

RETHINKING THE FOUR-YEAR, ON-CAMPUS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

By Laura Yaeger and Peter Stokes

Today's student population is no longer limited to the recent high school graduate seeking a bachelor's degree. This growing audience of non-traditional students presents a significant opportunity for higher education institutions to take a more expansive view of who they could serve, and adapt accordingly.

Analysis shows that almost [three-quarters](#) of current undergraduate students have at least one non-traditional characteristic, including (but not limited to) being financially independent from their parents, having a dependent of their own or being employed full-time. The post-traditional student population (defined by the American Council on Education as adults in the workforce who lack a postsecondary credential) is up to [80 million](#) students strong.

The non-traditional market is not entirely new (institutions have offered continuing education programs for decades). However, delivering competitive degree programs, services and experiences that best support this audience—and create new, sustainable revenue streams—requires innovative thinking and planning.

Offering online or night course options alone isn't a future-proof strategy, nor does it add up to a rich student experience that many desire. Just as the modern student isn't bound by certain demographic traits, the future of education

delivery won't simply be a choice between on-campus or virtual degree programs. To attract and engage students for generations to come, and generate the funding necessary to grow, institutions will need to diversify beyond the four-year, residential model.

Investing in Student Experiences That Aren't Limited to the Campus

There has been a recent push for colleges and universities to [adapt their academic portfolios](#) to keep pace with student and skill demand. Evolving student and employer preferences present institutions with an opportunity to rethink not only what they offer, but also how and where they provide it.

Whether an institution is already experimenting with new delivery models or still building a case for change, broadening beyond the four-year residency standard can help better serve students and maintain a strong financial foundation by:

- **Expanding access to education.** Location, technology and price factors continue to act as barriers to entry for potential students. Nearly [41 million American adults](#) lack access to a physical campus, and three million of this population don't have the internet connectivity required for virtual learning. Between 2006 and 2016, college tuition and fees rose [63 percent](#). By designing degree programs beyond a choice of online or on campus, institutions can start

identifying new pathways that accommodate historically underserved learners from within and outside their communities.

- **Adapting to workforce needs.** [More than half](#) of Americans are concerned about the direction higher education is moving toward, in large part due to students not gaining the skills they need for careers. Major employers from Google to Hilton have responded to these pain points by dropping degree requirements for certain roles. Demand for programs that provide more tangible skill development is unlikely to subside in the near term. Talent shortages and increased adoption of automation will spark a wave of retraining needs, with [54 percent](#) of global workers expected to require additional skills in the next few years. Planning around these projections is a way of not only setting students up for future success, but also supporting local economic development.
- **Honing a new competitive advantage.** Not unlike recent patterns in healthcare, retail and other industries, emerging competitors promising a new model for post-secondary learning are challenging institutions' value proposition. New entrants such as [Minerva](#) schools are upending the student experience, with all classes offered via live video and students travelling internationally in cohorts for three years. Online learning providers are also expanding their presence through partnerships, such as 2U's alliance with WeWork and Harvard Business Publishing's alliance with the LinkedIn Learning Platform. Institutions that start envisioning tomorrow's education delivery today will be best suited to thrive even as the competitive landscape becomes more crowded.

Leaders should be conscious of positioning efforts to evolve education delivery as core to their institutions' academic strategy, rather than isolated auxiliary initiatives. Making transformation a priority and successfully piloting it will not only help spark greater collaboration, but also make it easier to scale across the enterprise.

Framing a Student-First Approach to Education Delivery

Any reimagining of the education experience should be rooted in a complete understanding of who institutions serve today and who they want to recruit in years to come. With greater insight into each audiences' expectations, challenges and goals, colleges and universities can create models that match specific demand.

Multiple factors beyond the question of "What major do I want to pursue?" influence a student's decision to apply and enroll with an institution. Rather than presenting full-time, part-time, in-person and online programs as mutually exclusive, institutions should build delivery models that align to students' core needs, such as:

- **Cost:** Developing programs that accelerate the time to degree completion or provide meaningful, paid work-study opportunities can help institutions attract students for whom the cost of a traditional four-year degree is a non-starter. For example, Arizona State University's Global Freshman Academy (which offers virtual first-year courses at no cost until students pass) helps students gauge their college readiness prior to investing in a full degree program. Institutions could also consider programs built around two years of on-campus instruction, followed by two years of full-time immersion in paid apprenticeships or externships tied to the students' area of study.
- **Time:** For students of all ages, financial and family needs can change quickly. Flexible programs that emphasize on-demand or non-linear learning (and the ability to move fluidly between online and classroom-based coursework) ensure that students don't need to sacrifice educational or personal commitments. Some institutions already offer year-round course options that don't box students into semester or quarter schedules. Stanford University for instance, as part of its Stanford 2025 project, introduced the [Open Loop](#)

University: a concept in which learners space out the student experience over six years throughout their lives, inside and outside the classroom.

- **Place:** Inconsistent internet connectivity across communities precludes millions of learners from enrolling in online programs. Institutions should consider blended experiences that meet students where they are. Similar to how brands like [Target and Sephora](#) introduced smaller format stores in specific regions, colleges and universities might establish distributed learning outposts well beyond the primary campus. Locations in vacant commercial space, coworking facilities and office buildings (as proposed in Georgia Tech's 2040 vision report) could support in-person instruction and digital learning, as well as peer collaboration.
- **Skill development:** As technology and economic forces reshape workforce needs, higher education institutions can craft a strategy that will not only help fill employer pipelines but also help current employees adapt. This means developing training and coursework that provides hands-on experience in convenient environments, such as institution-branded learning labs embedded in office space or digital curriculum employers can subscribe to for employee use. Institutions may also pursue more immersive student experiences, applying the medical school residency model to other areas (as the University of Michigan is doing for education majors through its P-20 Partnership).

they shop, however they choose to buy. Higher education institutions hoping to attract an increasingly diverse student population can benefit from a similar philosophy and audience-first strategy.

Education delivery does not have to be beholden to the four-year, on-campus model. The modern student demands greater choice in how and where they learn. By thinking beyond these traditional parameters, colleges and universities can develop truly innovative degree programs that offer significant value for students, graduates and their communities.

Key Takeaways

Think differently.

Imagine what education delivery could look like without four-year, residential limitations.

Plan differently.

Rather than present students with only on-campus or online programs, develop pathways that align with learners' personal, financial and professional needs.

Act differently.

Seek out strategic partnerships that allow your institution to improve access to education and better equip students for tomorrow's workforce.

Future Success Will Require Greater Focus on Who You Serve and Why

For years, Amazon existed only as an online marketplace. Today the company has branched out into physical retail, connecting with customers via cashier-less markets, general stores featuring highly rated products and even pick-up locations within or near campus bookstores. Each of these strategies was aimed at meeting consumers where



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