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Aligning Lifelong Learning Programs and Outcomes with Employer Needs: What Research Recommends for Colleges

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It will likely come as no surprise to readers that the U.S. economy, along with the global economy, is undergoing a continual, long-term transformation toward an economy that is knowledge- and service-oriented. As a result, the changing and more complex nature of work is placing new demands on employers and employees. This change makes continuing education and lifelong learning more important than ever to the economic success of individuals, organizations, and even nations. In this context, the demand for lifelong learning provided directly to employers by colleges ("contract training") is as strong as ever. As colleges and universities seek new revenue streams, increasing their presence in the employer learning and development marketplace represents a significant growth opportunity that is a logical extension of colleges' position as a quality leader in the provision of skills and knowledge.

Across the last few years, Eduventures has conducted a number of research studies (all national surveys of 500+ employers across a range of industry sectors) examining employer demand and preferences for college-delivered courses and programs in a contract training context. The key findings from these studies suggest some simple actions that colleges and universities can take to better align their course and program offerings and marketing approaches with the needs and interests of employers. Considering these recommendations will enable colleges to improve their market share in the growing corporate and government learning and development market.

Position Content and Curriculum to Address Real-World Business Problems and Applications

Employers invest in education and training for a variety of organization- and industry-specific reasons, but common principal motivations include improving operational efficiency and profitability, complying with government or industry regulations, and establishing competitive advantage based on a better educated and trained staff. To the extent possible, curriculum and even marketing strategies should be tailored with these goals in mind. Colleges can improve their position by demonstrating how the outcomes of their courses and programs will help the employer to achieve these objectives, and it is within this context (of improved profitability, regulatory compliance, etc.) that employers make education and training purchasing decisions and ultimately evaluate the return on investment of learning efforts.

Additionally, when making purchasing decisions, employers prioritize skills-based training and the practical, real-world experience of faculty. The applicability of learning outcomes is paramount, and a chief complaint among employers is that college and university education and training offerings are too focused on theory, rather than practice and application. In addition to seeking outcomes specific to the curriculum discipline or subject area of study, employers look for courses and programs that will improve employees' skills in a variety of high-priority areas, including problem solving, interpersonal communication, teamwork/collaboration, written communication, and leadership. For example, a successful course, certificate, or degree program in engineering might emphasize a project-orientation, team-based approach. Or, a program in international business might integrate assignments that improve written communication skills, in addition to covering international business related topics.

Recognize that Customization is Key

Employers consistently emphasize their desire for greater levels of customization and flexibility in university offerings, and these capabilities are a key driver behind their frequent utilization of consultancies and commercial training providers. Of course, because of academic standards, faculty philosophies, and a variety other factors, the

true “customization” of college courses and degree programs can be difficult to achieve.

In the context of serving working professionals, there is a growing trend among colleges to incorporate real-world examples and cases from the employee-students’ employers and industries into assignments and discussions. In the case of a program serving individual employers (e.g., hosted at their work site), employers often expect that the curriculum will be tailored to the needs and current challenges faced by their organization or industry. The customization of curriculum is highly valued by employers, and employer-focused college offerings should be customized wherever customization would add value and be appropriate and feasible.

Partner with Professional Associations

Professional associations are the third-party providers of education and training that employers utilize most often, followed by consultancies, commercial training providers, and colleges and universities. Again and again in surveys and interviews, employers emphasize the value of colleges partnering with relevant professional associations—both in the development of and endorsement of curriculum, and as a marketing vehicle to raise awareness of courses and programs within employer organizations.

In many fields—from healthcare and finance, to project management and teacher education—colleges are developing certificate programs, degrees, and sequences of courses that are aligned with professional/industry standards, and serve as a pre-requisite for professional certification. In surveys, both employers and adult learners indicate that the endorsement of a professional association adds credibility and value to a college program. There are many opportunities for colleges to develop partnerships with professional associations that position the college as part of a select group of preferred providers, or even an exclusive provider of accredited education within a particular content domain. In online education, in particular, this trend opens up nationwide opportunities for colleges with strong brands in a specific niche to grow their enrollment and national impact. Moreover, professional associations—through their conferences, newsletters, etc.—are a primary source that employers turn to in order to learn more about education and training opportunities. Colleges can attract greater employer interest and better serve employers through programs that are co-developed with, endorsed by, or simply marketed by or in partnership with a professional association.

Engage Employers Through an Active “Sales” Dialogue

Historically, most colleges and universities have marketed their courses and programs to employers in a fairly passive way: for example, through direct mail, brochures, or telemarketing. Eduventures research suggests that a “consultative selling” approach is preferred by and most effective with employers. Simply, employers want colleges to visit their organization and have a candid discussion about their business challenges and how education and training can help answer these challenges. If colleges can map their offerings to these challenges and employers’ desired outcomes, a fruitful relationship awaits. This active, problem-solving-oriented approach also lends itself to identifying opportunities for customization, and ensures that the program will align with employers’ business objectives and desire for applied learning and practice-oriented outcomes.

Don’t Forget Customer Service

Finally, it is important to recognize that colleges have a reputation among employers as being somewhat slow, inflexible, an unresponsive to customer demands—relative to employers’ experience with other types of education and training providers (e.g., consultancies and publishers). Because most colleges are focused on individual students as customers (B2C), “business-to-business” (B2B) customer service is often not a core competency, but colleges will need to focus on and invest greater levels of resources in B2B customer service to have success in the employer market. In the employer market, customer service and responsiveness are even more important than in consumer education markets, as a large contract or significant pool of potential enrollments can hinge on the experience of one key decision-maker.

These recommendations are a starting point in optimizing the relationships between colleges, employers, and students. Eduventures estimates that the market opportunity for colleges to deliver education and training to employers is in the billions of dollars, providing a solid financial incentive to complement an economic or workforce development mission.