

UNICORPS

Futures of Higher Education and Business Are Intertwined

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The model for how higher education interfaces with businesses is broken. This has not occurred overnight; it has been gradually occurring for years. For those in the business sector, searching for solutions to talent management questions, the problem has reached an inflection point.

Technological advances have broken down classical barriers to global workforce management, demanding new and different skill sets from employees and requiring companies to rethink their recruitment and development practices. Gratton (2011) observed five forces have dramatically reshaped work and life—globalization, advancements in technology, changing demographics in the workforce, longevity, and social changes.

In the business sector, companies that failed to adapt quickly enough have lost market share and eventually been replaced by more innovative, adaptive organizations that take full advantage of globalization and technology (Christensen, 2000).

In the academic world, challenges posed by Khan Academy, Coursera, and iTunes University are a further reflection of the changing times.

The role higher education plays is changing because products sold by academia have been commoditized. For universities and colleges to survive, they must show greater differentiation and value compared with other resources. Currently, 50% of students fail to see the value of a college education in preparing for future employment. Businesses report there is a lack of qualified applicants for entry-level roles. Yet, and most

surprising, 72% of post-secondary education providers responded *graduates from my institution are adequately prepared for entry-level positions in their chosen field of study* on a survey (Manpower Group, 2013; Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2013). Clearly, there is a disconnect; what can we do?

Core to the dilemma is how business and education each define their various roles. Historically, we in business have approached the academic *supermarket* to *pick* the desired

individuals. Those in higher education, for their part, have conveyed knowledge. This worked fine when skills, technology, and sourced jobs remained static. However, the skill sets needed in today's jobs are morphing to the business's inherent challenges. In some sectors, learning on-the-job cannot keep up with

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role demands. Companies find mental agility one of the most critical capabilities required today, along with the ability to influence people over whom one has no direct authority. I would add to these the ability to dissect a problem, look beyond the obvious, and deal with ambiguity. In business, we need a greater focus on training students how to think through problems and present ideas clearly. We can Google the information found in many textbooks.

To accomplish such needs, higher education and business need to partner more effectively. Academia can do this by recognizing how businesses are changing and better aligning classroom teaching with the capabilities required in communities. Businesses need to move beyond *picking* talent and engage institutes of higher education in creating talent. This is happening in some businesses now. Companies recognize a need to provide lifetime learning and developmental opportunities.

However, for this partnership to flourish, colleges and universities can no longer keep the outside world at bay. They need to communicate and collaborate with businesses and develop an integrated strategy for partnering. As a talent management professional, I see opportunities for academia to partner on two fronts—assisting businesses in training and recruiting graduates straight out of college as well as providing customized curriculum that focuses on industry-specific content. I elaborate on both, briefly, below.

Training and Recruiting Graduates

If we look at how adults learn, learning is best and more sustainable when it occurs on-the-job. In most companies, we think 70% of development occurs as part of the actual job. We complement on-the-job training with 20% coaching and mentoring. *Away-from-work* training, such as classroom and eLearning instruction, represents the smallest fraction of the employee's total learning and development experience. *Away-from-work* training is least effective and least sustainable until direct connection is made between what is acquired in the classroom and on-the-job. If learners do not *quickly* use information acquired in a classroom, they will lose it. This is where the current academic model breaks down and where collaborating with businesses can provide a solution.

A term to express the future of higher education/business partnerships is *UNICORPS*. In this type of partnership, universities provide classroom training, while local businesses concurrently provide on-the-job experiences. This is not an internship or co-op; both are longer in duration and focus on the entire work experience. UNICORPS offer contiguous learning experiences where the classroom training and on-the-job experience happen within the same week. The focus is on providing the student a real-time opportunity to apply classroom or online course learning in a controlled, coached business environment. At the conclusion of the course, successful students would earn certification for the on-the-job experience, which future job applicants could hold out to potential industry employers to represent their deeper dive into the course material.

There are multiple benefits to the university, the student, and the business collaborating in UNICORPS. Universities create a sustainable revenue stream, gain an opportunity to align curriculum to community needs, and further prepare students for work after graduation in the local community. Students gain a deeper, applied understanding of the course material as well as an opportunity to showcase their talents to businesses in the community and to experience firsthand working inside a company in a role connected to the subject matter. Businesses save costs in recruiting and developing potential employees by observing them on-the-job prior to hire. This knowledge can be instrumental in identifying those students with the skills and personality to fit the company's employment needs. For promising students, businesses may choose to sponsor and share tuition costs in return for the student's commitment to work for the company post-graduation.

Customized Curriculum

Companies could use a similar model for in-house employee development. Although programs could be offered exclusively for the needs of a sponsoring company's employees, a best practice and more collaborative approach would be to encourage diversity of thought and engaging multiple stakeholders. This would allow companies to defray employee development costs. Serving as a platform to lead this change, post-secondary education providers would

partner with local companies and deliver customized curriculum that would benefit multiple business stakeholders. Here, companies would develop their in-house staff alongside their key customers and vendors' in-house staffs. Companies could further enhance development of their high-potential employees and senior leadership by having them deliver a portion of the customized program alongside college faculty. Faculty members would also benefit from such teaming by grounding their thinking in the practical aspects of business.

The point here is institutions need to think differently about how they prepare students to enter the workforce. Part of this preparation involves customizing the learning experience to address the needs of the business community. Perhaps more importantly, higher education and corporations need to more consistently communicate and collaborate in addressing local issues that each perceive as important but cannot handle on their own. Rather than a detailed explanation of how such a partnership would work, I intend this as an example to suggest possibilities and fuel dialogue.

UNICORPS can serve as a platform to driving change in communities. By aligning advanced curriculum with the training needs of local businesses, the latter find a source for recruiting qualified employees. Graduates of these institutions see a practical link between coursework and future employment. In the end, communities struggling to retain college graduates have a vehicle for connecting the dots between program learnings and specific community needs. Once this partnership forms, companies have further incentive to partner with and outsource internal learning and development to local universities and colleges. Ultimately and advantageously, businesses can reduce their direct capital outlay for employee recruitment and development because partnerships with universities, vendors, and customers achieve greater scale and diversity of thought.

Institutions located in regions of the country severely affected by the economic downturn have the most to gain from partnership. These communities hold out great prospects for companies looking for a vital

workforce with lower entry costs. Colleges and universities recognizing these opportunities will build alliances with businesses and tailor curriculum to community business needs. Program content will morph, over time, with the changes in business. An academic institution connected to the business community through a collaborative partnership will innovate and stay vital. Vigilance to business community needs will help higher education be more nimble, encourage more creative partnerships, and provide ongoing service to the community and better assistance to students seeking employment upon graduation.

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