

The New Postsecondary Landscape

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Public higher education in the United States is at a watershed moment. As education costs rise and colleges and universities face growing financial pressures, the education gap is widening and public student financial aid systems are getting stretched to the limit—all of this at a time when our economy needs more college-educated workers than ever before.

The quotation from the website of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sums up the issues we face in all sectors of higher education today, public and private: How do we do much more with far less than we have done in the past?

The United States has long prided itself on having one of the most highly educated populations in the world, but that is no longer the case. Over the past decade, the proportion of the population with a postsecondary degree has increased far more significantly in other advanced economies than in

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the US, particularly among young people. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012), only 42 percent of young Americans age 25-34 currently hold an associate's degree or higher. Contrast that with South Korea at 65 percent, Japan at 57 percent and Canada at 56 percent (OECD, 2012, p. 36).

Moreover, 63 percent of US jobs are projected to require some level of postsecondary education by 2018 (Carnevale, et al., 2010, p. 14). On a social level, postsecondary attainment has always been an important means for providing social equity and economic mobility to US citizens. There is a

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huge gap to fill. We must develop the means to provide quality education at a larger scale than ever before. Most national attainment goals envision 60 percent of the population achieving a postsecondary degree, credential, or certificate by 2025 (see Gates, Lumina, and Russell, among others). The White House goal is even more ambitious: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (Obama Administration Goal, p. 1). Though the work ahead of us is daunting, university-based professional and continuing education units can play a significant role in helping to meet our national challenges.

Continuing education units have two main historical strengths: they have always served nontraditional student segments and they have always been willing to innovate in terms of pedagogy, technology, and business models. In addition, professional and continuing education units tend to be highly cost effective and data- and results-driven. To help continuing education leaders to capitalize on these inherent strengths and to think about and strategize for the future, this article will provide an overview of some of the major drivers of change within the new postsecondary landscape in the US and will highlight areas where professional and continuing education units are poised to make a unique and positive contribution.

MAJOR DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Besides affordability and attainment, several other drivers of change confront higher education today.

Demographics

Students are far more diverse along multiple dimensions than ever before. General demographic trends, also reflected in student populations, include urbanization, an aging population, immigration patterns, and the growth of a highly multigenerational workforce. In addition to these and more standard notions of socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, other elements of student diversity include:

- Digital natives with different needs, preferences, expectations.
- International students.
- More students self-identifying with various disabilities.
- Veterans with special needs and concerns, including high unemployment rates.
- Greater proportion of first-generation, low-income students.

- More underprepared students due to challenges in public K-12 systems.
- Students with a range of learning styles.
- High proportion of nontraditional students (60 to 70 percent range depending on definition).

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Technology

All the attention on and debate about massive open online courses (MOOCs) over the past year or so has served to highlight the way technology has begun to permeate higher education as it has other parts of our lives. This trend will continue. The application of online and technology-enhanced education, open educational resources, and predictive analytics will continue to increase. Discoveries from cognitive science and learning theory combined with the collection of massive amounts of data on student learning behavior show great promise for us to use technology to enhance student learning and attainment. However,

we are seeing that MOOCs in and of themselves may not be the single magic bullet that addresses challenges in affordability, access, and student success. Other, more nuanced applications to technology and open educational resources—mediated by faculty—may allow us to scale education with quality to serve more students.

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Outputs

Traditionally, American higher education has been aligned with inputs. If we have the best students, best faculty, biggest libraries, most luxurious student housing, and a sufficient number of hours sitting in classrooms (credit hours), we necessarily will have positive outcomes. Yet until recently we rarely defined or measured outcomes. From many different directions we are witnessing a shift to more of an outcomes orientation. The Obama administration has introduced “college scorecards” in the US Department of Education’s College Affordability and Transparency Center where, as President Obama stated in his 2013 State of the Union address, one can access information so

“you can get the most bang for your educational buck” (Remarks by the President). Regional accreditors began to incorporate measurements against stated outcomes as part of accreditation reviews. States are experimenting with performance-based funding models in addition to entrenched enrollment-based funding for public institutions. Probably the biggest shift is represented by the US Department of Education’s April 2013 granting eligibility for Southern New Hampshire University to receive Title IV federal financial aid for students enrolled in their new competency-based degree program (Parry, 2013, p. 1), signaling a distinct willingness to move beyond the traditional credit hour measure.

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Consumerism

Related to outcomes and due in large part to the high degree of peer-to-peer information sharing made possible by the Internet, students, families, and employers increasingly view their relationship with higher education through a consumer lens. An institution’s ranking is a longstanding example that reinforces this consumerist orientation. Consumerism also invites questions about the value of a degree or specific majors. It is tending toward a high level of vocationalism and specialization and less focus on the liberal arts or on encouraging exploration in selecting a major. Students and alumni demand more extensive career services. “Helicopter” or “snowplow” parents demand only the best for their children and are willing to intervene at all levels within the institution. Employers want input into curriculum decisions.

Customization/Personalization

Cascading from technology and consumerism is a trend toward greater customization and personalization. Students are accustomed to finding exactly what they want in other aspects of their lives, and this is finding its way into higher education. Students want to personalize their experience and seek a high degree of input into choices about professors, classes, programs, and various other services. Another important aspect of personalization is the ability to customize and personalize the delivery of education in a way that enhances individual learning at the intersection between advances in technology and cognitive learning science.

New forms of credentialing

The bachelor’s degree will not disappear any time soon. In addition to validating a level of mastery of certain content knowledge, the degree also serves as a proxy for broader competencies or “soft skills” as well as organizational skills and a willingness to struggle and persevere. Despite this, other credentials are gaining more acceptance, including high quality certificates with labor market value. New forms of recognition, like digital badges, also are beginning to evolve.

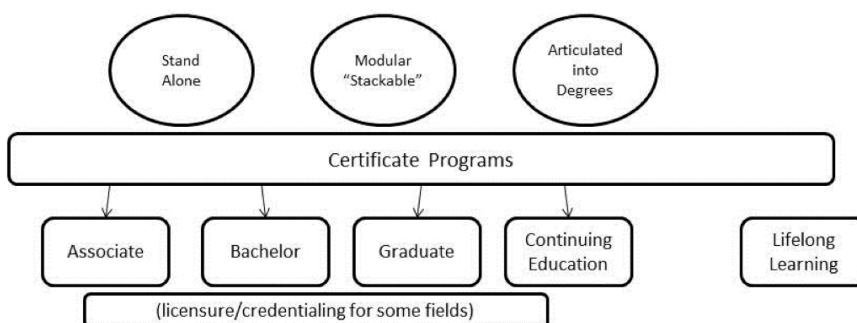
SYSTEM APPROACH

With all this change, the new postsecondary landscape requires us to look at higher education as a system that provides multiple pathways in and through the various parts of the system, all with the goal of helping students complete a postsecondary degree, credential, or certificate.

The following graphic illustrates what most of us think of higher education—various types of degree granting institutions.



I have included continuing education in the graphic because most units do offer degrees. Though the term “lifelong learning” is often used as an umbrella for professional and continuing education, it has increasingly become associated with “leisure learning,” completing noncredit courses for personal exploration or enrichment. That function is definitely in the picture, but in terms of attainment, is somewhat off to the side.

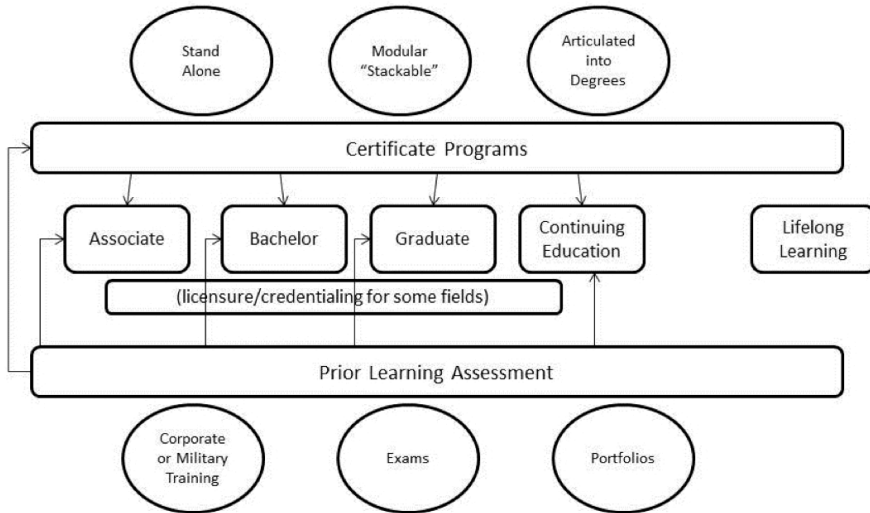


The above graphic illustrates additional components of the higher education system, those typically inhabited by professional and continuing education units, components that have received increased attention recently in conversations about postsecondary attainment and completion. Current US postsecondary attainment goals include various forms of credentials and professional certificates as well as degrees. The nomenclature for this type of certificate—one the continuing education community knows well—is “high quality certificates with labor market value.” Efforts are underway by the Lumina Foundation and others to establish a more precise definition of and criteria for a certificate.

There is also more discussion of “stackable” or “modular” certificates through which an individual could build competencies over time and have those recognized and validated. We need to think about a true system where an individual might earn a certificate immediately following high school or GED® test completion, join the workforce for a while, then complete more advanced certificates and possibly eventually articulate that learning into a degree program. Students should not find themselves in dead ends where they have to restart their postsecondary journey. This is wasteful for both the individual and society. The proportion of adults with “some college, no degree” is testament to this problem. We can and should develop a well-articulated postsecondary system that allows for multiple smooth paths in and through postsecondary education for a much larger segment of our population.

The traditional role of university-based certificate programs has been to support the continuing professional development of individuals who have already earned degrees. This function will continue as rapid changes in all aspects of life continue to require constant updating of knowledge and skills to remain relevant in the workforce. Certificates might be designed

to articulate into applied master’s degrees for those who need or desire a graduate degree.



The above graphic shows even more components of the postsecondary education landscape of the future—prior learning assessment. Prior learning assessment encompasses various methods for validating and providing academic credit for formal learning that does not take place on a college or university campus, also known as “extra-institutional learning.” Prior learning assessment encompasses three general categories: examination, course review, and portfolio review. We are probably most familiar with credit by examination, like Advanced Placement exams. All the various forms of prior learning assessment are forms of transfer credit. It is important to note that transfer credit is always subject to review and approval at the discretion of individual accredited degree-granting institutions. Acceptance of prior learning assessment varies from sector to sector and from institution to institution.

In addition to Advance Placement exams, College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) exams are widely accepted within US higher education. These offer validated, high-stakes examinations delivered in a controlled and proctored environment. Credit by examination also is a key feature of the growing number of competency-based, direct-assessment degree-granting programs.

Course review refers to a process for examining formal learning that did not take place in a university setting (such as military or corporate education and training) and then issuing recommendations regarding university-level credit equivalencies. The American Council on Education (ACE) College Credit Recommendation Service (ACE CREDIT®) and the National Credit Review and Recommendation Service (NCRRS) are two examples. ACE currently oversees approximately 150 reviews per year, conducted by teams of faculty reviewers who apply national standards that are highly aligned with those used by most institutions when they approve their own new courses. ACE authorizes the issuance of more than 400,000 credit recommendation transcripts per year and supports a network of 2,000 institutions that have a practice of considering credit recommendations, with individual credit decisions at the discretion of each institution.¹

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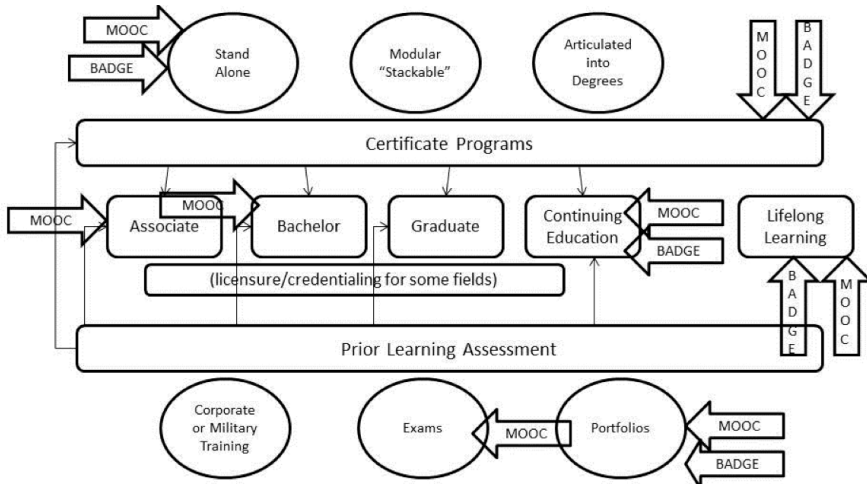
Portfolio review is a more complex process that involves the creation of a portfolio that captures and documents formal learning a student might have accomplished through exams, coursework, and various experiences. A faculty member reviews the portfolio and subsequently makes recommendations about credit equivalencies. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) through its LearningCounts.org initiative is the leading proponent of this form of prior learning assessment.

All categories of prior learning assessment are particularly appropriate for the large numbers of nontraditional students—students who do not fall within the first-time, full-time student segment. Students who have “some college, no degree” likely have amassed a number of additional formal learning experiences since leaving campus.

The Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce has determined that on an annual basis \$772 billion is spent in the US on postsecondary education with only 35 percent of that occurring on a college or university campus (Carnevale, et al., p. 2). The proper and appropriate application of prior learning assessment is a way to capture that significant national investment and also to provide nontraditional students recognition of prior learning, giving them a degree of confidence and a head start toward their next degree or certificate while also saving them time and money.

Prior learning assessment holds great potential for professional and

continuing education units. Given their historic role in serving nontraditional students and being open to new and innovative pathways to postsecondary education, continuing and professional education units can serve as advocates for the process, convening stakeholders on their campus for a conversation about the appropriate application of prior learning assessment with the goal of helping more students complete their education smoothly and quickly.



The final graphic illustrates where some of the newer educational innovations like MOOCs and digital badges might fit into the system. As originally conceived, MOOCs had no prerequisites or admission requirements, were offered at no charge to students, had relatively low levels of direct faculty interaction, and carried no academic credit. MOOCs were initially designed for the lifelong learning or “leisure learning” market. Courses were not the same as an institution’s credit-bearing classes. Students participated in courses for various reasons, mainly for general interest or personal enrichment. However, a small percentage of students (representing large numbers of students in high-enrollment MOOCs) completed their courses successfully and inquired about academic credit for their accomplishment. If credit can be awarded for these courses, and institutions agree to accept that credit, the graphic illustrates various points in the

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system where MOOC credit might articulate.

ACE is currently overseeing a multifaceted research project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that includes applying its course review process to MOOCs. To date, nine MOOCs from two different platforms have received credit recommendations.² For another component of the research project, the University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) is collaborating with ACE and has identified seven institutions that have agreed to accept MOOC credit and will allow researchers to track the progression of students who transfer in with MOOC credit.³

In addition to MOOCs, this graphic also speculates on where digital badges might be inserted into the postsecondary education system. The Mozilla Open Badges concept is the leading example of digital badges and is modeled roughly on the iconic Boy/Girl Scout badge or military decorations. Badges tend to acknowledge narrow and specific work-related skills and competencies and currently are a new form of alternative micro-credentialing not linked to formal academic credit as we know it. This could change. A great deal of innovation and conversation has emerged about new forms of credentials and new ways to capture, validate, and display a range of credentials (a sort of “next-generation” transcript or résumé format). This is an area that continuing professional education leaders should pay attention to, and where they might contribute as their institutions begin to understand these new developments.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This article has outlined the significant challenges we face in order to meet our country’s postsecondary attainment needs. Our higher education system faces transformational changes, largely brought about by external forces and trends. But internal change is needed as well, and professional and continuing education leaders can and should play a major role in this conversation.

I began this article with an observation about two strengths in professional and continuing education units that will be particularly important in the new era of postsecondary education: serving more nontraditional students and being willing to innovate. Professional and continuing education units have other

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advantages, such as the discipline to operate in a cost-effective manner, an evidence-based orientation, and strong connections with employers that help inform the development of relevant educational programs. All of these traits and practices are exactly what is needed as the new postsecondary landscape evolves.

Specific areas where professional and continuing education leaders can contribute to their own and to broader campus attainment initiatives include defining the unique needs of nontraditional students; applying expertise in online and technology-based pedagogy; leveraging current relationships with employers and the workforce system; developing and promoting more certificate programs (especially stackable certificates); fostering acceptance of prior learning assessment vehicles; and creating pathways for the application of prior learning.

Now is the time to step up and make a significant contribution. Fostering social equity and social mobility is built into the DNA of the professional and continuing education community. Now is the time to harness existing capacities and passions to contribute even more to the important work of postsecondary attainment. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. In full disclosure, the author oversees ACE CREDIT® as part of her responsibilities as ACE vice president for education attainment and innovation.
2. As of February 2013, the following courses on the Coursera platform received ACE credit recommendations: *Calculus* (University of California Irvine); *Genetics and Evolution* (Duke University); *Bioelectricity* (Duke University); *Calculus Single Variable* (University of Pennsylvania); and *Algebra* (University of California, Irvine). The algebra class received a recommendation for “vocational,” pre-collegiate credit rather than university-level credit. As of May 2013, the following courses on the Udacity MOOC platform, designed by Udacity, received ACE credit recommendations: *Introduction to Computer Science*; *Introduction to Physics*; *Introduction to Statistics*; and *Introduction to Artificial Intelligence*.
3. The following institutions will participate in this research project and have agreed to accept ACE credit recommendations for MOOC courses: Central Michigan University, Western Carolina University, SUNY Empire State College, University of Maryland University College, Kaplan University, American Public University System, and Regis University (CO).

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