Chapter 22
A Model for Lifelong Learning:
Reframing Institutional Policy, Process, and Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

The higher education industry is in a state of significant transformation. The learners institutions serve are evolving, demanding new kinds of offerings and credentials that drive direct and clear outcomes. Unfortunately, the policies, processes, and partnerships that structure modern higher education institutions are still designed for a traditional model that no longer serves most prospective learners. This chapter—authored by The EvoLLLution's Editor-in-Chief—will highlight insights from higher education leaders across North America to frame a new model for higher education, designed to serve a next normal defined by lifelong learning. It will highlight opportunities for growth, identify challenges with the status quo, and provide suggestions for higher education leaders looking to form partnerships to explore these new options.

OUR ENROLLMENT GROWTH PLAYBOOK ISN'T WORKING

As an industry, higher education has historically been able to weather—and even benefit from—significant societal changes.

Since launching *The EvoLLLution* in 2012, it's been my privilege to collaborate with thousands of higher education leaders from across North America and around the world, sharing their insights on where the industry is and where it's going. This topic in particular—how to adapt to the shifting business realities of the higher education market—has captured the imagination of our contributors, subscribers, and readers for a decade. I'll be leaning on these insights through this chapter.

Recessions have traditionally driven growth for colleges and universities, and the logic is sound. When people lose their jobs, they need access to relevant learning to help them upskill or reskill to re-enter the labor market into a less vulnerable role. Historically, for every percentage point increase in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3809-1.ch022

unemployment, universities have enjoyed a 1.9% increase in enrollment (Barbu, 2015) and community college have seen full-time enrollment increase 2.5% (Johnson, 2015).

This logic held during the Great Recession (2007-2009). Enrollment in degree programming jumped by nearly 2.5 million learners—16 percent!—between 2007 to 2010 (Barshay, 2021). It was such a successful period for colleges and universities that the enrollment increases offset almost entirely the massive funding cuts imposed on public postsecondary institutions. In fact, tuition and fees grew significantly between 2007-2012—27% at universities and 24% at community colleges. In the states that suffered the most significant cuts to their funding, prices increased by as much as 30-40% (Long, 2014)!

The focus of postsecondary institutions also changed during the last recession. Recognizing the opportunity to attract and engage out-of-state and international students—who pay higher fees than their local counterparts—colleges and universities cast a wider net… to great effect. International enrollments grew 112% between 2007-2012 at public research universities specifically, and 30% across the board. (Fischer, 2019) This accounted for a 17% increase in tuition revenue generated industry-wide, and at some institutions international tuition accounted for as much as 40% of their revenue mix (Fischer, 2019).

All this is to say that higher education institutions have generally thrived in challenging times. But in the most recent recession—created by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders—the fates weren't aligned with the historical performance of the postsecondary industry. Unemployment rates during the early stages of the pandemic (between March and May 2020) were staggering. Over 30 million Americans—more than 15% of the entire US population!—filed for unemployment in the six weeks following the federal state of emergency declaration (Cox, 2020). For context, through the entirety of the Great Recession, 8.7 million Americans filed for unemployment.

Theoretically, this should have been a massive boon for the higher education industry—but that's not how the recession played out. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, enrollment has declined 5.1% (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). The trend has continued through Spring 2022. There are 1.4 million fewer undergraduate students enrolled than there were at the start of the pandemic—an overall decline of 9.4% (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022).

The fact is that higher education's enrollment growth playbook isn't working, and that's partially because the nature of the marketplace—and the demographics of the learners themselves—are evolving.

First, the results higher education institutions are delivering to degree holders have been lackluster at best. Even though most students enrolling in postsecondary programming do so to improve their career prospects, 43% of college graduates are underemployed in their first jobs (Burning Glass Technologies, 2018).

Second, many of the students who enroll never actually earn a credential. According to the Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation report, 13.3% of Americans aged 25-34 have some college education but no credential—neither a degree nor a high-quality non-degree certificate or certification (Lumina Foundation, 2021). In total, 39 million people have some college education under their belt but no credential (Seltzer, 2022).

Third, the average student loan debt is sitting at over $30,000 per learner (Kerr & Wood, 2021). Meanwhile, more than half the graduates from over 2,000 American colleges and universities earn less than $28,000 a year six years after graduation (Itzkowitz, 2019)!

And finally, learners don't necessarily recognize the connectivity between their postsecondary programming and their career paths. Specifically, only 25% of university students and 47% of community college students felt their institution does a good job at forging those connections (Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, 2021).

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