

The Future is Now

Essential Conversations for Building Tomorrow's University Today

Hardly a day passes without a major new challenge for campus leaders. A change in federal policy, funding streams in peril, a sudden legal issue—any of these can put senior administrators in firefighting mode. At the same time, it's critical to keep moving forward, positioning the institution to prosper in an era of shifting demographics, increased competition, growing price sensitivity and tighter budgets.

Trying to advance these priorities while addressing the “crisis du jour” can be overwhelming.

Beyond immediate issues, leaders must ask themselves what the institution could look like in 5 to 10 years? What types of students will it engage? How will learning be delivered? What other activities will be central to the mission? How will the business model evolve accordingly?

To answer these questions, institutions are tapping the expertise of their professional, continuing and online (PCO) education units, and their leaders, typically seasoned administrators effective at serving today's students with an entrepreneurial approach to expanding enrollments.

It Starts with a Conversation

To get the conversation started, here are three realities currently reshaping the higher education landscape—and associated questions for stakeholders to consider in crafting the best path forward.

1 It's a Buyers' Market

The balance of power has shifted. Institutions can no longer rely on a steady stream of students from the usual sources. Today, student choices are unconstrained by time or geography. They have an ever-expanding number of degree-seeking, non-degree, and even non-institutional options. Students are increasingly focused on ROI and can easily use artificial intelligence (AI) and other tools to access comparison information.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ? How do we better align our offerings with career outcomes?** Most students pursue education to improve their career and financial opportunities. Make return on investment a key measure of program success and clearly demonstrate to students how your institution will help them meet their goals and signal skills and competencies gained.
- ? Can we ladder credentials to maximize return on a learner's investment?** Make ongoing credential innovation part of the institution's strategic vision. Prioritize program portfolios that facilitate a frictionless path over the learner's career trajectory. Integrate microcredentials, certificates, degree completion, undergraduate degree, and graduate degree offerings within each discipline.
- ? What's our path to greater personalization?** Nearly every other industry offers flexible options to meet consumer preferences. Students expect the same in their education. Give students choices in schedule and modality and credit for what they already know.

② Traditional Business Models Are Cracking

Tuition dependence is increasingly the norm, even as declines in the pipeline of traditional students are expected to continue. This dynamic has strained the business model to the breaking point, and yet most institutions have not sufficiently reoriented to serve the full spectrum of today's students.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ❓ **How do we ensure our institution is as effective in serving working adults as traditional students?** Traditional enrollment, financial aid and other operations are aligned with full-time, degree-seeking students. Align policies and procedures to meet the needs of all students.
- ❓ **In today's highly competitive environment, how do we leverage our distinctive offerings?** Take the unique features and assets that set your institution apart and develop programs that leverage those strengths. Design portfolios where your distinctive mix of faculty expertise, industry relations, alumni networks, geographic location and other attributes make you the go-to provider.
- ❓ **How can we strengthen collaboration with employers to maintain relevant curricula?** Strong employer partnerships are essential for aligning program offerings with workforce needs. While labor market data can inform priorities in program planning, only direct employer feedback ensures that programs continue to meet demands in rapidly evolving industries. Consider how to increase the scope of your industry partnerships.
- ❓ **Can we add higher lifetime value by expanding enrollment management across the student lifecycle?** Every student is a potential lifetime customer. Unfortunately, the traditional higher education model treats the student lifecycle as lasting 4 to 6 years, not 40 to 60. Expand marketing, enrollment, retention and re-enrollment capabilities targeting potential students at every point of their lifelong educational journey.

③ Entrepreneurial Leadership is Key to Success

Demographics, competition, and student expectations are evolving. With AI and other innovations, the pace of change is only going to accelerate. To thrive, your organization must be highly adaptive and comfortable operating with uncertainty. Innovation at the edges of the organization must be quickly centralized and scaled. This takes a certain kind of leadership.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ❓ **How can we create an entrepreneurial culture?** Thriving institutions operate like innovative companies. Test new ideas, with an eye towards quickly scaling what works and scuttling what doesn't. Identify leaders that are customer focused, adaptable and constantly aware of the bottom line.
- ❓ **How should we balance institutional goals with unit-level success?** The strongest leaders must balance institutional goals with unit-level autonomy, and innovation with economies of scale. Define a coordinated approach to innovation, aligned with a shared vision and administrative structure.
- ❓ **Do we need a Chief Online Learning Officer?** Many forward-thinking institutions have created the role of Chief Online Learning Officer (COLO) to address institutional silos around online learning and advance a shared vision. Much as the role of CIO emerged a generation ago to bring strategic coherence to a rapidly evolving technology landscape, the COLO is empowered to operationalize the vision for borderless delivery of lifelong, personalized education.

The Transformative Power of Online and Professional Education

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PCO units have long been incubators for new ideas. They are platforms for testing and scaling innovation, adept at delivering ROI across a broad range of student populations. Tapping PCO leaders to drive institutional evolution is a great way to balance the future with the now.

Leaders in online and professional education are addressing our current enrollment cliff, provided academic continuity during the pandemic, and diversified revenues during the Great Recession. As the higher education environment becomes more tumultuous, leverage that expertise to keep institutional evolution on track.

Start by engaging key stakeholders in online and professional education in a conversation about the institution's vision. Once a common vision of the future is set, empower PCO leaders to engage with their counterparts across the institution to advance the work. These leaders and their units are accustomed to operating independently, with limited support from centralized functions. There's no better group to stay focused on the horizon as the institution navigates the current storm.

ABOUT UPCEA

UPCEA is the online and professional education association. Our members continuously reinvent higher education, positively impacting millions of lives. We proudly lead and support them through cutting edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy. Our collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes. Learn more at upcea.edu.