

How Colleges Can Prepare Students for Jobs of the Future



- **Generating new programs**
- **Staying on top of industry demands**
- **Creating mid-career offerings**
- **Designing substantive work opportunities**
- **Blending classroom and career**

The Covid-19 pandemic created major disruptions in every sector, upending the economy, reshaping supply chains, and highlighting inequities in the service and health-care industries.

Those challenges have [played out on college campuses](#), too, as administrators were forced to throw out their playbooks and [help students adjust](#). Economic shifts are especially relevant as institutions consider how best to prepare students for careers. Tech skills are increasingly in demand, and institutions are under

pressure to ensure graduates are treated fairly in the workplace.

And getting students into a job is only part of the equation. Colleges must also figure out how to help midcareer adults pivot or build new skills, ensure career preparation begins early for all students, meet industry demands, and show students empathy and flexibility as the pandemic drags on.

Intervention from faculty and staff — incorporating career readiness into all levels of the college experience — is key to the success of those efforts, higher-education administrators, consultants,



Future-ready learning starts with career-connected education

Employers need higher ed's help. Our latest employer survey found that **55% of organizations have a skills gap** — simply put, they can't find all the talent they need. And the pandemic has intensified the challenge. We're seeing rapid transformations — and yes, disruptions — across society, with considerable impacts on e-commerce, supply chains, healthcare, and cybersecurity. These impacts have created an urgent need for programs that help **upskill and reskill** workers and enable them to thrive in a rapidly changing labor market.

That's where higher ed enters the picture. I firmly believe **providing career-connected education is key**. Through our **University Services**, we help institutions get learners ready for the jobs of the future, equipping them with the emerging skills employers need today and tomorrow.

At the core of focusing on career-connected education is striving for **high-impact outcomes**. For learners, that often means acquiring the talents to secure a job, get a promotion, or change careers. We help universities do this every day, conducting market research to **identify skill needs** so that what students learn leads to career success.

There's another way for universities to identify employer skill needs: team up with them. Partnering with employers helps universities learn about skill deficits at the source and identify opportunities to **offer skills training** to the employer's workforce. These partnerships are becoming a higher priority for organizations in every industry. After all, providing access to education is now an integral workplace retention tool. In fact, LinkedIn found in 2019 that 94% of employees would stay in jobs longer if their company gave them chances to learn.

Finding employer partners doesn't have to feel like a job search for universities. **Our Talent Development offerings include Wiley Beyond**, a learning benefits platform that connects universities with employees at companies in our employer network. It's an immediate way to bring programs to workers seeking new skills or community college grads ready to transfer to a four-year school.

Readying students for the jobs of the future starts now. Higher ed can lead the charge by focusing on **accessibility, affordability, and quality outcomes** targeting the most relevant career skills. This approach creates a win-win-win, allowing higher ed institutions, employers, and learners to thrive together.

Onward,

Todd Zipper
Executive Vice President and General Manager
Wiley University Services

and researchers said. And connecting students to employers through internships, project-based learning, and networking should happen consistently throughout the college years.

“The model can no longer be ‘We have a career center. Come see us,’” said Jeremy Podany, founder and chief executive of the Career Leadership Collective, which advises colleges on career preparation.

Here are five strategies colleges can consider as they try to prepare students for a world that has been upended by Covid-19.

Generating new programs

The pandemic highlighted the need for tech-savvy workers and spurred colleges to find creative ways to help students quickly build skills.

Blue Ridge Community College, in North Carolina, has turned some previously 16-week courses into eight-week courses to help students complete an associate degree faster than the typical two years. The shorter timeframe means students can complete more classes within a semester, President Laura Leatherwood said.

And the college started using simulation software in nursing, biology, and chemistry courses. The software made it possible for nursing, surgical-technology, and nurse-aide students to experience what a clinical rotation would be like after the pandemic curtailed in-person opportunities.

The Education Design Lab — a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that designs, tests, and implements new models for higher education — is in the second year of an effort to invest in community colleges and create microcredentials aimed at high-demand industries. (The Lab [calls them](#) micro-pathways: two or more stackable credentials that can be completed within a year and result in a job at or above the local median wage).

The first cohort, which worked together from October 2020 to December 2021, developed [30 pathways](#) in sectors including hospitality, health care, and IT.

The Colorado Community College System, Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona, Bunker Hill Community College in Boston,

and the Community College of Philadelphia make up the second cohort.

Four-year colleges are also creating programs to meet demand.

Caldwell University in New Jersey will offer a supply-chain management degree starting in the fall of 2022. In [announcing](#) the program, the university cited Bureau of Labor Statistics [data](#) projecting 30 percent growth in the field from 2020 to 2030. Belmont University, in Nashville, [started](#) a similar degree in the fall of 2021.

Since 2020, Ouachita Baptist University, in Arkansas, has added programs to meet the health-care needs of its region: a master’s degree in applied behavior analytics and a graduate certificate in dietetics that will be ramped up to a full master’s program in the fall of 2022. OBU also got the state accreditor’s initial approval in January for a bachelor of science in nursing.

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Staying on top of industry demands

Preparing students for the work force requires that colleges are up to speed on what employers want. Approaches include encouraging faculty and staff to join local associations, and coaching faculty on building relationships with employers.

Colleges can also assemble groups of local companies for panel discussions. In December 2021 Blue Ridge Community College and the Henderson County (N.C.) Partnership for Economic Development [held a forum](#) for about 60 manufacturing companies to discuss labor shortages in the area. One idea that came out of the session was creating an employer-led task force focused on inclusive hiring practices.

In many cases, employers are seeking workers with tech skills. Some tech giants have taken on the necessary training themselves: Amazon Web Services [has vowed](#) to offer free cloud-computing

training to 29 million people worldwide by 2025. And Tesla [has partnered](#) with community colleges to incorporate its intensive training program into automotive and manufacturing curricula.

Colleges can also play a key part in ensuring job quality for their graduates by asking companies about flexible work arrangements, benefits, and future promotion opportunities, said Iris Palmer, deputy director for community colleges at New America, a public-policy think tank.

Palmer also said colleges should talk to employers about equity issues — and hold them accountable for recruiting and hiring diverse employees. It’s important, higher-education observers said, given work-force trends.

Women’s participation in the labor force remains below its pre-pandemic rate, according to January data. And Black Americans ended 2021 with an unemployment rate of 7.1 percent, compared with 4.9 percent for Hispanic workers and 3.2 percent for white workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Creating midcareer offerings

Extra flexibility is key when working with adult learners, who are often juggling family needs and working part-time or full-time jobs.

While full-time internships still have benefits, such a commitment may not be possible for an adult learner trying to graduate quickly or for a student who already has a job.

A 2020 study of working students at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside recommended maintaining online offerings — such as advising appointments or virtual panels with employers — even after the pandemic ends.

Because of the demands on adult learners, getting those who have started a degree to finish it requires that a college can show the effort will be worth it.

Blue Ridge Community College has some experience making that pitch. It increased enrollment of students ages 25 and over by nearly 40 percent — to 848 adult learners — from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2021, with support from the John M. Belk Endowment.

The college targeted adults who were already halfway done with a degree, Leatherwood said. It created [marketing materials](#) emphasizing the chance to learn new skills and get a better job, offered eligible students full-tuition scholarships, and hired two success coaches who helped the students throughout the year.

Texas retooled its college-attainment plan to reflect the new pandemic reality for adults. The original plan called for 60 percent of Texans ages 25 to 34 earning a degree or certificate by 2030 — the reworked plan adds that goal for Texans ages 35 to 64.

High-value credentials, such as apprenticeships or short-term credentials, can also count. But a key consideration for the state is whether a student is better off for receiving that credential despite the cost, said Harrison Keller, the state’s higher-education commissioner.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board approved the changes at the end of January 2022. Keller said the new attainment goal is vital: Hundreds of thousands of Texans were out of work during the pandemic and needed new skills — particularly in technology and data analytics.

The state also learned that for adults with some college but no degree, a main barrier to returning to finish was a lack of clarity about available programs and outcomes.

“We don’t just need to advise students about pathways to earn credentials. We need to provide a clear line of sight to good jobs and to career opportunities,” Keller said.

Designing substantive work opportunities

Internships have long been a chance for students to gain work experience outside of classroom hours. But higher-education

observers are seeing a shift: Colleges are increasingly trying to incorporate work experience into courses.

While full-time internships still have benefits, such a commitment may not be possible for an adult learner trying to graduate quickly or for a student who already has a job.

Co-ops are one option. At the [University of Cincinnati](#), students can alternate academic semesters with semesters working in a desired field, work part time while still taking classes, or work on a single project.

Start-ups are also playing a growing role. Riipen, an experiential-learning platform, connects employers to students through in-course projects. The online marketplace Parker Dewey contracts with college students and recent graduates for paid, short-term assignments — for [example](#), reviewing 20 résumés and ranking top candidates for \$300.

Growth is also likely in tech and manufacturing apprenticeships.

Blue Ridge Community College has added apprenticeships over the last several years, centered on business, electrical, manufacturing, and automotive skills. The college saw its highest-ever number of apprenticeship applications last year.

Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College has apprenticeships for prospective carpenters, boilermakers, and iron workers. Those who complete an apprenticeship program have the potential for an average annual salary of \$70,000, according to the college's [website](#).

Blending classroom and career

Michelle Weise, vice chancellor of strategy and innovation at the National University System, noted that employers are increasingly dissatisfied with the proxy of

a degree, asking that recent graduates have “more and more years of experience.”

Preparation for students should include frequent conversations — directed by faculty — about how coursework relates to a career path.

It's important to explain the intent behind assignments and show students how the information will be relevant later on.

For Casheena Stephens, an assistant professor of practice in work-force education and development at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, those conversations are a natural fit in the career-readiness courses she teaches.

It's important to explain the intent behind assignments and show students how the information will be relevant later on — “making the connection so they can be thinking professionally and thinking in terms of the job that comes after” college, Stephens said.

And, career preparation shouldn't just be reserved for targeted courses, Stephens and others said. Every course can be an opportunity for faculty members to share information on employers and teach students in-demand soft skills such as problem-solving and flexibility.

“I think what we're all realizing, especially over the last couple decades, is the need for a much clearer connection between education and employment,” Weise said.

“How Colleges Can Prepare Students for Jobs of the Future” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.