

# Presidents' Insights: 3 Reasons Continuing Education Will Define Higher Education's Future



# Introduction

Higher education leaders are concerned.

It's hard for them not to notice other longstanding institutions shutting their doors, cutting staff and dialing back programming without breaking a sweat. Lockdowns, the recession and the accelerated decline in degree enrollments—a symptom of the demographic cliff we've been approaching for decades—are devastating an industry that's been slow to change.

Deans, presidents, provosts and other senior leaders are realizing that survival (and growth) in higher ed will be determined by their ability to adapt.

Continuing Education and Workforce Development units are the stalwarts of this adaptation and are bearing the brunt of the responsibility for picking up the pieces. Given that nearly 70% of adults considering higher education prefer non-degree pathways, it falls to non-credit units to bring value-adding programming to new learner communities and drive degree attainment.

Although non-credit units are up for the challenge, they'll need more than willpower alone to be the knights in shining armor that institutions need them to be.

## Student-Centricity is the Dealbreaker

Delivering on the demands of the modern market requires a shift in perspective—one that's been a long time coming: centering all aspects of education around learner outcome and ease. To support CE and Workforce Development in the coming years, **modern non-credit units must prioritize learner-centricity within all areas of the student experience.**

The days of learners being bound for an institution based on location are long gone; online and hybrid courses mean that modern learners have a plethora of higher learning options to choose from.

As is the case with other industries, the most successful models are the ones that put fulfilling the consumer's need highest on their priority list.

This white paper will illustrate **what your higher ed peers are most concerned about in 2022**. It will show you **what innovations your institution needs to deliver modern learning outcomes to modern learners**—to the benefit of both students and their schools.

# 1. Greater Institutional Focus on Non-Traditional Learners

70% of learners fit the definition of non-traditional. Most individuals considering postsecondary enrollment are leaning towards non-credit offerings. Despite this trend, degree education remains in the spotlight at many institutions, closing the door on many—perhaps even the majority—of today’s prospective learners.

Even the number of high school students considering four-year colleges has decreased nearly 25% since May 2020, with less than half of teens planning to pursue that pathway (down to 48% from 71%). Regardless of age, your prospective students are not looking to spend several years and tens of thousands of dollars on a degree. Rather, the future of higher learning is flexible programming that serves learners on a per-need basis.

Thomas Stith III, president of the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), is **seeing a shift toward convenience that is quickly becoming the standard.**

“Students are looking for quick pathways—whether they’re retooling or reskilling or upskilling—and they want to measure that in a very short time period,” he said, adding that credentialing needs to change to acknowledge learning done outside of traditional academic settings. According to Stith, NCCCS is one of many institutions redefining its credential infrastructure to accommodate growing demand.

“Students want flexibility, and they want recognition of the additional credentials that they’re receiving in the workplace,” he said. “We’re having to make those adjustments now.”

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**Thomas Stith III**

President of the North Carolina Community College System

# Alternative Credentials and Flexible Programming Attract Non-Traditional Learners

The shift facing higher ed is an inclination toward flexibility. Learners want to engage with higher education institutions at their own discretion, when it suits their lifestyle and needs.

That's why alternative credentials are gaining traction in higher ed. Aside from discretely communicating clear competencies in job-specific areas (the kind employers are desperate for), alternative credentials appeal to your students' demand for just-in-time education. Without a lengthy and costly commitment holding them back, **microcredentials free up a greater number of learners to pursue higher learning at their own pace.**

What's more, the "stackability" of these shorter, skill-based credentials can prompt learners to pursue other credentials an institution offers. Why stop at one badge when adding another can lead to a certification? Further down this route, many of these non-credit learners can even find their path to traditional academic programming.

Higher ed is warming up to the idea as well. **Nine out of ten higher ed leaders say microcredentials support their competitiveness against emerging entities**, with seven out of ten saying alternative credentials will help them meet their revenue and enrollment goals.

Stith said short-term credentials provide a quick turnaround and clear return on learner investment.

"Learners might not be able to measure their higher education in years; they need a turnaround in weeks," he said. Stith suggested workforce credentials often take the knowledge and skills of an associate degree and modularize those skills so they can be developed more quickly.

"This way," he said "we help that individual gain the skills and experience to be much more marketable in the workforce. As we continue to look at strategies to serve our new learners, short-term workforce credentials are going to be key to the learners we're focusing on."



## 2. Student-Centricity in the Digital Experience

Changes in commerce have had a substantial effect on higher education, with eCommerce having a particularly strong impact on what learners expect from their institutions. Across nine global markets, research suggests that **seven out of ten of students want their institution to change its digital strategy for student administration.**

By a wide margin, most learners suggested that overly complex administration negatively affected their experience and impression of the institution in question. When asked to choose which attributes most influenced their decision to apply to an institution, over **40% of learners said a “high-quality, user-friendly online platform” was the most important asset in their decision-making.**

This statistic makes sense when you consider the substantial amount of time your prospective or matriculated learner spends in front of a screen—with most websites and digital tools built to provide a seamless, highly engaging user experience.

Madeline Pumariega, president of Miami Dade College, questioned whether institutions are technologically ready to deliver the user-centricity provided by companies like Amazon and Uber.

“The next set of disruptions for us will be driven by consumers, which are our students,” Pumariega said. “They’re out there today having an Uber experience, and they’re going to expect our institutions to provide the Uber of education experiences.”

One study found that **a third of all learners were unable to identify excellent providers of online education** when asked to do so through open-ended queries. This discrepancy begs a question posed by Pumariega: “Are we prepared for that disruption?”



# Offering the Uber Experience Is Integral to Student Engagement

There's no longer room for debate. Higher ed is unfortunately lagging in offering the seamless experiences that learners depend on elsewhere—and it's having an adverse effect on student enrollment, satisfaction and success.

More and more, higher ed leaders are finding that their school's ability to deliver high-value programming is only as strong as its ability to reach learners where they are. The more an institution can do to make the process of finding, evaluating and enrolling in a program as simple as buying sneakers from Amazon, the more learners will be inclined to enroll.

Pumariega outlined the simplicity with which programming could be delivered, citing Uber as an excellent case study.

"[Learners] get on an app, they know where they're going, they know how much it's going to cost, they know when they're expected to arrive, and they can select their preferences for the modality they can take," she said. She also suggested that the student's digital experience could be this frictionless.

Frank Dooley, chancellor of Purdue University Global, said it's ultimately a question of ensuring that non-credit units have the right tools at their disposal—tools that break down barriers between Continuing Education/ Workforce Development and credit-bearing education.

"What we're talking about doing is dedicating critical resources to address industry needs in our states," Dooley said.

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”

**Madeline Pumariega**  
President of Miami Dade College

# 3. Clear Pathways toward Lucrative Careers

Overwhelmingly, learners enroll at a higher ed institution to either land or advance a sustainable career. That's hardly news on its own, but what may be surprising is how critical seeing the ROI of a school's programs before they enroll is to making the decision to register.

**Seven out of ten first-year students want their institution to help them understand the qualifications needed for chosen occupations.**

On-campus career and academic advising isn't cutting it: *Seven percent of students at four-year institutions and 17% of community college students* rate their career center as excellent, and less than 50% of learners rank it as very good.

## Putting Career Pathways Front and Center Serves the Learner

Unlike many of higher ed's modern woes, the solution to learner confusion may be a simple one: clarity around career options and program outcomes from the get-go.

One of the biggest reasons for the decline in degree-oriented education is learner satisfaction with the outcomes upon (and often years after) program completion. Learners frequently cite a lack of access to viable career and labor market information when they first decided to enroll.

Philip Regier, CEO of EdPlus at Arizona State University, said that **relying on the old model of career services won't serve learners in the years to come**. This is where he says an institution's infrastructure plays a valuable role.

"We used to offer a set of degree programs to a learner and say, 'Which one do you want?' They'd select one and we'd tell them what was on the menu," Regier said. "But it's clear now that what we need to do is have much more flexible systems, that allow people to come into the system and access that 'menu' whenever they want it."

This is where the modern institution can set the record straight—by embedding everything a student needs to know about the potential paths that lay before them into the administrative framework. Learners should be made aware of more than the basic curriculum before enrolling; they should be able to quickly grasp where every offering can take them—including what industries these skills will allow them to work in, what roles they can pursue and what courses they'll need.

Rich labor market data is integral to the equation as well. A learner should, at a glance, be able to see critical information, like the average salary associated with a position, expected job growth and the number of people working in that role in the learner's local region. Such data are eminently possible to display, and it's entirely necessary for institutions that want to continue serving learners effectively.

Regier said institutions will need to heed students' calls for greater transparency in career outcomes.

"We need to be able to provide them with an understanding of what they need to advance themselves, and let them choose and move on," he said, adding that access to this data can be a determining factor in a student's long-term success.

## Your Student Experience Determines Your Institution's Success

From the moment a learner lands on your website, to the moment they complete their first program and eventually land a career in their chosen field, higher ed leaders have made it clear that the most successful Continuing Education and Workforce Development units will be those that build their infrastructure around the student's experience and outcomes.

At a time when higher learning options are exploding, it's up to institutions to differentiate themselves from one another (and other education providers). The solution? Prioritizing student satisfaction above all else. The more flexible, convenient and value-adding your non-credit education unit can prove itself to be, the more it will do to scale the institution as a whole.

To see how a modern learner experience drives learners to engage and enroll with your institution, [read our white paper now!](#)