The Learner Revolution

How Colleges Can Thrive in a New Skills and Competencies Marketplace

Reflections from five years of applied human-centered design at 100+ institutions

Executive Summary
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Higher education is in the throes of a Learner Revolution that will fundamentally change the way students and institutions interact. We see the beginning of this movement now and will see all colleges and universities responding—or not, at their peril—within a decade. Trends ranging from declining numbers of traditional students, to the rise of artificial intelligence, to the shrinking half-life of job skills have conspired toward this wake-up call moment for all but the most exclusive global higher-education brands. At the same time, and partly because of the pressure, leaders are addressing the needs and goals of a changing student population. The calls for “student-centered” design can be heard throughout the ecosystem today, in a way that was just beginning when we started the Education Design Lab.

Colleges and universities must be much more deeply attuned to the twin pressures of learners’ decreasing appetite for debt and employers’ honing of their hiring requirements. That means, in part, an increasing focus on work-relevant skills and competencies—both technical skills and soft skills such as communication and systems thinking. Degrees as the most valuable workforce currency are beginning to give way to more nuanced competencies. At the same time, globalization and rapid technological advancements, including automation, are reshaping the nature of work, demanding that workers be more nimble, have a broader range of capabilities and regularly increase or revamp their skills. They will now need to extract learning from multiple parts of their lives to be credentialed continuously over the course of a lifetime. The liberal arts part of education, more important than ever, will need to be embedded on all fronts.

The same technology that is increasing pressure on institutions to lower tuition prices is also opening up new ways of teaching and of capturing and certifying learning. Through our work over the past five years, we have identified five major ways that savvy traditional institutions are combining both those demands and opportunities into new or revamped models:
Revamped Models

The Platform Facilitator
A few institutions will be able to fashion themselves into Netflix-style distribution curators, while others will be content providers for those platforms, licensing courses, experiences, certificates and other services.

The Experiential Curator
These institutions will double down on their role as the curators of expansive learning experiences, using advances in assessment, the maturation of online and hybrid education and the increasingly connected globe to provide, measure and certify transformative experiences outside the classroom.

The Learning Certifier
These institutions are recognizing learning across a wide range of contexts, in particular helping students codify, even gamify, their out-of-classroom learning experiences and translate them into a coherent whole that makes sense to employers and themselves.

The Workforce Integrator
These institutions are building deep connections with employers, ensuring tight connections between the competencies learners acquire through their programs and the competencies needed for employment in specific fields or jobs.

The Specializer
These institutions are taking a niche specialization or characteristic, such as religious affiliation, and reimagining it.

These models, while certainly not the only ones, capture a wide range of promising approaches for addressing the shifting demands of today’s students. They provide a framework for institutions to not simply be swept along by the Learner Revolution, but rather to embrace it.

The Education Design Lab is a national nonprofit helping post-secondary educators respond to the changing needs of both learners and employers with equity-based solutions.

To continue reading, download the full Learner Revolution white paper for free at eddesignlab.org/LearnerRevolution

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