

Rethinking the Role of Work in Higher Education

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Calls for accountability and complaints about higher education in the United States have cycled over the years, but in the wake of the Spellings Commission's report on U.S. education, we have heard continued laments. It may seem strange to go back to the administration of George W. Bush to open a viewpoint penned in 2017, but calls for evidence have yielded a longer-term impact seeking evidence that students learn, and not just learn, but learn what the country needs them to. Arum and Roksa's (2011) *Academically Adrift* looks at evidence that suggests precisely the opposite, that students are not learning. Even if that volume has its issues, the swirl of concern has not much abated. We continue to hear calls for effective education of students.

What "effective" means, however, depends on to whom you talk. Those most concerned with economic issues will explain that we need coming generations to be well prepared to undertake the skilled jobs that require STEM training—a call that may be turning STEM fields into glorified vocational training in students' minds, but that's another viewpoint. Those concerned with Humanistic values will prioritize the responsibilities of citizenship in a liberal democracy. Still others, focused on the inherent value of knowledge, will argue that neither argument is appropriate when education is intended to broaden or to enlighten the individual. What they all miss is that each of these is an application of learning.

Degrees that Matter: Moving Higher Education to a Learning Systems Paradigm (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017) argues that we need to pay attention to this commonality and think more broadly about what we are asking students to do, because in reality, we want them to make all three of these applications of their learning and more. The problem is that our institutions aren't built to do that, or when we are, we choose not to, because we rarely have before. *Degrees that Matter* paints a different picture of higher education in the US, one that is integrative and concerned with the whole rather than disjointed and relying on students to create the kinds of integration that meaningful application requires. Creating a more integrated, intentional whole requires a very different perception of what the space of higher education looks like or should look like.

In addition to redefining spaces, we need to rethink the relationships between partners in educating students as well as reach out to new partners as well. One group to more meaningfully redefine relationships might be employers. We realize that this may seem to go back on the statement that education is for more than the economy. It is not. It is, rather, a realization that we strive to nurture conscientious, contributing individuals. The world of work can be a site for all three. That being said, employers can be partners in educating students, but only if they are engaged in ways meaningful to those working in higher education.

Viewpoint

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Anxieties about vocationalizing higher education often arise around this point, but that fear emerges out of an assumption that the world of work wishes to dictate to higher education what we do. Consider, however, any of the number of surveys of employers that reveal that employers, above all, seek the kinds of applicable learning that most institutions codify in General Education learning outcomes (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Their priorities are very much aligned to ours, if that correspondence is anything to go by. Further, we should not fail to remember that institutions employ many students in jobs that depend on those same areas of learning. Assigning work can be a space to also assign learning and connect work with the larger learning goals of higher education, fostering more reflective and involved learners and workers.

The Iowa Grow (<https://vp.studentlife.uiowa.edu/priorities/grow/>) and WIGrow programs (<https://www.talent.wisc.edu/home/Hide-A-Tab/WiGrow/tabid/418/Default.aspx>) have leveraged this to students' benefit. Students working on campus are asked regularly to consider the ways in which what they are learning in classes is relevant to their workplaces and vice versa. Students begin unsure of such connections, but ultimately find correspondence between the two as they consider interrelations we have not asked them to explore before. Students, in effect, make those connections when given some coaching on how to do so, establishing with their supervisors the kinds of alignment, knowledge transference, and life-long learning to which higher education aspires.

The world of work is just one example of how we can begin to make connections across disparate places of learning by rethinking our structures and helping students unpack learning that occurs in different locations outside of the traditional classroom. It also provides an illustration of the ways the threats we sometimes perceive to higher education might be sites of greatest opportunity.

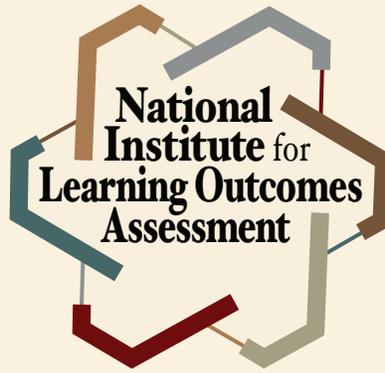
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References

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