Why We Need Innovation

Is postsecondary education capable of innovation? Given the academy’s long history of research and applied breakthroughs, this question may at first glance seem ironic or insincere. However, despite its substantial record of innovation in medicine, technology, society, and culture, postsecondary education seems mired in tradition when it comes to student success, particularly postgraduate career success. For every university innovation like the CAT scan and electron microscope, there are millions of college and university graduates flailing in the world of work. Why can’t a sector that invented rocket fuel seem to embrace innovative approaches that ensure the career readiness and ultimate success of its graduates?

What Is the Purpose of Postsecondary Education?

When scholars conduct research, ethical standards require that all efforts be geared toward improving some aspect of society. At a minimum, we are to do no harm. With this in mind, it seems more than fair to ask two related questions regarding current postsecondary practice: (1) Why do colleges and universities continue to produce graduates who struggle so mightily to achieve their career goals? and (2) Why do employers continue to signal their dissatisfaction with the work readiness of college graduates?

One might argue that career readiness is not—or should it be—an aim of postsecondary education, and that such talk is simply part of the ongoing corporatization of higher education. However, as Busted (2019) notes, “Our national narrative about ‘college’ has created a decidedly false dichotomy between the two primarily professed purposes of college,” work and enlightenment (para. 2). Moreover, in survey after survey, students and their families consistently tell us that finding a good job is their primary motivation for postsecondary study. Specifically, in a 2018 Gallup poll regarding student motives for choosing postsecondary education, a majority of respondents (58%) said that job and career goals were their primary impetus. Respondents were more than twice as likely to select career outcomes than the next most prevalent reason (learning and knowledge), and these results were consistent across various higher education segments and demographics.

Strikingly, students who reported general learning and knowledge as their primary motivation were more likely to be
non-completers in comparison to those who cited work and career. Thus, assisting students with clarifying career aspirations for their studies may also prove to be a pathway to student persistence and completion.

Additional research suggests that career readiness is indeed a necessary part of postsecondary education. A study by Bates College and Gallup (2019) found that four out of five recent graduates believed having a sense of purpose in their work is “very important,” yet only 37% said that they understood how their work contributed to their life’s meaning and only 26% said they like what they do every day. Moreover, employers in the study noted that graduates’ employability is closely associated with attributes related to purpose-finding, and they also expressed a desire to hire employees who both know what they want out of work and personally align what the company is trying to achieve. As it stands, we clearly have what Bates and Gallup call a “purpose gap,” a gulf between students’ stated desire to define and discover their purpose, particularly as it concerns work, and the opportunity to engage in experiences that elicit such growth during the undergraduate years.

With all of this in mind, it would seem appropriate to put to rest the either/or debates regarding the purpose of college. Moreover, those of us within higher education should embrace the fact that postsecondary education is indeed a pathway to a better life via work, and a plurality of Americans view it as such. The recent spate of small college closures should serve as a wake-up call that the prevalent siege mentality regarding college and work will not serve higher education well; in fact, such a mindset may actually hasten the pace of such closures if students’ and families’ expectations regarding work readiness are not met. A new approach is needed.

**Meeting the Needs of Today’s Economy**

Not only do a majority of people think that the purpose of college is career preparation; many also perceive that higher education is doing an exceedingly poor job at meeting that expectation. Specifically, only 33% of students believe they will graduate college with the skills and competencies necessary to succeed in the workplace (Puckett, Pagano, Henry, Krause, Hilal, Trainito, & Frost, 2020). Unfortunately, this belief persists in an era when job-ready college graduates are increasingly in demand, yet employers consistently note that many students lack the skills required to hit the professional ground running. While employers acknowledge that many graduates are conceptually proficient, their lack of applied knowledge makes it difficult for them to position themselves as strong job candidates as well as effective workers once hired. This career readiness gap can be distilled into two primary categories: digital skills and relational skills.

**Digital Skills**

As Craig (2019) notes, 66% of the jobs created over the last decade have required high or moderate digital skills. To assist in training workers for these positions, Amazon has launched the Upskilling 2025 campaign, an initiative designed to re-skill one-third of its current employee pool (Braun & Latham, 2020). This growing need for digital fluency is not restricted to the business and technology sectors of the economy; as Braun and Latham (2020) point out, energy, manufacturing, tourism, education, health care, and food services are all experiencing rapid transformations due to innovations in machine learning and artificial intelligence. Thus, colleges and universities that neglect to provide all of their students—not just computer science or information systems majors—with some degree of technical skill-building will contribute to the glut of digitally unprepared college graduates entering the workforce. A survey conducted by Internships.com and General Assembly demonstrated that students are keenly aware of this reality, as 52% of student respondents said that digital and technical skills should be a requisite part of their education (Cision PRWeb, 2014).
It is worth noting that cultivating digital skills for today’s economy should not be seen as a threat to the liberal arts. Quite the contrary, the profound education students receive from a broad liberal arts curriculum is enhanced when it is paired with the applied digital skills necessary to succeed in today’s workplace. Moreover, when these digital skills are cultivated in the context of a liberal arts curriculum, students are empowered to develop a second skillset critical to their vocational success.

**Relational Skills**

Due to less exposure to paid work opportunities, Gen Z has larger gaps in soft skills than previous generations. This is problematic because many employers highly value non-technical soft skills such as written and oral communication, teamwork, decision making, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge to real-world settings (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Moreover, only 14% of employers believe that today’s college students are prepared with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute in the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2015). As the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has long professed, competencies like work ethic, problem solving, communication, and teamwork/collaboration continue to be valued across all sectors of the economy. In fact, NACE’s survey of employers (2014) affirms that candidates who can demonstrate their readiness with respect to such soft skills enjoy an advantage over their less-ready peers in landing an initial job post-graduation. Further, once these candidates are employed, they will also advance in the organization more quickly than those who lack the same level of competency.

While the liberal arts by their very nature provide a portion of this training, Braun and Latham (2020) state that such relational and cognitive fluencies are increasingly essential in the workplaces of tomorrow and thus will need to become more clearly articulated outcomes of postsecondary education. To this point, colleges and universities must do a better job of helping students translate their course learning through the lens of career-ready competencies. That is, educators should explain how course activities contribute to work readiness. For example, students should understand how oral presentations reinforce communication skills and how group-based project work builds collaboration skills. The academy must not only create the proper conditions for such competency-based learning to take shape, but also be intentional about helping students articulate the workplace value of those experiences to potential employers.

**Complex Challenges Require Multifaceted Solutions**

As is the case with most complex challenges, no one solution will suffice. To address the challenges discussed, colleges and universities will need to take a comprehensive and integrated approach, zooming in and out to look at both the overall institutional landscape and particular issues that emerge at the divisional and department levels. Innovation at the scale suggested here does not happen without this level of cooperation, and it will certainly require buy-in from all levels of the institution. Although whole-institution engagement is required, institutions can also benefit from initially creating smaller cross-functional teams comprised of capable individuals who are willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work. Such cross-functional teams should be given a clear charge and timeline from institutional leadership, as well as the freedom to examine and interrogate even the most taboo of subjects. This approach will support the innovation necessary to foster student career readiness through educational alignment with workforce needs.

While the most appropriate innovations will vary according to the particular context of each campus, cross-functional teams should consider the following recommendations:

- **Communicate with industry partners regularly, particularly at the local and regional levels.** Aligning employer skill, training, and competency demands with the education offered will be key in assuring that
students are both work ready and have a clear, viable path to employment. These conversations may also support retention of talent at the state and regional levels.

- **Offer for-credit credentials that are stackable.** Not all learners can commit to a two-year or four-year course of study. Moreover, their career goals as well as the needs of industry may not necessarily demand a degree. With this in mind, colleges and universities would be wise to create more intentionally designed, modular learning pathways that require less student investment of time and money than more traditional curricular offerings. What is more, institutions should particularly consider how to provide digital credentials so as to address the digital skill gap mentioned previously. The Institute for Credentialing Excellence (www.credentialingexcellence.org) is a helpful resource on this topic.

- **Create capstone courses that align with industry needs.** The capstone project’s hands-on approach to education encourages and requires students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to dynamic, complex professional situations. When conducted as part of a capstone course, capstone projects allow educators to build experiential learning programs at scale alongside senior business leaders from innovative startups, non-profits, government entities, and globally renowned enterprises.

- **Expand micro-internships.** Micro-internship programs connect students to a diverse network of companies and organizations to complete paid short-term professional assignments. They usually consist of 5 to 40 hours of work and can occur at any time of the year. They are highly specific, project-based positions, often in arenas such as lead generation, content creation, or data entry. Students receive a fixed fee, typically $15-$25 per hour for a set number of hours, and are given between one week and one month to complete their project. These experiences help students understand the current needs of the field even as they gain valuable marketable experience.

- **Encourage faculty to include career competencies as part of their stated course outcomes.** In addition to outcomes related to the course’s particular discipline, faculty should consider including some—if not all—of the NACE competencies as course objectives. Many undergraduate courses already include assignments and/or activities that develop these competencies, but faculty members often miss an opportunity to highlight them for students, who, in turn, are unable to articulate such competencies when they describe their learning experiences to prospective employers.

**The Prudent Path Forward**

As cliché as it may sound, postsecondary education is clearly at a crossroads. We can ignore the trends and demands mentioned above and hope that expectations from both students and employers go away. Alternatively, we can embrace the facts and lean into current expectations regarding postsecondary education and work readiness. While innovation can appear daunting—even threatening—more clearly aligning curriculum with the needs of the workforce does not mean an abandonment of general education or the liberal arts. Instead, a willingness to adapt the curriculum and overall student experience in order to create a clear, aligned integration between college and career will result in a strengthening of postsecondary education that is understood and appreciated by students, families, and employers alike.

Despite increasing competition from private recruitment and training companies, industry leaders still believe that colleges and universities can be the source of such pre-professional skilling (Puckett et al., 2020). Therefore, postsecondary education currently maintains the degree of public trust necessary to achieve successful institutional adaptation. However, that window of opportunity may not remain open for long. It is incumbent upon colleges and universities to take responsibility for meeting the needs of society while they control their own destiny, and in so doing, to realize their greatest potential for benefitting both students and society.
References


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