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→ Innovation Amid Uncertainty

# Economic Mobility in the Age of AI:

## What Colleges Must Do Now


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As a new academic year begins, higher education stands at a pivotal moment. Rising tuition costs, a challenging job market, and the rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence have all contributed to growing uncertainty about the long-term value of a college degree.

National enrollment trends reflect this shift: more Americans are choosing to forgo higher education altogether, a signal that the traditional promise of college as a gateway to opportunity is under strain.

This erosion of trust in a college degree is particularly concerning for first-generation and low-income students, who often face the greatest barriers to entry and the greatest potential for social mobility.

To meet this moment, colleges must adopt new models that connect academic learning directly with pathways to economic mobility. Programs that bring industry expertise into the classroom are helping students gain practical skills, build professional networks, and prepare for leadership in an AI-driven work force.



## Traditional Campus/ Employer Model Falls Short

The default model of employer engagement with higher education — career fairs and recruiting events— does not meet the needs of today's students or employers. This approach misses a broader student population and falls short in preparing graduates for the skills required in today's workplace, especially as AI reshapes entry-level roles.

Consider the fact that AI is projected to generate 170 million new jobs globally, each requiring a new set of skills. Meeting this challenge will require new thinking and new models. It calls for meaningful collaboration between colleges and industry, combining academic depth with real-time insights from the work force.

Programs that build these collaborations with inclusive talent pipelines represent the future of how higher education can deliver on its promise of social mobility. This is exactly the kind of intentional engagement that the traditional, transactional model has failed to deliver.

## A Model for Impact

Five years ago, Aon, a global professional services firm, and Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York, launched a collaboration designed to go beyond traditional recruiting. The program includes new curriculum developed by faculty members who listened to industry leaders, new employment opportunities for students, and a long-term investment of over \$1 million by Aon to support student success.

Students gain access to internships and receive coaching from Aon colleagues who help them build confidence for full-time roles. Through the program, students also explore emerging topics such as cyber risk and intellectual-property protection — areas increasingly relevant to the future of work.

The results have been significant. To date, Aon has granted over 60 scholarships, internships, and full-time jobs to Brooklyn College students. Brooklyn College faculty members report a noticeable increase in student interest as students meet professionals and see their peers secure full-time jobs. At Aon, Brooklyn College hires are thriving as they bring fresh perspectives and resilience to the work force.

This model is not without its challenges. Aon and Brooklyn College have built a strong relationship by using their respective strengths and recognizing each other's areas of expertise. Real collaboration requires trust, iteration, and a willingness to adapt. But the outcomes speak for themselves.

## Lessons Learned

By collaborating closely, Aon and Brooklyn College have gained new insights. We must:

- Engage students early, not only in their final years: For example in 2022, Aon's participation in Brooklyn College's 'Executive in Residence' program facilitated personal connections with first and second-year students, laying the groundwork for future hiring upon graduation.
- Build sustained relationships between industry leaders, faculty members, and academic departments: Faculty collaboration with Aon embedded critical industry content and real-world examples into the classroom.
- Respect both faculty authority over the curriculum and employer authority over the needs of the work force: Our new risk and insurance curriculum aligns evolving industry demands with faculty-led academic content, including emerging trends like cyber risk and intellectual-property valuation.
- Track outcomes that reflect both career readiness and academic growth: This collaboration has supported students' transitions from classroom to full-time employment — and in some cases onward to MBA programs.
- Prepare students for the future by embedding AI literacy into the classroom: This fall, we will introduce Aon's proprietary tools into coursework, equipping students with the skills needed to thrive in an AI-enabled work environment.

## A Call to Action for Higher Education

To restore confidence in the value of a college degree, higher education must prioritize a path to economic mobility, which will soon hinge on our students' ability to compete in an AI-driven workplace.

That means rethinking how colleges engage with employers, not as contacts, but as deep collaborators. These relationships cannot be confined to the career-services office. They must be embedded across campus life, with faculty, administrators and industry leaders working together to ensure students graduate with the skills, networks and experience needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving economy.

Imagine a future where public institutions like Brooklyn College are recognized as top hiring schools across industries — not because they mirror elite models, but because they deliver on the promise of opportunity and readiness for the jobs of tomorrow. That future is within reach. The next generation of leaders is already on campus. Let's make sure they're supported, prepared, and equipped to lead.