

Time to Re-Engineer Higher Ed for Working Students

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By now, it should be clear that we're not going back to February. COVID-19 has [changed](#) higher education irrevocably. The way Americans expect to learn, the demands on their time and energy, and the job market students will graduate into are forever altered.

Prior to COVID-19, colleges and universities were already struggling to meet the needs of many of today's students — of whom nearly [two-thirds](#) work, half are financially independent, and a quarter are raising children themselves. These students often cannot afford to go to college [full time](#) and balance school with a patchwork of jobs on their path to a degree. Most likely, the demographics of postsecondary education will continue to skew toward part-time post-traditional learners as recently laid-off workers look to gain new skills in order to re-enter the workforce. With good reason, workers without degrees are among the [first fired](#) in a recession, and few good jobs [go to workers](#) without at least some college, during periods of growth and recovery.

Institutions can't change overnight to meet this need. But the abrupt and nearly total shift to online education—while certainly not ideal from a learning standpoint—has demonstrated that colleges and universities can move far quicker than they thought. Now, we need a more deliberate focus on quality and design. We need to build for the longer term, but we still need to do so with urgency.

Fortunately, change need not be dramatic to have a major impact. As institutions make their way toward a new “normal,” they can take smaller steps to meet the needs of the overwhelming number of students who are juggling work, family commitments, and complex lives.

Take online education as an example. Earlier this year, millions of courses and tens of thousands of faculty moved online in one fell swoop, and with the pandemic far from over, many will stay fully or partially online into the fall. Colleges and universities should seize this opportunity to be more deliberate not just about online learning, but also about blended learning, which harnesses many of the benefits of both in-person and online education. A growing body of [research](#) shows that blended learning has better outcomes than either approach alone. Rather than treating blended education as a Band-Aid, institutions should approach it as a way to serve students better over the long haul.

That, of course, is a heavy lift. But institutions don't have to tackle the entire curriculum. They could make meaningful gains, for example, by redesigning just their top three programs by enrollment or the handful of general education courses that present the greatest challenges for students. The University of Central Florida, for example, [switched](#) some of its largest lecture-style business courses to blended learning a couple years ago—a move that was supported by [outcomes data](#) and allowed them to build in more active learning. Nevertheless, some students were originally concerned about these changes—not unlike the current pushback about the value of an online fall semester—which underscores the importance of regular, proactive communication with students.

As an alternative to fully blended courses, institutions could implement a single active learning technique, like project-based learning supported by online tools or well-designed online discussion, many of which allow faculty to extend the classroom. Even just one additional weekly touchpoint for faculty to check in with students can go a long way. Faculty could also flip the classroom, using an online learning management

system to deliver the bulk of class materials and lecture-style content and using face-to-face time—perhaps a reduced amount with COVID-19—to engage students in discussion, small group work, or other active learning.

Colleges and universities also should look more seriously at offering certificates and other short-term credentials. A recent survey by Strada Education Network [found](#) that a majority of Americans who are considering enrolling in higher education in the next six months are interested in non-degree programs, including certificates and certifications, or standalone job-related courses. This aligns with the urgency around helping laid-off Americans retool and get back to work.

Certificate and other short-term programs can—and should—be designed to stack into degree programs. Degrees still matter, as underlined by the pandemic, which has seen workers with bachelor's degrees be laid off at much [lower rates](#) than workers without degrees. But we need stackable pathways to degrees that also provide the intermediary credentials people need to obtain stable employment along the way. Ivy Tech Community College, for example, is allowing up to 10,000 learners to take free courses or training that will [immediately prepare](#) them for a new job and could also lead to a certificate or degree down the road.

Colleges and universities can move in this direction one program or meta-major at a time, perhaps starting with fields such as healthcare and technology that are perennially in high demand and currently face acute labor shortages. Take radiology—a certificate can lead to a job as a limited medical radiologic technologist with stable hours and [average wages](#) near \$45,000. That, in turn, can stack into an associate's degree program to become a radiologic technologist and earn a [median wage](#) of above \$62,000. The student still ends up with a degree but doesn't have to wait two years before seeing an earnings boost along with benefits

that can have an important impact on life. As institutions of all stripes—from community colleges such as [Oakton](#) in Illinois to universities such as [UCLA](#)—launch training programs for contact tracers and other pandemic-related jobs, they should also look at how those programs can lead to longer-term education and career pathways.

Colleges and universities should also consider prior learning assessment (PLA) as a means to recognize all relevant learning, no matter where it happens, and speed time to degree. ACE credit recommendations, portfolio programs within colleges, CLEP exams, challenge exams, and the like can play an instrumental role in building pathways for all learners, but especially working adults. Institutions can also step up during this time of uncertainty by simply ensuring that [credit earned at other institutions](#), including short-term industry-recognized certificates, can fully count toward a degree. [Too often](#), the nearly one-third of all students who transfer can find themselves further behind if their new institution does not accept all of their previous credits.

In all three of these cases—blended learning, short-term credentials, and PLA—starting small helps build the muscle for change, creates a proof of concept, and develops faculty champions who can credibly talk about their experience. Taking steps now is not only necessary amid the crisis, but will also pay off down the road in the form of greater success for learners and increased economic mobility.

Institutions may not be able to do everything at once, but they can use the impact of COVID-19 to make immediate changes and build a clear strategy for the coming year and beyond. Done thoughtfully, one step at a time can add up to big changes—changes that are desperately needed to better serve the students who need postsecondary education the most.