

# Chapter 20

## Ever Upward: Building an Ecosystem to Support and Validate Lifelong Learning

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In a world where skilling, upskilling, reskilling, and career shifting are becoming the norm, and where lifelong learning is a requirement, models of higher education designed to best support the needs of learners and the workforce remain relatively limited. In the chapter, the authors discuss strategies used by Excelsior University's School of Graduate Studies to respond with agility to the needs of students and employers, including structures and processes used to better connect with employers and their needs. They highlight the development of high-quality learning outcomes, the creation of industry-aligned curricular and co-curricular learning experiences, and the development of stackable credentials to demonstrate how they provide students with flexible on-and-off ramps to learning and skill development.*

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Traditional, residential models of higher education have never worked for our diverse student body of working adults, active-duty military service members, industry leaders and those working on the front lines of health care, yet this is our primary audience. Excelsior University (Excelsior) students need policies, processes, and systems that remove barriers and prioritize access, affordability, and flexibility. They desire academic programs that help them meet their career and personal goals. Our students want courses and instruction that recognize and appreciate the learning and experience they bring to the classroom. They must have tools to help them validate and communicate what they have learned, regardless of where they have learned it. In many ways, the more recent macroeconomic changes have only intensified the need for more accessible and flexible approaches to postsecondary education.

As the second largest institution in New York State and backed by an inclusive mission of serving the historically underrepresented, Excelsior has been at the forefront of serving adult learners in flexible and innovative ways for over 50 years. As “post-traditional” students, our learners “...often make decisions to participate in or forego higher education based on and evaluated against a set of priorities that involve work and family, and shaped by unique adult-life experiences and responsibilities” (Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017, p. 7). Like authors in other chapters in this book, we are thinking more purposefully about the vision for the future of higher education, and we are developing and testing models that can better serve learners who are looking to keep up with the pace of change around them.

Despite the unique position of higher education to meet the urgent needs borne of these workforce and societal changes and the capacity to meet students’ lifelong learning needs, the sector is known for being notoriously slow to change, largely resisting the call to evolve in a coordinated way. As Schejbal notes, academia has developed a unique and strong culture over many centuries (Maxey, 2021). We argue that this strong culture manifests itself in numerous ways: the sector’s hesitancy—and sometimes unwillingness—to engage with employers in efficient and scalable ways, the continued reification of disciplinary boundaries, a one-size-fits all approach to degrees and credentials, the pervasiveness of pedagogical approaches that often lack career relevance, and the persistence of legacy bureaucratic organizational structures marred by inertia. As Bialik and Fadel (2017) write, “all systems persist in part because their elements continue to perpetuate them. Education systems are no different, making large-scale reform extremely difficult, despite the acknowledged urgency of such change” (p. 1). In a world where skilling, upskilling, reskilling, and career shifting are becoming more normal and where we argue that lifelong learning is becoming more of a requirement, models designed to best support the needs of learners and the workforce remain relatively limited, idiosyncratic, and piecemeal.

In response to the dramatic changes occurring all around us, Excelsior has developed a multi-faceted strategic plan designed to respond with agility to the needs of students and employers. Our approach places great emphasis on building an academic and learning ecosystem that provides students with opportunities to develop their skills and acquire knowledge, while allowing them to move more seamlessly between the world of skill development and the more long-term benefits of degree attainment. At the core of our approach is the idea of making learning industry-aligned, stackable, career-relevant, and portable. While much of what we discuss below may not be completely new, our approach has led us to reimagine how we customize, package, and bundle the various components in ways that work for our students and their needs. As part of their lifelong journey with us, students can access prior learning assessments, certificates, full degrees, and continuing education. Learners can bring in a portfolio of their prior learning and add to it as they move through the various stages of their learning journey, from micro-credentials to degree completion.

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