



NEW HORIZONS:

American Universities and the Case for Lifelong Learning



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About the Longevity Project. We foster research and public conversation to build awareness of the implications of longer life and bring together leaders from business, government, and the social sector to plan for the transitions in health care, retirement planning, the future of work, and more. Together with our lead content collaborator, the Stanford Center on Longevity, and other leading nonprofits, think tanks, and media organizations, our goal is to support a new awareness of the longevity challenge and support change so that people around the world can live healthier, more secure, and more fulfilled lives.



About "New Horizons: American Universities and the Case for Lifelong Learning". The primary resources for this paper include original public opinion research conducted by the Longevity Project and over a dozen interviews of experts in the field, from institutions including the Stanford Center on Longevity, the Stanford Graduate School of Education, Arizona State University, Georgetown University, Purdue University, Third Way and New America. We wish to thank those experts, as well as colleagues from our partner company Instructure (the maker of Canvas LMS) who provided valuable advice and significant counsel through the development of this paper.



OVERVIEW

The year of the coronavirus pandemic augurs many changes in American society, everything from how and where we work to how we take care of our elderly population. But perhaps, more than anything else, this year has turned our system of learning upside down, with far-reaching implications that are difficult to gauge at this early stage. The overriding educational story of this year has been the hasty shift from in-person teaching to almost exclusively digital learning for thousands of k-12 institutions and colleges, and millions of their students. Those changes have been significant and disorienting for many, and have understandably occupied the attention of parents, students and the media alike.

But the biggest changes in education stemming from this year may, in the long run, prove not to be for k-12 or for college-age students, but for adult learners. The pandemic accelerated an already rising need for adult educational programming and also opened the eyes of many adults to the opportunities afforded by digital learning platforms. Unlike the k-12 and college systems, however, which have clear and established pathways and institutional players, the educational systems serving adult learners are somewhat less than a system, and more a patchwork of community colleges, for-profit universities, associations and companies. Because of this, credentials earned at one institution are often not transferable to another, and a lack of standardization means that disparate credentials often do not “stack” up to more valuable academic certificates or degrees. This hampers the critical needs of lifelong learners. This paper outlines the important and growing needs of adult learners, amplified by the pandemic, and discusses the opportunities and reasons for America’s colleges and universities to expand their mission in support of workforce development and lifelong learning.

BACKGROUND

The concept of an organized national approach to adult learning and workforce development dates back in the United States to the New Deal. Over the last two decades, the demand for adult learning has spiked for a number of reasons. Greater longevity has meant longer and more varied careers, and a resulting need for continuous learning as workers attempt to ensure their marketability. Technology change has also displaced millions of workers, raising the need for reskilling both displaced workers and still-employed workers trying to keep their skills current and competitive. And finally, as adults live longer, and as the connection between lifelong learning and late life health has become clearer, more retirees and near retirees have sought educational opportunity. However, in our interviews, experts told us that the advancement of adult learning has been hampered by inconsistent federal policy, the lack of clear standards and pathways, and by the fact that adult learning has been driven by a jumble of public and private organizations, some of which have had, at best, a checkered history of effectiveness.

Many significant trends have come together this year to spur what appears to be a significant leap in demand for adult learning. In general, the changed circumstances of this year present an important opportunity to advance workforce training and adult learning, concepts critical to the long-term health of the American economy. But this will only work if the current chaotic system can be organized in a fashion more transparent and beneficial to adult learners, and if the key players in American education play a productive role.

This paper looks at the trends of 2020, assesses the changing needs of American society and describes the important role that American universities can play in lifelong learning. In developing this paper, we have relied on our own polls fielded in collaboration with the data firm Morning Consult; other publicly available studies; and a broad range of interviews conducted with experts from leading universities, think tanks, foundations and companies, including experts from our corporate partner Instructure, the makers of Canvas Learning Management System.

ADULT LEARNING AND THE YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

Four important trends have converged this year to create what we believe is an inflection in adult learning. In our interviews and research, these developments emerged in 2020 as key drivers for change in adult learning in the United States: the growing need for training and reskilling among American workers, the growing comfort of adult learners with digital platforms, the growing interest in alternative paths to learning and the growing awareness of the importance of lifelong learning to healthy, active and longer lives:

The pandemic displaced millions of workers and increased the need for retraining. The nature of employment relationships in the United States has changed radically over the last 70 years. Fundamental shifts in longevity and in the structure of the economy has made careers longer and more varied. Part of this transition reflects choice on the part of workers to seek more flexibility in careers across a longer work life, but more consequentially, it reflects the decline of protected union and corporate relationships that offered job protections and stabilities. Globalization and the offshoring of work has long been a key component of job instability, but now the growth of automation technologies, including artificial intelligence, is likely the greatest contributor to job insecurity in America— and the automation trend is only accelerating. McKinsey has estimated that 15% of jobs worldwide could be replaced by automation technologies by 2030. It is not, according to McKinsey, that the total job market will constrict, but that portions of the market will shrink and other portions will grow. Because of this epochal shift in the job marketplace, hundreds of millions of workers will be required to update their skill sets in order to accommodate a changing global economy.

The need to enhance education in response to this technology change has not gone unnoticed. In 2019, the International Labour Organization (an agency of the United Nations) Global Commission on the Future of Work declared that “Today’s skills will not match the jobs of tomorrow, and newly acquired skills may quickly become obsolete.” The commission strongly recommended that governments, employers, and workers invest in education and training.

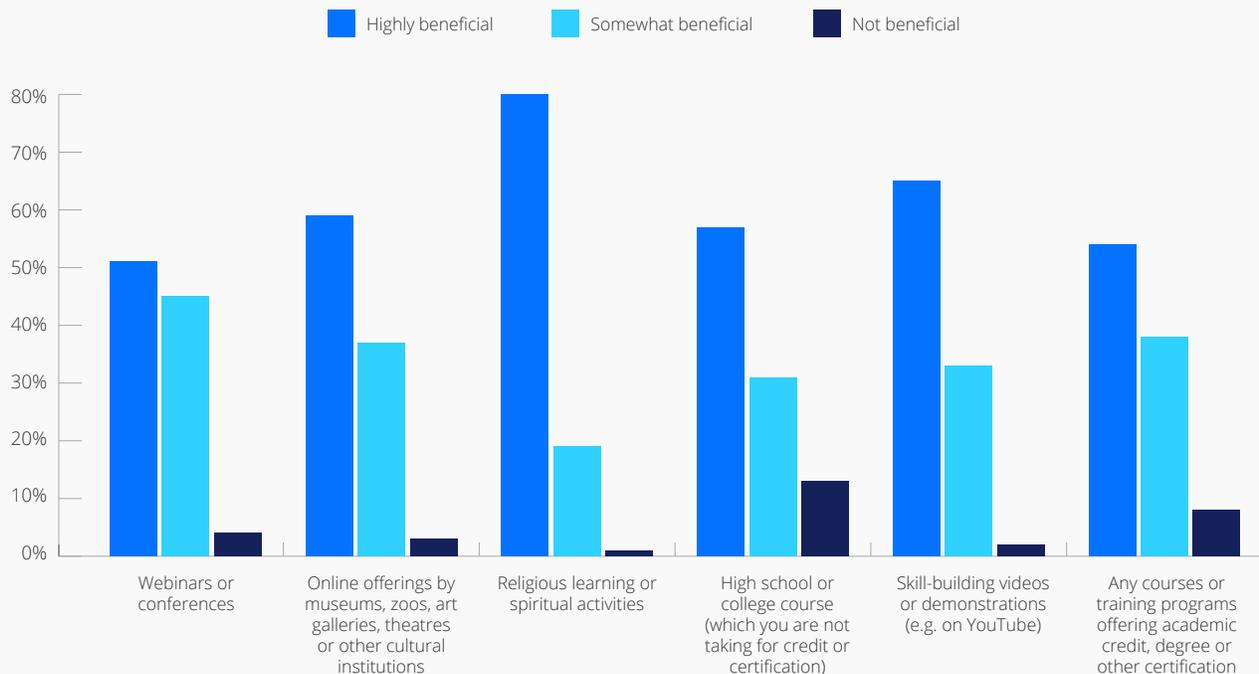
While concerns about automation and the need for adult training and education are hardly new, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the process of technology change and brought the reskilling revolution to the doorsteps of hundreds of millions of workers far quicker than expected. This has been a product of the economic dislocation caused by the pandemic but also by trends in digitization, deglobalization and corporate consolidation. For example, the pandemic has accelerated the trend toward e-commerce rather than brick-and-mortar sales, revealing a critical mismatch within the retail sector as to employer needs and employee skills. Similarly, the COVID crisis has encouraged a significant rethinking of the global supply chain, with the result that many companies are relocating critical production closer to home. As a consequence, some core strategic or automatable activities will probably be on-shored in the next 12 to 18 months in order to build up domestic value chains for critical products and industries, like food and pharmaceuticals. The waves of lay-offs caused by the pandemic combined with fundamental shifts in the production economy all translate into a greater need for adult training, education, and learning. During our interviews, several experts indicated to us that they expected the next Congress to move rapidly to expand work training and adult education programs in response to the pandemic, but regardless, government, industry and the educational sector will need to find a way to address these critical transition trends in work.

In 2020, millions of American adults discovered digital platforms to be effective and convenient ways to learn and communicate. Adult education, whether in the form of college credits, workforce development programs or personal betterment has been part of the American landscape for generations, but the spread of these programs has been limited by the practical aspects of adult life, most prominently, by professional and family commitments. In the analog era, some schools addressed these challenges by locating learning centers near highways between residential and work areas, so that adult learners could more easily attend classes. All of this changed with the growth of digital learning, schools like Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University leveraging digital platforms at scale to serve adult learners. But digital learning, like many new technologies, faced challenges in its early years around consumer adoption, which lead to overstated and therefore unrealized early expectations for MOOCs (massive open online courses), and even to the abuse of platforms by some for-profit educational outfits.

The digital learning marketplace has matured dramatically over the course of the last decade, but the experiences of 2020 have catapulted forward the industry. The industry has witnessed the drastic changes to learning models in K-12 and higher education during the pandemic. Growth in usage of learning management systems in schools shows how sudden this has been. Instructure reported that

usage of its Canvas LMS grew more than 200% between April and September. But even more drastic perhaps has been growth in adult learning. Forced by quarantine rules to shelter at home, millions of American adults dived into online learning platforms. Enrollment at Coursera – an online platform that offers MOOCs - jumped 640% higher in March and April compared to the same period in 2019, growing from 1.6 to 10.3 million users. Enrollment at Udemy, another MOOC provider, was up by over 400% between February and March 2020. Adult online learners took to online learning with remarkable ease, as many reported being extraordinarily satisfied with the quality of their online learning experience. In a summer 2020 Longevity Project – Morning Consult poll, adult learners expressed great satisfaction with digital learning: 92% said that courses offered with credit towards college degrees or other credentials were either highly or somewhat beneficial, while 88% described such courses without credit in equivalent terms. When asked if they would continue such online activities after the end of the quarantine, 81% of respondents said they were much more likely or somewhat more likely to continue credit programs, and 75% said the same with respect to non-credit courses. These very positive evaluations reflect an increased appreciation and comfort with distance learning technologies and digital platforms, one that correlates with the rapid technological transition undertaken by workers and parents during the pandemic. This reflects an important evolutionary point in adult learning in America, and likely around the world.

How beneficial were the online activities you engaged in during the shelter-in-place period?



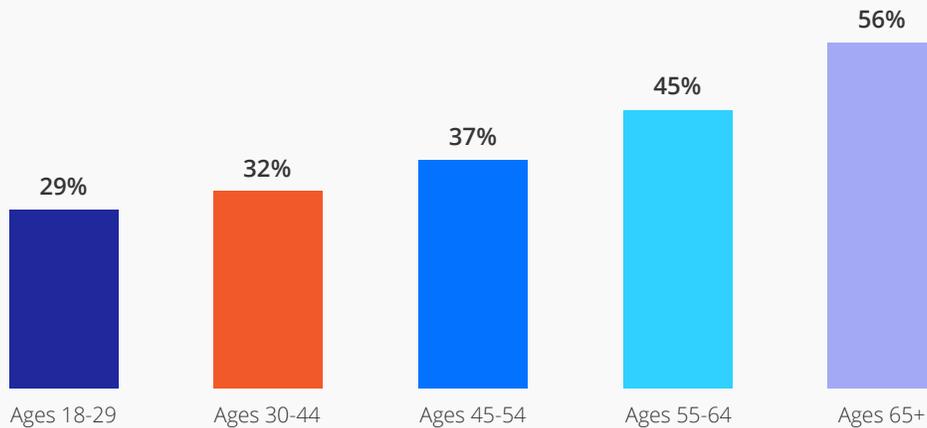
Source: Longevity Project – Morning Consult poll on Online Education (July 2020).

Growing Recognition of New Pathways for Learning and Credentials. For many years, many education experts have been arguing for more variety in educational pathways. Even as bachelor's degrees have become more economically important than ever—Kevin Karey of the New America Foundation described bachelor's degrees as the “front door to the professional managerial class in our economy” -- experts have noted the growing cost of traditional university education, its inaccessibility to underrepresented communities, and the tenuous nature of the four-year model in an era of increased work longevity. This has led to ideas such as evergreen degrees, proposed most recently by Brandon Busteed of Purdue Global, in which learning is stretched (and financed) over decades, rather than the more compact four-year period that currently holds preeminence in higher education. In 2020, driven by the educational and workforce displacements of the pandemic, new ideas for changing our basic educational model have begun to be converted from theory into action. Most prominently, in July, Google unveiled new certification programs in data analysis, UX design, and project management, to be hosted on Coursera. These programs, according to Google, are designed to be completed in three-to-six months and, according to their analysis, afford a gateway to high-paying jobs, both at Google and elsewhere. Significantly, Google announced that these certificates would be treated by Google as “equivalent to a four-year degree for related roles.” The idea that one of America's most prestigious employers, coupled with similar moves by other major technology employers, would treat certificates obtained in a fraction of the time at a fraction of the cost as equivalent to the bachelor's degree is an astonishing development. If copied by other major employers, it could represent a major milestone in American education and potentially offer a pathway to economic opportunity for many locked out of the traditional educational system.

Growing Understanding of the Link between Lifelong Learning and Later Life Health. The link between later life learning and lifetime health has been studied and written about for several decades, but it was not until the last several years that knowledge of this connection has edged into public awareness. Articles with titles like “Lifelong Learning is Good for Your Health, Your Wallet, and Your Social Life” have, in recent years, begun to lay out the argument that researchers have known for some time; increasing brain function through formal and informal learning can have considerable positive health benefits late in life. Those with better education tend to live longer, and people who engage in later life learning tend to have better physical and mental health. The engagement associated with learning can delay cognitive decline, postpone the impact of Alzheimer's Disease and dementia, and improve mental acuity. The impact of learning on cognitive ability is important to many Americans, especially older Americans. In a Longevity Project – Morning Consult poll, 39% of Americans said they are concerned about their quality of life if they live too long, with concerns about late life cognitive function most likely contributing to this concern. For younger respondents, the issues of late life functioning are likely too distant to register – only 17% of Generation Z respondents share this concern – but as people get older,

those concerns are increasingly central – 56% of respondents over the age of 65 are concerned about late life quality of health.

I'm concerned about my quality of life if I live too long.

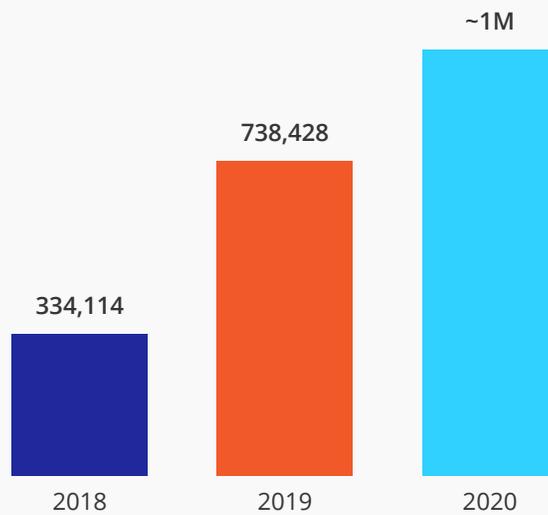


Source: Longevity Project – Morning Consult national survey, Dec. 2019

The pandemic has caused greater focus on the health and vitality of older Americans. It is now increasingly clear that finding ways for Americans of all ages to engage in educational activity is a meaningful part of any late life health care plan.

These trends from 2020 do not live in isolation and are mirrored by an extraordinary and unprecedented explosion in educational and training programs for adults, everything from programs that offer traditional bachelor and associate degrees to certificates and badges offered by community colleges, for-profit institutions, trade schools or even companies seeking to create a qualified workforce. Credential Engine, a Washington DC nonprofit seeking to bring greater transparency to this burgeoning marketplace, first estimated the existence of some 334,114 credential programs in 2018. Its 2019 census totaled 738,428 such programs and the 2020 count is expected to reach almost one million. In 2019, the largest components of the credential census were degrees from Title IV schools, digital badges, and certificates from Title IV schools.

Number of Credential Programs in US.



Source: Credential Engine, Counting US Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials.

In some ways, the explosion of credentials can be seen as an important positive development, the education marketplace responding with speed and innovation to a growing need. But with this proliferation comes greater difficulty in acquiring “information about the precise skills and abilities they develop, the pathways they support, and their impact on employment and earnings outcomes,” as Credential Engine reports. It is hardly surprising in this environment to find growing concern among experts about transparency, portability, and quality assurance, and a fear that many adult learners are being driven to the best-marketed programs, rather than the programs that provide the most useful and economically valuable skills.

PROVIDING TRANSPARENCY, PORTABILITY AND CERTAINTY: THE CASE FOR UNIVERSITY INVOLVEMENT

Given the growing needs of adults for training and education, the marketplace for adult education will most likely continue to grow. Some of that growth will be in terms of greater demands for bachelor's and advanced degrees, but most of it, according to experts like Ryan Lufkin of Instructure, will come in the form of increased interest in non-degree professional training that can be acknowledged in the form of skills programs, certificates and even industry recognized badges. The development of a more complex and personalized education system is likely a net positive, given the changing needs of the marketplace, but it leaves complex issues for employers and workers alike: which of these one million programs is right for me? What is the economic value of a specific credential and are there job opportunities at the other end? Are these credentials transferable or "stackable" and can they lead to higher level degrees? And, from the employer side, how does a company or organization value the quality of the program and the relevance of any particular credential?

Bringing order, transparency and certainty to such a clamorous ecosystem is a major challenge, one that organizations like Credential Engine and the Lumina Foundation are focused on addressing. Nevertheless, it is a significant task, likely requiring the engagement of major actors from the policy, education and business communities. Success in this task is critical, as failure would leave the effective education of millions of adults at risk and leave the American economy exposed to the risk of an unequally and ineffectively trained workforce.

It is possible that this task could be accomplished without the effective participation of the traditional four-year university sector, but we are doubtful. Creating new and effective pathways for adult education is a herculean task, and one that requires a unified national approach. Community colleges and the new players in the adult education field may have a part to play, but the power to effect real change lies within the university system. Public and private universities in the United States are an almost \$700 billion a year industry, and they have significant advantages of resources, educational expertise and public reputation. Universities house much of the teaching and educational expertise of the nation; they have far more resources even in an era of constraint; they have unique abilities – as ASU has done with Starbucks – to forge important corporate partnerships; and they have market presence to provide assurances to employers and students alike of the quality of education. The scale of the challenge of educating America's adults in the context of a longer life and technology change requires the attention of America's leading educational institutions.

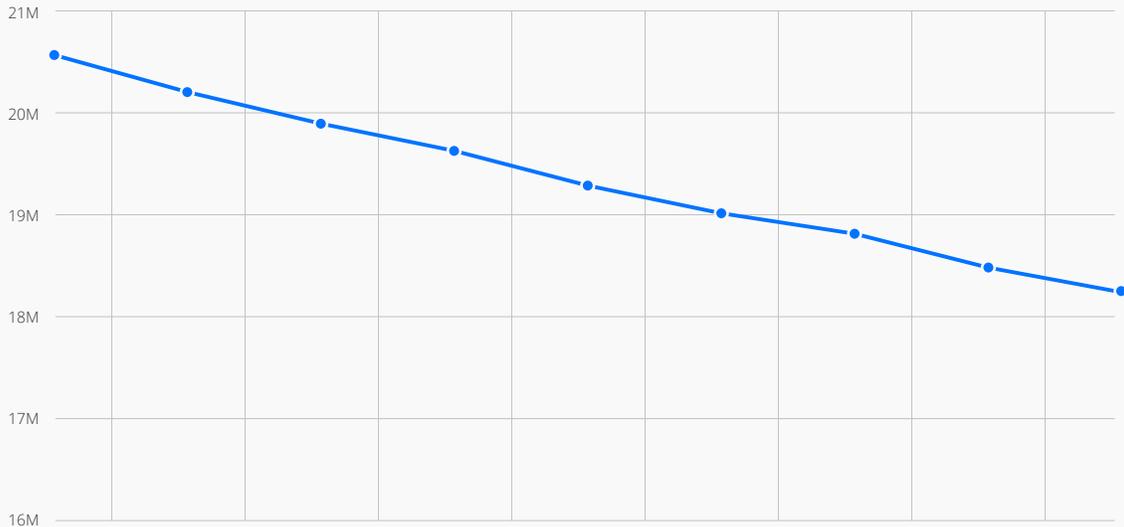
One of the major challenges in this new system is how to evaluate so many different credentials and make them portable and “stackable,” so that credits earned in different places can accumulate towards higher level certificates and degrees. This is particularly important for adult learners who may aggregate educational assets over the course of years or even decades and critical to the potential success of the roughly 35 million adults who are classified as having “some college,” meaning that they have taken credit courses towards a bachelor’s or associate’s degree but not completed it. Some universities have begun to recognize a need to embrace credits from other institutions. Frank Dooley, the chancellor of Purdue Global, described to us an institutional effort to recognize learning from a wide range of institutions experiences, whether that be traditional college courses, certifications, or even leadership skills learned in the Armed Forces. But Purdue Global appears to be somewhat of an outlier, as most traditional schools have remained reluctant to engage in a system of genuine portability and measurement. Without the buy-in of the university system, it is difficult to see how our educational system can work to the full advantage of adult learners.

The case for involving universities is clear, but why should they want to be involved? It comes down to mission, money and better technology:

The Economics of American Universities Require New Customers. The business model for colleges and universities is under enormous stress. Even before the pandemic hit, hundreds of colleges were already facing significant financial pressure and dozens were at risk of closing, as more than 50 colleges have done over the last decade. The financial pressures within the educational sector are the result of changing demographics and shifting public support, some of which have been exacerbated during the pandemic, but would exist regardless. College enrollment peaked in 2010 at approximately 20.5 million students enrolled, and has gradually declined to 18.2 million in 2019, largely because of declining birth rates two decades ago. Roughly 1,360 colleges and universities have seen declines in first-year fall enrollment since 2009, including about 800 four-year institutions. And nearly 30 percent of all four-year schools brought in less tuition revenue per student in the 2017-18 academic year than in 2009-10. While schools have been facing loss of revenue from a declining customer base, state government support for higher education, starting during the Great Recession, has declined significantly. On average, nationwide, state governments are spending 13% percent less per student than they were in 2008. More than half of public campuses nationwide have had state and local appropriations decrease since 2008, according to federal data.

Student Enrollment At U.S. Colleges Down 11% Since 2011

About 2.3 million fewer students enrolled in college this fall than in fall 2011.



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Credit: Daniel Wood/NPR

All of these challenges existed before the pandemic, but the events of 2020 will certainly heighten economic insecurity for years to come. Higher education finance experts predict more cuts ahead for public institutions as the coronavirus decimates state budgets. Some have already started. In May, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine announced \$110 million in higher education cuts, a nearly 4 percent budget reduction for every state institution. And many students – and their parents – are likewise putting cost pressures on colleges amidst widespread concern about finances and service. Compounding these stressors, the intervention of Google and other educational upstarts threatens the unique role that colleges play in our system, and the economic monopoly that they hold over a certain category of learner. The top tier of American education – padded with substantial endowments – can no doubt weather this storm, but many in the middle and lower tiers of academia face very difficult times and decisions.

In a rational business environment, colleges and universities, especially public universities with a broad educational mission, would look elsewhere for new markets to serve, with older, nontraditional students being the most obvious choice. That has not come to pass, as we were told by a number of experts, due in large part to intransigence from faculty who are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with new methods of learning. If the college system as we know it is to survive, however, public universities will need to embrace adult learners more fully, a development that can only be good for teachers, students and budgets alike in the long run. It is not an impossible

feat under current conditions to build such an enterprise, as Arizona State University and a handful of other schools have proven, but the extension of federal education funding programs to cover more adult learners would no doubt drive useful innovation and service in this area, as Mitchell Stevens of Stanford and Richard Arum of UC Irvine have recently and cogently argued.

ASU Case Study

The EdPlus program at Arizona State University (ASU) is a prime example of how a major state institution can leverage online programming to serve adult learners. Launched by ASU President Michael Crow in order to serve a student body representative of the entire state, the ASU Online program, which is part of EdPlus, has grown rapidly: from 11,000 students in 58 programs in 2012 to 63,000 students in 204 programs in 2019.

Far more than the average residential program, ASU Online is focused on serving adult learners and developing programs that help adults advance their careers. Only 30% of the student population is under the age of 25 and the average age of an ASU Online student is 29. EdPlus invests heavily to create workforce opportunities -- extending as far as building significant corporate partnerships with companies such as Starbucks, adidas and the Mayo Clinic. The school has also launched a "student success center" and assigns a success counselor to each student to help navigate the job search process. In part because of these initiatives, ASU graduates who are looking for work do comparatively well, with 89% finding employment or at least offers of employment within six months of graduation, with a median salary of \$54,000.

The core of ASU's mission is to make higher education accessible to a diverse population of students. In a sense, ASU Online has not been fully successful on a percentage basis, reporting a student population that is 59% White, 19% Latino, 8% Black, 5% Asian, and 4% two or more races. But Phil Regier, Dean of Educational Initiatives and CEO of EdPlus, pointed out to us that traditional demographic reporting is deceptive here because ASU Online has the capacity to expand and admit all qualified students. As a result of sustained outreach and recruiting efforts, ASU now, according to Regier, serves a student body of underrepresented minorities "greater than the entire . . . Ivy League" and serves more Native Americans than any other university in the country. Even if ASU Online's mission is not complete, it is on an important path to expand service for underrepresented communities.

Technology Barriers are Falling. Online learning has had a significant presence within US higher education for many years. CALCAMPUS offered the first online course with real-time instruction in 1994 and MIT began offering free educational resources through the OpenCourseWareProject starting in 2002. But, despite the fact that millions of students have successfully completed courses on digital platforms, the spread of digital learning for adults has been hampered by the checkered reputations of some online providers and by faculty resistance to the adoption of new technologies in traditional colleges and universities. Though faculty involvement and acceptance in online courses has gradually increased over time, a 2019 Inside HigherEd poll still found that less than half of faculty had ever taught an online course, and among those who had not, only 14% viewed online courses as providing an equivalent education to in-person classes. In our interviews, it was repeatedly reported to us that strong faculty resistance has effectively limited the ability of many universities, including public universities, from leveraging online platforms to serve traditional and untraditional students alike.

The situation, however, is clearly changing. Not only has technology advanced considerably, but the forced adoption of online learning during COVID has been an eye-opening experience for many teachers, administrators and students. Despite the rushed and adverse circumstances surrounding the transition, many faculty members and administrators have reported positive experiences. According to a survey published by Instructure, 50% of students and 62% of administrators reported that their preference for online learning increased after the emergence of COVID-19. Compelled by the pandemic to move to online platforms, an entire generation of faculty and students have learned about the numerous values of digital learning. Dooley of Purdue Global reported to us that once engaged in online learning, faculty, even those initially reluctant to teach on digital platforms, quickly see the structural teaching and learning benefits of online platforms. The COVID-19 crisis, which pushed many previously resistant teachers and students onto digital platforms, may prove to be an inflection point in institutional comfort and deconstruct the barriers to full university participation in digital learning.

Insights from Our Partners at Instructure: The Future of Digital Learning



The pandemic has created immense challenges but also opportunities for higher education institutions. Around the world, a global shift to online learning has been essential to support learners through the crisis, but the adoption of technology and intentionally designed online learning will have long-term impacts on education.

In our recent global research study, *The State of Student Success in Higher Education*, when asked what factors are considered to be the main drivers of student success, respondents named:

88%

Quality of faculty

86%

Technology availability

86%

Hands-on instruction

Planning for the future, we suggest designing online learning in a way that delivers a consistent, seamless student experience. This should be combined with professional development for faculty focusing on effectively using technology in the classroom. The key: deliberately supporting online connections between educators and learners, but also between learners and their peers.

Source: Working with Hanover Research, 7,070 educators, administrators and students in 13 countries were surveyed .

The Public Mission of Colleges and Universities Should Be Extended to Encompass Adult Learners. The American higher education system has long demonstrated an ability to innovate to help achieve important social objectives. In the mid-20th century, American colleges and universities, incentivized by the GI Bill and other government funding programs, undertook a vast rethink of who and what they taught, with the result being a fundamental, though by no means complete, democratization of education in this country. In a span of only a few years, the higher education system transformed itself from a bastion of the wealthy into “broadly accessible engines of social mobility.”

For a considerable number of years under this model, colleges and universities more than adequately fulfilled their social mission by educating millions of young people through the residential college model. This remains a crucial avenue of service that the education system provides, but the educational needs of society have undergone significant change over the last decade. The entire economic and social fabric of this country has changed, defined by longer life spans and longer careers, economic shifts that have engendered less employment loyalty and more varied careers, the increased pace of change inside a truly global economy, and intense technological dislocation. All of this has led to a massive shift from a post-World War II economy characterized by stable professional and union work to a highly stratified and profoundly unstable work environment. The economy of the future will be punctuated by head-snapping changes: half of employment growth between 1980 and 2015 took place in occupations with new job titles or tasks. One recent study has found that the share of jobs requiring a high level of digital skills more than tripled—encompassing nearly a quarter of all jobs— between 2002 and 2016. Surveys show that workers and employers also perceive an increasing pace of change in demand for new skills. When questioned in 2016, roughly two-thirds of workers said the need to improve skills was greater than in the past 20 to 30 years, and more than 70 percent said that need would grow over the next 20 to 30 years. While there is a wide spectrum of scenarios about timing and extent of job change, there is general agreement that change and dislocation will continue to be significant and that workers who are more vulnerable economically will be disproportionately at risk for negative outcomes. Skilling and reskilling a vast workforce for this uncertain future is as profound a challenge as was the new educational mission articulated through the GI Bill after World War II, and American colleges and universities need to be key players in this effort should it have a chance to succeed.

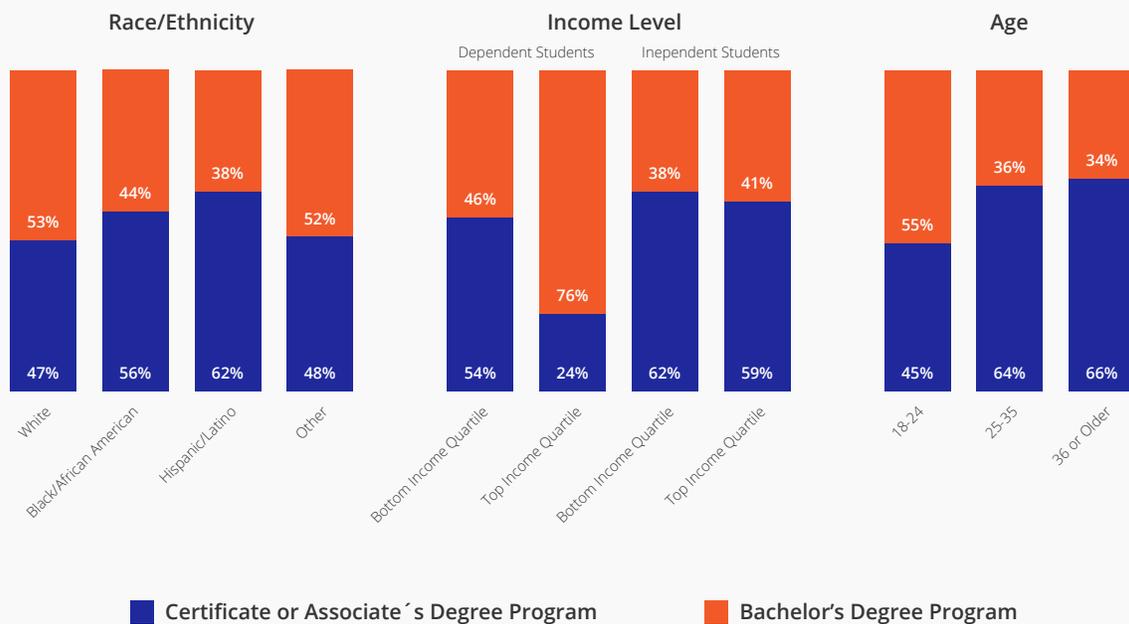
Adult Learning is One of the Best Methods for Advancing Opportunity for People of Color.

Advancing the education of minority students is a critical – and oft-stated – goal of the American higher education system. Higher education is a key pathway for social and economic mobility, and increasingly, even having a job requires some form of college education: according to the Education Trust, 65% of jobs in America now require some college education, compared with just 28% in 1973. But if the events of this year prove anything, it's that the American higher education system has not been sufficiently effective at leveling opportunities across different classes of society. Black and latino people still lag far behind in access to college and degree completion: while 36% of non-Hispanic whites hold four-year degrees, only 22% of black people and 15% of people of latin heritage have achieved bachelor's degrees or higher. Even when there has been progress, little of that can be attributed to the traditional college sector. Recent studies from the Center for American Progress demonstrate that black and latino students are far more likely than white students to have received their degree from for-profit colleges, and these schools typically have far fewer resources to offer in the way of quality education and their degrees confer less prestige and value in the job market. Overall, the gap in degrees conferred between white people

on one hand and black and latino people on the other has actually grown over time, despite the public awareness around this damaging trend. According to the Department of Education, “the gap in bachelor’s degree attainment has widened for both black and Hispanic adults compared to white adults. Specifically, the gap in bachelor’s degree attainment has doubled, from 9 to 20 percent for Hispanic residents since 1974 and from 6 to 13 percent for black residents since 1964.”

The long-term failure of the higher education system to reduce the achievement gap does not reflect a lack of effort or commitment, but it does suggest a short-sighted strategy of assuming that students of color will conform to the pre-existing norms of universities and colleges. In fact, a far higher percentage of black and latino students, according to data collected by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, are more likely to be enrolled in associate and certificate programs. Collaborating with the broader education sector to make associate and certificate programs economically effective and “stackable” toward the goal of earning a bachelor’s degree would be a more impactful way of supporting opportunity for communities of color than existing programs have proven to be.

Students Enrolled in Certificate and Associate’s Degree Programs Are Diverse



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 2016. Note: Percentage may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Institutions of higher learning should indisputably continue to push to expand opportunities and support for students of color in traditional four-year programs, but they also need to meet minority students where they are— in often untraditional situations that preclude them spending four years at a residential college. Where universities have made strong commitments to adult education, they have also greatly expanded their service to underserved communities. Dooley of Purdue Global reported that 40% of its students are from underrepresented communities; similarly, with the expansion of Arizona State University's EdPlus program, which serves students across bachelor, associate and certificate tracks, ASU has been able to deliver access to education to a diverse population fully representative of the state of Arizona. In our interviews, experts told us that the single most effective thing that colleges and universities can do to help communities of color is to expand their services towards lifelong learning and adult education, and the experiences of 2020 support that very important notion.

CONCLUSION

The case for greater attention to be paid to adult learning has been clear for many years. The pandemic has accelerated trends and exposed even greater need for adult learning, specifically for effective reskilling efforts. The growth of programs to serve adult learners, and the greater confidence of adult learners in digital platforms, are generally positive developments. Positive outcomes, however, are limited by lack of transparency, programmatic measurement and portability of most certificate and credit programs. The greater involvement of four-year degree institutions in this area is not a panacea for these problems – they have their own challenges with measurement and portability to be sure – but the greater resources, teaching skills and program credibility could add considerable promise and purpose to this space. These factors, combined with greater attention from the new Congress and from business leaders, could help transform adult learning and advance the critical cause of improving opportunity for tens of millions of American adults. We hope that university leaders will similarly see this as an important mission and service opportunity for their institutions as well.