creating that culture and being intentional about it," Joe May says. "Historically,

higher education has focused on the institution, not on the learner. But what I see today is leadership that is changing that culture. And from there, the staff can take it and go further than even the most forward-thinking leader envisioned. That's the ultimate goal."

It may seem radical at first for leaders to prioritize learners above all else, but in reality, it is the rare concept that all institutions should be able to embrace. And, if leaders are brave enough to be forward-thinking and shed historical policies and practices, they may find that starting fresh presents new opportunities for collaboration and progress.

"An essential mindset among leadership is a willingness to break some of the old molds and say, 'We are going to collaborate across institutions, we are going to build trust and work in new ways, which are based on our communal unrelenting and unyielding belief in every human being's potential,'" adds Kate Smith, the president of Rio Salado College. "If we come together as institutions of higher education with this common passion and belief, we will make real progress because we are keeping the learner at the center of all decisions. And that we can all agree on."

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