



The Unmudl Report

Community Colleges Powering
the Skills-To-Jobs Marketplace

Holly Zanville

This Report is Dedicated to the 65 Million Working Learners in the United States

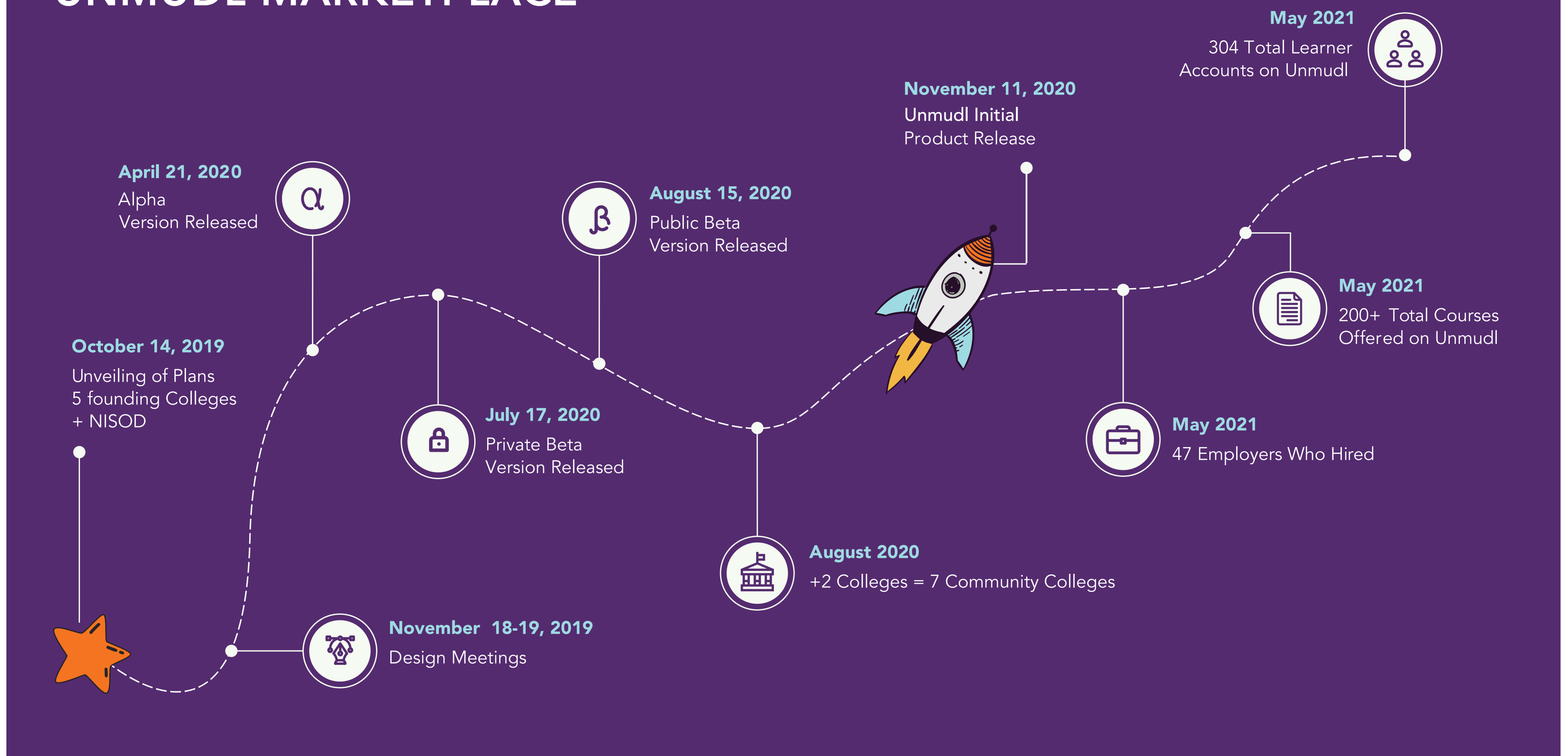
Definition

The term, “working learners,” is used throughout this report to refer to students, learners, student workers, adult learners, and employees engaged in upskilling and retraining.

In 2014, ACT Foundation coined “working learners” in its first publication (National. Learning. Economy.) as “individuals who are working and engaging in education opportunities at the same time.”

Jassal and Clark (2016) amplified the concept of working learners in “The New Learning Economy and the Rise of the Working Learner — a Working Learner Anthology of Recent Evidence.” It provides a summary of the latest research findings and presents the vision of a new learning economy in which everyone is valued for their ability to perform, and where everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve greater life satisfaction for themselves and their families.

MAJOR MILESTONES UNMUDL MARKETPLACE



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Acknowledgements

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The [SocialTech.ai](#) team contributed critical insights on the Futures Innovation Lab which set the stage for planning Unmudl, and on the range of services the intermediary provides to realize the [Unmudl](#) vision: Parminder K. Jassal, Merrilea Mayo, Julian L. Alssid, Asad Raza, and Mary Dixon.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Unmudl Report: More than a Snapshot in Time

[SocialTech.ai](#) commissioned this report initially to provide a snapshot of the development of the Unmudl Marketplace as it nears its two-year milestone. The period covered is roughly October 2019 to April 2021. There is a solid history of related work that extends long before fall 2020, and firm plans to move developments well past spring 2021.

The Unmudl Report is more than a snapshot in time. Strictly speaking, it is a type of “developmental evaluation,” given Unmudl’s approach to systemic change — a community collaborative approach that is unfolding in dynamic ways.

The Unmudl Marketplace is a social change innovation. “Social change innovation occurs when there is a change in practice, policies, programs, or resource flows. Innovation is distinct from improvement in that it causes reorganization at a systems level and can occur at the level of an organization, a network or society at large” (Gamble, 2008, p. 15).



Social change innovation occurs when there is a change in practice, policies, programs, or resource flows. Innovation is distinct from improvement in that it causes reorganization at a systems level and can occur at the level of an organization, a network or society at large.

Jamie Gamble

Gamble notes that developmental evaluation is ideally suited for innovative initiatives that are often in a state of continuous development and adaptation, unfolding in changing and unpredictable environments. This type of investigation is useful for “emergent, exploring, learning-oriented and adaptive process[es] in which those involved discover answers to their own situationally specific questions” (p. 14). With so much in flux, in innovative initiatives the framing of issues can change, how problems are conceptualized evolves, and various approaches are likely to be tested (p. 23).

Unmudl Overview

The Unmudl Marketplace is a future-forward initiative led by a founding group of community colleges and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), working with the intermediary, SocialTech.ai, to create a skills-to-jobs marketplace.¹ The Unmudl Marketplace is powered by America’s community colleges to connect learners with new or better jobs, college and continuing education credits, and credentials from certificates to certifications and degrees. The marketplace was released publicly in November 2020.

Working learners (see definition on p. 2) that visit Unmudl.com have access at present to more than 260 noncredit courses covering more than 40 subject and occupational areas which enable them to develop skills that will lead to jobs. The underlying philosophy of Unmudl is to provide equal access to learning and job opportunities to working learners nationwide by a collective of community colleges. Access to these resources provide needed opportunities to gain skills for those newly entering the marketplace and to upskill for those who have been displaced or impacted in their mobility within their workplaces in the nation’s rapidly changing job market.

There are many learning platforms on this playing field. These include Coursera, edX, Udemy — all developed in the U.S.; as well as platforms developed abroad, which include JMOOC (Japan), Swayam (India), Springboard+ (Ireland), and ecampus (Ontario, Canada).

¹ Founding group included the National Institute for Student and Organizational Development (NISOD.org) and five community colleges: Bellevue College (Washington); Central New Mexico Community College (New Mexico); GateWay Community College (Arizona); Pima Community College (Arizona) and San Juan College (New Mexico). Two additional colleges joined the founding colleges during the planning phase: San Diego College of Continuing Education (California); and SUNY Broome Community College (New York).

Unmudl may be unique among all of these in that it is leveraging the physical and digital resources of community colleges including noncredit skills-oriented programming leading to potential for-credit paths. Also, the Unmudl Marketplace programming is hands-on and experiential, and aligned with jobs and employers that are increasingly agreeing to interview working learners who are completing courses. Unmudl is committed to enabling working learners to mix and match the learning acquired by enrolling in courses from multiple colleges which have agreed to act as a collective, trusting one another to accept the learning acquired from participating colleges.

The key features of the Unmudl Marketplace are:

- High flexibility
- Multi-modality
- Courses that lead to jobs
- Tailored to working learners
- Experiential and hands-on learning
- Strong on support services
- Digital blends of human and machine
- Synchronous and nonsynchronous
- Hybrid and place-based
- Able to reach students where they are

The Unmudl Marketplace is a physical infrastructure linked through a digital marketplace; a database of courses out of which employers have hired individuals; a suite of wraparound services for working learners; and backend services to enable the colleges to participate in the collective (e.g., registration, financial reimbursement models, IT tools, common principles of collaboration).

Unmudl is stewarded by both the community colleges acting individually to provide their resources (courses and services) to the collective plus the intermediary, SocialTech.ai, providing the technology and related technical assistance services to power Unmudl.

Several factors are especially notable in Unmudl's early success:

- **Strong leadership and partner buy-in:** The collective has established strong relationships central to building trust and engagement. Strong leadership by the Unmudl President's Council and the Champion's group have spearheaded developments among the founding partners, identifying the range of efforts which need to be addressed as the "plane is being built." Although there are uneven staffing commitments among the colleges given the varying financial realities faced by colleges, there is a considerable amount of learning which accrues to the collective. This element of Unmudl has helped the colleges individually and as a collective to make significant progress in this work and to experience significant "buy-in" in the model being developed.
- **User experience:** Designing and adapting Unmudl.com to two user groups especially – working learners and employers – is a work in progress. The public-facing website and databases behind it have been continually improved during the developmental period, reflecting the goal to develop an easy to use, customer friendly service.
- **Quality control for courses:** The "good neighbor policy" the colleges agreed to early on, that the colleges would trust one another to put quality courses on the platform without review by other colleges, established an early commitment among colleges to put their best courses forward. None of the colleges wanted to put up courses that might call into question the quality of the offerings.
- **Employer validation through hiring.** Some employers are hiring out of courses at the Unmudl skills-to-jobs marketplace, which speaks to the value these courses have for employers.
- **Rapid momentum:** Unmudl has been built rapidly, due in part due to the impacts of COVID on working learners, the community colleges, and employers. The collective with SocialTech.ai powering the platform has moved more quickly than they thought possible, to launch the platform mid-November 2020.

Report Overview

The report is presented in five sections.

Section 1 provides core thinking from the founding community college leadership about the driving vision behind the Unmudl Marketplace. It also introduces and recognizes the large community that has engaged in developing the Unmudl model for nearly two years.

Section 2 provides an overview of the Futures Innovation Lab which drove the planning and laid the foundation for a solution to the pressing issues facing working learners, community colleges, and employers. The community college Futures Innovation Lab identified five future forces that have driven the design of the Unmudl model:

- **Seamless Futures:** The most successful education providers will be the ones that seamlessly fuse the physical infrastructure with the convenience of digital in connected colleges, allowing learners to channel-hop without friction. The future is about joining the numerous dots that constitute the learner journey.
- **Instant Futures:** Learners no longer desire to follow any single fixed path for learning. Their education journey might start with a click on a website and end with an in-college experience, or begin as window shopping at a campus and end at home with an online purchase. A learner experience where the educational purchasing process is fluid, familiar, and frictionless is the goal.
- **Equitable Futures:** The Unmudl population is aimed at individuals who typically have no degree or other credential and have not had equitable education and career opportunities.
- **Sustainable Futures:** Revenue generation is a must. Community colleges must take their place and command the space to deliver skills, particularly hands-on skills.
- **Collaborative Futures:** Simply being interconnected or part of a network does not guarantee collaboration, although it is an important first step. Collaboration will be needed among community colleges — to be able to work together to create and achieve the same goals.

Section 3 presents the 19 common principles the Unmudl community developed to guide its work within four main areas: the Learn-and-Work Ecosystem; Restructuring, Resource-Sharing, and Collaboration; Growing Enrollments and Revenue Model; and Faculty/Staff. This section also provides an overview of the numerous design and implementation components of Unmudl, such as:

- Naming Unmudl.
- Identifying the target populations (working learners, employers).
- Design aspects for training, curriculum, and advising.
- Role of prior learning assessment.
- Future vision of noncredit and credit.
- What will be required for the revenue system to work.
- Types of preparation the founding colleges did to join Unmudl and requirements for other colleges considering joining the collective.
- Competition from other learning platforms.
- Activities/timeline to get Unmudl up and running.
- Milestones (metrics) established in 2021.

Section 4 reviews several pressing issues facing community colleges. These are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted in fall 2020 with the eight founding partners of Unmudl. The purpose of this section is to familiarize readers with the important range of issues driving the colleges as they develop the Unmudl solution, such as:

- Restructuring for rapidly changing credentialing environment.
- Roadblocks in growing enrollments in nondegree programs.
- Community colleges' role in a crowded marketplace of providers.
- Meeting employers' needs.
- Lifelong learning impacts on restructuring.
- Revenue and policy.
- Making noncredit, continuing education, and career education a more central part of community colleges.
- Noncredit programming — enrollment, access, imperative to serve diverse populations.
- Noncredit versus credit-bearing including bridging nondegree and credit programs.
- Role of community college leaders, faculty, advisors.

Section 5 focuses on the next steps for Unmudl, drawing on interviews conducted with the founding partners three months following the initial product release of Unmudl.com. These interviews focused on the challenges the partners anticipate in the next six to 12 months, and what fine-tuning may be needed in the model based especially on the pandemic recession (unanticipated when the Unmudl solution was born) and the resulting significant impacts on working learners, community colleges, and employers as the nation works toward economic recovery. This section also includes main takeaways for Unmudl's future, drawn from the nearly two years of effort by more than 200 individuals who have worked to realize the Unmudl vision.

Appendix A and B provide the voices of community college leaders through in-depth interviews conducted in fall 2020 and February 2021.

The Future of the Unmudl Marketplace

There are four especially important takeaways for Unmudl's future:

- The rise of working learners/nontraditional students as a large, coherent demographic in higher education coupled with the race among providers to develop noncredit offerings to serve this demographic.
- The challenges that community colleges face as they redesign their systems and processes to serve the demographic of working learners/nontraditional students are daunting, especially in the pandemic recession and resource-tight realities of the colleges — and of course the students who are paying for their educations.
- Assessing the extent to which Unmudl is meeting its goals, or needs to re-set goals in light of the rapidly changing marketplace; and establishing criteria to evaluate success.
- There are reasons for optimism that Unmudl will succeed in realizing its vision, because many solutions are already in progress. These include progress in several areas critical to long-term success, such as alignment and coordination of noncredit to credit programming; financial support for noncredit programming; IT systems capacity; metrics-setting for 2021 plus data-tracking systems going into place; and marketing and public relations.

As Unmudl enters its next crucial stage of development, its highest priority is to quickly market the resources available at Unmudl.com and establish its brand on the increasingly crowded learning platform playing field.

Based on suggestions from Unmudl's founding partners gleaned especially from the February 2021 interviews (see Appendix A), there are several considerations for the next stages of activity to include:

- Continuing to evolve the content of the Unmudl platform.
- Messaging the early wins of the Unmudl model and bringing new community colleges to the collective.
- Bringing more employers to the partnership to strengthen the connections between the skills-to-jobs marketplace.
- Building a national brand for Unmudl as a community college-led learning platform that serves working learners in a skills-to-jobs marketplace.
- Conducting research to inform fine-tuning of the model and identifying lessons learned to inform future growth.
- Creating and sharing data dashboards on enrollments, type of course taken, experiences of working learners completing courses, employer hiring, etc.
- Supporting ongoing evaluation to capture and share learnings among the team, key stakeholders, and funders.

The milestone metrics for Unmudl for 2021 are ambitious. They project the goals of the collective to move forward quickly in this new community college-led skills-to-jobs marketplace.

Milestones Metrics

For colleges:

- 15 colleges in Unmudl community college network by the end of 2021.
- 300 skills-based total course offerings driven by high demand, of which 50 are employer-validated, and mapped to credit.

For learners:

- 10,000 by the end of 2021.
- Learners can put together credits and redeem against a credential program at any of the Unmudl colleges.

For learner outcomes (drives the vision of Unmudl in three key indicators):

- New or better job.
- Credits or noncredit from college and/or continuing education.
- Credentials including degrees.

For employers:

- Five international employer sponsorships.
- 50 employers hiring from Unmudl courses.

The challenges ahead are steep, as is the nation's economic recovery as we emerge from the pandemic. As Unmudl continues to evolve and market its product nationwide, this report provides a useful snapshot for what it has taken to reach this major two-year milestone — and what it will take to reach the next major milestones.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

“The future is already here. There are 65 million working learners in the United States alone. We have teamed up with cutting-edge community colleges to fuel economic growth and help communities and working learners meet the future now.”



Parminder Jassal

Founder & CEO
SocialTech.ai

FOREWORD



Holly Zanville

Research Professor and co-director of Program on Skills, Credentials and Workforce Policy, The George Washington University

Even before the pandemic recession, employers were sounding a warning alarm: the nation needs inclusive, high-quality skills training so that more people will have access to a better life, and more businesses will be able to sustain their growth projections. The alarm is a blaring civil defense siren now, warning us to take action in this 2020-2021 global pandemic with its accompanying economic distress and recognition that we must address racial inequities in our education and workplace systems.

This report focuses on key reasons for the warning siren—the **why** behind the demand for skills by working learners and employers.

It also focuses on a promising solution—the **what**—establishing a blended physical and digital one-stop to produce three outcomes for working learners: a job or better job, credit (college or continuing education), and credentials.

And there is the **how**. SocialTech.ai is a key how—a bridge-builder intermediary helping to connect working learners, employers, and educators in the redesign of dated practices and organizational structures. The how

has included bringing a new tool to the planning table for community colleges: a Futures Innovation Lab.

This report describes the planning, design, and early implementation of the Unmudl solution. It provides information to help educators, employers, and others glean early lessons from the evolving Unmudl enterprise. We hope that stakeholders will recognize the rich resources that reside in the nondegree, noncredit side of community colleges—that we can and must do better to meet the needs of working learners and employers by collaborating more effectively and efficiently.

Unmudl is new on the skills preparation playing field with community colleges at the helm. Now comes the harsh reality: partnerships like Unmudl are difficult to scale and sustain. Intermediaries like Socialtech.ai have already demonstrated the value of the critical bridge-builder role since no college can do this work on its own.

The colleges will need reorganized educational structures and new revenue models to deliver services and curricula more effectively—through the Unmudl tech platform created to support this skills-to-jobs marketplace. These new collaborative paths are critically needed and they must be communicated clearly to working learners and employers. And if this challenge was not large enough, work must proceed at top speed in this unprecedented pandemic recession seeking economic recovery. The civil defense siren is sounding loudly.



Parminder K. Jassal

Founder & CEO of SocialTech.ai

Growing up, one of the first chapter books I read was Future Shock. This worn out, every two pages dog-eared, yellow paperback is burned into my brain. Though some of the futurecasts—like underwater cities and family-owned spaceships—are far from reality, some pieces of advice still stick with me today like “if you don’t have a strategy, you’re part of someone else’s strategy.” So many questions evolve from this one statement—do you want to be part of someone else’s strategy or create your own?

At the heart of our collaborative work with the nation’s most future-focused leadership from our 1,049 community

colleges across the U.S. (AACC 2021), we chose to create our own strategy by solving for a future of an equitable sustainable society, and bridging back to today to create that new future. To be transparent, as a community college graduate myself, this effort is somewhat selfishly driven and isn’t about “fixing” community colleges but about helping them reinvent their business models for the future—to remain the gem that they are.

Within this decade alone, large infusions of funds like the \$2 billion for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training starting in 2011 plus millions more from foundations across our nation have helped to create 2,691 new programs at community colleges serving 498,793 students over seven years (as of September 30, 2018) at a cost of \$3,800 per student (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).

We know we can do better in a competitive landscape where universities are reaching into microcredentials, for-profits are quickly marketing new credentialing programs, and the short-term credentialing market with badging and the like is exploding (Credential Engine 2021).

A Futures Innovation Lab has informed the creation of Unmudl. The central issue addressed in the lab focused on scale for an equitable sustainable future. How do we start with scale and work backwards from there? On one hand, it's important to create more programs — on the other hand, how do we scale to serve more learners? And for the latter, not serving learners one time but multiple times in their lives? Furthermore, how do we reach all learners — not just those in the urban or affluent areas?

By starting with scaling in mind, our planning work quickly moved beyond congeniality to collaboration. Scale has been driving our collaboration to create a community college-driven marketplace to respond to the Courseras

and edXs who are reaching into the space typically served by community colleges.

As we celebrate two important milestones to offer working learners a new future (the Unmudl marketplace is complete plus the shift to the next phase of going public), I could not be prouder of the collaborative spirit demonstrated by our team, partners, champions, and countless others who are contributing to our advancement in big and small ways. Together we have rallied around the BIG IDEA of facilitating intentional connections between the nation's working learners and real employment opportunities through skills-based curricula at community colleges that are aligned to jobs.

I am humbled and grateful to those impacting and inspiring the important Unmudl work. What we are doing together is more than pursuing a mission. We are launching a movement. And our movement is just beginning towards an equitable sustainable future.

Business Roundtable (2017)

- The private sector already spends more than \$164 billion each year on education and training, but we are still falling behind in generating enough skilled labor to meet our nation's needs. To address this problem, we need to work directly with our nation's academic and government leaders to rebuild the pipeline that generates top talent — from the earliest grades through college, career training and beyond. This rebuilding will require a national effort involving all levels of government, the private sector, educational institutions and training providers.
- Our economic growth is hindered because the skills of today's workers have not kept up with the requirements of current and future jobs. The situation is dire and worsening due a combination of challenges: the working-age population is growing at half the rate of the last century; labor force participation is holding steadily below that of the past three decades; and baby boomers are retiring in record numbers.
- The U.S. is experiencing a workforce skills gap that is holding our economy back and threatening our economic future. In particular, there are three types of skills gaps in today's workforce, often acting in combination: lack of individuals with fundamental employability skills such as the ability to use basic math, communicate effectively, read technical manuals, and work successfully in teams and participate in complex problem-solving; lack of workers who have the specialized skills needed to fill many trade positions; and lack of applicants with the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills needed for many of today's jobs.

Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (2018)

- Every year, more than 500,000 of our best students, those in the top half of their high school class, give college a try but never earn a degree or certificate. Even among those who get BAs, more than 20 percent end up in jobs that don't require college-level skills and pay high school-level wages.

National Skills Coalition (2020)

- American life has always depended on people working at every level of our economy — skilled workers in growing industries like healthcare, medical technology, IT and software, and advanced manufacturing — as well as tradespeople like plumbers and electricians. But the Covid-19 pandemic has brought that reality into sharp focus.
- The unsung heroes of this crisis are the men and women keeping the internet and other critical utilities up and running. They drive trucks and work in logistics and manufacturing. They are the hundreds of thousands of people risking their own health as they work in hospitals doing behind-the-scenes jobs like sanitizing and preparing rooms and equipment, and those working as medical assistants, phlebotomists, or technicians. These folks have always been the very backbone of America's economy — it's never been more clear: a person's ability to contribute doesn't depend on a college degree.
- Jobs that require skills training are the backbone of our economy.

MESSAGE FROM UNMUDL PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL

This report is a roadmap for innovation. You start with a blank sheet of paper and build the foundation for change — using the best data available on the needs of employers and working learners, using futures forecasting tools to identify the scenarios likely coming, and using the many resources you have such as faculty, courses, wraparound and backend services, and IT, at your own college and collaborating colleges.

Our Unmudl collective, seven colleges strong plus the NISOD (National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development), and SocialTech.ai started with a blank sheet of paper. We're committed to connecting our nondegree shorter-term credential programs to students, employees, and employers at this critical time in the nation's plans for economic recovery.

When we started this work, we could not have anticipated the pandemic-caused recession. Fortunately we had recognized the need to escalate workforce alignment efforts, and shift resources as best we could to shorter-term credentialing. We determined the best way forward was to come together as a collective and take it national, because none of our colleges could go to scale on their own.

Originally, we envisioned 50 to 100 additional colleges, one or two per state. And while we are still challenged to raise the community college voice nationally through Unmudl, we know realistically that building such a network will take too long in the short-term

Now with the Unmudl technical platform ready and a substantial amount of available content from our current colleges, we are focusing our efforts on pulling together quality, in-demand courses and programs and making these resources available within a manageable collective of community colleges. We believe that number in the next three to four years will likely expand from our current seven to 125 to 145 college.

In light of the economic imperative before us, today our strategy is to escalate marketing and branding of the platform as it stands to encourage enrollment of individuals who need shorter-term credential options now and in the near term.

We will be working hard — and as a collective — in the next year to get the word out about Unmudl, which we

believe is a very important, burgeoning resource. We know there are many platform efforts offering important educational and training resources as well, but few are focusing on skills courses and programs available from community colleges. Like those innovative educational providers that preceded us and have taken their place in the postsecondary education ecosystem, we are just entering the playing field. The stakes are high to mount this ambitious skills-to-jobs marketplace — and we are committed to helping learners and employers at this critical time.

There are more than 200 individuals who have spent countless hours, weeks, and months of work to get us to this near two-year milestone. We are grateful for their contributions and commitment to the vision of Unmudl.

This report is a narrative of our journey together and the roadmap to innovation we are on as Unmudl partners. We invite others to join us in our vision to scale a national marketplace that brings together working learners, employers, and higher education institutions in one ecosystem.



Chair of President's Council

Lee Lambert

Chancellor
Pima Community College



Chair-Elect

Tracy Hartzler

President
Central New Mexico Community College

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAMPION'S GROUP

Community colleges have long served in the role of providing a vital path to economic mobility, particularly to working learners and people of color in their local communities. While millions of Americans begin their degree pathway at a community college, community colleges are also important providers of nondegree workforce training.

Predominantly, units providing this training have operated separately from the credit-based programs. This separation has allowed for distinctions in noncredit programs, such as curriculum development and enrollment processes, educational approaches, and instructor hiring — all beneficial to effectively engaging the learners and employers they serve.

However, in many cases this has also resulted in inequitable access to the institutional resources that support credit programs such as student support, marketing and outreach, and IT services — negatively impacting their visibility and efficacy.

Unmudl is not just providing community college partners with the opportunity for increased visibility to a national marketplace to working learners and employers, it is also prompting us to dig deeper into many of the long-standing and increasingly problematic divisions between credit and noncredit programs that exist within our colleges. As we began our work in championing our Unmudl partnership to our internal stakeholders — to solicit support for backend integrations with our finance and IT staff, to develop strategies for marketing and outreach to learners we weren't currently serving, to engage in mapping noncredit-to-credit pathways, and to identify funding and other support services noncredit students could access — we realized that Unmudl was helping to serve as a much needed catalyst for changes in the relationships, mindsets, structures, and processes supporting our workforce training units.

Given that the creation of Unmudl was informed by futures thinking, it is hardly surprising that shortly after our collective journey began in bridging the gaps between noncredit and credit programs, several prominent articles and reports were published calling out the need for such alignment.

In "A More Unified Community College: Strategies and

Resources to Align Noncredit and Credit Programs," for example, the Education Strategy Group put forth a framework of five key tenants to realizing a more unified community college, developed from insights gained from several community colleges. At the time of the report's publication they stated, "no single institution or system has completely implemented the new framework or achieved full alignment. Yet, those who are doing this work are leaders in the field, demonstrating the need for further alignment and showing how change in this area is both possible and essential" (p. 2).

We believe Unmudl to assist us in the goal of achieving full alignment. While we are all at different places in this journey, our involvement has given us the opportunity to learn from and with leaders who are doing this work at each partner institution, most especially our fellow "Unmudl Champions" who have met bi-weekly for over a year with a commitment of working together to address the challenges and opportunities. While the potential of Unmudl as a marketplace connecting learners, employers, and community colleges has yet to be fully realized, it has already delivered on its promise as an innovation hub for a network of community colleges, powering transformations that will benefit all of our stakeholders.



Erica Barreiro

Unmudl Champion Lead
Central New Mexico Community
College

RECOGNIZING THE INTERNATIONAL UNMUDL COMMUNITY

The international Unmudl community has grown exponentially from the founders to over 150+ individuals to include the next round of community colleges joining the Unmudl community college network, employers, international partners, advisors, and other supporters.

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² Founders include five community colleges + NISOD. The Unmudl workplan calls for ten Round #2 colleges. The first two of those are SUNY Broome Community College and San Diego College of Continuing Education which joined the collective in fall 2020. Others will be joining the collective throughout 2021.

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SocialTech.ai

SocialTech.ai is a public benefit corporation located in Austin, Texas. It builds and scales technologies that support social processes with the goal of nudging human decision-making towards an equitable, sustainable future. Its mission is to make a difference to working learners “— to always benefit working learners.”

This mission is founded in the belief that a future-focused, skills-centric approach to education and workforce development is the key to serving both employers and learners.

SocialTech.ai has a Practical Futures Advisory that translates futures research into practical implementation.

SocialTech.ai unveiled plans for Unmudl.com, its flagship Work + Learn marketplace, in the fall of 2019.



Flagship Product:

Unmudl Marketplace

Powered by community colleges to efficiently stack skills + jobs for working learners and employers, Unmudl is a national resource that aims to serve the 65 million working learners and more than 10 million employers in the United States.

SocialTech.ai powers the Unmudl marketplace composed of three key stakeholders: learners, employers, and community colleges.

- For learners, the marketplace reduces time investment, cost, and increases certainty so it is clear how outcomes link to their futures: a new or better job, credit and noncredit through either college or continuing education, and credentials to include certificates, certifications, and degrees.
- For employers, assists in recruiting and sourcing talent from community colleges while allowing employers to collaborate with each other and community colleges across the nation to build credentials and courses. Unmudl blends the physical community college infrastructure with an online digital network to help colleges seamlessly offer courses, services, and credentials to learners and employers.
- For community colleges, a solution for the problems of declining enrollments, revenue generation, and maintaining curricular strength in a growing array of skills areas.

Six founding partners: Bellevue Community College (Bellevue, Washington); Central New Mexico Community College - CNM Ingenuity (Albuquerque, New Mexico); GateWay Community College (Phoenix, Arizona); Pima Community College (Tucson, Arizona); San Juan College (Farmington, New Mexico), and National Institute for Staff and Organization Development (NISOD) (Austin, Texas). Two additional community colleges joined Unmudl Futures Lab during the planning phase: SUNY Broome Community College (Broome County, New York), and San Diego College of Continuing Education (San Diego, California).

SECTION 2

CONTEXT FOR PLANNING

“In an increasingly competitive higher-ed landscape, Unmudl elevates the high-quality training programs offered by community colleges, while simultaneously increasing access to training through a central marketplace. With decades of experience in preparing people for jobs, community colleges on Unmudl bring together economically relevant content for meaningful wage training.”



Steven Gonzales

Interim Chancellor
Maricopa County Community
College District

THE PLANNING CONTEXT

“Muddled”

Unmudl’s founding community colleges started with this premise: we’re living in a state of “muddle,” a “state of bewildering confusion or disorder” (Oxford Languages). The 2020 report, “Bridge Builders: How Intermediaries Can Connect Education and Work” (Strada Education Network and Lumina Foundation) sets the stage for the nation’s “muddled” context. It further points to a solution: intermediaries can connect the learn-and-work ecosystem in real-time to be responsive to changing needs.

The need to better prepare people for work is as urgent as it is universal. Work everywhere is becoming more complex. So is education. To navigate these, people all over the world need help they often can’t find or don’t get. Many governments, educators, and employers — all presumably responsible for coordinating demand with supply — don’t have a formal way to do it. They have largely relied on the market to somehow fill gaps, or on haphazard efforts by education providers and employers who speak different languages and have divergent interests. And all of these problems are now made more pressing by a global recession.

The coronavirus pandemic has given still greater urgency to connecting the supply of qualified employees with the demand for them. The fact that there’s a gap between this supply and demand is well established. But it’s also geographically uneven, unexpectedly nuanced, and surprisingly persistent — with dire implications for cities, states, and rural areas that don’t address it. At a time of renewed attention to social and racial justice, this disconnect particularly affects low-income racial and ethnic minorities whose families are less likely to have finished postsecondary education and who themselves earn college and university degrees at lower rates than higher-income whites. They’re left to find their own way, with little guidance.

With no tradition of centralized, federal-level planning and investment in nationwide labor market policies, it’s no surprise that the United States invests less in active labor market policies than any industrialized country except Mexico. In any case, examples of effective workforce policy show it’s best coordinated from the bottom up, and not the top down. Economies from one community to another are different. What all of them need are bridge builders — intermediaries that can bring together education and training providers, employers, and workers who today fail to communicate well (if they talk to one another at all) in a crowded and chaotic marketplace of occupations and credentials.

Strada Education Network and Lumina Foundation, 2020, p. 8

The Bridge Builders report reminds us that in this economic recession, many jobs have been eliminated and some have been added back; many jobs are requiring more training; and the disparity in accessing successful pathways between education and work is particularly limiting for Black, Latino, and low-income learners. At the very time economic changes are requiring more education and training post high school, workers trying to navigate the confusing array of credentials are often stymied and even misled about what are the next best steps in their economic recovery journeys.

Many organizations are working in the arena of skills, credentialing, and workforce development to bring solutions to these problems. These include federal and state policymakers, business and industry, education institutions, third-party providers of education and training, credential verifiers, quality assurance organizations, researchers, think tanks, and philanthropy.

Yet there are wide-ranging views on what are the best credentials for learners to acquire to enter, re-enter and/or move up through the job marketplace. Some contend that learners are often overeducated for the jobs they get that shorter-term credentials such as certificates and industry-awarded certifications can be faster and better ways to meet workforce needs. Still, many employers will not consider candidates for middle-skills jobs without bachelor’s degrees, even for jobs that have not traditionally required one.

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce concludes: “Today’s ecosystem of postsecondary credentials is complex, fragmented, and multilayered, and presents significant challenges to learners, employers, and policymakers” (Carnevale, Garcia and Gulash, 2017).

Many in the community college and workforce arenas have noted a shift is in order to focus more on short-term credentialing. Career-oriented microcredentials such as short-term certificates are thought to be good solutions to the need for quickly acquired, focused skills. Prior to the pandemic, nearly a million certificates were being awarded annually, up by more than 50 percent since the number started to be tracked in 1995 (NCES, 2017). And some adults with certificates and no degrees have better outcomes finding and keeping jobs and higher incomes than their counterparts without them (Strada Education Network and Lumina Foundation Gallup, 2019).

Futures Innovation Lab

A futures approach kicked off solution planning, based on the recognition offered decades ago by William Gibson that “the future is already here – it’s just not very evenly distributed.”³ The futures approach begins with a Futures Innovation Lab placing an “inquiry” before a thought leader group to start planning and forecasting processes. The inquiry for this work was “the future of the student in 2030.” For this exploration (fall 2019 to early 2020), key stakeholders (community college educators, researchers, futurists, university educators, employers, and others) were interviewed by the Futures Innovation Lab at SocialTech.ai.



The future is already here — it’s just not very evenly distributed.

William Gibson

Futures Innovation Lab: well-tested method of forecasting futures scenarios. Diverse stakeholders in the lab process identify signals and use multiple data-gathering processes (e.g., Delphi technique, ethnographies, interviews, data points) to develop a range of potential scenarios imagined for the future. The building of solutions comes from the emerging scenarios.

Signals

A signal is typically a small or local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scale and geographic distribution. A signal can be a new product, practice, market strategy, policy, or technology.

It can be an event, local trend, or organization. It can also be a recently revealed problem or state of affairs. In short, it is something that catches our attention at one scale and in one locale and points to larger implications for other locales or even globally.

Signals are useful for people who are trying to anticipate a highly uncertain future. Signals tend to capture emergent phenomenon sooner than traditional social science methods.



Signals are useful for people who are trying to anticipate a highly uncertain future. They tend to capture emergent phenomena sooner than traditional social science methods. Unlike trends, they turn attention to possible innovations before they become obvious. Unlike indicators, they often focus attention at the margins of society rather than the core.

Institute for the Future

³ Speculative science fiction writer and essayist, William Gibson, helped create an iconography for the information age before the ubiquity of the Internet in the 1990s.

Unlike trends, they turn attention to possible innovations before they become obvious. Unlike indicators, they often focus attention at the margins of society rather than the core. In this way, they are more likely to reveal disruptions and innovations. Of course, local trends and indicators can function as signals: when a trend hits a certain threshold, for example, it might be a signal of a change in the larger population, as when an innovation moves beyond the lead user stage and begins to diffuse much more rapidly.

The community college Futures Innovation Lab focused on solving for the problems of community colleges, working learners, and employers by identifying the signals and data points that point to the future. Examples of signal clusters/new trends identified during the Futures Lab included the following:

- Development and fast growth of Coursera and EdX, and the recent unicorn IPO of Coursera that took the visibility of online education to an all-time high plus the recent IPO of PluralSight a few years back (Berman, 2021; Renaissance Capital, 2018).
- Expansion of Amazon with the investment in “physical locations” such as Whole Foods, Amazon to Go stores, and partnership with Kohl’s and UPS Mailboxes to add the in-person component that humans crave (Goulston and Storrs, 2020).
- Continued gifting to universities and colleges indicating “trust” in traditional higher education (Whitford, 2021; Redden, 2020; Akhtar, 2019).
- Rise of the shadow industry consisting of more credentials to use for qualifications than a human mind can comprehend, indicating that “packaging” of skills and knowledge is still important even if it’s not a degree (Credential Engine).
- Dissolving lines between work life and education life; therefore, expected student outcomes have expanded.
- Separate digital strategy is no longer the norm.
- Instant gratification is not a “nice to have” any longer — it is expected.
- Polarization of labor as a result of gig work is exacerbating the racial wealth gap (Sumagaysay, 2021).
- Negative equity impacts in credit-based programs due to many barriers to entry for working learners; e.g., placement testing, selective admissions programs, hidden prerequisites, developmental education, and FAFSA. Community colleges are “open admissions” in theory, but not so in practice. These barriers disproportionately limit access to the college to people of color and marginalized populations. With noncredit, such barriers are removed, and the major barrier to the learner becomes cost.

Mapping Signals to Two-Curve Framework

After in-depth analysis of the signals in the environment, the planning group mapped signals onto the Futures Innovation Lab’s Two-Curve Futures Framework. The framework is a well-tested forecasting tool to embed test signal scalings within an environment of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (known as VUCA). Once mapped, planning groups can more easily determine which signals form clusters and new trends that are part of a coming wave of innovation and which are on the declining “business as usual” curve and fading into the past.

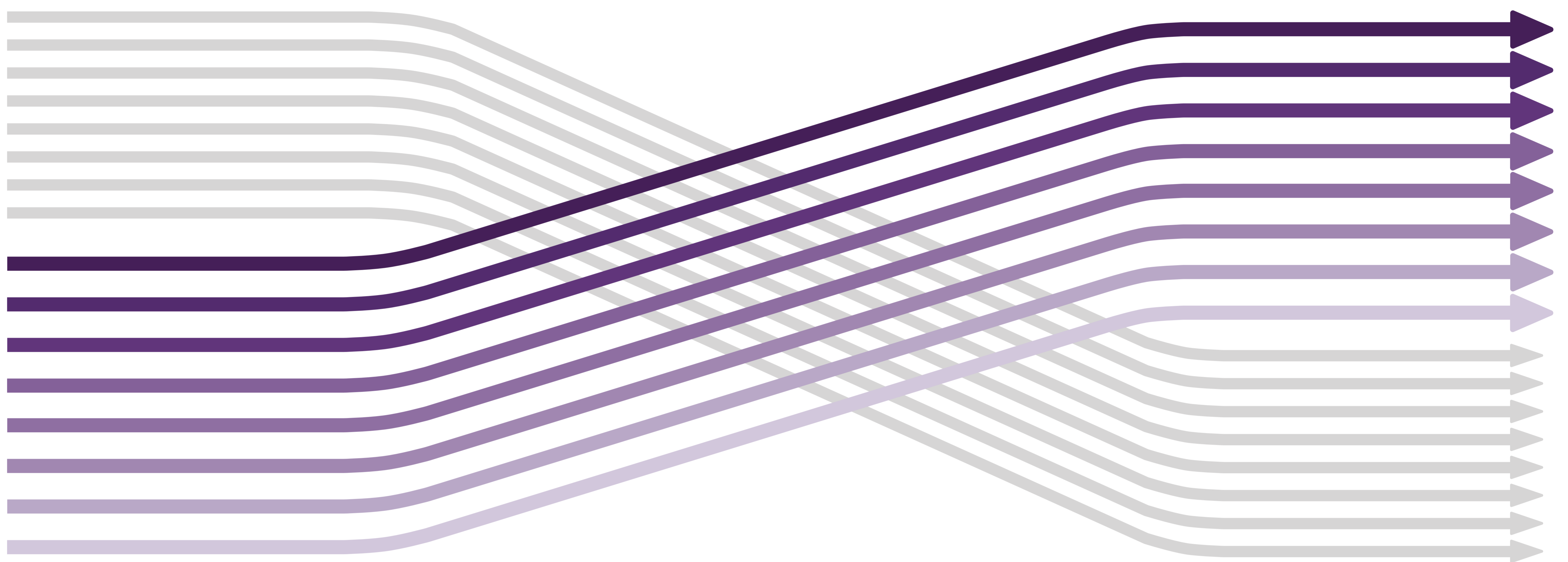
Former Institute for the Future president Ian Morrison developed the theory of the “second curve.” In this theory, incumbent leaders in a market or society will always be displaced by emergent innovations.⁴

⁴ While there are other schools of thought about whether (or the extent to which) signals tend to capture emergent phenomena sooner than traditional social science methods or incumbent leaders will always be displaced by emergent innovations, there is a literature on innovation that speaks to first-mover advantage, network effects, and other advantages that incumbents enjoy. These are key reasons many think Netflix, Apple, Amazon, Google, eBay, Facebook and the like are so hard to displace. When Clay Christensen talks about innovation by newcomers, he emphasizes the newcomer advantage with respect to disruptive innovations, not normal ones (Larson, 2016). Whichever is the preferred perspective for the ways in which emergent innovations displace current practices, first mover advantage captures the likely reality that in being first to enter a new market, a business gains a commercial advantage over its actual and potential rivals and this will lead to higher revenues and profits over time.

The incumbent curve is always a declining S-curve, while the emergent curve is an ascending S-curve. Understanding the signals and new trends on each curve helps to anticipate particularly difficult-to-forecast transformational futures.

We Live in a 2-Curve World

1st curve: business as usual; 2nd curve: coming wave of innovations



First formulated by former Institute for the Future president Ian Morrison as tool for thinking about transformations the economy and society at large are likely to undergo in next decade and beyond

Key Drivers of Change

Like many large-scale national initiatives, planning for change initiatives begins with research and discussions with stakeholders to explore key drivers for change. The community college Futures Innovation Lab occurred during a truly unique timeline: after the Great Recession but before the pandemic recession.⁵ The dynamic learn-and-work ecosystem and needs for reform of our educational system — to develop a strong skills orientation — was front and center when the Futures Innovation Lab began its inquiry in fall 2019, and launched out of the Work + Learn Futures Lab located at the Institute for the Future.

[SocialTech.ai](#)'s founder, Parminder Jassal, describes the stage-setting for this work which had actually begun years earlier.⁶ "I had been involved in work around the working learner for a long time, seeing a world in which the lines between worker and learner were dissolving. Some of us were envisioning people no longer putting on one hat to work for 40 hours — and another hat to learn for 40 hours. We needed systems to support an integrated future. That was the vision: to understand who the human is and what changes in higher education would be needed to accommodate those changes. I started this work at ACT Foundation in 2012. That vision strengthened when I moved to the Institute for the Future to learn how to make systems change happen within the context of the future. At the Institute, I established the Work + Learn Futures Lab to focus on research behind the human — the working learner" (Jassal and Clark, 2016, 2017).

Various universities, governments, third-party educational providers, and community colleges started coming to the Futures Lab with questions. They asked about research and needed systems to support future learners.

⁵ Great recession, December 2007 to June 2009; COVID recession, February 2020 to present.

⁶ Information from interviews with Jassal.

“The bravest sector coming to the Lab was the community colleges.” Jassal noted. “Many colleges asked what they were going to do in this vast landscape of change — they felt ignored. Universities were creating microcredentials, encroaching into what had been traditional community college areas such as early-level/entry-level skills and shorter-term credentialing. They asked for advice and guidance on the possible future roles of community colleges.”

The callers from the community colleges were typically chancellors, presidents, board trustees, and college strategy staff. They had questions including:

- How do we serve small and medium-size businesses?
- How do we scale when we can’t afford to offer too many small programs?
- How do we redesign our workflow for working learners when our funding is focused on building programs and credit-based enrollment?
- How can we serve our local community yet have a larger impact?
- How might we generate revenue to define our own futures?

One topic consistently came up: the billions of dollars that came to the colleges through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant program (TAACCCT) of the U.S. Department of Labor. But very little that was scalable came out of it. The programs impacted maybe 5, 10, or 50 learners at a college — maybe 500 to 1,000 if they were online programs. The idea of a repository of college resources was yet to be envisioned. An audit of many of the repositories that were already established from the TAACCCT efforts found there was limited or no use because of either the static nature of or backwards-looking, obsolete information (ACT Foundation, 2016).

The repository research was conducted at ACT Foundation. This question about the student of the future and future role of higher education informed the founding of the new Work + Learn Futures Lab at the Institute for the Future. One line of inquiry within the lab identified resources needed to answer questions about scaling and identifying signals and new trends for community colleges.

The world the community college questions described during the Futures Lab discussions was a chaotic one. When all was said and done, the discussions boiled down to who is the student of the future, and how are we going to support that new student?

The key answer emerging from these conversations was: instant access to continuous learning flows that provide immediate gratification with certainty of outcomes. In short, there should be a move from programs to shorter term, skills-driven noncredit or credit courses that connect to jobs and future education paths. There should be no more “ors,” as in jobs *or* education).

After determining that the working learner is the student of the future, the group focused on understanding questions from the college view and brought in the Institute for the Future’s human-centered design process. This process resulted in interviewing hundreds of learners regarding their needs.

Key Questions in College Planning Discussions

Who is the student of the future, and how are we going to support that new student?

The key answer emerging from these conversations with community college leaders: instant access.

The questions from working learners (and learners that had not yet worked) to the traditional higher education system were:

- Why are we being pushed into decisions before we're ready?
- Why is it if you go to college, when you walk away just because you walk away it is worth nothing?
- Why do we have to decide two, four, or six years out — when every day we hear how we need to be agile?
- Why is it that the learning we do in different places cannot be put together to get us to a greater path?
- Why does only college campus learning count when we can learn anywhere, anytime?
- Why are we required to take all these different courses when they don't make sense to us?
- Why is there a "terminal degree" when everywhere you turn it's about "lifelong learning?"
- Why do there have to be timelines for learning, like four or five-year graduation rates when we are supposed to be learning for our entire lives?

Jassal explained, "Those were the kind of questions we were designing for. If we could get noncredit resources pulled together as an exploratory mechanism, why not also explore building your skill set and getting on a path to a credential? And why do that at just one college when everything outside education is working toward pulling skill sets from multiple sources?"

The pandemic recession hit hard amid these developments. "Because we did not start with today but instead are solving future problems, there was no change in our work other than everything had to accelerate," Jassal noted. "That's one of the beauties when solving for the future. You run scenarios to understand possible alternative futures (like pandemics), so you already have assumptions for reverse engineering. Because we had gone through that with the colleges in the Futures Innovation Lab, they believed in those alternative futures and were already on board."

The colleges moved through these alternative future discussions primarily one to one. "It was done one by one because the colleges came to us asking for and training on futures methodologies. They were proactive, thinking ahead, already beginning to ask the questions. However, they needed a framework for thinking through successfully bridging from today into the future," Jassal explained.

The role of an intermediary organization helping community colleges was key. The colleges expressed an interest in having a network of colleges plus an intermediary to help people and organizations find their way in this difficult context.

The initial Futures Innovation Lab pioneered by the five, and later seven colleges, represent a cross-section of community colleges in the U.S. (see Tables A on p.29 and B on p.30). An emerging question was whether a model like Unmudl would work with colleges very different in their approach — or would there need to be many commonalities among the colleges for the model to work?

Early on Jassal observed key commonalities among the founding colleges: "All of them have presidents that can see into the future. Many quickly saw Unmudl as a vehicle for boosting revenues and allowing their colleges to promote areas they see as centers of excellence."



The role of an intermediary organization helping community colleges was key. The colleges expressed an interest in having a network of colleges plus an intermediary to help people and organizations find their way in this difficult context.

Parminder Jassal, SocialTech.ai

“The colleges are looking at operating centers of excellence, determining who does what and does it well, to leverage the unique resources of colleges. As example, one college has expertise in virtual reality; it is looking at the marketplace to augment and amplify that work beyond its geographic region. Another college does a lot with the autonomous vehicles industry and offers certificates and other skills courses and credentials. Other colleges can offer related credentials that stack with the first college’s programming.”



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Jassal pointed to other use cases. “A marketing team at a college in a rural area, where the economy is essentially turned off now, is interested in creating training to attract students beyond its service area. That college could use Unmudl as an economic development tool to bring in people to do training, to use in any part of the country. Other use cases might include market testing before investing in the development of new courses, and colleges depending on the college network for needed courses instead of outside vendors, thereby, increasing faculty support for the Unmudl collective.”

The Unmudl model has been based on the capacity of leadership to invest in the future. By committing to working within a collective, the colleges adopted a growth mindset — an “abundance mindset.” The sum of the whole (the community college collective) would be larger than the parts (individual colleges).

Table A
Unmudl’s Community Colleges: Learner Demographics

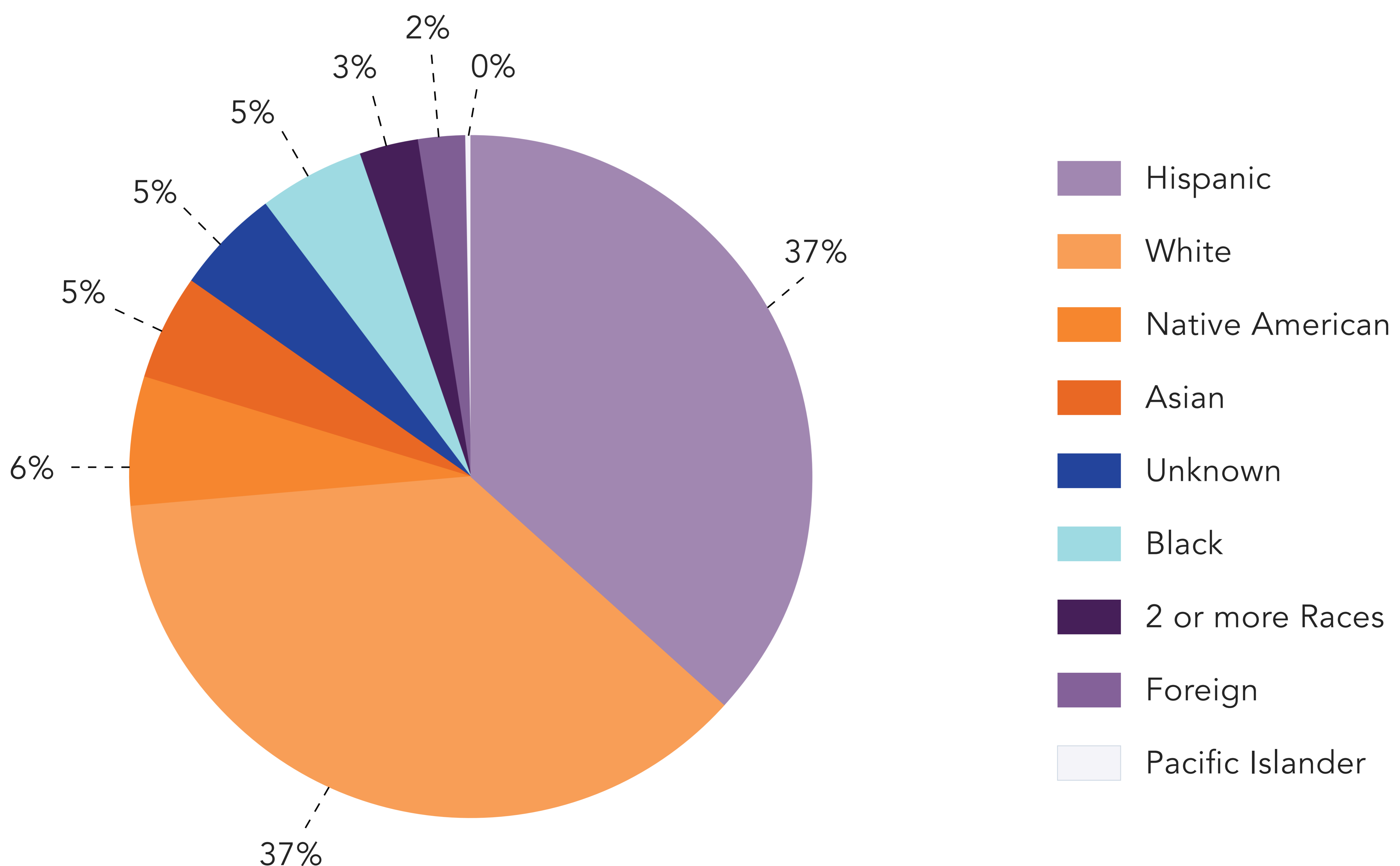


Table B

Unmudl Community Colleges Represent a Cross-section of Community Colleges

COLLEGE, STATE / STUDENT ENROLLMENT	>50% OF STUDENTS ARE:		TYPE OF LOCATION	UNIQUE FACTORS
Bellevue College, WA 29,120	White or Asian	20-30k	Suburban	Offers Bachelor's degrees; home to largest tech companies, Asian-serving
Central New Mexico Community College, NM 22,278	Hispanic	20-30k	Urban+ Rural	Tech bootcamps, national audience; Native American-serving; top 5 for Associate degrees to Hispanics; most populous in NM
GateWay Community College, AZ 12,000	Hispanic	10-20k	Urban	Designated workforce college in 10-college Maricopa Community College District
Pima Community College, AZ 62,252	Hispanic or White	>50k-65k	Urban+ Suburban	Space-grant college
San Diego College of Continuing Education, CA 40,000+	N/A	30-40k	Urban – online only	Online college for San Diego College of Continuing Education District – the fourth college with 7 campuses; Nation's largest separately-accredited noncredit continuing education institution.
San Juan College, NM 12, 723	White or Native American	10-20k	Rural	Native American Reservation Services; Farmington lies between 3 Indian reservations: Navajo to west, Ute Mountain Indians to Northwest, Southern Utes to Northeast; American Indian Science & Engineering Society earned National Student Chapter of Year Award
SUNY Broome Community College, NY 6,507	White	<10k	Rural + Suburban	Birthplace of IBM 15 minutes away; rural-suburban
Student Enrollments consist of students in credit programs as noted in this table.	Hispanic(37%); White (36.5%); Native American (6%); Black (4.4%); other (16.1%)	150-205k	Mixed	Unmudl's target population extends beyond credit program enrollments and includes noncredit students and alumni.

Notes: Numbers may vary from other sources because some small campuses within a district are not consistently listed with main campus. Numbers come from the U.S. Department of Education (IPEDS) and therefore do not reflect noncredit enrollments, which is part of the problem concerning noncredit education that Unmudl is addressing. Noncredit enrollments do not exist currently in any official reporting.

Takeaways from the Discussions: Future Forces

The community college Futures Innovation Lab identified five forces that are pulling them into the future whether they like it or not. For planning purposes, these future forces function as drivers for significant change:

- **Seamless Futures:** Education can no longer afford to function within silos. It must embrace the best of both worlds — the sensory experiences of the physical along with the ease and personalization of online shopping. The most successful education providers will be the ones who seamlessly fuse the physical infrastructure with the convenience of digital in the connected college — allowing learners to channel-hop without friction. The future is about joining the numerous dots that constitute the learner journey to create enduring learner relationships across both the physical and digital channels. The physical presence remains time-tested and valuable; and empowered by digital, it offers anytime availability for ultimate convenience, fluidity, and familiarity in a frictionless environment. Learners look for experiences where the physical and digital coexist in the same customer journey. We're no longer just talking about the digital experience; rather, we're talking about the learning experience.
- **Instant Futures:** Learners no longer desire to follow any single fixed path for learning. Their education journey might start with a click on a website and end with an in-college experience, or may begin as window shopping at a campus and end at home with an online purchase. Impatient shoppers crave immediacy. Therefore, education providers need to provide flexible fulfillment options to meet these expectations with the help of accurate real-time program visibility. No matter the channel, learners expect every purchase to be fulfilled in an efficient and timely fashion — and their experience to be consistent. Instant gratification seekers are constantly searching online so it's important to make their shopping experience as pleasant and easy as possible. A learner experience in which the purchasing process is fluid, familiar, and frictionless is the goal.
- **Equitable Futures:** The stats behind MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) reveal that many of their learners already have degrees, come out of established careers, and/or come from highly inspired backgrounds and these learners will typically do well in any learning situation. Those stats do not describe the target population for Unmudl. The Unmudl population is aimed at individuals who typically have no degree or other credential, have not had equitable education and career opportunities, and wish to build social capital.⁷
- **Sustainable Futures:** Revenue generation is a must. The Unmudl solution must solve for the problems identified: community colleges taking their place and commanding the space to deliver skills, particularly hands-on skills. This is what community colleges are known for — and being agile.
- **Collaborative Futures:** One community college leader remarked during the planning discussions that community colleges are congenial with each other, but are not typically collaborative. Simply being interconnected or part of a network does not guarantee collaboration although it is an important first step. Collaboration is about being able to work together to create and achieve the same goals.

Prepared with “futures forces” from this planning phase, the community colleges moved to solution-building: this was the birth of Unmudl.

⁷ Social capital: “the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively (Wikipedia).” From OECD Insights: “... the knowledge economy puts a premium on human capital and can worsen the job prospects of people with limited education, who are also often the least well off in our societies. Some analysts speak of the emergence of an ‘underclass’ in developed countries, a group that is outside the mainstream of society and has little chance of re-entering it, both because of a lack of human capital and, arguably, the ‘right’ sort of social capital. Indeed, that twin absence may not be a coincidence. A case can be made that human capital and social capital are inextricably linked” (OECD, p. 105).

SECTION 3

DESIGNING THE UNMUDL MODEL

“With a number of commercial organizations in the market, the high-quality programming offered by community colleges can get overlooked. We are the originators of sound, outcome-oriented, workforce training that is delivered in flexible ways. Unmudl organizes us nationally in a way that could change the landscape completely given the ubiquitous presence of community colleges across the country, and at just the right time. Collectively our educational content and stackable learning opportunities put us in a very unique place in the market.”



Kevin Drumm

President
SUNY Broome Community College

THE DESIGN OF UNMUDL

Overview

Unmudl is designed to provide a one-stop marketplace of skills-driven courses for the 65 million working learners in the U.S. — and even greater numbers across the globe. The marketplace offers nondegree, skills-driven community college learning options.

Founding partners included the National Institute for Student and Organizational Development (NISOD) and five community colleges: Bellevue College (Washington); Central New Mexico Community College (New Mexico); GateWay Community College (Arizona); Pima Community College (Arizona) and San Juan College (New Mexico). Two second-round colleges joined the founders during the planning phase: San Diego College of Continuing Education (California); and SUNY Broome Community College (New York).

Unmudl is designed as a collective, collaborative model with a number of features layered on the physical infrastructure at community and technical colleges:

- High flexibility
- Multi-modality
- Courses that lead to jobs
- Tailored to working learners
- Experiential and hands-on learning
- Strong on support services
- Digital blends of human and machine
- Synchronous and nonsynchronous
- Hybrid and place-based
- Able to reach students where they are

The platform⁸ contains more than 260 courses from the network of community colleges:

UNMUDL COMMUNITY COLLEGE NETWORK (AS OF APRIL 12, 2021)	
Total Colleges	7
Total Courses	261
Total Subjects/Occupations Covered	41
Total Employers	47

Public Launch

Unmudl, the online Skills-to-Jobs Marketplace, launched publicly on November 11, 2020. The marketplace links courses available through the Unmudl community college network with specific skills-based hiring needs of Unmudl employer partners. As a result, partner companies can easily interview and hire the most qualified and diverse talent out of America's community colleges.

Derivation of Name, "Unmudl"

The learn-and-work future is muddled up (confused, muddy). This effort is named because of the goal to "unmuddle" the education-to-work ecosystem.

⁸ A significant design and development effort has gone into creating the Unmudl Marketplace. The technology effort led by SocialTech.ai in collaboration with community colleges is not described in this report.

Designing and Implementing the Model

A steering committee of college presidents leads Unmudl's design activities.

A Champion's group composed of the intermediaries between the campus team and president — finance, IT, and marketing staff — meets biweekly to work through issues such as credit to noncredit paths, articulation, and what is the learning students will gain (see p. 15 for the campus leads for the Champion's group).

Together, these two groups have built the Unmudl business model, and committed to designing a system that makes it easy to play for all stakeholders.

SocialTech.ai is the intermediary that provides a range of services to the founding college partners and NISOD. Services include planning assistance with a focus on futurecasting; IT platform development; fundraising; nationwide marketing and communications; discussions with new colleges to join the partnership; discussions with employers to participate with Unmudl; data collection assistance; and coordination among partners.

Target Populations

The design of the Unmudl Marketplace has been to focus on serving two main populations:

- Working learners, a large group of students, learners, student workers, adult learners, and employees engaged in upskilling and retraining (see p. 2).
- Employers who need upskilling for their workforce.

Since planning for Unmudl began before the pandemic recession, data projections focused on both the number of working learners and number of employers in the U.S. prior to 2020. The target population for **working learners** ranges from a conservative 50 million to high of 80+ million. An estimated number of 65 million, therefore, has been used for planning purposes based on examination of several sources of data.

- U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample: 14.5 million working learners. Working learners were defined as "those enrolled in school and working 20+ hours/week."⁹
- Pew Research (Horrigan, 2016): Workers engaged in "professional learning" was 81 million based on extrapolations to total 2017 U.S. Census population of (a) bachelor's degreed, and (b) nondegreed workers (Pew study had separate percentages for both). Professional learners were defined as those who "have taken a course or gotten additional training in the past 12 months to improve their job skills or expertise connected to career advancement."¹⁰
- National Student Clearinghouse (2019): 36 million American adults with "some college but no degree." Of those adults, 10 percent (or more than 3 million) have characteristics of students most likely to return to college and complete their degrees.

⁹ Data retrieved via query that defines working learners as age 18-99, enrolled in school and working 20+ hrs./week.

¹⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/03/22/lifelong-learning-and-technology/> Conservative estimate: 50 million comes from U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Workers age 18-99 with bachelor's degrees working 20+ hrs./week or more. The rough equivalence between learning workers and workers with bachelor's degrees based on paper by Christensen et al, "The MOOC Phenomenon: Who Takes Massive Open Online Courses and Why?", which illustrated high alignment between MOOC enrollees and bachelor-degreed populations. Later, Unmudl determined that instead of 50 million, a more correct estimate would be 81 million working learners based on fraction of bachelor's degreed and non-bachelor's degreed students who actually engage in learning, from Pew Research Center Study (2016) which found 72 percent of bachelor-degreed workers and 49 percent of non-bachelors-degreed workers have engaged in some kind of lifelong professional learning (typically internet or workplace-based) in the past 12 months. Combining this with Census numbers for each category gives 81million.

- Adult learner literature: 35 percent of college population are veterans, working parents, and perpetual students. With economic recessions and veterans' education benefits, adults have sometimes comprised more than 40 percent of the nation's college student body. With adult college students numbering some 6.6 million (2018), that one-third of enrollments was expected to grow much faster than that of younger students for several more years (Gross & Clark, 2018).

The target population for **employers**, based on the rationale that employers need to upskill their workforce, also varies considerably, from 10 million employers to 30 million businesses in the U.S.

- Bureau of Labor Statistics: 10.75 million employers in the U.S. in March 2020.
- Census Bureau's Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs: 5.6 million employer firms in U.S. Firms with fewer than 500 workers accounted for 99.7 percent of those businesses. Firms with fewer than 100 workers accounted for 98.2 percent (Small Business and Entrepreneurship Council, 2018).
- U.S. Small Business Administration: 30.7 million small businesses. Most are sole proprietorships or one-person LLC's (they are businesses but have no employees, so they are not employers).¹¹
- Kehoe (2019) explains the Census Bureau estimate of more than 32.5 million businesses in the U.S.: the biggest group are non-employer businesses about — 25 million businesses, or 76.2 percent. These include sole proprietors who set up shop in their home or at a shared office space but also include people who work as independent contractors, consultants, or freelancers for larger businesses.

Getting a firm hand on the size of both the working learner population and the employer population was challenging before the pandemic recession but more challenging in the recession. There is a decline in employers in the U.S. and uncertainty about what will be the number of working learners as the economy recovers. Unmudl's projections currently are that the target population for working learners is more than 60 million and target population of employers is more than 10 million.¹²

Common Principles and Shared Perspectives

The community college network identified several common principles and shared perspectives to guide their work within four areas: learn-and-work ecosystem; restructuring, resource-sharing, and collaboration; growing enrollments and revenue model; and faculty/staff.

Learn-and-Work Ecosystem

1. **Learning:** More learning happens outside the classroom than inside — maintain strong relationships with industry to help students establish connections and gain the work experience they need. And recognize the learning student bring with them to academic programs through prior learning assessments (PLA).
2. **Working:** Employers have to be continuously involved to help validate learning outcomes in real-time without administrative burden.
3. **Hands-on is crucial:** No one wants a welder welding parts in a plane without actual hands-on experience on a plane wing and a plane!

¹¹ <https://cdn.advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/23142719/2019-Small-Business-Profiles-U.S..pdf>

¹² The Unmudl view is that the large number of "non-employer" businesses in the U.S. will not influence the upskilling marketplace to the same level that larger employers will, though some percentage of non-employers will likely seek upskilling.

4. **Lifelong learning requires varied credentialing:** Degrees cannot deliver a lifetime of work — fast, stackable, noncredit programs are better suited to keep people in the workforce and up to date on their skills.
5. **Learning paths/alignment with the skills marketplace:** Community colleges should focus on the skills each job or career requires, and make them stackable so learning and working are stacked in one stack. In this way, students can sharpen their skills at a fast and efficient pace and build careers as they go (incremental credentialing).
6. **Distance education:** With populations moving out of the cities, big city institutions will be relying more on distance education to retain their enrollments.

Restructuring, Resource-Sharing, Collaboration

7. **Restructuring credit/noncredit:** A strong backend support system is needed for community colleges to become significant players in the noncredit programming space. There should be no distinction between credit and noncredit learners; they should all receive the same support and services to help them succeed. Community colleges are not typically set up to serve noncredit training to nontraditional audiences; they need a seamless system that can integrate with their main campus systems. Many problems can be eliminated when you begin to close the gap between the credit and noncredit sides of an institution and encourage more collaboration between them. This will require restructuring of units at the institution.
8. **Flexible offerings:** Flexible offerings will help grow the full credit side and create a diverse set of offerings on the noncredit side, which appeals to the adult market. Flexibility across colleges is required so as not to interrupt working and learning due to different admissions, registration, and requirements.
9. **Collaborative approach:** Joining the marketplace allows colleges to leverage their strengths and highlight their best programs while scaling their noncredit programs.
10. **Alignment within communities:** To avoid hit-or-miss with noncredit programs, use advisory councils to help create a robust, high-quality program for your community's needs.

Growing Enrollments, Revenue Models

11. **Enrollments:** There is significant opportunity for colleges to gain enrollment within the noncredit space. Without diving into this area, community colleges can easily lose a key demographic of students: the lifelong learner.
12. **Financial burden on students:** Although community colleges can offer quality, needed, and flexible noncredit programming, students continue to face the hurdle of paying for it.
13. **Staffing in fee-based models:** In having fee-based education offerings, faculty members don't need to be displaced — rather, institutions may need to look at hiring more staff.
14. **Scaling/growing noncredit enrollment:** To scale and grow noncredit enrollment, community colleges should develop clear and seamless pathways from noncredit programs that allow students to move into the credit space if they choose to (bridge programs).
15. **Program affordability:** To make program offerings as affordable as possible, look to which local resources can help provide these career pathways for adult learners.
16. **Community college baccalaureates:** Community colleges can help retain students, meet local employer needs, and grow revenue if they begin moving into the baccalaureate degree space.
17. **Investing in noncredit education:** Community colleges must invest in noncredit education since its structure is targeted toward the colleges' main demographic: adult learners. There is a high demand specifically for fast noncredit training. There are both learner and institutional benefits for serving this market.

Faculty/Staff

- 18. Customer-centric support and wraparound services:** The institution must be designed around the customer. All learners should be treated equally and provided support and wraparound services to help them succeed. Noncredit students will look to other educational offerings from other providers which will give them a seamless user experience.
- 19. Faculty/Staff:** With a more traditional faculty, it is challenging to become progressive in education offerings particularly when it comes to noncredit. A community college cannot ask faculty to do something without giving them support — it is the college’s job to try to make the faculty and staff jobs as efficient and stress-free as possible, with the right systems in place. Keeping faculty and staff informed of the process and giving them a voice in the decisions being made are important.

Training, Curriculum, Advising

Unmudl is a three-sided marketplace that solves for the problems and challenges of community colleges, working learners, and employers.

- From the college perspective, there has been much talk about unbundling or disaggregating higher education’s black box to something that makes sense for employers, individuals, and the world. That means for colleges — unbundling into courses, credentials, services, and space. Though each one of those can work in a vacuum, they can connect or not connect — you can use them as building blocks to put together. That is what changes the business model for community colleges.
- What this could mean for working learners is they can enroll at multiple community colleges, not have to stay within their geographic boundaries. They can enroll in more than one college, and attend in person (have access to labs, performance theaters, gyms, the library, and meeting spaces) as well as attend online for other resources.
- From the employer point of view, Unmudl offers one point of contact without having to attend years of advisory committee meetings. Employers can collaborate with all the community colleges in the network, as well as source talent by posting skills-based jobs that increase competence and opportunity at their companies. As example, one large company had to shut down a substantial training program because it required them to set up a staff of 26 to work with a large number of colleges, for not that much return on their investment. The model that employer set up was unworkable and unsustainable.

How Unmudl Impacts Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

The Unmudl colleges will grant PLA credit for noncredit learning. This will function more like a mapping than assessment with mapping aligning the noncredit to the credit side.

An example is a for-credit course for Business Information Systems. A module pulled out of BIS can be the noncredit portion tied directly to a job. It might be a quarter of what is in the for-credit courseware. All of this can be “mapped” so the noncredit fits into the credit path. When the learner completes the noncredit module, this can be fit into the credit path without a separate assessment since it is already mapped.

Because many good jobs require a blend of noncredit and credit, it makes sense to disaggregate the content, break down the credit and noncredit worlds. This will serve working learners better now and in the future; and serve colleges and employers better as well.

Future Vision of Noncredit and Credit

Often there is friction between the noncredit and credit units at a college. The Unmudl vision is that these divisions will be realigned, coordinated, and potentially merged because the differences between credit and noncredit are diminishing in serving working learners, whether they're ages 14 or 80. This approach does not mean, however, that the need and intent is to absolve the system of noncredit altogether and make everything credit-based. Rather, the vision is to meld the accessibility and flexibility of noncredit with the quality and credibility of credit, as determined by outcomes in the labor market, not institutionally driven values.

The Preparation Community Colleges Do to Join Unmudl

It takes a community college about six months to get up and running to join Unmudl. There are typically organizational problems in an academic culture to be addressed. For example, there needs to be reorganization within the colleges and they must address the mapping issues — map noncredit to credit. Some colleges can more easily do the mapping than other colleges.

Can Other Community Colleges Join Unmudl? What Is Required to Be Ready for This Model?

Other community colleges can join Unmudl. There are several components of a college's readiness.

1. A college must have a clear vision of the future.
2. A college must be unhappy with the status quo.
3. A college must have the right type of people in certain positions, such as a person (e.g., a dean) who oversees both credit and noncredit because they have moved into overseeing both units. The college must have the motivation, desire, and resources that both units are going to be coming together.
4. A college must have willing IT folks — have good command of IT since internally the culture of how they do things at most colleges is using IT as an enabler, not a driver. If IT is a driver, it won't be able to move, especially in noncredit-to-credit processes.
5. A college must have willing finance departments. To collaborate, a college must have business systems in place to divide up revenue in real time. The whole idea of the new marketplace is different from how community colleges do business today. Colleges must be able to use marketplace backend; i.e., the way revenue shares work, the ways colleges can collaborate to use divisions of revenue.
6. The college must have HR workflows, which means formulas for hiring and how to fund credit and pay (e.g., how to pay adjuncts vs. fulltime, union employees). To collaborate, HR must be willing to look beyond traditional systems to new college redesign.

How Big Can the Model Get for the Revenue System to Work?

Because funding formulas vary considerably among community colleges and are based, in part, on funding formulas within the states, the tipping point to influence policy (and policymakers) that Unmudl could be a successful model is expected to be at least 15 community colleges. It is believed formulas will shift when stakeholders can see how the model works — when Unmudl is fully functioning.

Other networked educational partnerships offer useful insights for Unmudl's development. As example, Coursera has 250 partners, and edX has 150 universities participating across the world. The Unmudl partnership estimates there is only about 10 percent major market penetration for community college content in these other partnerships now. The projection is for Unmudl to grow to the 125-college level for a focus in the next few years. If Unmudl goes global, the projection is to grow to 400-500 community colleges.

Are Other Educational Platforms Competition to Unmudl?

Platforms such as Coursera and edX traditionally have not been reaching the students Unmudl is planning to reach so they are not viewed as competition. Unmudl's projected working learners are not on the campus. Unmudl's strategy is to leverage community colleges resources — the courses, support services, the space. The timing is thought to be right given the nation's economic recovery plans focused on skills development and short-term credentialing.

Student Benefits

Unmudl is offered by a partnership of accredited community and technical colleges. The key aim of the partnership is to help working learners get a job, a better job, a promotion, or higher wages. Whether students need help because they've never been to college or have attended college but did not complete a degree, once they enroll for a course through Unmudl, whether online or in-person, students will have access to the instructor and advisors. This will be a major benefit to students who currently do not have access to these services.

Key Points Shared with Colleges about Joining Unmudl

When a community college is interested in exploring joining the partnership, Unmudl representatives focus on relaying three initial messages:

- There is a large market of working learners that are not on your campus. You are limiting yourself by traditional means of marketing.
- It is too hard to do business with you. You are slow to respond. The traditional side of the house is taking months to build curriculum. You must elevate the workforce side of the house. The Unmudl partnership is set up to focus on the workforce side of the house.
- This is an opportunity to advance your college's interest and use those interests in your region and also work in collaboration with leading colleges around the country, to expand your market nationally and potentially internationally.

Main Concerns Community Colleges Raise about Participating

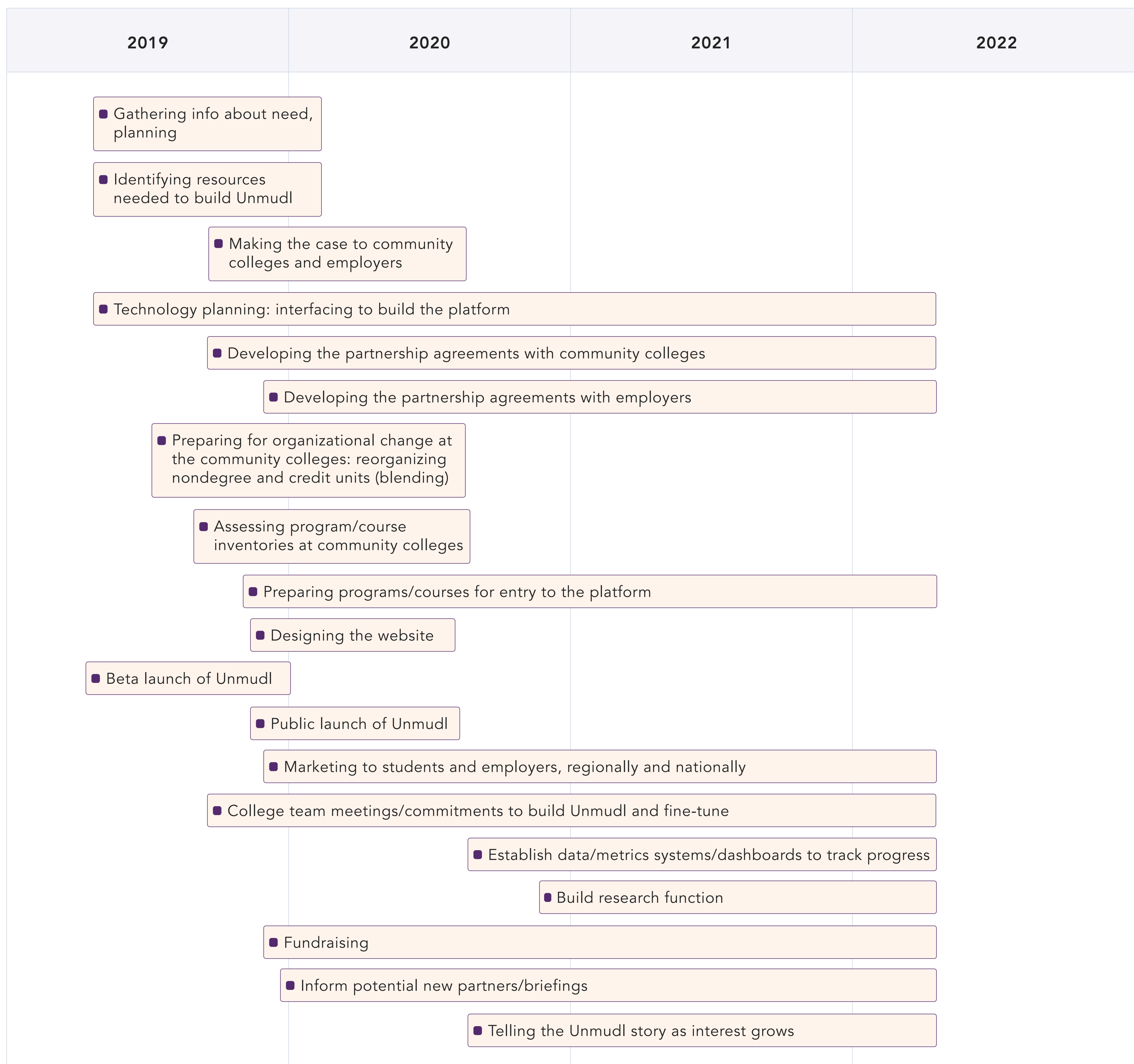
Colleges raise numerous concerns about participating in the Unmudl model. Main concerns include:

- Dwindling budgets.
- Uncertain student registrations.
- Getting the attention of busy college administrators.
- Difficulty of thinking through the many components needed to support the model.
- Challenges of getting an entire team on board since the model touches on all aspects of the college.
- Competition: What if Unmudl has 20 courses with the same content? What about the potentially duplicative aspect that could develop through the repository?
- Competing priorities such as addressing race/ethnicity issues, and managing a balancing act between short-term vs. future (how much to invest in future needs vs. today's needs).

- They are slow to do business given their other priorities and challenges.
- There is a freeze on spending (participating in Unmudl requires investment in the partnership).
- Willingness to change is too big of a lift.

Several colleges have indicated they don't want to be first — they don't want to be early adopters. They prefer to see how the model unfolds and have indicated interest in talking at a later time.

Key Activities and Components to Get Unmudl Up and Running



Milestones in 2021

Four sets of milestones have been established for 2021:

Milestones Metrics

For colleges:

- 15 colleges in Unmudl community college network by the end of 2021.
- 300 skills-based total course offerings driven by high demand, of which 50 are employer-validated, and mapped to credit.

For learners:

- 10,000 by the end of 2021.
- Learners can put together credits and redeem against a credential program at any of the Unmudl colleges.

For learner outcomes (drives the vision of Unmudl in three key indicators):

- New or better job.
- Credits or noncredit from college and/or continuing education.
- Credentials including degrees.

For employers:

- Five international employer sponsorships.
- 50 employers hiring from Unmudl courses.

Unmudl Employer Hiring Web

More than three dozen companies are currently in the Unmudl Employer Hiring Web. They represent a range of business sectors and job opportunities — each is aligned with specific courses from community colleges in the Unmudl network, including:

- **Idaho National Laboratory** [www.inl.gov]
Idaho Falls-based national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy historically involved with nuclear research.
“Introduction to Java” at GateWay Community College.
- **ON Semiconductor** [www.onsemi.com]
Phoenix-based international corporation driving energy efficient innovations contributing to reduced global energy use.
“Introduction to Java” at GateWay Community College.
- **RS21** [www.RS21.io]
Albuquerque-based data science analytics company that recently won the 2020 Hyperspace Challenge.
“Deep Dive Fullstack Web Development” & “Deep Dive Java + Android” at Central New Mexico Community College.
- **Rural Sourcing Inc.** [www.ruralsourcing.com]
Atlanta-based leader in domestic and outsourced digital engineering that is expanding its Albuquerque operations in 2021.
“Deep Dive Fullstack Web Development” & “Deep Dive Java + Android” at Central New Mexico Community College.

- **Werner Enterprises** [www.werner.com]
Omaha-based front-runner in cargo hauling.
"Class A Commercial Driver's License" at Central New Mexico Community College.
- **TuSimple** [www.tusimple.com]
The world's first and only autonomous freight network of self-guiding trucks.
"Introduction to Autonomous Vehicles" at Pima Community College.
- **Unmudl** [www.Unmudl.com]
Austin-based community college marketplace is hiring Customer Service Professionals through their site.
"Improve Your Sales, Branding & Presentations" at Central New Mexico Community College.



An employer's direct support of their local community college results in great returns to the residents, to the community, and to the company itself. By nurturing an agile and qualified talent pool, companies are better positioned to expand, support their neighborhoods, and contribute to local economies. For people seeking career opportunities, Unmudl is facilitating the highest quality, fastest, and most efficient pathways to better jobs and further learning.

Parminder Jassal, SocialTech.ai

SECTION 4

OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE MARKETPLACE — COMMUNITY COLLEGES SPEAK TO KEY ISSUES

“While community colleges have offered workforce training for decades, this offers new models that inspire mobility between credit and noncredit learning which is a challenge for many of us. While we here in the northeast especially have been focusing on a very traditional demographic, that has created unintentional barriers for working adults. Unmudl reminds us that we have to break free of our own long-standing paradigm to make sure that mobility from training to the traditional classroom becomes streamlined and applied to our entire business model.”



Kevin Drumm

President
SUNY Broome Community College

COMMUNITY COLLEGES SPEAK TO KEY ISSUES

Interviews to Collect Community College Views

The following two sections (Operationalization of the Marketplace: Community Colleges Speak to Key Issues, and the Future: Preparation and Nearing the Two-Year Milestone) draw on the perspectives of the Unmudl team, the founding community colleges, NISOD, and the second-round community colleges.

The colleges and NISOD were interviewed by The EvoLLLution in fall for featured articles published in fall 2020, to help share the innovative insights of the leaders across Unmudl's member institutions. See Appendix B for the published interviews.

A second round of interviews with the colleges and NISOD was held in early 2021 conducted by Holly Zanville, author of this report. The focus for these interviews was the colleges' perspectives on the driving philosophical foundation of Unmudl and what fine-tuning might be in order following the mid-November public launch of Unmudl.

Zanville's questions probed whether Unmudl was delivering on the potential and commitments formulated during the planning phase, what the biggest challenges have been in implementation, what issues they expect to face in the next year of Unmudl's implementation and scale-up, and what revisions may be warranted in the model.

The information collected from both rounds of interviews are woven into the following sections. This approach seemed feasible since an analysis of the body of information by the colleges resulted in close congruence among the colleges on their perspectives regarding early experiences with Unmudl, and the wider dialogue about the problems and solutions offered by Unmudl.

MARKETPLACE DESIGN: FOUNDING PARTNERS SPEAK TO KEY ISSUES IN FALL 2020 INTERVIEWS

Restructuring for Rapidly Changing Credentialing Environment

Issues

- Community colleges are at the frontlines of a rapidly evolving ecosystem of skills and noncredit programming. The Unmudl community colleges agree that no matter what education path someone takes, work-based and experiential learning hold high value — and the colleges must incorporate them into their program models.
- Community colleges serve their communities and have a mission to get learners into the workforce. Noncredit programming, though not always understood or seen in all community colleges, has the ability to accelerate this process by getting students the right credentials for a specific job. Community colleges must look especially to learners who may not see themselves as “college material” and help them see the potential in these programs.
- While many colleges can develop high-quality noncredit programming, what's most important is to illustrate the value of these pathways to students and faculty. This is easier said than done. First, colleges must ensure students understand the value of noncredit programs and how those programs can benefit career growth. Then, colleges must provide learners with the education they need while guiding them through it.
- Community colleges have two opportunities in this work: not only to retain but to gain enrollment rates, and to increase revenue through noncredit programming.

- There has been a dramatic increase in working learners and learning workers. These two populations — one pursuing traditional degrees while holding down jobs, and the other pursuing small increments of education

to advance within their jobs — are responsible for tremendous gains seen in online learning prior to the pandemic (520 percent in ten years), MOOCs (910 percent in five years), microcredentials, and more.

Chancellor Lee Lambert and his leadership team from Pima Community College are focusing economic recovery efforts in two phases: “We have a very loose, decentralized system in Arizona. Community colleges don’t have state oversight, so we’re banding together to build those structures from the ground up ourselves.” Because of the COVID-19 crisis and recovery, Pima is focusing on short-term reskilling and upskilling opportunities; and longer term, on policies that will incentivize the right set of behaviors from the colleges, among employers, and in the public workforce system. The goal is to build the college back up from the pandemic to make their network resilient and, more importantly, the workforce more resilient so that whatever the next crisis is, these structures and systems will help workers pivot in volatile labor markets.

Adrienne Forgette, Vice President for Learning at San Juan College, describes “baby steps” in the processes at her campus — making sure there are clear pathways so course elements are designed to be seamlessly integrated into them, and students can start wherever they need to and go from there. “Our workforce students are on to something with their drop-in/drop-out approach. It’s about being relevant to student needs. Right now there’s a huge demand for short-term programs. Before that, there was a huge demand for four-year programs. What will it be like in the future, and how do we prepare for it? We’re still figuring out how all those things work together and have some work to do.”

“One thing extremely successful is our bootcamps, notes San Juan’s President Toni Pendergrass. “One of them has been in partnership with an employer named PESCO—a manufacturing facility—here in our community. We’ve been able to design and partner with our workforce solutions department at the regional and state levels, so students learn while they earn. After the six-week boot camp, we guarantee they will be interviewed by the employer, and every time we’ve offered this, they have hired every one of the graduates out of the bootcamp.”

To be successful at this work, Pendergrass notes a college must maintain strong partnerships with community employers and local workforce development boards — together creating innovative solutions that meet the demand. “A lot of people need a position as soon as possible to provide for their families. While it’s important that people have entry-level skills for jobs, we can also bridge them over so that they can receive a certificate or degree.”

At Central New Mexico Community College, President Tracy Hartzler sees “a movement and need beyond formal degrees or certificates. There’s a specific need for more accelerated skills-based training or retraining, in addition to having work-based learning opportunities. People value work-based and experiential learning, no matter the educational path chosen.”

Furthermore, though all community colleges were not used to distance education, the pandemic has forced them to rethink their infrastructure around it. It has not been an easy step to take, but once a college begins to reshape distance program offerings, the institution can reap many rewards.

Erica Barreiro, Future of Work Strategist, Central New Mexico Community College, underscores that “a degree does not suffice anymore for a lifetime of work. What happens once you’ve completed a degree? Oftentimes, you need to go back to get skillsets to stay relevant, especially with the pace of accelerated change that we’re going to experience in the future.”



We’re recognizing that a degree does not suffice anymore for a lifetime of work. What happens once you’ve completed a degree? Oftentimes, you need to go back to get skillsets to stay relevant, especially with the pace of accelerated change that we’re going to experience in the future.

*Erica Barreiro, Future of Work Strategist,
Central New Mexico Community College*

In thinking about what it takes to create highly accessible noncredit offerings, Carlos Cortez, former President of San Diego College of Continuing Education in the San Diego Continuing Education District and recently appointed Chancellor of the District, notes that “Every state in the U.S. has an education trainer provider list (ETPL). These lists are composed of approved educational programs. Clients of public social welfare programs, like housing authorities, veterans’ services, employment and development offices and workforce partnerships, provide stipends to engage in educational development. Often these students are looking for immediate opportunities to enroll in school. They walk into one of these social welfare providers and get approved for educational training. Due to the way community colleges are structured, there are not always multiple points of entry for a student to be able to begin classes immediately.”

These students need to get into a class as quickly as possible, Cortez explains. “They do not want to wait, nor should they wait, until the course officially starts in an academic semester. By developing fee-based course offerings, there will be multiple points of entry into our organization. Within California, some individuals might have the state-provided resources to enroll in fee-based courses, but our intention is to enroll nationally and internationally. Historically, most community colleges have not engaged in this marketplace. Many colleges offer fee-based courses, but they typically offer them in partnership with third-party providers.” Cortez explains: “These are companies that come in and provide fee-based courses through community colleges. Community college students think they are enrolling in my college, but they are actually not. We are simply an intermediary, and we get paid a small fee to place students in these third-party courses. We want to blow up this model with the assumption that we can actually provide quality educational programming that meets or exceeds what is currently in the marketplace across all these higher education systems, and at a better price.”



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Carlos Cortez, San Diego College of Continuing Education

The skills and nondegree programming market are inconsistent across the U.S. because every state’s system is different. In some states, for example, community colleges do not receive apportionment. Even credit or noncredit offerings have to be fully self-sustainable.

The nomenclature varies as well. What one state calls credit or not-for-credit or noncredit or fee-based or contract education may have different meanings in a different system. The result is a confusing ecosystem for students, educational institutions, workforce agencies, employers, and policymakers alike.

Noncredit and Skills

Issues

- Noncredit education refers to courses or activities that carry no academic credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal academic award at the institution or within the postsecondary educational system. Noncredit programming may include workforce instruction, contract training, customized training, developmental education, recreational courses, Adult Basic Education (ABE), and English As a Second Language (ESL).
- Noncredit workforce education refers to courses or activities that provide technical skills for the workplace but carry no institutional credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal award; and may result in an industry-recognized certificate but does not include ABE, ESL, developmental education, or recreational courses.
- Noncredit programs are valuable because they can meet industry standards and credentials; be flexible and easily updated; content emphasizes abilities important to job performance; can be delivered with appropriate instructors; and can be developed/delivered outside the traditional rules governing education.

- Noncredit students tend to be older, interested in gaining skills, and have a wide range of educational backgrounds. Many are uninterested in seeking a degree.
- Many noncredit programs link students to credit programs through program features such as competency-based modules and articulation of noncredit courses in career ladders.
- Many noncredit programs are designed for specific employers.
- Three key reasons for offering noncredit programs: college can test out program and transition to credit later, best fit based on student and labor market needs, and solution to getting program up and running in timely manner because of institutional barriers in credit programs.

Tracy Hartzler notes: “Skills-based training is a natural extension of the community college mission. It’s not an either/or. We have to provide the range of education and skills-based training to meet our diverse population. We still know that degrees and training pathways are needed for advancement. And we know we can provide greater resilience for everybody when we have well-defined options in the various pathways as the economy changes over time, and as we experience incredible downturns.”

Erica Barreiro adds: “Our federal financial aid funding was built to fund degree completion. But what happens once you’ve completed a degree? Oftentimes, you need to go back to get skillsets to stay relevant. We’ll have a significant number of individuals who need educational postsecondary services who already have a degree. They need a menu of options that suit them, as well as the financial support to pay for them.”

“I served a couple of years in the regular United States Army,” Lee Lambert notes, “and they put me through a rigorous training program to become an administrative assistant. I chose it and they honored that commitment. When I arrived at my permanent duty station, they decided to train me on the job for something else. All of that training isn’t recognized by colleges or universities. Something’s wrong with that. You’re telling people who serve our country that the valuable skills they obtained during that time have no value in the civilian world. That’s not right. Now you layer on the automation reality, and we’re at a key point in history when we need to recognize that skills are obtained in a variety of ways. Sometimes it’s validated by a college or university, by the Army, or by some other party. The point is, it’s about the skill, not who you’re obtaining it from; it’s about whether you actually received it or not.”

Roadblocks in Growing Enrollments in Noncredit Programs

Issues

Community colleges face a number of roadblocks in growing enrollments in noncredit programs. The top seven roadblocks among the Unmudl college are:

- Funding.
- Cumbersome backend systems at the colleges.
- Perceptions of quality.
- Difficulty locating faculty to teach courses.
- Lack of infrastructure around distance education.
- Employer demand in local areas where there are primarily medium- and small-sized employers who cannot employ a large number of students.
- Noncredit is often the “second thing” the colleges do and there are challenges of messaging the importance of these programs to students.

Albert Lewis, Vice President of Economic and Workforce Development at Bellevue College, explains the funding roadblock: “While credit-based courses and programs receive support and federal financial aid, the federal government does not support noncredit courses and programs. Furthermore, many employers only support reimbursements for students taking credit classes that align with a degree or certificate at the colleges. Since most community colleges

students taking credit classes that align with a degree or certificate at the colleges. Since most community colleges are FTE-driven in their budgets, it takes a significantly larger proportion of noncredit students to shore up budget holes that are large in the current context of losses in traditional enrollments. The challenge is to develop a well-balanced system of credit and noncredit enrollments.”

President Hartzler adds: “One of the biggest barriers is helping students access the noncredit, nondegree training that they need and the funding to pay for it. We know how that works for high school graduates or even adults going back to college for credit certificates and degrees, but this is much less clear for noncredit, nondegree education.”

A second roadblock in growing noncredit enrollment is outdated, inefficient technology systems. The records systems, enrollment systems, and procurement systems that most community colleges have become dependent on to report to the federal government and to accrediting agencies are cumbersome. “It is a real challenge for community colleges to be significant players in the noncredit training space if backend support isn’t there for them,” explains Kristin Gubser, Director of External Affairs, GateWay Community College.



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Kristin Gubser, GateWay Community College

Another barrier to growing enrollments is the perception that noncredit classes may not have the same quality or rigor that credit-bearing classes have. More and more, college program directors drive programming based on advisory council input as well as labor market data.

There are barriers tied to the availability of faculty to teach some of the noncredit offerings as well. Toni Pendergrass notes “Especially in short-term IT programs that require a highly specialized skillset, it’s sometimes difficult in a rural area to locate people with specific credentials on the noncredit side.”

Another challenge is that so many community colleges serve local areas characterized by small- and medium-sized employers. Adrienne Forgette explains: “They’re not going to hire huge numbers of students out of any particular training program. So, how do we partner with them? How do we be there for our local employers and do it in a financially sustainable way?”



People underestimate the quality of noncredit offerings. Depending on the community college, the level of robustness really is driven by the local community and its needs. Many noncredit courses and programs are quite robust, of high quality, and offer the skills that employers are demanding right now. But there are some duds too, and that’s the challenge — getting rid of the duds so that you can make sure your graduates are immediately employable.

Adrienne Forgette, San Juan College

Many colleges struggle too with managing and scaling noncredit program access. Carlos Cortez notes “The primary challenge San Diego Continuing Education has faced is the lack of infrastructure around distance education, particularly in light of the COVID-19 closures and having to move its program remotely. The reality has set in. When COVID hit, about 10 percent of our course offerings were delivered in a hybrid or web-enhanced format. But zero programs were fully online. That said, we have been working for the past five years to launch a fully online division of our institution. The launch of the Interactive Competency-based Online Micro-credentialing Academy coincided with the COVID crisis and propelled our institution forward. It pushed resistors in our institution toward embracing a paradigm shift in delivering adult noncredit.”

Cortez notes that “all student services were historically offered in a brick-and-mortar format. With COVID-19 closures, there is increased interest in accessing the dynamic student services platform built for the courses at ICOM Academy across all programs. When the college returns to some form of in-person classes, 90-95 percent of courses will likely be web-enhanced. So not only has the college district replaced replicating every brick-and-

of courses will likely be web-enhanced. So not only has the college district replaced replicating every brick-and-mortar student experience online, but it is also adding new student services on its campuses. The plan is to create access to fee-based courses to those who live outside of the state of California. This will generate revenue that will then be reinvested into the ICOM Academy to cover subscriptions for 40-plus student services, tools, and resources that currently total over two million dollars annually.

Among the key roadblocks, San Juan College's Adrienne Forgette notes: "many noncredit and workforce programs tend to be the second thing we do as a college. They're not as well known to students as our credit offerings are but there's this sense that they are the first thing that we do."



When the college returns to some form of in-person classes, 90 to 95 percent of courses will likely be web-enhanced. So not only has the college district replaced replicating every brick-and-mortar student experience online, but it is also adding new student services.

Carlos Cortez, San Diego College of Continuing Education

Community College Role in a Crowded Marketplace of Providers

Issues

- There are more than 960,000 unique credentials in the U.S. alone.
- The credentials awarded are varied including degrees, certificates (credit and noncredit), industry-awarded certifications, badges, licenses, microcredentials, and apprenticeship.
- Community colleges increasingly operate in a crowded marketplace of credential providers: high schools, community and technical colleges, universities, military, companies (employers), and third-party organizations such as for-profit education and learning platforms.

Lee Lambert describes the "community college as the hub of the wheel — probably one of the few, if the only, entities in a community that has a 360-degree connection. We are essential to our community. And when you think about where most workers reside, they're going to be either in a community's middle or lower tier. That's the community college space — universities often aren't training and educating people in the middle and lower tiers, so I think it's important to recognize that our value proposition is much larger. We're connected to the workforce system. We're connected to the non-profit and K-12 sectors. We're connected to other community-based organizations in a way that other entities are not. A lot of our students are low income, disadvantaged, and not in a position to go onto a university without a lot of support."

The challenge is how to stay competitive when the space the community colleges used to occupy as the sole participant is becoming increasingly crowded, despite the colleges' unique role in serving low income and disadvantaged learners.

"One of our advantages is many community colleges have already been functioning in this noncredit space," Lambert notes. "It's in that noncredit space that you see a lot of the flexibility — less tethering to the rules and accreditation. That gives us flexibility. Now the question is, how are we using that flexibility to ensure that the quality of education remains? The world of work is the ultimate validator because you can acquire a skill but if you can't apply it, it doesn't really matter that you acquired it through an education or training environment. It doesn't really matter who those validators are but whether you can bring your skill in, have it validated, and then constantly refresh it."

The marketplace is highly disruptive. “Each time these disruptive innovations come along, they’re going to require skill.” Lambert contends, “that’s where community colleges are well positioned because that’s fundamentally what we do. We’re not focused on learning a set of disciplines rooted in tradition or in history. We are truly calibrated to the ever-evolving world of work. That positions us nicely, vis-a-vis other entities. Not that other entities can’t do this, but it’s in our DNA to be doing this.”



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Lee Lambert, Pima Community College

Participating in National and International Marketplaces through Collaboration and Networking

Issues

- The strategy of a platform one-stop is not a new concept in higher education. There are many examples in the marketplace such as learning platforms of Coursera, edX, and JMooc (Japan); and the government-led enterprises such as ecampus (Ontario), Swayam (India), and Springboard+ (Ireland).
- Technology advances have made it possible to build “matching” services of many types including matching employer job openings with potential employee skills (e.g., SkyHive, a skill-based job matching platform, and SKILLUP which is helping COVID-impacted workers get rehired for in-demand jobs); matching employer internship slots with potential interns (e.g., Service Year Alliance and Ripple Match); and offering shared curricular materials for use by educators (e.g., the MERLOT system provides access to curated online learning and support materials and content creation tools, led by an international community of educators, learners and researchers).
- Community colleges face a major challenge in the noncredit programming area — whether to go it alone or collaborate with other colleges to service students and employers in this growing marketplace.

Kristin Gubser explains that “joining the marketplace doesn’t replace what we’re doing in terms of trying to scale and strengthen noncredit training. It complements it and allows us to expand our reach across the country in areas that we wouldn’t be able to reach on our own. It enables us to leverage our collective strengths and highlight the program areas we’re really strong in. We can conduct feasibility tests for new training and programs by tracking data in ways we haven’t been able to before. The marketplace platform provides a lot of rich data on what is trending with students and what price points they’re willing to pay for noncredit training. Where the opportunities exist, we can then extrapolate full credit programs from some of the noncredit training, and perhaps outreach to those students so they can finish their certificate or degree as they move through their career. Locally, we will continue to offer noncredit community education workshops for enrichment, as well as custom contract training.”



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Kristin Gubser, GateWay Community College

One of the benefits of being a part of a marketplace is “if we don’t have what a student needs, we can connect them to training at another college. We’re making sure students succeed no matter where they start or what program they choose. It’s been a real benefit for us to scale some of our efforts nationally, as a lot of the things we’ve wanted to do as one college would’ve been too manpower-intensive, marketing-intensive, and technology-intensive.”

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There have been questions among the Unmudl colleges as to whether students or employers in their district would engage with the marketplace in order to enroll in a course or a program elsewhere or would still come to their local college — and what this would mean for future growth.

Gubser indicates her college “will encourage them to go to the marketplace. The marketplace is a wonderful tool and resource for individuals looking to compare cost, time, programs, and training. When it’s a business-to-business need, when an employer needs custom or noncredit training for a group of employees, it would be more of a college-to-business relationship. Whereas with any individuals looking to move up to that next level, to get into a field, to re-career, we would direct them to the marketplace to do that comparative shopping.”

Kevin Drumm, President at SUNY Broome Community College notes that “Broome has always done a lot online. We were fortunate when we had to go online last March, that we had 25-30 percent of our courses online anyway, so those students didn’t miss a beat. We were a leader until March 2020 and then everybody caught up to us, whether they liked it or not. We just happened to have all the infrastructure and training in place to get the rest of our faculty up to speed. We’ve been focusing on short-term workforce upgrades, workforce training, certifications, microcredentialing — that market’s been growing and now it gives us access to a monster market, compared to the shrinking one we have locally.”

One of the issues facing colleges as they have geared up their online programming, is whether joining the marketplace replaces internal efforts to scale and strengthen noncredit and career education programming or provide a new channel for access.

Erica Barreiro explains that “participating in a course marketplace doesn’t replace but accelerates and scales what we are already doing. It offers us a chance to learn from other colleges and potentially share curriculum to enhance what we offer our local community as well as the marketplace. It strengthens our internal efforts. We

can see where there are gaps in the work that we need to do as we’ve never had to communicate it in the ways that we are now. All these translate into practices that we can bring back into our own internal efforts. It’s also enhancing our efforts in student course access. In order for a student to be able to find the best type of training for the right price at the right time — having a one-stop shop — is incredibly valuable. But with the systems that colleges rely on today, having that storefront marketplace is practically impossible.”



Participating in a course marketplace doesn’t replace but accelerates and scales what we are already doing. It offers us a chance to learn from other colleges and potentially share curriculum to enhance what we offer our local community as well as the marketplace.

Erica Barreiro, Central New Mexico Community

Meeting Employer Needs

Issues

- Employers are at the center of the Unmudl marketplace, defining what they need in terms of talent, skills, knowledge, and abilities.
- Employers are important levers in scaling access to noncredit, nondegree workforce training programming — small, mid-sized, and the largest employers.
- An increasing number of large employers are awarding credentials. While some offer programs in partnership with community colleges and universities, there is growing activity among large employers to move into the credentialing arena on their own, particularly in the skills arena.

Lee Lambert notes “employers are becoming less focused on the degree and more focused on the skills. You have an employer like Google coming out with its own certification and making a bold pronouncement, saying, ‘If you do these, we will see this as on par with a bachelor’s degree.’ As the skills gap continues to persist, employers who are flexible and more focused on skills will be the ones to thrive into the future. Those who are wedded to a traditional model of talent development are going to struggle because they’re not going to find the talent that they need.”

Albert Lewis, Bellevue College: “Typically, industries also offer certificates within noncredit programming. For instance, Cisco, Microsoft, and CompTIA offer professional certificates housed within many continuing education or noncredit programs. Students receive an education and then that education is validated by certificate attainment. Just to clarify, students will take a course and then sit for an exam sponsored by the certificate provider. Some students may already have the skills, but they don’t have the validation.”

“Community colleges are very well-versed in partnering with local employers to understand what their workforce needs are,” Erica Barreiro notes. “We’re really well positioned to serve as that hub for people needing to change careers. The statistic I’ve heard is that today’s college graduates will have 17 different careers across five different industries, so it goes back to seeing a very different relationship with colleges.”

Lifelong Learning Impacts on Restructuring

Issues

- There is growing understanding that community colleges must think about changing their programming to support a lifetime of learning required for the work of the future.
- Richards and Dede have noted that today’s disruptive shifts call for a revolution in educational objectives to accommodate six decades of employment and this will require a lifetime of learning. There is growing recognition of the need to prepare for a “60-Year Curriculum” based on a new perspective oriented toward continuing education and six decades of employment that requires repeated occupational change and transition.

“Without a doubt we are thinking about lifelong learning,” explains Tracy Hartzler. “What I’m finding at the community college level is a richer depth to the learning, and it’s hands-on. There’s an element that makes it feel applicable, valuable, and tangible. There are a number of four-year institutions beginning to look at experiential learning and how to supplement it. Or they are seeking ways to make sure bachelor’s degree students seek that component in their education because they know how valuable it is to employers. Also, programs should include hands-on, practical examples to help students make sense of the academic or theoretical lessons they learn. There’s a blending of these efforts at many levels of postsecondary education, but community colleges are distinctly able to reach so many more people with broader skillsets when they’re starting off.”

Lee Lambert notes: “It will start back to where the pre-K and K-12 systems reside. It begins with the parents. If they’re not ensuring the student can be exposed to adequate language by a certain age, that individual is going to be limited in growth and development. That’s why it’s more of an ecosystem than a linear progression. The more we recognize that, the better we’re going to be able to support and develop human potential.”

Kristin Gubser: “It’s going to take an institution-wide understanding of the benefits of that type of delivery. At GateWay, we offer clock-hour training in addition to noncredit and credit-hour programs. A collective understanding of the markets we serve through each type of training, and that each type of training presents different opportunities for student success, will position us well to maximize lifelong learning potential for all.”

Revenue and Policy

Issues

- With a decreasing population of traditional-aged students, many institutions are trying to make a pivotal shift to creating programming catered to working learners. Institutions have taken a hard financial hit due to the pandemic, and many are continuing to struggle.
- What these institutions may not realize is they can use noncredit offerings to gain revenue back. Many community college leaders are thinking that done right, noncredit education can not only help maintain enrollment rates but keep lifelong learners at the institution.
- With noncredit programming typically offered in continuing education units, many colleges are rethinking its value and who should be able to offer it. But noncredit offerings in the college environment can be tricky when it comes to scaling and growing. Often, there is no financial support available, and colleges are left with this great need for programming but no resources to deliver it well. This will require a reshaping in legislation to help better fund these offerings.
- It's going to take a reshaping of the minds of institutional leadership to see the benefits of noncredit education in community colleges, especially since most students are ineligible for financial aid, while credit-bearing offerings tend to be eligible for financial aid.
- A major concern too is finding ways to generate revenue from services and unused physical spaces as an approach to combating some of the budget crunches that tend to happen when colleges are reliant on state dollars.

Kristin Gubser: "Our college, part of the Maricopa County Community College District in Arizona, was eliminated from our state budget a number of years ago. We have tried — and continue to pursue — different ways to generate revenue to make up for that loss in aid. But it's almost a catch-22. We have to generate revenue to keep our programs affordable. Many programs are equipment and technology-heavy so that we can graduate the most highly trained professionals who don't need on-the-job training. They're ready to work in the field on day one. That type of equipment and technology is very expensive. It's a balancing act — to generate revenue but stay faithful to our commitment and mission. What we want to do for students is be as affordable, accessible, and high-quality as we can. So, we are creative and always looking at ways to leverage our assets through cost-sharing or revenue-generating partnerships. We want to help fill that gap so we don't have to depend on increased taxes and tuition. We want to be the solution, not the problem."

Lee Lambert explains, "the colleges can look at full-time student equivalent accounting they report to the state for expenditure limit purposes, but it doesn't recognize noncredit workforce training. If the colleges were able to bake that into the funding formula, perhaps that would incentivize colleges to do more of it."

While continuing education divisions are frequently seen as cash cows for universities or as the revenue-generating hub, that approach does not necessarily translate on the community college side. Kevin Drumm explains, "you do get some flexible revenue, it's marginal compared to the core business, no matter what operation you look at. We had about 10,000 on the noncredit side and about 10,000 on the credit side annually, but there are no comparisons to be made between the revenue totals."

From a budgetary and revenue generation perspective, community colleges are also trying to find ways to monetize things like college services and unused physical space.

Drumm notes that "Right now, using space is not something high on our priority list because we need that spare space to socially distance. However, prior to COVID-19, we were already experiencing an excess of space on campus. We were expanding one of our residence halls, and had wait lists and were turning people away up until last year. What might we do to repurpose some of the space in the residence hall? We'd have to negotiate with the bank to have anything other than college services or our own college students in there. But, right now, we're focused on the adult market, which demands more flexible offerings. That, nationally, is the only growing market."

The community colleges face significant challenges around creating financial aid eligibility, access to noncredit programming, and impacting decision-making around offering more noncredit or professional development offerings.

Albert Lewis, Bellevue College, notes: “It would be a boom for the colleges if financial aid was extended to noncredit courses and programs — you could actually increase revenue. That could then increase the number of certificates granted because the ability to increase revenue and subsequent margins will allow for reinvestment into courses and programs, making it easier to update content. Being able to constantly improve noncredit programs is essential to their long-term sustainability. But from an eligibility perspective, there are some legislative things that need to happen, at the state and federal levels to allow noncredit programs to receive financial aid. Some states already provide it.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding sometimes supports noncredit training. Lewis explains, “In the state of Washington, we have a program called Worker Retraining. It’s basically funded by WIOA dollars, which supports professional technical training from a credit perspective. If the student is a worker retraining, why should it matter whether they’re enrolled in credit or noncredit programming? When people enter the Worker Retraining program, they usually have a masters or bachelor’s degree. Many people entering the program are not focused on completing another degree. Instead, they focus on the courses they need to improve their skills. It would be great if colleges were allowed to use that money for noncredit courses. Fast track or accelerated programming could be created to move students toward their educational goals in a timelier manner.”

A common feature of the noncredit experience is that benefits and services are not really accessible or don’t meet students’ needs like they do in degree programs. There is an important divide between noncredit programming and services at most colleges.

Adrienne Forgette explains, “Part of this is a follow-the-money thing. Traditional students have access to financial aid that basically finances the college’s infrastructure. On the noncredit side, financial support isn’t there. For instance, we don’t get the same level of state funding for noncredit offerings. Our students may qualify for programs like WIOA or some other benefits, but it’s not the same. So we’re trying to have a potentially high impact on a shoestring budget. We’ve made the decision at our college to offer supports to noncredit students. They can go to the tutoring center; we don’t have meal plans but they’re always welcome at the cafeteria; parking is free, so that’s not an issue; and we’ll also offer them our wraparound services in terms of food pantry and other supports like that. We don’t draw lines — but it’s only recently that we’ve been explicit we will do these things. So, it’s structural, financial, and traditional — the kind of thing we want to take apart and put back together in a different way.”

Toni Pendergrass: “A lot of those offerings are short-term so we don’t always think through what a student needs in that short amount of time. There’s also another segment of students on the noncredit side who are corporate training students. We have strong relationships with industry partners, and these students are generally at the college for a short amount of time for specific training. We probably don’t think enough about what other types of support they need too. We are really focused on the time they are with us and what experience they receive during their time with us.”

There is little doubt among the colleges that financial aid access to noncredit programming would impact decision-making, for both prospective students and colleges making programming choices.

Toni Pendergrass underscores, “It would be extremely helpful to have sufficient resources for all our students, but it’s our responsibility to build packages so they all have options, no matter what they choose to pursue on the credit or noncredit side.”



If the student is a worker retraining, why should it matter whether they’re enrolled in credit or noncredit programming?

Albert Lewis, Bellevue College



We’re trying to have a potentially high impact on a shoestring budget. We’ve made the decision at our college to offer supports to noncredit students.

Adrienne Forgette, San Juan College

“It’s a game changer, and it creates a lot of impetus for the college to change in response to that as well,” notes Adreienne Forgette.

Funding and policy issues play a major role in whether the college can make noncredit and career education a more central part of their strategy and focus, versus those departments being on the periphery of the institution rather than at its core.

Toni Pendergrass notes: “Some institutions have adapted well in recent years to offer more workforce development options. You see it in states in which funding support has been reduced on the credit side. We’re fortunate in New Mexico to receive the large portion of our funding from state appropriations on the credit side, but we’ve had to diversify our revenue streams and look to the noncredit side to bring in additional sources of revenue — on the corporate side especially. It just depends on the college’s financial situation, but I know there are several community colleges that garner more revenue on the noncredit side. They’ve had to make strategic decisions based on what’s best for their institution and their particular situation.”

Tracy Hartzler: “Each state funds and prioritizes workforce training differently. We have to look at the key partnerships that need to be engaged, leveraged, and developed, whether it’s with local workforce boards or our state or local agencies, to provide an easy path for people to get much-needed training. There’s a variety of potential funding sources but we need to focus on funding noncredit training.”

Erica Barreiro adds: “These barriers have existed for a long time but national conversations on how to address them have only been emerging in the last few years. COVID-19 has accelerated and magnified these conversations. The idea of giving individuals universal learning credits or opportunities to access funding that they can apply to a wide variety of their learning needs wasn’t even on the table before. But with massive job displacement now, people are seeing the fractures and the fissures of the existing postsecondary and training systems — and these prevent people from accessing some quicker solutions and pathways.”



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Erica Barreiro, Central New Mexico Community College

Toni Pendergrass: “That’s what students are demanding. A Strada survey conducted since the start of the pandemic has found that 62 percent of those surveyed strongly preferred nondegree programs and skills training over degree programs. So that’s where the demand is, and we need to strive to meet it.”

“This is part of a larger national conversation for the last decade or so in the country and with large foundations,” notes Tracy Hartzler. “How do all states in the country move the needle on scaling up our workforce more efficiently and more effectively? That includes everything from traditional trades to students entering a two-year institution with plans to transfer to a four-year university. In New Mexico, there was significant movement through policy to promote credential and degree attainment. As a result, we’ve seen significant growth in postsecondary credentials and degrees.”

Continuing education is a strategic imperative for community colleges for economic recovery.

Carlos Cortez explains: “We are at a crossroad in higher education at this moment. We had a meeting with a major public entity in San Diego positioned to lay off 200 employees at the end of 2020. These individuals have a strong work ethic, education credentials, and resumes. They have shown an interest in caring for themselves and their families without relying on state assistance. These are only 200 of the millions of hardworking Americans who are finding themselves in this situation now. Yet when we look at how our systems are designed, there is minimal to no investment toward providing rapid pathways for these individuals to move back into new career pathways. In California, only about 3 percent of our overall full-time equivalent student-funded apportionment is allocated

to short-term noncredit career education. Within that, many do not lead to livable wages. I would challenge our legislatures to identify additional resources and provide them to the states that find the 5 or 10 percent increase in apportionment. But to also hold the colleges accountable by solely putting the money toward developing short-term career education pathways, so the U.S. gets back to work.”

Making Noncredit, Continuing Education, and Career Education a More Central Part of Community Colleges

Issues

- The colleges are struggling with how to make noncredit and career education a more central part of the strategy and focus of community colleges.
- Noncredit training and programs are in higher demand than ever before. Community colleges must find ways to get onboard with noncredit education to retain students and help their communities.
- Not structured well to serve this type of programming, community colleges must find ways to best serve their students with fast and stackable programs. This will require restructuring and innovative investments.

Kevin Drumm notes: “Sadly, the economic realities particularly for a region like the northeast aren’t positive, maintaining a shrinking young population for longer than the rest of the country. Eighty percent of our budget is enrollment-driven no matter how you slice it. The only way we can continue to provide raises is if we find a way to grow our market. As a community college, we can’t just raise our tuition in order to pay our faculty better. That’s anathema to the philosophy of community colleges. Our only option is to push for some form of growth if we’re going to be able to continue to pay our faculty well and provide any raises at all. That’s just the hard financial reality that we face.”

Albert Lewis, Bellevue College, explains the dilemma of centrality of noncredit programming: “Most community colleges are committed to access, completion, and creating lifelong learners. Continuing education addresses lifelong learners, but I question how strong the commitment is because most continuing education departments are self-supported. We have to scramble to make as much money as we can to maintain our staff. In many cases, that doesn’t leave a lot of money to reinvest into programming or infrastructure—things that are really needed. When you talk about noncredit programming being part of continuing education programs, we’re not just competing with just other colleges; we’re actually competing with private sector institutions.”



As a community college, we can’t just raise our tuition in order to pay our faculty better. That’s anathema to the philosophy of community colleges. Our only option is to push for some form of growth if we’re going to be able to continue to pay our faculty well and provide any raises at all.

Kevin Drumm, SUNY Broome Community College



I question how strong the commitment is because most continuing education departments are self-supported. We have to scramble to make as much money as we can to maintain our staff. In many cases, that doesn’t leave a lot of money to reinvest into programming or infrastructure—things that are really needed.

Albert Lewis, Bellevue College

Enrollment, Access, and Imperative to Serve Diverse Populations

- Research from the College Board has found that of all undergraduates enrolled at public two-year colleges: 51 percent identify as a race/ethnicity other than White: 5 percent Asian, 14 percent Black, 22 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent Other. Data from the AACC on first-time students at community college indicates they are largely minorities: 21 percent identify as two or more races, 19 percent Hispanic, 19 percent Black, 18 percent American Indian, 16 percent White, and 15 percent Asian/Pacific Islander
- Reported by Community College Week: older students are returning to various community college campuses for an array of reasons. Specifically and most commonly, many adults today are forced to cope with an unexpected career shift as a rising number of employers and companies have been required to downsize their staff to accommodate a struggling economy's spending changes.
- The trend of adult students returning to community college campuses is not a new phenomenon. In 1997, nearly a third of community college students were thirty years old or older. The trend has continued today, with increased enrollment rates among older students.
- Community colleges face a significant enrollment and access imperative – do they focus on developing nondegree programming or on expanding credit-bearing offerings that bring in subsidized tuition dollars?
- To increase the number of adults with education beyond high school, colleges must see credit and noncredit education as equals and quickly deliver the skills employers need now.
- Advising nondegree students is a growing concern for the colleges. The colleges' role must change to keep up with the changing nature or the ever-changing nature of the labor market. The college infrastructure is being redesigned to deliver to adult students the customer experience they need to focus on academics as opposed to navigating the bureaucracy.

Kristin Gubser notes: "Noncredit and credit programs tend to attract different audiences. You're reaching out to and serving different markets. Oftentimes, the credit programs are really targeting the just out of high school, first to college, straight into school type of student as well as the older adult student. These students might have some training, and a family to take care of, and they tend to be more mature in their careers. These individuals may need that college credential in order to move up into leadership and managerial positions."

Gubser explains the noncredit market is really for skill enhancement — to be able to test professional competencies, where individuals can access training quickly on their own time. "They're not looking for programs for which they're going to need federal financial aid. They understand they're paying for noncredit training that is immediately going to pay off in terms of a pay raise and increased responsibility. If community colleges don't enter that space, they're losing that type of noncredit student. If we can attract them with quick training, noncredit credentials, and deliver them a great experience, they're more likely to stay with the community college. And their families will stay with that college through generations of the lifelong learning cycle."

Community colleges can focus on and grow access to noncredit offerings and there are compelling reasons for this.

Kevin Drumm cites benefits his college could realize by offering more noncredit offerings. "We're in the 15-year process of losing 25 percent of our teenagers. In June 2021 alone, our total county high school graduating class will be down by 10 percent, and it will continue down until 2026. So, we're getting hit pretty hard, and the old junior college model tends to hold sway in the northeast. The majority of our enrollments are credit students who plan to transfer, even though we have loads of one- and two-year certificates and degrees designed to get students straight into the workforce. In other areas of the country, part-time and adult student enrollments are much higher than they tend to be in the northeast. So, we do have an opportunity to grow our continuing education adult markets."

Lee Lambert places the challenges facing the colleges in the larger context: “Brookings recently released a report on low-wage earners across the entire U.S. When you isolate Tucson, and use their calculator, you find that we have over 175,000 individual earners considered low-wage earners. Now stack that against the work that the University of Arizona has been doing on automation and workforce impact, and they’re saying well over 40 percent of earners will be affected. You’re talking about a substantial portion of this community’s economy and talent that will be directly impacted by automation. When you overlay that with other data points, especially around equity, many of those individuals are people of color. That’s the growing segment of our community in Tucson, as well as in the state of Arizona. How are we going to address that? One way is to have a clear goal and set some standards we can reach. In this case, by 2030, 60 percent of Arizona adults ages 25- 64 will hold a postsecondary credential or degree. It’s important that they frame it that way because it allows for both credit and noncredit students to be part of the solution.”

Tracy Hartzler adds: “There’s the community colleges’ equity and social justice mission. We work with a significant population who doesn’t see itself as ‘college material.’ This belief has been internalized. Noncredit can open a door for those individuals. Once they’ve succeeded in a noncredit environment attached to an institution of higher education, we have the opportunity to bring them into the credit environment. We can tell them that they’ve done college-level work so they’re essentially a college student — why not finish the rest of your journey?”

Albert Lewis explains nondegree students “primarily are older, established, have bills and families, and are working. They don’t have the privilege of putting everything on hold to go to school. They have to fit school around their lives. That’s the biggest distinction. Depending on how long a person has been out of school, you may run into an issue with how much of the general subjects they remember. Are they ready to jump back into a classroom setting and succeed within it? Adult learners have to navigate life while trying to focus on school whereas a traditional student coming out of high school perhaps still treats school like a party.”

Adrienne Forgette notes: “There seem to be two groups of learners here: those who need some basic job entry skills and a path to employment, and a group who already have a degree and are returning to acquire in-demand skills. The second group, I think, is becoming a larger part of this noncredit market.”

To deliver an experience that meets nondegree learners’ expectations and market demand, Forgette explains that: “Most community colleges are not organized to serve noncredit, credit, online, face-to-face, and adult traditional students in the same way. We’re very compartmentalized and segmented. I’ve started thinking about implementing more of a one-door approach to how we operate, where everybody comes in and goes through a very student-focused admissions and counseling advising process that helps them sort out where they want to go. Does it matter to us if it’s credit or noncredit, online or face to face? A lot of people are starting to talk about what it might look like when we blend these things more.”

Toni Pendergrass underscores: “It needs to be an integrated approach through which everyone receives wraparound support services throughout their entire college experience, regardless of whether it’s credit or noncredit.”

Albert Lewis adds: “As colleges, we need to focus on what the student is trying to accomplish versus what we’re trying to direct. Credit versus noncredit, degree versus nondegree, or degree versus certification or certificate. We do this to serve our own interests. We should really be sitting down with each of our students and asking them what their goals are — what they’re trying to do and where they’re trying to go. Then, we align a path for that student based on what’s important to them.”

“Like many community colleges,” Tracy Hartzler notes, “we’re really looking at how to develop credit for prior learning pathways that recognize what people have learned outside of formal education and how these experiences transfer into degree credits. We’re also looking at how noncredit programs, certificates, and courses that an individual may have previously accumulated grant them credits for what they’ve already learned and show them potential pathways to new careers. If you completed a program, course, or certificate in the noncredit realm, how does that translate to progress on an associate degree?”

Carlos Cortez adds: “we are losing enrollments to organizations that are able to make these processes more seamless. We are positioning our organization to be increasingly student-centered, and that is in direct response

to our competitors who have already figured out how to do this work. The challenge lies in the fact that we are large government bureaucratic institutions, and with those types of entities come a significant amount of red tape. I challenge myself to reinvent how we do our business before we go extinct because there will be others in the next ten years who will figure it out and do it for a cheaper price. And frankly, I have found that students are willing to pay a premium if their institution meets them where they are at.”

Noncredit and Credit Education

Issues

- To increase the number of adults with education beyond high school, colleges will need to see credit and noncredit education as equals and quickly deliver the skills employers need now.
- Most communities across the nation face the fact that a low percentage of adults have any education or training beyond high school, and communities are looking to change that with new initiatives.
- Community colleges especially are examining changes needed in their role in the labor market, how they can help train and educate, and what it will take to get community members back into the workforce fast and efficiently.

Lee Lambert, Ian Roark and leadership team from Pima Community College are actively engaged in Achieve 60 AZ which is looking to increase the percentage of adults with learning and training beyond high school to 60 percent. To achieve this goal, institutions are rethinking how they look at noncredit education. Lambert underscores that noncredit, nondegree workforce training programming is key in achieving the attainment goal. The new approach will allow for both credit and noncredit students to be part of the solution. “Noncredit is important because it allows you to come in on a short-term basis, quickly acquire a set of skills and tools, and to continue to build upon them to stay viable and relevant in your career.”

Community colleges must start creating access to services and access points to the institution for people in workforce training and nondegree offerings. Lambert notes: “It starts with the mindset shift. The focus is on skills. It doesn’t matter which modality you choose to pursue to acquire it. My competitive advantage is to say, ‘You come and do these things, you’re going to get these services as part of that.’ I could price things on an à la carte basis, which will come with little to no support or build in additional pricing to have access to an advisor and faculty members. That’s why I come back to the idea that it’s a mindset. It’s not that it can’t be done; it’s whether we’re willing to think creatively about how we do it. But remember, it’s our brand on the line. The learner’s going to start thinking, ‘Can I get my skills needs met from Pima? What are the barriers to entry? What are the services? What are the offerings?’ That’s what’s going to be more important, as opposed to the distinction between credit and noncredit.”

“As part of our strategic plan,” Roark adds “we are ensuring through policy that noncredit learners have the same access to services as credit learners do, so we’ve been baking this into the operations. What we’ve started doing in all of our meetings is refusing to refer to people as noncredit versus credit learners. Noncredit is not a person — it’s a modality. Many members of my own team, who have been in continuing ed for years, will stop and ask why we’re calling them noncredit learners. Noncredit is a way you offer something, so let’s talk about the learner.”

Albert Lewis notes that “Despite the roadblocks, it’s valuable to increase noncredit offerings at the colleges. You have to think about the basis of noncredit training. Primarily, noncredit training is geared toward adults that already have work experience and education. Most noncredit training or noncredit courses are housed within a continuing education unit. That said, these people already have degrees and are seeking additional skills and knowledge that will help them move up in their existing organization or help them transition to other employment opportunities. Also, at the community college level, the people enrolling in noncredit programming generally are folks who already have some educational base and are looking for professional development.”

Kristin Gubser explains: “One of the biggest roadblocks is making sure that students understand what they’re choosing when they enroll in college training, whether that be a credit or noncredit program — and whether they earn a credential, certificate, or degree. College certificates and degrees still hold a lot of value. As individuals start with the noncredit training program, they shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that the credit, certificate, or degree can serve a purpose throughout their careers. Making sure students really understand what they’re taking, when they’re taking it and why, is important.”



What we’ve started doing in all of our meetings is refusing to refer to people as noncredit versus credit learners. Noncredit is not a person — it’s a modality.

Ian Roark, Pima Community College

Bridging Nondegree and Credit Programs

Issues

- As nondegree programs grow at community colleges, there is more attention to the ways to either bridge the gaps between or to create stackable offerings toward certificate, nondegree offerings, and more traditional or formal offerings.
- At most community colleges across the country, there is a division between credit programs that lead to an associate degree and noncredit, technical training programs that lead to an industry-aligned certificate or certification of value (not a degree). Despite operating within the same institution, distinctions between noncredit programs and credit programs in structure, educational approach, faculty, technology, and student resources can compound to make programs function worlds apart.
- Bifurcated systems can lead to content duplication, lack of communication, mistrust among units, and missed opportunities to collaborate and build coherent, articulated, and stackable pathways.
- Bridging is increasing between nondegree and credit programs through mapping noncredit credential offerings to associate degrees, credit matrices, articulation agreements, equivalency agreements, advising, and navigational assistance to students.

Lee Lambert thinks about stackability as a mind shift that institutions have to make. “I approach it through my legal training. If I can prove the higher crime, then I must have proved all the other lower crimes too. Think about stackability in the same way. A degree in cybersecurity is built from the pieces that make it up. I can get certified in those pieces first. And if I meet all of these requirements, then I get the degree. It’s not credit versus noncredit students, transfer versus CTE students, adult ed versus GED students. If you come to Pima, you’re a Pima student, and have access to our entire platform. You decide what pieces you want. We want to make sure that each part you obtain leads you to employment, so there’s no waste in your learning. We’ve still got work to do, but that’s the idea. Let’s start building the systems, policies, and practices to make it happen.”



It’s not credit versus noncredit students, transfer versus CTE students, adult ed versus GED students. If you come to Pima, you’re a Pima student, and have access to our entire platform. You decide what pieces you want. We want to make sure that each part you obtain leads you to employment, so there’s no waste in your learning.

Lee Lambert, Pima Community College

Colleges are looking more closely at how to connect and crosswalk credit and noncredit offerings, Albert Lewis notes. “It offers a real opportunity because noncredit training is typically less expensive than credit courses. Also, we can do things faster. If we can take a semester course, do it in three weeks and the student can successfully finish it, why spread it over ten weeks? There are opportunities to create accelerated models that leverage noncredit’s flexibility, mirroring what’s happening in credit programs. If we start to look at ways for people to accelerate their learning, there are some really interesting opportunities available, particularly for adult learners. It’s really important that we make a distinction: accelerated learning makes a lot of sense because the adult learner works full-time, has outside responsibilities, and time is usually an issue. So, if there’s a way to accelerate their path with noncredit offerings that align with identified career pathways, it gets them workforce-ready faster. We need to think more about adult learner needs. There are many roadblocks to establishing robust crosswalks between noncredit and credit, where credentials align with career progressions in specific fields.”

Role of Community College Leaders, Faculty, Advisors

Issues

- Community college leaders, faculty, and advisors all have an important role in helping people outside the college understand the value of noncredit education.
- There is a lack of understanding in communities of the range of roles community colleges play, especially when it comes to noncredit education.

Albert Lewis: “Success stories need to be presented more often. Every community college has them — where people have gone through a program, earned a certification, received a credential, and were hired for a new job. We need to talk about that more from a marketing perspective. We’re not talking about a minimum-wage salary, we’re talking about living-wage jobs that people are getting because of the certifications they received at our college and many others. It goes back to the whole concept of student success. Most colleges define it from their own institutional points of view. I once attended a GED ceremony during which a man in his 60s spoke about earning his GED. The reason he completed it was because of promise he made to his mother. That example demonstrates student success as defined by the student.”

Ed Leach from NISOD notes: “Institutional innovation should be an ongoing effort, but it’s important to keep faculty and staff informed of the process along the way. Institutions are known for being traditional and staying inside the box when it comes to innovation. But that model is beginning to change as higher education heads into a new normal. Innovation needs to happen, but it’s critical that everyone involved is on the same page.”

There are often faculty objections to institutional innovation, especially when it comes to scaling access to and development on a noncredit program.

Leach notes: “Anytime you ask faculty to do something new and you do not provide them with the necessary support, it can lead to problems. Much like anything that you and I might be asked to do that we’re not familiar with, we might need some type of training in order to be successful at it. It’s no different with faculty.”

Another objection, Leach says is, “oftentimes we ask faculty to do things without making it clear why we’re asking them to do it. All of a sudden, a request just comes down like some type of edict. We don’t provide enough information or context about the reasons behind the change, and that can cause problems.”

“As far as the noncredit side of the house goes,” Leach adds, “those same rules might not necessarily apply. My experience has been that most noncredit courses are not taught by full-time faculty or even adjuncts from the academic side. They’re taught by people who are actually working professionals in the field. If there’s a new course that the noncredit side wants to offer, it is usually able to go out and find someone who has current working expertise in that subject matter.”

“For the longest time, and maybe it’s still the case,” Leach explains, “the noncredit and credit sides were really separate entities; there wasn’t a lot of collaboration between the two sides, which can be problematic when trying to scale access to and develop a noncredit program. But there are some institutions

that have gotten better at bridging the academic and non-academic sides of the house. And obviously a lot of problems can be eliminated when that happens. Administrators and institutional leadership must take faculty concerns seriously. If you want to get something done with your faculty, but do not include them in the discussion, it’s likely going to result in a difference between what the faculty are willing to do and what the administration wants to do.”

There are many best practices leaders can employ to increase the buy-in for innovation from their colleagues on the faculty side.

Leach suggests: “By involving faculty from the very beginning, taking their input and ensuring that there’s space for adequate back and forth is probably the number one way get their buy-in. That said, you’re not going to get everybody’s buy-in. But hopefully you can get a critical mass of faculty onboard. Everybody on campus knows which faculty members tend to be willing to take part of new initiatives. Find these faculty members and get them onboard from the beginning. They can help bring along some of their fellow faculty who might need a little more encouragement to get onboard.”



Another objection is that oftentimes we ask faculty to do things without making it clear why we’re asking them to do it. All of a sudden, a request just comes down like some type of edict. We don’t provide enough information or context about the reasons behind the change, and that too can cause problems.

Ed Leach, NISOD

SECTION 5

THE FUTURE — PREPARATION AND NEARING THE TWO-YEAR MILESTONE

“The future of colleges and universities will turn on their ability to reduce the friction points between the learner and employers. On-demand, anytime, anywhere access to virtual reality (vr), augmented reality (ar), and o20 teaching and learning tools (using smartphones to access popular mobile social network apps such as wechat, and mobile qq will disrupt the traditional model of higher education.”



Lee Lambert

Chancellor
Pima Community College

THE FUTURE:

PARTNERS PREPARE FOR NEXT-STAGE WORK

Now that the Unmudl marketplace has been designed and developed, what does the future hold? This section shifts the emphasis to design, develop, and deliver on the Unmudl promise of unmuddling the work + learn futures to marketing to learners and employers, and providing customer service. This section presents the results of the 2021 interviews conducted with the Unmudl partners three months following public launch, and identifies takeaways to guide future next steps and thinking.

Interviews

One-hour Interviews with the seven collaborating community colleges plus NISOD were conducted in February 2021 to identify key challenges facing both the campuses and the Unmudl collective in the coming year. Some colleges included multiple members of their planning team in the interviews; others were represented by their Unmudl lead. Interviews covered the following seven questions, though some additional issues were raised during the discussions:

1. How is Unmudl doing at delivering on the promise and potential developed during the planning phase?
2. Do you see a need to alter the vision or components at this stage of implementation? If so, in what ways?
3. What have been the biggest two to three challenges your college is facing in implementation?
4. What fine-tuning is most needed to realize the vision of Unmudl?
5. What are the top three issues you see emerging in the next several months of Unmudl implementation — for your college? For the collective?
6. Are documents like reports and briefing papers needed and useful going forward? In what ways?
7. What policy issues need to be addressed?

This section describes partner responses to the seven questions without attribution. At this critical time of implementation and fine-tuning, we believed the partners would be more frank in their assessment of changes needed if anonymity was built into the reporting process.

Finally, though many of the same issues were raised in the post-launch interviews that were raised in the interviews conducted in fall 2020 presented in the previous section and shared in their entirety in Appendix B, there has been no attempt in this section to repeat, update, or compare and contrast pre-launch response to post-launch responses.

Partner Responses

Overall, there was significant congruence in partner responses during the post-launch interviews. This was not surprising given the similar challenges they face in trying to advance both the campus and collective aspects of Unmudl in the pandemic recession. There were, however, many different types of challenges the partners raised when asked to identify the top challenges faced in the first months of Unmudl — and ones they expect to face in the next year. Responses were impacted by whether the college was a faculty union campus, and what impact that might have on faculty teaching roles; how and if their state provided reimbursement for noncredit courses; and how risk-tolerant the college was (including how long colleges could wait for enrollments to materialize given their varying financial situations).

Key areas of congruence and differences among partner responses are summarized below. Examples of partner responses from the interviews are provided in Appendix A.

EXAMPLES OF KEY AREAS OF CONGRUENCE AMONG COLLEGES	
Marketing Unmudl nationally is the top priority	There was partner consensus that marketing Unmudl nationally is the top priority going forward in order to build awareness of the new platform and build enrollments. This is not something the colleges can do on their own, given their local/regional missions. This must be the responsibility of the “intermediary” serving the collective’s purpose: SocialTech.ai.
College leadership is essential	All partners cited their strong college leadership and the importance of leadership in moving the Unmudl initiative forward. This was not surprising since a condition of joining Unmudl was strong college leadership, but the testimonials to leadership were woven throughout their comments.
Technology readiness is essential	All the partners expected (and were trying to accommodate) the technology challenges they faced, though there were differences in their capacity. Typically this depended on their funding formulas, whether they were a unionized campus, and how steeped in online delivery they were prior to joining Unmudl. Given the pandemic’s reality that all colleges had to move to online delivery in 2020, the colleges were engaged significantly in online delivery, though all had prior experience in this area. Again, a condition for participating as a founding institution in Unmudl’s technology-based innovation was readiness to place courses on the new platform and offer services in online formats.
A “good neighbor policy” is essential	Partners appreciated the “trusting” approach of courses put on the platform for course sharing through an agreed-upon “good-neighbor” policy. There was agreement that this enabled the course-publishing process to move ahead more quickly, by dispensing with the need to establish a course-by-course academic review structure among the colleges.
The Intermediary role is essential and there is power in the collective	Partners appreciated the opportunity to learn from one another through the collective, to inform other work they are doing, and to move their work in Unmudl ahead more effectively. They also appreciated the importance of the work of the intermediary, SocialTech.ai, in moving pieces of Unmudl forward — like building the tech platform, convening meetings, and seeking out national employers interested in meeting their employee upskilling needs through Unmudl. There was agreement that these are not functions the colleges could do on their own.
Innovations take time	Partners recognized — and expected — that it would take time to build Unmudl and that the initiative has generally delivered on its promise — its vision in the first phases of planning and operation.
The vision is strong and prevailing	Partners understood the vision and embraced it though they recognize that some fine-tuning is needed. The main fine-tuning must be about marketing to realize enrollments and critically needed revenue streams next.
New population of learners will be served	The colleges want to correct the perception (reset the perception) that they primarily serve developmental education (remedial) and first-generation students since they are increasingly at the frontlines in serving workforce needs. Many workers already have college degrees but need skills training. Unmudl focuses on this need and this will be a growing role for many community colleges — therefore, the populations they are and will be serving are diverse and expanding.
Workforce courses may have higher costs – expectations must change to accommodate this reality	The colleges want to correct the perception that because of their mission as open admissions institutions and often lower cost programming compared to universities, that workforce courses will be low cost. The reality is, there will be higher costs for many of these workforce-focused skills courses and the colleges should not be apologetic about this. There is a need to inform policymakers, business/industry, students, and the public at large that workforce development is changing and meeting the education/training needs has as well.

EXAMPLES OF AREAS OF DIFFERENCE AMONG COLLEGES

<p>Faculty roles differ</p>	<p>Some campuses are unable to use their credit-based faculty to teach noncredit courses because of union requirements. Instructional loads are impacted by union contracts in noncredit areas. At other colleges, faculty participate among both credit and noncredit programs.</p>
<p>Patience and tolerance of early results varies</p>	<p>Because of differences among revenue models, reimbursement policies within states, institutional reallocation approaches, and the general financial health of the colleges, there are varying levels of tolerance for how quickly new revenue streams must be realized through the Unmudl collective. Some colleges indicated they must realize enrollments and new revenue streams soon through Unmudl — without enrollment growth, they may not be able to sustain their commitment to Unmudl. Other colleges can (and will) tolerate a longer guide path.</p>
<p>Use of Strategic Plans varies</p>	<p>Campuses are varied on whether they have strategic plans guiding their innovation work. Generally, those campuses with Strategic Plans that address innovations such as Unmudl expressed an easier time with implementation, and fewer challenges for implementation.</p>
<p>Staffing plans are varied</p>	<p>Some campuses have designated Unmudl staff with defined roles; other campuses have encountered more staffing challenges (not enough staff to do the work). Colleges with funds (often reallocated internally to take on the Unmudl challenges) to invest in staffing appear to be finding it easier to manage their responsibilities in the Unmudl collective.</p>
<p>Credit and noncredit alignment vary</p>	<p>Campuses are at various stages of alignment between their credit and noncredit courses/ programs. Though a condition of joining Unmudl was a commitment by the college to align their credit and noncredit operations and reduce/eliminate the silos between them, colleges have approached their commitments in various ways, and progress varies considerably.</p>
<p>The view of how unique this platform is varies</p>	<p>Some of the colleges view the Unmudl platform as unique — they will be serving needs that no other tech platform is/can serve — and community colleges are at the helm of the nation’s growing attention to workforce development. Some other colleges noted that as they’ve gone further into it, they’re seeing that Unmudl may not be that different than some others and that it’s getting to be a crowded marketplace. There are questions among some colleges about how to differentiate Unmudl from what others are doing.</p>
<p>Revenue management models and regulatory approvals for systems vary</p>	<p>Colleges vary in their capacity to use a common revenue payments management model. For example, some states do not approve of the system Unmudl is using, so colleges with this circumstance have to decide whether to follow regulatory rules or try to use the Unmudl system.</p>

KEY TAKEAWAYS NEARING TWO-YEAR MILESTONE

Unmudl is nearing its two-year milestone — having moved through planning, design, and implementation phases. A growing community of stakeholders are supporting the vision to create a national marketplace of skills courses to serve working learners and employers — and the community colleges themselves who will benefit by sharing curricular resources within their collective.

There have been many lessons learned. Many were identified in the fall 2020 interviews before Unmudl was publicly launched — and more lessons were identified in the months following launch.

As Unmudl gears up for its next phase of growth, especially to market its unique resources to a national audience and expand its repository of courses, it is useful to think about key takeaways from this report on the planning, implementation, and next steps planned for Unmudl.

The rise of working learners/nontraditional students as a large, coherent demographic in higher education and the race among providers to develop noncredit offerings to serve this demographic.

- The rapid steady growth of Coursera, EdX, and other platform-based online marketplaces of courses and programs will impact all of the providers in this marketplace, those already in the marketplace, and those new to the marketplace such as Unmudl. There will be questions about how much competition can realistically thrive in the marketplace, and whether various learning platforms will come together to collaborate or push one another out of the marketplace. Unmudl is unique with its focus on community college skills courses, but other providers could add community college content through partnerships with community colleges and third-party providers. This will likely be a tumultuous and dynamic environment as students and workers seek to get back into the job market during post-pandemic economic recovery, and as employers seek to upskill their current and new workforce.
- Community colleges have naturally — though not intentionally — served this same audience in the past. But now, it has become intentional.
- Intentionally serving working learners means there must be a much more substantial focus on noncredit offerings, skills and work-focused training, shorter time-to-completion, flexible and/or online formats in short — a “system” change.

The challenges community colleges face as they redesign their systems and processes to serve the demographic of working learners/nontraditional students are daunting, especially in the pandemic recession and resource-tight realities of the colleges and, of course, the students who are paying for their educations.

- There are still deep divisions and mistrust between noncredit and credit functions at the colleges, even among the Unmudl colleges which have been working to align their noncredit and credit functions for nearly two years. The roadblocks are high.
- There is a lack of financial support mechanisms for noncredit offerings; e.g., no or limited federal financial aid, and no state apportionment funds.

- There is an increasingly crowded field of competitors when going online (e.g., EdX, Coursera, Udacity, Udemy) as well as Ed2Go and other third-party content providers that create courses and sell them to colleges to post online.
- There are significant IT systems capacity issues even at a time when there are so many technological advances. A college cannot adopt new processes if their systems cannot handle them. That includes hardware, software, maintenance, and providing continuing professional development to faculty and staff to use technology efficiently and effectively.
- Marketing and public relations have not been key capacities of most community colleges; and the collective called Unmudl as yet has no national brand and no experience in national marketing. The challenge for Unmudl to succeed will require that.

The focus on building a successful learner-centered enterprise that also serves employers and colleges requires assessing the extent to which Unmudl is meeting its goals, or needs to reset goals in light of the rapidly changing marketplace; and establishing criteria to evaluate success.

- Unmudl will need to establish criteria to evaluate its success and need for fine-tuning in the coming years. Metrics for 2022 and beyond will need to be developed and criteria established for what success will look like. For example, what data tracking must Unmudl provide? Some partners have already suggested metrics such as the number of colleges that join up, what revenue is generated, the number and type of students enrolling, the number and type of students searching for courses at the platform, and the number of employers who are engaging.
- Unmudl will also be considering what goals to focus on. For example, how much revenue to seek, what should be the cadence of growth, and what is the awareness level and acceptance of Unmudl's messaging?
- With an increasing focus on evaluation and goal-updating, it will be necessary to identify what methods will be used. For example, will methods include additional community college Futures Innovation Labs, rounds of interviews by partners and users of Unmudl, studies of the analytics developed over time by the operation of the Unmudl Marketplace?

There is optimism that the Unmudl model will continue to evolve and meet its vision because many solutions are already in progress for many of these challenges.

- **Noncredit to credit front:** Many solutions are underway and trying to accelerate on the noncredit-to-credit front. These include development of prior learning assessment mechanisms; dual contract arrangements for faculty to cover separate payment formulas for teaching credit versus noncredit courses; and leadership messaging on the importance of learner-centric pathways, whatever shape that may take.

While Unmudl focuses on noncredit courses “for sale” at its platform, it displays dynamic pathways diagrams to the learner that show how noncredit and credit courses can be mixed and matched to attain a desired credential or job. This is a growing navigational tool to help learners and expands the “product and service” base of Unmudl. There is also recognition that advising and wraparound services are needed and will be provided — working learners will require this to make good decisions about courses to enroll and succeed in.

- **Financial support of noncredit:** National advocacy efforts to extend federal Title IV financial aid funds to noncredit enrollments and use employment outcomes as the validation metric rather than accreditation status are in consideration — and there is growing recognition of the need to provide financial support for short-term workforce-oriented courses and programs. As there is expanded financial support of noncredit education, there will be an expanded market in which to sell Unmudl resources.
- **Crowded field of competition:** Centers of excellence that are already attracting a national audience are and can be moved online. Each of the Unmudl colleges has some of these, and these will expand from here on out. The Unmudl platform presents unique courses and connections which the other learning platforms typically do not offer and which can be used to differentiate the Unmudl resources. For example, the unique features of Unmudl include a national footprint of physical infrastructure and in-person courses and services; the ability for employers to send personal requests easily to colleges; the ability for employers to hire right out of a course; and the ability for learners to navigate from employer to course and back again. Eventually, learners will also be able to mix and match courses from multiple colleges and redeem the learning at any of the colleges for a credential later on.
- **IT Systems capacity:** COVID-19 has forced all the colleges to move instruction online. This has been a major step forward. The faculty and staff know what can be done now, and can build their future programs armed with hard-fought new knowledge and skills. The ability to integrate with colleges' existing information systems, meeting colleges wherever they are at technologically, will increase capacity among the Unmudl colleges.
- **Metrics and data tracking systems:** Metrics are set for 2021 and the President's Council and Champion's Group are exploring metrics for future years and the criteria for what success will look like. Unmudl has built data-tracking capacity and this capacity will expand as more granular outcomes are set for the collective (e.g., outcomes for the colleges, the learners, and employers).
- **Marketing and public relations:** Community colleges have the beginnings of a national marketing footprint through their alumni networks connected to colleges, LinkedIn, and other social media pages that transcend local/regional college geographic boundaries. The beginnings of a national marketing effort centered around a common marketplace, with all colleges plus Unmudl contributing to the marketing activity, stand to move Unmudl to a national brand.

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APPENDIX A:

EXAMPLES OF PARTNER RESPONSES FROM FEBRUARY 2021 INTERVIEWS¹³

How is Unmudl doing at delivering on the promise and potential developed during the planning phase?

- It's delivering on its promises but it's slow going — as we knew it would be. We don't have the advertising budget of an Amazon. Remember, when Amazon started, they ran deficits for years and years, but you knew it was going to pay off. That's what we're looking at with the Unmudl model. We have to get the word out because you've got a double barrier to overcome. A lot of people don't know or understand community colleges. Even though we're the largest sector, we're still the most misunderstood or unknown sector. The words, "hidden gem" are often used but being hidden is not good. We're not as well known and it's hard to describe us.
- We tend to have a high-risk tolerance. Many of our counterparts in higher ed want a certain degree of confidence that the risk levels have to be low before they jump into an opportunity like this. What we saw was an opportunity to be at the center for the future. Unmudl was where we knew education was going to go — with the greatest bundling, modularization, using noncredit and prior learning assessment as the catalyst to bring about a real competency-based education model. We were already thinking about those things. The opportunity to develop a platform formed by community colleges in this market space to be an answer to the MOOCs and also an answer to many of the bad actors we see in workforce development out there that take advantage of the population — it all came together.

We don't know if this is going to work but we have to get started and get moving and be part of this, because even if it doesn't work, the first thing is, we're going to learn along the way how we're going to live in this ecosystem. Has Unmudl delivered on the promise? If we went into this with the expectation that upon launch, we're going to have tens of thousands of learners flooding the space, we would have been disappointed, but that would have been an unfair expectation from

the onset. It's a startup and the opportunity to be a part of a startup is very fluid, very risky. And, we've had a once-in-a-century pandemic experience plus a once-in-a-century economic collapse in the middle of this launch as well. With all of that context, the fact that we were able to go from concept to launch in just a little over a year's time, actually more than fulfilled expectations.

- It's doing quite well but it's early on yet. Based on where they are at this point, they're doing some really good work. They have a good set of colleges on board, and those colleges that have served as the core colleges have taken a very deliberate, sensible approach to moving this forward. They've been deliberate about identifying colleges that would be a good fit to get involved in this and the companies as well. They're taking their time and doing a very good job to get a good foundation in place to move on from. The timing couldn't be any better given how much community colleges are struggling with down-enrollments and revenue sources.
- There are areas in which we have exceeded the promise and areas we have not quite met. What was anticipated as the outcomes has been impacted by COVID. When we originally invested in this vision of Unmudl, it was leveraging the local experience the community college could provide; e.g., the thing that differentiates what educational offerings we have is our connection to local employers, ability to provide onsite quality guided-learning experiences, as well as support services, particularly to students that are not going to do well. We were going to launch with hybrid learning experiences but all of a sudden, not only are we scrambling at our own institutions to make that pivot, but we're trying to figure out if that's not the value proposition at launch time for Unmudl, what is the value?

¹³ Quotes abridged from the transcript of interviews with Unmudl's founding partners.

It wasn't that there weren't other things that were part of the value proposition, but all of a sudden we had to change the playbook. So, we're in this place where something else became really important.

Unmudl has done a fantastic job of delivering a promise on -- and is continually testing — the marketplace with working learners and finding out real time, how are they reacting, what are they looking for? There are updates constantly by how people search, by what they're searching for, by how they're bucketing things. The framework Unmudl is based on is still right on; it's just the timing and the sequencing of how we've had to prioritize and phase things in that had to adjust because our market changed. We don't think it's changed for the long-term. The vision is still absolutely the promise that community colleges deliver in their local regions with connections to national collaborations. But the way we're having to think about it now in COVID and in COVID-recovery is going to be different than where we thought we would be, and where we will be in say three to four years.

- Unmudl has done well. But like any startup, you have your hiccups, and we certainly have — and with the pandemic hitting in the middle of all this, some things have slowed down. But by and large, Unmudl has been able to keep to a schedule. They have been good about communicating changes that might arise because of COVID or other circumstances.
- It really hasn't launched yet so we don't think we can say it's delivered if it hasn't launched. By launch, we mean we're not enrolling people yet. The group has raised the issue that it's going to take time but enrollment of students is the art of the business and revenues.
- Unmudl has done a great job in what was a monstrous lift. Most of us didn't realize how big a lift it was going to be. So in terms of delivering the platform

and delivering the marketplace, Unmudl has done a great job, especially during the pandemic that no one expected. But is there a room for improvement? Sure.

- Unmudl started out as a fairly loose concept, which has tightened as time has gone on. It started with how to connect working learners with opportunities to improve their skills and the employer piece of that was very important. So we came to this kind of triad: learners, employers, and the actual courses and training that's available on the platform. We like to talk about this as a "three-legged stool" but that was not the focus as we started. It was more of "we need to get some classes up" and "get that kind of thing going." When we started, it was a leap of faith but now we're excited about it based on what's been developed to date. It is delivering on its promise though the plane is still being built — not even necessarily as it's flying. We're not sure we're off the ground yet. In talking with some of the other colleges, we have a sense that they define flying as actually having some enrollments, as opposed to putting courses on the platform. Some colleges don't think that's flying and we concur. Honestly, we haven't seen a return on our investment yet. We just know there's this castle in the air that the airplane is definitely aimed at.
- We're excited about some of the partnerships that have been developed with employers, and how all the colleges can work together and collaborate to meet the needs of national partners coming forward to work with Unmudl. This is a way in which being in the pandemic has helped us — traditionally, workforce students are place-bound and face-to-face students, and this is an online platform. Right now everything is online pretty much, or it's not happening. So students who previously might have looked for something else can now be more open to what is available on Unmudl. That's a good thing. We just have to make sure that they can find it.

Do you see a need to alter the vision or components at this stage of implementation? If so, in what ways?

- We're hopeful for the vision in the next one to two years. But it's not the sort of thing that will happen overnight, like with Coursera and MIT, because they had the MIT brand coming out of the gates that we don't have. It's going to take a while to build the brand across the country. That's one of the reasons we were interested in jumping on board with Unmudl.

Community colleges for the most part have local brand footprints — it's the very nature of community colleges, our mission. So to go national, there's really nobody in the community college world who has a national brand. And that's part of the vision for community colleges. And that's part of the vision for Unmudl, to build a national brand and national exposure around

workforce development for community colleges, because in the aggregate, we're probably the largest workforce development entity in the U.S.

- We are in this phase where we know the mechanics work but we really have to get our marketing strategy more developed and employed.

This is still the great frontier for all of us — how to meet the challenge of the “hybridization” of what we're offering because a lot of the offerings have to be done in person. For example, the “shared services” model has some part of a program at one college and the face-to-face component delivered by our college because the learners are actually closer geographically to our college. Those are some of the other pieces we still need to be working on.

Another component we need to focus on is cultivating partnerships with major industry partners — so they will know what we are already able to do and deliver. It's a matter of them seeing us as a group, with scale across multiple geographies. We want them to know we're a group of community colleges working toward a common goal of meeting working learners' needs in a very dynamic environment.

- Based on what we've seen so far, Unmudl is spot on with what they're trying to do.
- The vision for Unmudl only gets stronger because it offers both asynchronous and synchronous learning to draw people to highly cultivated programs. Particularly for entities strong in mapping that to credit or to professional certifications, that's an important emerging field in education — maybe more than traditional education.

Another component of the vision is to create transcripts and collect those credentials and provide that avenue so that people can have and follow pathways to specific outcomes they want. Perhaps students will leap from school to school, on the Unmudl platform, to get all of the components they need to land in the place they want to be. That “abundance” mindset of curriculum and sharing is a big outcome because in the end, students don't care how they get their dreams fulfilled — they want them fulfilled easily. So the Unmudl vision has stayed true.

We will need industry to come to the table. If this happens, we can hire people and keep building the system. But if progress goes slow materializes later

than four years from now — we won't have the volume and scale to make this work. We compare ourselves to a Coursera or Udemy that has so much more scale and recognizability. But we know they're not offering the same thing. They're offering a “take all the courses you want for the next year” but the learner is clicking through slides — taking in theory, skills-based tests, but they're standardized for giant populations as opposed to the cultivation of what Unmudl has, which is a quality of experience that can't be met by any other platform we've seen so far. Unmudl has not fulfilled the interconnectivity to industry, the other part of the equation that is so important. The vision is good but we have to get each of the components operating as we enter this next phase.

- Put lots of money into marketing.
- We could benefit by being clearer about the vision, more strategic and more pragmatic about implementation. With any startup, you have to be ready to move on a dime — be flexible to survive given the pandemic. It would help us from a resource side to stay more focused, not feel as if we're constantly scrambling to keep up but can work our plan internally to make sure we can execute in a well thought-out way. The vision doesn't need to be altered but be clarified for each other in the group. And if one college starts to veer, we need to bring each other back so we are all on the same page.
- Focus as part of the vision on national marketing now that we have some high-quality courses out there. Collectively as a group, we need to focus on enrollment. We went into this with the idea that there wasn't anything like this for community colleges and workforce out there. But as we've gone further into it, we've seen that in some ways we may not be all that different than for instance, Coursera. And that's actually a pretty crowded marketplace. It may not be as easy to differentiate ourselves/what we're doing as we assumed would be the case at the start.

What have been the biggest 2-3 challenges your college has faced in implementation?

- Some would think it's taking the risk to join an innovative effort, but this was not true for us. Some presidents are more entrepreneurial than others, and more willing to take risks. There wasn't a lot of downside to this — wasn't a huge buy-in, in the grand scheme of things. There was a certain readiness, for example, that the noncredit side of the shop had to lower the walls with the credit side. We're in the process of doing that and that's a big struggle for us — and for most community colleges in our region because the faculty see themselves as transferring people on to universities. They don't see themselves as having part to play in noncredit workforce training really. We have many traditional classically trained professors who've come through the classic university structure, so that is how they view the world.
- We have issues with our enterprise system — student database, registration processes, etc. that are built around a false spring/summer and rinse/repeat mentality. So when you're building on top of ways to serve learners that are in demand, it causes the need for conversation. Then, the need to set aside time to do the actual work in adjusting the system; i.e., backend work like website and student services processes that have to be changed. This slows us down. Even once everyone's on board with this idea and you start moving through those tedious processes, momentum can be lost. You have to keep the goal in mind — the working learners — to keep progress going.

We did anticipate the big lift on our backend systems. But community colleges are being faced with the need to change at a rate we have never faced before. It's hard to sort it all out on a day-to-day basis. Our college leadership provides continuing reminders of why we're doing this and also empowering us. We understand that Unmudl may not work right off the bat but we're going to learn from it. The college leadership is really crucial.

- A big challenge is the outlay of funds on the front end required of colleges to participate in Unmudl. This is happening in a context of decreased enrollment and decreased state funding.

Another challenge is the disconnect between the credit and noncredit side, and the impacts on implementation. At many colleges, the credit side of the house seeds

the noncredit, so the noncredit side is not held in as high esteem as the credit side. If an institution is going to try to do more with the noncredit side, there may concern on the credit side; e.g., is the noncredit side going to be seen as more important and start to get more of the resources and more of the time and energy of the administrators? Then, what does that mean for the credit side. Do they start to cut offerings? What does it mean for people — laying off people? These are issues that can be managed with the right leaders — bringing everybody to the table and working through some of those issues — but this is a major challenge for leadership to be cognizant of and step lightly with.

- The industry/employer piece is one of the biggest challenges. The industry component is about to face terrible market confusion because, they will be faced with dozens of similar but not identical offerings. They will all be faced with build-their-own, particularly the gigantic organizations. Why is ours better? The reality is the corporate folks won't know why. Unmudl can play a really important part of that, but all of those are going to have to roll up into the system that can interconnect all of the places where people acquire learning credentials.

Another challenge is staffing. After listening to our other founding colleges, we have had fewer hurdles on the implementation front. We are fortunate to have someone who has dedicated time to shepherd this project.

A third challenge is continuing to bring in stakeholders across the college to understand and connect with the promise of Unmudl and to get excited about it — then really use it. Unmudl challenged our internal systems and has helped us think about using what we are learning for other things, like one-click registration. We can use this for other functions at our college.

- Bandwidth is a huge challenge. We just laid off a bunch of people in our continuing education department because our revenues dropped so much — in COVID-19, we had to do almost half a million dollars in refunds to students.

Another challenge is bridging the divide between credit and noncredit. That journey differs from college to college. Some institutions have built and embraced

a new model. Our college has not embraced that model at this point in time.

A third challenge is with the payments system Unmudl uses (a system our state does not approve of). We decided to go ahead and pilot it anyway because it's simple and easy to use. Finding revenue management models that actually split the money up and divides the amount for each college based on services the students use. These are obviously new kinds of models for collaboratives and most higher education doesn't have a history of collaborating very well. We were familiar with the platform but it was not an approved state platform. That's the piece you run into with regulatory issues — in terms of doing applied training at a national level. There are also some international issues/rules related to international students training.

- There's been a little resistance from stakeholders, unions, etc., wondering what's going on, but we've managed to navigate that. The biggest issue now is viability of Unmudl — whether students enroll. It's not that there are no other challenges but enrollments just supersede everything.
- The first challenge is marketing. The second is a constant chase for content, and the process it takes to get the content into the learning management system (content instructional design) to get that on Unmudl. The third is person-power. We would love to have a staff person dedicated to Unmudl. Activities could be blogging, doing social media, managing content, helping hire instructors and handling the HR paperwork that goes with that, doing reconciliations when we anticipate having enrollments and need to do financial reconciliations at the end of the month — managing contracts with some of our third-party

vendors that have content on Unmudl, using the data, communicating with the students, and data analysis. These are big jobs that we need help with.

- We have close to 140 certificates and degrees. So one of the challenges is developing online courses since this is resource-intensive work and those are not resources most colleges have. To the extent that we have them, we've always put them into our credit offerings. We do have some of the basic expertise here but to try to develop 20 courses in six months or so, has been one of our major challenges.

Also, how do we get quality courses — because if the first courses are not good, people will not come back. There are issues around the level of trust and review among the colleges. Those were questions we talked about that we should have some kind of review process. Ultimately the college collective went in the direction of “trust” and be confident in each other's ability to put up good courses, appropriate courses, and courses in line with our institutional expertise. We think the “trust your neighbor approach” has worked. In hindsight, this approach simplified that process — not to have some kind of a review committee to review all courses.

Another challenge was the internal reorganization we had to do to put resources toward this. We upgraded a position that would include oversight for Unmudl as well as other parts of our adult learning programs. We hired an instructional designer for Unmudl and for the noncredit side. And we're still working out some other processes regarding how components go together. We identified a need for a more formal PLA policy and how that works.

What fine-tuning is most needed to realize the vision of Unmudl?

- Alter the vision for the college because future work will take time from our traditional unionized faculty. It will take time to create a new vision where we have to think more in terms of short-term credentials, whether noncredit or credit, or overlapping noncredit and credit. We have to think too more about Internet even though we're pretty good at it now. And interweaving everything we do with the community. Finally, our faculty will need to think differently about the future of a community college. It's going to be a long road to achieve this. We have to lead our faculty — there's no

pushing faculty — in the direction of thinking in terms of both the Unmudl model and traditional classroom credit degree model and how we marry those two because our market here is shrinking dramatically. This is one of the reasons we're interested in Unmudl — it gives us a nationwide playing field where previously we had only a local playing field.

- What some of us are already doing, others will start to do too: have PLA built into the Unmudl piece and also on our own websites. We want to relay the message this is not just another group of offerings we're doing

on another web platform to market better; rather this is leading to new and better conversations about fundamental change within our colleges. There is a power in the colleges working together — in Unmudl the colleges can have more flexibility and voice when we're innovating and fine-tuning. We need to flesh out the learning assessment services piece a bit more and work more on the employer connections.

- Another challenge that differs state to state: who is going to pay for the training on credit workforce training? Payment is subsidized in different ways, but by and large, most states are not funding this at the level needed. Our systems for individual learners are not sufficient to meet the scale of reskilling and retraining needs.
- The vision is big and important but with any new initiative, as you move forward you're going to figure out that some things are working better than others. Things will need to be added in and others will need to be changed.
- All community colleges are facing the gap between noncredit and credit. Colleges deal with that differently, but we're all trying to figure out how to align these two sides of our shop. We've managed this in different ways; e.g., by hiring existing faculty into a separate pool and paying them at a different rate than by their faculty contract. But it's outside of their meeting the obligations of existing faculty contracts. We have on occasion worked across the credit and noncredit divide, and figured out ways to release faculty from a portion of their teaching duties in order to help invest in the development of noncredit programs, as either curriculum experts or instructors. There's nothing in the contract that prohibits it. There's always places where we have to do workarounds, which require shifting mindsets. We have to not think of credit and noncredit as just programs. That's the opportunity of Unmudl to think about changing traditional silos to function more effectively in the future.
- Two things need to happen: we need more time to post courses to the platform and more marketing. And we need to stay as focused as possible on the noncredit side. But there are many questions emerging; e.g., does credit have a role in Unmudl and how do we explore that? Does the opportunity to offer baccalaureate degrees through community colleges link to Unmudl? We haven't had a whole lot of visitors yet to Unmudl so this is still a work in progress. We

have to give it time, but we must start branching out to marketing.

- Marketing is the highest priority for fine-tuning. We hope that marketing will drive enrollments, to set up business/industry partnerships to establish contract education arrangements and other networks too, to help populate courses with their clientele or membership.
- Our top issue is marketing — it cannot be left up to the colleges. Second issue: the amount of content. For example, we don't want to have as much content as Coursera does because we want it to be focused, meaningful and valuable — and have those hands-on experiences. It's questionable how valuable Unmudl will be if there are hundreds of programs, unless they're constantly changing, which we would not be able to do.
- So business decisions around how much content can be shared, and the hands-on experiences we're able to provide, will require fine-tuning.
- National marketing is where we need to focus. Now that we have some high-quality courses out there collectively as a group, we really need to focus on enrollment. We went into this with the idea that there wasn't anything like this for community colleges and work towards serving students out there. But as we've gone further into it, we've seen that in some ways we may not be all that different than for instance, Coursera. This is actually a crowded marketplace — it may not be as easy to differentiate ourselves and what we're doing as we assumed at the start of this.

What are the top 3 issues emerging in the next several months of Unmudl implementation — for your college and for the collective?

- We need to carry the message about the working learner. Stereotypically, community colleges are looked at as serving those who cannot perform and can't pay. But we are so much more than that. Unmudl is a great avenue to change the understanding that in addition to our mission to be affordable, accessible, high quality places of education, we're not only going to have dev ed students, are not going to only have first-generation students — we have got to maintain our own relevancy and start talking about the 73 percent of our students who are part-time adults. At least half of the students are here because they choose to be. Some have bachelor's degrees; some master's. We need to come to a point as part of our vision that we're serving a working learner, and it will cost for a quality product; e.g., some training programs cost as much as \$9,000. We don't need to knock ourselves out with WIOA eligibility and federal financial aid. People can be spending \$24,000 in a bootcamp and some of those programs are not necessarily paying off. We're not wanting to go out and gouge students — we just need to be okay saying we're going to serve this working learner for workforce. And we need to charge what it costs us to serve this market; we have to give ourselves permission to do this. This is a new way of people viewing the community college — a lot of people have not seen this side.

The communities and people most negatively impacted by this economic downturn are the very same who need the type of education and training we're providing on Unmudl the most. But there is the least amount of funding for them to do this. At the highest level, that's a fundamental inequity that Unmudl alone cannot solve. There's got to be either a corporate partner and/or policy component (preferably both in terms of long-term sustainability) to make sure that just like what Title IV eligibility provides for students seeking a for-credit option, there's a means for taking the burden off of people who need assistance to get this type of training.

Watching the federal landscape in terms of how dollars are going to be allocated in a stimulus package is going to be key. What leverage will the governors and the state workforce boards have? Are they going to drive workforce education/training to colleges, or drive it somewhere else like the workforce system? How will funds be accessed. From our vantage point

as community college workforce providers, how do we give the displaced workers agency with dollars in their hands? And if it's free mass dispersion through grants to the colleges or mass dispersion to the workforce system, the workforce system doesn't serve everybody impacted by this pandemic. So the second piece is funding in the context of recovery from the pandemic. The third is going to be the unknown competitors, the unknown paradigms, in the tech world. Community colleges are coming together under Unmudl and we're making a very bold stand about what we know is innovative and we're here to play in this.

- How to get the word out effectively that there is this marketplace put together by community colleges and here are the benefits of it. We're a small staff — to market Unmudl is going to take more people than we have to work on this at the colleges. Another issue: how to evaluate Unmudl — how to determine success. Will we focus on the number of colleges that join up as one metric, whatever revenue is generated, the number and type of students enrolling, the number and type of students searching, the number of employers engaging? We need to determine the criteria to evaluate success.
- We're not serving dislocated workers in Unmudl we're serving working learners. We're often caught in the conversation of us serving people who have been laid off and re-careering. But that is not supposed to be the market with Unmudl. We're talking about people already in a job who want to improve their skills on their own time and work up the ladder. Our colleges have to pull each other out of these tangents. We all go down the rabbit holes because of what we do at community colleges.

But part of what we are doing is changing we have to explain this to people that we have high expectations and we're going to bring everybody with us.

- The number one issue is enrollment. Based on early analytics, we're getting looks at the platform but what are our conversions? How much will we expand — the number of eyeballs on the website and how that grows over the next few months. Our college will also need to decide what else to put on the umbrella platform — so there will be curricular challenges. And funding challenges: as a startup, the number one problem is funding. With that being said, how is our funding

stream holding up and where do we see ourselves getting to in year two?

- The main issue is marketing. All our credit divisions are underwater and noncredit is in the black. People want short-term. Most courses could enable individuals to get a skill and start making money on their own. Unmudl could aim at a gig economy marketplace, trying to serve people who have lost a job, who are unemployed and need to get back to work and reinvent themselves. This is an issue Unmudl will need to determine.
- The next step is marketing enrollment.

- We need to start focusing on marketing collectively. Everybody has been working so hard to populate the platform with courses so there is something for people that visit the site to select from. But how are we going to help each other build enrollment now — and also bring more national employers to the table because then enrollment will take care of itself? We likely cannot meet employer needs on a single college basis, but can we fulfill their needs collectively? And do we have to have similar delivery methods or similar price points, because national employers are not going to want to pay five different prices?

Are documents like reports and briefing papers needed and useful to you going forward. In what ways?

- Documented stories are going to be important, especially how we're impacting real people. We're not doing this work only about revenue — we have to meet our mission as a community college. Telling our stories will help relay the importance of the work we're doing.
- Some institutions will find various types of reports helpful, especially if they're trying to persuade the critical mass at an institution that this is something we should be doing. Reports that inform audiences about what's going on out there, where we're headed, what we're trying to do, etc. would serve that purpose. Such documents can be used in marketing. And if we get various reports and articles into the hands of a college president, they will read them — that may spawn various types of action and sharing.
- Would like to see us focus on management reports; e.g., monthly reports on revenue and expenses, marketing activities, eyeballs conversions, things of that nature — a kind of dashboard.
- All effort should be on marketing these classes because if we don't market them, partners will likely pull out. Everything else should be secondary — reports are secondary.
- If documents come out and effectively relay information about Unmudl, we would share with faculty, staff, and board members. We tend to share things when they come across — we would send to them or do a summary in an email. If in reading reports it's valuable information, the first group we would share it with is our workforce strategies committee — that is all of our academic deans.
- It's good to have documents like reports and foundational documents. We like to have the best data we can get, especially when taking on something that has risk like Unmudl does.

There also needs to be goals and assessing if we are reaching our goals; e.g., how much revenue should we anticipate, what will the cadence be, what is the acceptance of our messaging, are we testing our messaging, are we measuring our messaging, how often are we tweaking our messaging? Those are really important. So if we put an ad out there and nobody comes, are we sitting back and analyzing what happened?

What policy issues need to be addressed?

- Any level of aid for noncredit offerings would be a help in our state — that would be important state policy. Some states have a formula for helping their community colleges offer noncredit workforce training. We don't have such policy in our state.

The notion of a tenured faculty member doing noncredit work right now is a policy issue. We can't ask a faculty member to offer a noncredit class, no matter how many hours they might have to put into it in any year, in any given chunk of time as part of their load to teach fulltime. That is a union policy. No doubt there are innovative colleges out there that are doing it — mixing noncredit with credit for a full-time load for faculty. But likely these are private universities and they're not unionized.

- Critical here would be settling the issue once and for all of short-term Pell-eligibility — short-term means not just shorter than 16 credits but including noncredit. The other thing that we have to be careful of is that as more things become eligible for Title IV, that they're not onerously burdened by the same levels of bureaucracy, of the regional accreditors and U.S. Department of Education. The federal level oversight such as gainful employment has a measure of importance because they ensure or mitigate to an extent that it's the bad actors we've been referencing in this — the people who are opportunistic and profiting off of people in need through these models. That's what we're trying to avoid.

There's a lot more stability within the confines of federal policy that we can be doing at the local and state levels. This includes maximizing resources and helping to allow the diffusion of resources as the necessary economizing at the local and state levels to the providers who have the scale and capacity to deliver at scale. This still needs to be done and refined.

- Issues of financial aid and credit courses and how some of those policies might need to be tweaked to better allow students to take advantage of something like Unmudl or other opportunities to take courses (like whether Pell grants will be opened up to people on the short-term credential side of the shop or noncredit) are policy areas of concern.

We're also concerned about faculty policy too. We hope they will have more of a voice on issues like

financial aid. But they tend to weigh in more on the side of quality, like policies around accreditation and who guides them, who tells them if something's a quality noncredit credential, the student services, etc.

- We need to make sure that from a statewide and accreditation perspective we are consistent across the board because we all have different accrediting bodies. We want to make sure that's in alignment. We will make sure that from a policy standpoint, we talk about our offerings — like should we be thinking about competing offerings and how does that work? What is the policy around that?

Also, policy around the leadership and governance of the organization. As we add more schools to the partnership, do we have policies around how that's going to be shaped? We need to make sure we've got some firm policies in place in terms of who's on the board, who's on the steering committee, etc.

There is intersectionality in this area. Most education laws are localized or state laws that really have no bearing on Unmudl. We're talking about systemic reforms every state workforce development board has their list of approved trainers. We are getting our courses out there — they just went on our state's ETPL this week, which would hopefully begin to provide enrollment. It would be good if Unmudl could get all Unmudl courses on every ETPL — somehow make blanket agreements with workforce development boards to have all their courses uploaded. In our state, they're interested in and prefer to work with public institutions, especially community colleges.

Nationwide, there is a lot of respect and trust for what we do in community colleges. So, if we could get our courses on those lists, folks would have funds to take educational training and we provide the training.

- The few policy issues that come to mind are mostly internal policies, like fair labor standards act, which is hiring and being able to hire faculty or instructors or staff to do the content development work because we have to pay them. We also have some administrative regulations and even procurement processes like to buy a subscription to a cloud hosted CRM.

Another trend is around noncredit — is it going to make the need for and the value of, and the purpose

of accreditation go away? We're all still accredited because that is how we qualify for federal financial aid. But we wouldn't be surprised if that doesn't start to change. And then what value does accreditation bring? Another noncredit issue may be state reciprocity. We're taking a big look at NC-SARA — state by state reciprocity for certain programs.

- Making sure everyone has policies in place to ensure a seamless transition from noncredit to credit for the

students. Also, there are policy governance issues related to Unmudl. Each partner puts in funds into Unmudl but it's not clear if we've ever voted on any issues. The work has proceeded through discussion but there are policy issues we should be handling in a different way perhaps. Our hope is to involve the collective in more of the high-level thinking and decision-making, and to see more clarity around the roles and responsibilities of each entity, so we all know the guiding rules.

Other Issues

Equity

- The Unmudl colleges can take advantage of the diversity of our communities. Some of us are Hispanic-serving institutions or Native American-serving institutions. In thinking about our demographics, who we can bring to the table for national employers, to seek out for opportunities for diversifying their employment, is a tremendous asset that we take for granted in our own backyard.
- Making sure that microcredentials have value for students is critical. If a credential doesn't have value in the marketplace, then we're not doing students any favors by drawing them to Unmudl. We've all become a lot more aware through the pandemic of issues of equity and justice in education. The last thing we want is to become a platform where we provide only entry level training to low wage jobs, for example, that might serve some employer needs, but don't serve learners very well. How to position ourselves in ways that we're providing needed credentials that lead to jobs with good family-sustaining wages is crucial. We will need to differentiate Unmudl among the competitors. That comes back to placement in good jobs — high wage/high demand, if possible. The more we can validate that people will get promotions or be placed, the easier it will be. We will need outcomes data to differentiate ourselves — have metrics that we can track.

Importance of College Leadership

- The leadership culture is definitely the empowerment in the expectation of innovation at a college. You need both expectation and empowerment to be innovative and take risks. It is incredibly important for your CEO to set that expectation to innovate, to be vision-casting about where the future of higher ed is going. And then to empower us to be able to put it into action.
- Our leadership said: "we need community ed here, like Unmudl, so go build it." We have made huge leaps and bounds because of Unmudl, because of the time commitments, because of what we signed up to do, that allowed us to buy a noncredit Learning Management Service (LMS). As much as we feel like we're behind, we're actually really far ahead in some respects. Many in the mix of colleges were further ahead and we're seeing what worked and what didn't, how to market things that were already making money. This has been super helpful. We just wish we had the bandwidth and the resources to focus more — and do more.

Drivers of Innovation

- Sometimes innovation is necessary for survival. Though our college receives state funding and due to our college leadership we're in a good situation fiscally because we've been fiscally conservative where needed, there's also a degree of urgency about the need to capture market and new models. So it's the innovation that stems from

the recognition of the challenges in the market. It's a hyper competitive market. There's a lot of allowance for ed tech in our state, so it equally coupled with the recognition that we cannot take it for granted that we're going to have a crop of students coming to us in perpetuity, that they're always going to sign up for our college after high school is just no longer the case. The natural birth rates are massively declining in many locations. That's a driver of the need to think differently about who our students are already — and in the future. That is all coming together to a nexus of innovation: low regulation, high competition, and necessity.

- The campus planning process is a driver. We're in the fourth year of a strategic plan. Our goals and objectives are to help students get in through and out of college, and we need to have an agile and responsive business model. A second goal is to expand our national signature programs. So we've encouraged our employees to think outside of the box and think about how we can capture revenue from outside our service area. The third strategic direction is taking our energy programs internationally. The fourth is to expand health science. So, we provide updates to our employees every two weeks with everything that's going on — we feel like people understand what we're trying to do with Unmudl, which will help us implement our strategic plan. We provide updates at fall convocation, then bi-weekly about what people are working on, and we've really encouraged people to try and think about new programs we might launch. This is part of our culture — being innovative and supporting that innovation.
- Innovation isn't a light switch issue coming right on, and everything is done. It's an iterative process. This whole paradigm and concept for the college at first raised a lot of questions, particularly among faculty. What's interesting is, the more we talk with faculty about it, the more, most became involved. We've seen increased participation, particularly in the development of new content and courses to put onto the platform. The challenge is how we message it. It's seeming like a threat because it's not really binary. It's not either or it's both. There is still at our college and in every college, a necessity that we have certificates and degrees, that we have liberal and fine arts, that we have a transfer mission.

Duplication and Student Choices for Course

- There are programming options to Unmudl institutions and students. There may be individuals in our state who can find their coursework or their training programs at other Unmudl partners. Two benefits come with this. One is a revenue share for our college as a founding institution in Unmudl. Second is, we don't have to develop that program. Unmudl allows institutions to partner and leverage resources in ways we wouldn't have focused on before. Yes, we want this to grow our enrollment but the other legs of the three-legged stool are really important.
- Duplication and choice are important to the Unmudl vision. Do we only share content amongst ourselves? If we do that, there is no choice to learners and to employers. If we're going to take some of our unique programs, such as an autonomous vehicle program, and we all agree to curriculum-share as we all are, then we can share our programs. Students will have more choice. And we would have a marketplace where there might be more than one autonomous vehicle program, but the learner wants one with the hands-on experience, and the other student wants one that's a bootcamp, or one that has a prior learning assessment opportunity, or one that is four weeks versus 10 weeks. Some people are concerned about duplication because there are probably different permutations of the same type of a course or program, but we're all interested in creating a marketplace experience. This is less about competing among the colleges and more about having diversity in choice.

Implications of Community College Mission and Unmudl Revenue Model

- We are by our charter mission a community college. Whatever we do, we have to provide excellence for our community. The reality is, we have to remind our academic areas that students don't care about our "service area" as a community college and neither does business/industry. We do of course look at the labor market data

in our county. For the work ahead, we recognize we have to meet our mission as a community college, but it has to be a mission for the nation too — it has to be both. And what would be excellent for our community may also be attractive to a very versatile and sometimes volatile labor market.

- Unmudl offers the platform to our local students and unique opportunities we wouldn't necessarily be able to offer them. So it's good in that way. One of the "push pull" things about participation is that we all want to build our own enrollments and expand our reach. We're all in it for the same goals in a lot of ways; but is that sustainable if Unmudl works for 10 or so colleges — or for how many partners will it work? We don't know what the model will sustain going forward.

Marketing / Enrollments

- We're here to play this game on this court. That also means we're going to be inviting competition that we may not have otherwise thought about. The competition was already there and the downward trend we've seen in community college enrollment over the years, even before the pandemic, is because many of our students were where their keyboards are, and we just weren't aware of it. It's a hyper competitive environment and we're going to have to recognize that and deliver our very best to regain that market share. With any new business model and especially one that's so driven by an online presence, we are going to have to have more intentionality around a marketing strategy. The colleges themselves are not the best marketers, even colleges that are excellent at building their brand and marketing themselves regionally. This sort of national marketing is different; it's beyond most community college marketing teams.
- The challenge is always going to be the branding and marketing. Do we have enough money to make this happen? A lot of companies don't know anything about it because we just launched back in November, so we need to actually start thinking about external campaigns ourselves to make the local market aware as well as national market.

Tech Platforms and Clinical Experiences for Students

- There is a lot of noise around platforms. A couple of the main benefits or selling points about Unmudl is that it is community colleges. There are people with different opinions about community colleges, but many think they are the solution for the workforce challenges we face. If Unmudl figures out how to best leverage that when we are competing with all of these other platforms out there, that is a huge selling point for us.
- There is also the power of the collaboration. When we talk about working with a major national employer, for them to have access and sort of a curated experience with several community colleges and growing — this is a unique resource. One of the benefits of this community college partnership is that we know most of the students seeking these options need help. So one we've had to ramp up — just like we have for our native students — virtual tutoring and all the other supports that we didn't have robustly if at all, prior to the pandemic. One of our strengths is our support systems. Those will continue. We had to build our virtual support networks and improve them, and that will only benefit us as Unmudl goes forward. Again, why should big employers trust a community college? We can provide supports that an employer providing training, doesn't really. Community colleges will be able to provide needed supports for many students to get through their programs. That is not what the other opportunities really offer.
- Many people have already been providing platforms on a massive scale. Do we want to compete and at what level do we want to compete? They are where many people already go. We need to be clear about what our value proposition is — what will the community colleges offer that others will not/cannot? We have talked a lot about this as part of our vision, with the value proposition incorporated in some sort of "hands-on experience." Not every college wants to commit to that. What if we're potentially talking about massive numbers of students, which is what we want but we know we could not provide a massive amount of clinicals? For example, we cannot have 2000 people show up for a welding demo. While these would be good problems to have, we don't know what we would do if these scenarios were our future.

Credit / Noncredit

- There's going to be a question in the future — whether credit will still reign king and to what extent will the differences between noncredit and credit disappear. Who knows how rapidly (or if) employers won't care about the difference between credit/noncredit. Why do we call one good and the other one, not so good, if we think that "learning is learning?" Folks in the degree programs look down upon continuing education, claiming they haven't gone through a rigorous peer review process. But learning can happen in any way, shape, or form. Many institutions are proving that there are alternative ways to get to the adult learner. We have already come a long way getting a little more flexible but there's still a long way to go. We're in the process, partly because the pandemic is requiring that now.
- On the workforce side, we don't really have a curriculum committee like we do on the academic side of the shop. This is probably true for most workforce programs — that they're much closer to the ground. They're more responsive to employer needs, can move much more nimbly than the academic side, where getting a new course or new program can be a year-long process. Our college has been trying to break down the barrier between credit and noncredit — changing the structure, making some changes. We want students that are adult learners to be able to start in Unmudl and then perhaps finish on the credit side. We think that will require credit for prior learning and articulating noncredit over to the credit side through an articulation process. Building the pathway from noncredit to credit has been something that there was a lot of discussion on initially — to whether people would put only noncredit courses and programs on the platform or whether they could also put credit classes on the platform. We came to a consensus that the platform was for noncredit, but to the degree that you have alignment with your for-credit offering, then you can provide the credit for prior learning and provide the pathway for students.

APPENDIX B:

THE EVOLLUTION INTERVIEWS (FALL 2020)¹⁴

HIGHER ED AS A BUSINESS

Wednesday, 28th October 2020

Growing Noncredit Enrollments at Community Colleges

Kevin E. Drumm,
President, SUNY Broome Community College

Institutions have taken a hard financial hit due to the pandemic, and some continue to struggle. What these institutions may not realize is that they have something sitting in front of them that they can use to gain significant revenue back: noncredit offerings. Done right, noncredit education can not only help maintain enrollment rates but keep lifelong learners at the institution. In this interview, Kevin Drumm discusses what it takes to grow enrollments through noncredit programs, the roadblocks they face in doing so, and why it's important for an institution to focus on noncredit programming.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are some of the biggest roadblocks that community colleges specifically face trying to grow enrollments in noncredit programs?

Kevin Drumm (KD): The biggest challenge of course, is that most of us are FTE-driven in our budgets, and it would take a significantly larger proportion of noncredit students to shore up budget holes—they're big these days from our loss in traditional enrollments. So, that's the biggest hurdle that we face, and that's where our model can potentially help us.

Evo: Continuing ed divisions are frequently seen as cash cows for the university or as the revenue generating hub—why doesn't that logic necessarily translate in the community college side?

KD: It's the same no matter how much revenue is generated. I went to NYU for my doctorate, and there's an enormous continuing education operation there, but it dwarfs compared to the revenue from the traditional side of the house. So, while you do get some flexible revenue, it's marginal compared to the core business, no matter what operation you look at.

It can be a big revenue generator even when our numbers are down, which they were through the great recession. They significantly decreased since companies weren't paying for the training because they didn't have enough money and were laying people off. So, we were doing huge numbers before the great recession. Even after that, it continued to be rather profitable to offer continuing education despite numbers going down substantially. In those days, the enrollment was about the same. We had about 10,000 on the noncredit side and about 10,000 on the credit side annually, but there are no comparisons to be made between the revenue totals.

Evo: How does it benefit colleges to focus on and grow access to noncredit offerings?

KD: There are two ways it benefits an institution like Broome. We're in the 15-year process of losing 25 percent of our teenagers. This coming June alone, our total county high school graduating class will be down by 10 percent, and it will continue down until 2026. So, we're getting hit pretty hard, and the old junior college model tends to hold sway in the northeast. The majority of our enrollments are credit students who plan to

¹⁴ The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper that publishes articles and interviews by individuals across the postsecondary space sharing their insights on higher education and their opinions on what the future holds for the industry—through a uniquely non-traditional lens. With over 60,000 monthly visitors, The EvoLLLution is a go-to source for opinions and information on non-traditional higher education.

transfer, even though we have loads of one- and two-year certificates and degrees designed to get students straight into the workforce. In other areas of the country where part-time and adult student enrollments are much higher than they tend to be in the northeast. So, we do have opportunity to grow our continuing education adult markets.

Now, we've always done a lot online. We were fortunate, when we had to go online last March, that we had 25 percent to 30 percent of our courses online anyway, so those students didn't miss a beat. We were a leader there until March 19th and then everybody caught up to us, whether they liked it or not. We just happened to have all the infrastructure and training in place to be able to get the rest of our faculty up to speed. Since the big industry pulled out twenty or thirty years ago, our real estate was flat for decades, and it has just soared recently. People are getting out of major metro areas and working from home. Our positivity rate is about .025 percent in Broome County, which is very low. We're hoping that returning to college won't spike that significantly.

But all those things might suddenly change our demographics, whereas it's been going the other way for years. In the meantime, we've been focusing on short-term workforce upgrades, workforce training, certifications, microcredentialing—that market's been growing and now it gives us access to a monster market, compared to the shrinking one we have locally.

Evo: How important is it from a budgetary and revenue generation perspective to find ways to monetize things like college services and unused physical space?

KD: Right now, using space is not something high on our priority list because we need that spare space to socially distance. However, prior to COVID-19, we had begun very serious conversations about how some of our big spaces could be put to better use. The only way the metro area was growing was through immigration, so we were already experiencing an excess of space on campus. We were expanding one of our residence halls, and we had wait lists and were turning people away up until last year.

What might we do to repurpose some of the space in the residence hall? We'd have to negotiate with the bank to have anything other than college services or our own college students in there. But we would be prepared to have that conversation.

It was a short blip after 9/11, when people moved up

this way, but then they—in a matter of a year or two—they started moving back to the metro New York area or to other metro regions in the nation. Is that going to happen this time? It's starting to be debated. Certainly, many people are moving to more rural areas and being able to spend more time outside in this environment. Who knows if that's going to continue.

That could change our traditional demographic market back the other way. But, right now, we're focused on the adult market, which demands more flexible offerings. That, nationally, is the only growing market.

Evo: Does joining the marketplace replace internal efforts to scale and strengthen noncredit and career education programming or does it provide a new channel for access you've maintained a similar focus on developing internal strength?

KD: It's been a struggle for us because we have such a traditional university-educated faculty here in the northeast. It's been an employers' market for PhDs for a long time now. So, we get great folks, but they have a traditional view of the higher education world. It's been a struggle for us to really become progressive on the noncredit side.

It started to change over the last couple of years, as we had more of a strategic push to reach out to adult students. The rest of the country has more working adult students than traditional 18-year-olds coming to college. We're the other way around. So, we were trying to flip that curve. A model just helps us accelerate that work and, at the same time, provides us with a bigger market.

Evo: What's it going to take to make noncredit and career education a more central part of the strategy and focus of community colleges?

KD: Time wise, it'll take a decade or two. Sadly, the economic realities particularly for a region like the northeast aren't positive, maintaining a shrinking young population for longer than the rest of the country. It was only being accelerated by the overall birth dearth and the increase in taxes. As the economic reality sets in, and the northeast becomes heavily unionized, I'm telling my faculty that if they want raises in the future, 80 percent of our budget is enrollment driven no matter how you slice it. The only way we can continue to provide raises is if we find a way to grow our market. As a community college, we can't just raise our tuition in order to pay our faculty better. That's anathemic to the philosophy of community colleges.

Our only option is to push for some form of growth if we're going to be able to continue to pay our faculty well and provide any raises at all. That's just the hard financial reality that we face. I assume most college presidents in the nation would love to have a wellpaid faculty because they work hard, and they deserve it, but you can't do it without the funds.

Key Takeaways

- Having flexible offerings helps to not only grow your full credit side but to also create a diverse set of offerings on your noncredit side, which appeals to the adult market.
- With a more traditional faculty, it's challenging to become progressive in your education offerings—particularly when it comes to noncredit.
- With populations moving out of the cities, big city institutions will be relying more on distance education to retain their enrollments.

NEW AND INNOVATIVE MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Thursday, 29th October 2020

Finding Financial Support for Noncredit Programming in Community Colleges

Albert Lewis,
Vice President of Economic and Workforce Development, Bellevue College

Noncredit offerings in the community college environment can be tricky when it comes to scaling and growing. Oftentimes, there's no financial support available, and institutions are left with this great need for programming but no resources to help them deliver it well. This will require a reshaping in legislation to help better fund these offerings. It's also going to take a reshaping of the minds of institutional leadership to see the benefits of noncredit education in community colleges. In this interview, Albert Lewis discusses the challenges behind financing noncredit programming, how these programs can be supported and how to understand the value of noncredit education.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the biggest roadblocks that community colleges face when it comes to growing enrollments in their noncredit programs?

Albert Lewis Jr (AL): The biggest roadblock is funding. Credit-based courses and programs receive support and federal financial aid. The federal government doesn't support noncredit courses and programs. Many employers only support reimbursements for students taking credit classes that align with a degree or certificate at the college. Another potential barrier is perception—perception of noncredit classes not having the same quality or rigor that credit-bearing classes have.

Evo: From a college's perspective, why is it beneficial or valuable to increase noncredit offerings despite the

roadblocks?

AL: You have to think about the basis of noncredit training. Primarily, noncredit training is geared toward adults that already have work experience and education. Most noncredit training or noncredit courses are housed within a continuing education unit. That said, these people already have degrees and are seeking additional skills and knowledge that will help them move up in their existing organization or help them transition to other employment opportunities.

Evo: At the community college level, are the people enrolling in noncredit programming generally folks who already have some educational base and are looking for professional development?

AL: Yes, that appears to be the primary reason at our school. Typically, industries also offer certificates within noncredit programming. For instance, Cisco, Microsoft, and CompTIA offer professional certificates housed within many continuing education or noncredit programs. Students receive an education and then that education is validated by certificate attainment. Just to clarify, students will take a course and then sit for an exam sponsored by the certificate provider. Some students may already have the skills, but they don't have the validation.

Evo: How would creating financial aid eligibility, or access to noncredit programming, impact decision-making around offering more noncredit or professional development offerings?

AL: It would be a boom for the colleges. If financial aid was extended to noncredit courses and programs, you could actually increase revenue. That could then increase the number of certificates granted because the ability to increase revenue and subsequent margins will allow for reinvestment into courses and programs, making it easier to update content as needed. Being able to constantly improve noncredit programs is essential to their long-term sustainability.

Evo: From an eligibility perspective, what will it take and who needs to be involved to make noncredit programming eligible for financial aid support?

AL: There are some legislative things that need to happen, both at the state and federal levels, to allow noncredit programs to receive financial aid. Some states already provide it. Also, there is Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding that sometimes support noncredit training. But in terms of federal financial aid at this point at time, nothing's available. As a matter fact, in the state of Washington, we have a program called worker retraining. And it's basically funded by WIOA dollars, which supports professional technical training from a credit perspective. If the student is a worker retraining, why should it matter whether they're enrolled in credit or noncredit programming?

When people enter the worker retraining program, they usually have a masters or bachelor's degree. Many people entering the program are not focused on completing another degree. Instead, they focus just on the courses they feel they need to improve their skills. It would be great if colleges were allowed to use that money for noncredit courses. Fast track or accelerated programming could be created to move students toward their educational goals in a timelier manner.

Evo: What do community college leaders need to do to help folks outside the college understand the value of noncredit education, and what data is needed to make that case?

AL: Success stories need to be presented far more often. Every community college has them—where people have gone through a program, earned a certification, received a credential and were hired for a new job. We need to talk about that more from a marketing perspective.

We're not talking about a minimum-wage salary, we're talking about living wage jobs that people are getting because of the certifications they received at our college and many others. It goes back to the whole concept of student success. Most colleges define it from their own institutional points of view. I once attended a GED ceremony during which a man in his 60s spoke about earning his GED. The reason he completed it was because of promise he made to his mother. That example demonstrates student success as defined by the student.

As colleges, we need to focus on what the student is trying to accomplish versus what we're trying to direct. Credit versus noncredit, degree versus non degree, or degree versus certification or certificate.

We do this to serve our own interests. We should really be sitting down with each of our students and asking them what their goals are—what they're trying to do and where they're trying to go. Then, we align a path for that student based on what's important to them.

Evo: What will it take to make continuing ed and career education a more central part of community colleges' strategies?

AL: Part of that has to do with truly living in the community college vision. Most community colleges are committed to access, completion, and creating life-long learners. Continuing education addresses life-long learners, but I question how strong commitment is because most continuing education departments are self supported.

We have to scramble to make as much money as we can to maintain our staff. In many cases, that doesn't leave a lot of money to reinvest into programming or infrastructure—things that are really needed. When you talk about noncredit programming being part of continuing education programs, we're not just competing with just other colleges; we're actually competing with private sector institutions.

There are companies out there that deliver tech training, and that's all they do. Or there are companies that deliver professional development training, and that's all they do. For community colleges—and most colleges in general—degree attainment is the core mission. I'm not sure what can be done to change that core mission other than saying that continuing education is important and that we want to create lifelong learners. That's where noncredit training fits into colleges' commitment to lifelong learners, especially as they transition to different positions or professions in their careers.

Evo: Why should colleges be looking more closely at how to connect and crosswalk credit and noncredit offerings?

AL: It offers a real opportunity because noncredit training is typically less expensive than credit courses are. Also, we can do things faster. If we can take a semester course, do it in three weeks and the student can successfully finish it, why spread it over ten weeks? There are opportunities to create accelerated models that leverage noncredit's flexibility, mirroring what's happening in credit programs. If we start to look at ways for people to accelerate their learning, there are some really interesting opportunities available, particularly for adult learners.

It's really important that we make a distinction: accelerated learning makes a lot of sense because the adult learner works full-time, has outside responsibilities, and time is usually an issue. So, if there's a way to accelerate their path with noncredit offerings that align with identified career pathways, it gets them workforce-ready faster. We need to think more about the adult learner needs.

Evo: What are the distinguishing factors that differentiate an adult learner from the more traditional student that we tend to think about?

AL: Primarily they're older, established, have bills and families, and they are working. They don't have the privilege of putting everything on hold to go to school. They have to fit school around their lives. That's the biggest distinction.

The other piece is that, depending on how long a person has been out of school, you may run into an issue with how much of the general subjects they remember. Are they ready to jump back into a classroom setting and succeed within it? Adult learners have to navigate life while trying to focus on school whereas a traditional student coming out of high school perhaps still treats school like a party.

Evo: What does it take to make sure that your infrastructure

is designed to deliver adult students the customer experience they need to be able to focus on academics as opposed to navigating the bureaucracy?

AL: If we thought of our students more like customers, we would probably think about them very differently. In retail, the customer is king, and corporations are always trying to figure out new ways to engage them.

There are some schools that do a great job of engaging students, but I would say that that is not par for the course. We have to figure out a way to reach students and be able to sit down and have that conversation. Or at least leverage technology to do assessments, so we can have a conversation about their interests and career goals. If we could become more intentional about that process, we could then work much better with students and subsequently improve their outcomes.

Evo: Should community colleges be playing a bigger role in the baccalaureate degree space?

AL: Absolutely. When I think about community colleges moving into the baccalaureate space, I think about brand extension. You have students for two years and then you hand them off to somebody else? Does that make sense? Moving into the baccalaureate space is a natural progression for community colleges.

You grow community colleges by extending the time the student attends that school. And you do that by creating a baccalaureate offering that aligns with the college's associate's degrees. Typically, these are Bachelor of Applied Science degrees (BAS) that combine theory and hands-on learning. For an employer, that means hiring talent who has the fundamentals to excel rapidly upon hire.

Since this student will have both theoretical and experiential learning opportunities in their field, they should be ready to go. They should be further advanced than someone coming from a traditional bachelor's degree program.

In today's workforce it has become more about skills than knowledge. You walk into a company with skills that can be applied immediately, and have the added benefit of a BAS makes one more promotable. With a BAS, the student can compete on the same level as someone with a bachelor's degree from four-year universities and colleges. In other words, it puts our students in a better position than they would be in if they were only graduating with an associate's degree.

In many cases, depending on where you are in the country, the associate's degree might not be enough to even get you in the door. So, we can both fulfill that requirement and do it in a more cost-effective way than four-year institutions.

Evo: What are the roadblocks to establishing that model to have robust crosswalks between noncredit and credit, where credentials might align with career progressions in specific fields?

AL: There are a lot of political dynamics that come into play when you start to think about community college having four-year degrees. When thinking about creating more pathways internally, the perception for many instructors is that noncredit programming is somehow inferior to credit programming because it hasn't gone through as rigorous a vetting process as a credit program. That's internal. Externally, you're competing with other institutions. These institutions were used to us sending them our students after two years. Now, we're holding onto them, and that impacts their enrollment. It's as if you're interrupting the food chain. That could be a hard hit to regional universities. In many cases, community colleges are bigger than some of the smaller public universities in the U.S. So, it could be significant if a number of those community colleges all of a sudden start offering baccalaureate degrees.

Evo: What potential is there for a partnership product—like a student-sharing program or a collaborative degree program—existing between some of the public universities and the community colleges to overcome some of those fears?

AL: There are programs like that. In some communities there are university centers, where the university is actually located on the community college campus. Some community colleges offer three-plus-one programs—where you spend three years on the community college campus and one year at a four-year school to get your degree. There are schools using the 3+1 model right now. How prevalent they are, I'm not sure, but it depends on what state and environment you're in. Funding is different in every state. I always say that community colleges are like snowflakes—no two are alike.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the potential to serve lifelong learners out of community college?

AL: People underestimate the quality of noncredit offerings. Depending on the community college, the

level of robustness really is driven by the local community and its needs. Many noncredit courses and programs are quite robust, of high quality, and offer the skills that employers are demanding right now. But there are some duds too, and that's the challenge—getting rid of the duds so that you can make sure your graduates are immediately employable. It used to be that people would come and say, "I've got a course I want to put out there." That's not happening as much. Our program directors drive programming based on advisory council input as well as labor market data telling us what's needed. If you're going to have a good, robust noncredit program, you need to make sure that you have advisory councils helping program directors select the right programs that make sense for the community and that will upskill workers in their current roles or transition them to new roles within the community.

Key Takeaways

- Community colleges can help retain their students and grow revenue if they begin moving into the baccalaureate degree space.
- To avoid a hit-or-miss with noncredit programs, it's important to have advisory councils to help create a robust, high-quality program for your community's needs.
- It's important for community colleges to invest in noncredit education since its structure is targeted towards the colleges' main demographic: adult learners.

Getting Over Roadblocks: How Community Colleges Can Grow Enrollment

Kristin Gubser,

Director of External Affairs, GateWay Community College

Community colleges have an opportunity to not only retain but gain enrollment rates and increase their revenue through noncredit programming. Easier said than done, community colleges first need to ensure that their students understand the value of noncredit programs and how they can benefit their career growth. It's up to the colleges to provide their learners with the education they need, while guiding them through it. In this interview, Kristin Gubser discusses the obstacles community colleges face, the importance of transfer pathways for students and how focusing on noncredit degree programming can help bring in more tuition dollars.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the biggest roadblocks that a community college is going to face when trying to grow enrollments in nondegree programming?

Kristin Gubser (KG): From the global perspective, one of the biggest roadblocks is making sure that students understand what they're choosing when they enroll in college training, whether that be a credit or noncredit program and whether they earn a credential, certificate or degree. College certificates and degrees still hold a lot of value. As individuals start with the noncredit training program, they shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the credit, certificate or degree can serve a purpose throughout their careers. Making sure students really understand what they're taking, when they're taking it and why, is important.

One of the biggest roadblocks specifically to community colleges in growing noncredit enrollment is technology. The records systems, enrollment systems, and procurement systems that community colleges have become dependent on to report to the federal government and to our accrediting agencies are cumbersome. It is a real challenge for community colleges to be significant players in the noncredit training space if backend support isn't there for them.

Evo: How important is it that the system piece is aligned to create a clear pathway for students? How much work does it take from staff right now to try to mimic an Amazon-like experience for students when they're working with traditional systems?

KG: It's virtually impossible for a community college to

try to mimic an Amazon-like system on its own. That type of marketplace is so important to noncredit training because there is so much training available. In order for a student to be able to find the best type of training for the right price at the right time—having a one-stop shop—is incredibly valuable. But with the systems that colleges rely on today, having that storefront marketplace is practically impossible.

Evo: Why focus on developing nondegree programming as opposed to focusing on expanding credit-bearing offerings that bring in subsidized tuition dollars?

KG: Noncredit and credit programs tend to attract different audiences. So, you're reaching out to and serving different markets. Oftentimes, the credit programs are really targeting the just out of high school, first to college, straight into school type of student as well as the older adult student. These students might have some training, and a family to take care of, and they tend to be more mature in their careers. These individuals may need that college credential in order to move up into leadership and managerial positions.

The noncredit market is really for skill enhancement—to be able to test professional competencies, where individuals can access training very quickly on their own time. They're not looking for programs for which they're going to need federal financial aid. They understand that they are paying for noncredit training that it is immediately going to pay off in terms of a pay raise and increased responsibility.

If community colleges don't enter that space, they're losing that type of noncredit student. If we can attract them with quick training, noncredit credentials, and deliver them a great experience, they're more likely to stay with the community college. And their families will stay with that college through generations of the lifelong learning cycle.

Evo: How important is it to find ways to generate revenue from services and unused physical spaces as a way to combat some of those budget crunches that tend to happen when you're reliant on state dollars?

KG: It's incredibly important. We, at GateWay Community College, which is part of the Maricopa County Community College District in Arizona, were eliminated from our state budget a number of years ago. We have tried—and we continue to pursue—different ways to generate revenue to make up for that loss in aid. But it's almost a catch-22. We have to generate revenue, so we can keep our programs affordable. Many of our programs are equipment-heavy and technology-heavy so that we can graduate the most highly trained professionals who don't need on-the-job training. They're ready to work in the field on day one. That type of equipment and technology is very expensive.

It's quite an interesting balancing act—to generate revenue but stay faithful to our commitment and mission. What we want to do for students is be as affordable, accessible and high-quality as we possibly can. So, we are very creative and always looking at ways to leverage our assets through either costsharing or revenue-generating partnerships. We want to help fill that gap so that we don't have to depend on increased taxes and tuition. That isn't part of our mission. We want to be the solution, not the problem.

Evo: Does joining the marketplace replace internal efforts to scale and strengthen noncredit career programming or is it a different channel?

KG: It doesn't replace what we're doing in terms of trying to scale and strengthen noncredit training. It certainly complements it and allows us to really expand our reach across the country in areas that we wouldn't be able to reach on our own. It enables us to leverage our collective strengths and highlight the program areas that we're really strong in at GateWay.

We can conduct feasibility tests for new training and programs by tracking data in ways that we haven't been

able to before. The marketplace platform provides a lot of rich data on what is trending with students and what price points they're willing to pay for noncredit training.

Where the opportunities exist, we can then extrapolate full credit programs from some of the noncredit training, and perhaps outreach to those students so they can finish their certificate or degree as they move through their career.

Locally, we will continue to offer noncredit community education workshops for enrichment, as well as custom contract training. But by being a part of a marketplace, we're able to make sure that if we don't have what a student needs, we can connect them to training at another college. We're making sure that students succeed no matter where they start or what program they choose. It's been a real benefit for us to scale some of our efforts nationally, as a lot of the things we've wanted to do solely as one college would've been too manpower-intensive, marketing-intensive, and technology-intensive.

Evo: Would students or employers in your service district engage with the marketplace in order to enroll in a course or a program, or would they still come to Gatewaycc.edu?

KG: We would encourage them to go to the marketplace. The marketplace is a wonderful tool and a resource for individuals looking to compare cost, time, programs, and training.

When it's a business-to-business need, when an employer needs custom or noncredit training for a group of employees, it would be more of a college-to-business relationship. Whereas with any individuals looking to move up to that next level, to get into a field, to recareer, we would direct them to the marketplace to do that comparative shopping.

Evo: What's it going to take to make noncredit career education a more central part of the strategy and of the focus of community colleges?

KG: It's going to take an institution-wide understanding of the benefits of that type of delivery. At GateWay we offer clock-hour training in addition to noncredit and credit-hour programs. A collective understanding of the markets we serve through each type of training, and that each type of training presents different opportunities for student success, will position us well to maximize lifelong learning potential for all.

Key Takeaways

- A strong backend support system is needed for community colleges to become significant players in the noncredit programming space.
- Joining the marketplace allows colleges to leverage their strengths and highlight their best programs while scaling their noncredit programs.
- There's a lot of opportunity for colleges to gain enrollment within the noncredit space. Without diving into that area, community colleges can easily lose a key demographic of students: the lifelong learner.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Wednesday, 4th November 2020

Helping Drive Attainment Rates for the Workforce

Lee Lambert,
Chancellor, Pima Community College

Ian Roark
Vice President of Workforce Development and Strategic Partnerships,
Pima Community College

A low percentage of adults have any education or training beyond high school, and Arizona is looking to change that with a new initiative. Achieve 60 AZ is looking to increase the percentage of adults with learning and training beyond high school to 60 percent. To achieve this goal, institutions are going to rethink how they look at noncredit education. In this interview, Lee Lambert and Ian Roark discuss the need for change in the colleges' role in labor market, how community colleges can help train and educate, and what it will take to get communities back into the workforce fast and efficiently.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): How important is noncredit, nondegree workforce training programming in achieving that Achieve 60 AZ Concept attainment goal?

Lee Lambert (LL): Let me put this in a larger context for a moment. Brookings recently released a report on low-wage earners across the entire United States. When you isolate Tucson, Arizona, and you use their calculator, you find that we have over 175,000 individual earners who are considered low-wage earners. Now stack that against the work that the University of Arizona has been doing on automation and workforce impact, and they're saying well over 40 percent of earners will be affected.

You're talking about a substantial portion of this

community's economy and talent that will be directly impacted by automation. When you overlay that with other data points, especially around equity, many of those individuals are people of color. That's the growing segment of our community here in Tucson, as well as in the state of Arizona. So how are we going to address that? One way is to have a clear goal and to set some standards that we can reach. In this case, by 2030, 60 percent of Arizona adults aged 25 to 64 will hold a post-secondary credential or degree.

It's important that they frame it that way because it allows for both credit and noncredit students to be part of the solution.

We also need to recognize that this is ever-evolving. That's why noncredit is so important—because it allows you to come in on a short-term basis, quickly acquire a set of skills and tools, and to continue to build upon them to stay viable and relevant in your career.

Evo: How does our own understanding of colleges' role need to change, if our goal is to keep up with the changing nature or the ever-changing nature of the labor market?

LL: I served a couple of years in the regular United States Army, and they put me through a very rigorous training program to become an administrative assistant. I chose it, and they honored that commitment. When I arrived at my permanent duty station, they decided to train me on the job for something else. All of that training isn't recognized by colleges or universities. Something's wrong with that. You're telling people who serve our country that the valuable skills they obtained during that time have no value in the civilian world. That's not right.

Now you layer on the automation reality on top, and now we're at a key point in history when we need to recognize that skills are obtained in a variety of ways. Sometimes it's validated by a college or a university, by the United States Army, or by some other party. The point is, it's about the skill, not who you're obtaining it from; it's about whether you actually received it or not.

Learning doesn't just happen in the classroom. That's always been a false perception; more learning occurs outside of the classroom. But that doesn't get recognized from a third-party validation perspective. Your ability to be successful in life is often not because of the degree you got or the credential you received, it's about other variables: your persistence in life, your ability not to give up when you get knocked down. How much hard work and time and effort are you willing to put into achieving a goal? Noncredit allows you to recognize all of those other variables in the learning process.

Evo: What role must community colleges play in driving that attainment goal forward?

LL: Think of the community college as the hub of the wheel. We are probably one of the few, if the only, entities in a community that has a 360-degree connection. Universities don't have a connection like we do. The K-12 system doesn't have a connection like we do. We are essential to our community. And when you think about where most workers reside, they're going to be either in a community's middle or lower tier. Well, that's the community college space.

Universities often aren't training and educating people in the middle and lower tiers, so I think it's important to recognize that our value proposition is much larger. We're connected to the workforce system. We're connected to the non-profit and K-12 sectors. We're connected to other communitybased organizations in a way that other entities are not. A lot of our students are low income, disadvantaged and not in a position to go onto a university without a lot of support.

Evo: What will it take to scale access to noncredit, nondegree workforce training programming, for adults across the state of Arizona, but specifically in your service area?

LL: It's multi-pronged. Ultimately, everyone needs to work. Either they're going to work for somebody, or they're going to work for themselves, but everything is interconnected. And employers defining what they need in terms of talent, skills, knowledge, and abilities, is going to be the key point in all of this. Employers are becoming less focused on the degree and more focused on the skill. You have an employer like Google coming out with its own certification and making a bold pronouncement, saying, "If you do these, we will see this as on par with a bachelor's degree."

As the skills gap continues to persist, employers who are flexible and more focused on skill will be the ones to thrive into the future. Those who are wedded to a traditional model of talent development are going to struggle because they're not going to find the talent that they need.

It will start back to where the pre-K and K-12 systems reside. It begins with the parent. If they're not ensuring the student can be exposed to adequate language by a certain age, that individual is going to be limited in their growth and development. So that's why it's more of an ecosystem than a linear progression. The more we recognize that, the better we're going to be able to support and develop human potential.

Evo: How do community colleges stay competitive when the space that they used to occupy as the sole participant is becoming increasingly crowded?

LL: One of our advantages is that many community colleges have already been functioning in this noncredit space. It's in that noncredit space that you see a lot of the flexibility—less tethering to the rules and accreditation. That gives us flexibility. Now the question is, how are we using that flexibility to ensure that the quality of education remains? The world of work is the ultimate validator because you can acquire a skill, but if you

can't apply it, it doesn't really matter that you acquired it through an education or training environment.

It doesn't really matter who those validators are but whether you can bring your skill in, have it validated, and then constantly refresh it. It's going back to Stephen Covey—you got to sharpen the saw. And it's a constant sharpening.

Each time these disruptive innovations come along, they're going to require skill. That's where community colleges are well positioned because that's fundamentally what we do. We're not focused on learning a set of disciplines rooted in tradition or in history. We are truly calibrated to the ever-evolving world of work. That positions us nicely, vis-à-vis other entities. Not that other entities can't do this, but it's in our DNA to be doing this.

Evo: What will it take to start creating access to those services and access points to the institution, for folks that are in workforce training and nondegree offerings?

LL: It starts with the mindset shift. The focus is on skills. It doesn't matter which modality you choose to pursue to acquire it. But once you decide to enroll at Pima Community College, you're going to get additional services. This is where the marketplace becomes important. So, I'm trying to advertise and market Pima. My competitive advantage is to say, "You come and do these things, you're going to get these services as part of that." I could price things on an à la carte basis, which will come with little to no support. Or I'll build in additional pricing to have access to an advisor and faculty members. That's why I come back to the idea that it's a mindset. It's not that it can't be done; it's whether we're willing to think creatively about how we do it. But remember, it's our brand that's on the line. The learner's going to start thinking, "Can I get my skills needs met from Pima? What are the barriers to entry? What are the services? What are the offerings?" That's what's going to be more important, as opposed to the distinction between credit and noncredit.

Ian Roark (IR): In that vein, as a part of our strategic plan, one of Lee's goals as chancellor was to ensure through policy that noncredit learners have the same access to services as credit learners do, so we've been baking it into the operations. As an example: We offered the Google IT Professional Support Certificate through Coursera. Of course, you can take that through Coursera for free on your own. But what we did was embed it in our LMS shell, which automatically afforded the learner access both to a faculty member and our online student services.

So, that's the value that we're providing to a noncredit learner. As a part of that mindset shift that the chancellor was speaking about, what we've started doing in all of our meetings is refusing to refer to people as noncredit versus credit learners. Noncredit is not a person—it's a modality. Many members of my own team, who have been in continuing ed for years, will stop and ask why we're calling them noncredit learners. Noncredit is a way you offer something, so let's talk about the learner.

Evo: In what active ways we can start to either bridge the gaps between or create stackable offerings toward certificate, nondegree offerings, and towards more traditional or formal offerings?

LL: I approach it through my legal training. In criminal law, you might have what we call lesser-included. If I can prove the higher crime, then I must have proved all the other lower crimes too. Think about stackability in the same way. A degree in cybersecurity is built from the pieces that make it up. I can get certified in those pieces first. And if I meet all of these requirements then I get the degree. Again, that's a mindset shift that institutions have to make.

It's not credit versus noncredit students, transfer versus CTE students, adult ed versus GED students. If you come to Pima, you're a Pima student, and have access to our entire platform. You decide what pieces you want. We want to make sure that each part you obtain leads you to employment, so there's no waste in your learning. We've still got work to do, but that's the idea. This is what we want to achieve. Let's start building the systems, policies and practices that are going to make it happen.

We need to start recognizing how learning really works, not how we want to fit real learning into a system that we artificially created. How does learning work? It starts with tinkering and creativity and passion. Our job is to make it a little easier for people to tinker, create and study their passion—to sharpen the saw. That's where our value really is. Truth be told, that's how innovation's always been.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about working towards the Achieve 60 AC target and how you see the next few years playing out from a strategic perspective?

IR: It ties back to the Reskilling and Recovery Network piece. Arizona was one of the 20 states selected to be a part of the AACC NGA piece. Lee is one of four Arizona community college CEOs representing the 10 districts. I'm honored to serve as a steering team lead for that effort. We're really focusing our recovery efforts on two phases.

We have a very loose, decentralized system in Arizona. Community colleges don't have state oversight, so we are banding together to build those structures from the ground up ourselves. Collaborating at the CEO level where Lee sits with his peers, at the workforce level with me and my peers, our public information officers, our CFOs, we're really building the system together. It's ramped up because of the COVID-19 crisis and recovery. We're focusing on short-term reskilling and upskilling opportunities. The long term is about the policies that will incentivize the right set of behaviors from the colleges, among the employers, and in the public workforce system. For example, in Arizona we can look at our full-time student equivalent accounting that we report to the state for expenditure limit purposes. It doesn't recognize noncredit workforce training. If we were able to bake that into the funding formula, then perhaps that would incentivize colleges to do more of it. How do we build ourselves back up from this pandemic to make our network resilient and, more importantly, our workforce to be more resilient, so that whatever the next

crisis is, we can use these structures and systems to help workers pivot in a very volatile labor market.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Key Takeaways

- More learning happens outside the classroom than inside—it's important to have strong relationships with industry to help students establish connections and gain the work experience they need.
- Focus on the skills each job or career requires, and make them stackable. This way, students can sharpen their skills at a fast and efficient pace and build their careers as they go.
- There shouldn't be a distinction between the credit vs. noncredit learner—they should all receive the same support and services to help them succeed.

Institutional Innovation: Keeping Faculty Involved

Edward Leach

**Executive Director, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development,
University of Texas at Austin**

Institutions are known for being traditional and staying inside the box when it comes to innovation. But that model is beginning to change as higher education heads into a new normal. Innovation needs to happen, but it's critical that everyone involved is on the same page. In this interview, Edward Leach discusses common obstacles an institution faces when making key strategy decisions, how to bridge the gap between leadership and faculty and how to create a smoother process when implementing new and innovative tactics.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are some of the most common faculty objections to institutional innovation, especially when it comes to scaling access to and development on a noncredit program?

Edward Leach (EL): Anytime you ask faculty to do something new and you do not provide them with the necessary support, it can lead to problems. Much like anything that you and I might be asked do that we're

not familiar with, we might need some type of training in order to be successful at it. It's no different with faculty. Another objection is that oftentimes we ask faculty to do things without making it clear why we're asking them to do it. All of a sudden, a request just comes down like some type of edict. We don't provide enough information or context about the reasons behind the change, and that too can cause problems.

As far as the noncredit side of the house goes, those same rules might not necessarily apply. My experience has been that most noncredit courses are not taught by full-time faculty or even adjuncts from the academic side. They're taught by people who are actually working professionals in the field. If there's a new course that the noncredit side wants to offer, it is usually able to go out and find someone who has current working expertise in that subject matter.

For the longest time, and maybe it's still the case in a lot of places, the noncredit and credit sides were really separate entities; there wasn't a lot of collaboration between the two sides, which can be problematic when trying to scale access to and develop a noncredit program. But there are some institutions that have gotten better at bridging the academic and non-academic sides of the house. And obviously a lot of problems can be eliminated when that happens.

Evo: Why is it important for administrators and institutional leadership to take faculty concerns—to bridge the gap between the two?

EL: If you want to get something done with your faculty, but you do not include them in the discussion, it's likely going to result in a difference between what the faculty are willing to do and what the administration wants to do. If you're an administrator and you've got an initiative that you're expecting your faculty to take on, then you want to include them as much as possible in the process.

Of course, you want the initiative to be a success. And certainly, you want the process to be as smooth and effective as possible. But if there is much disagreement and confusion along the way, that's going to unnecessarily waste everyone's time and efforts. Faculty have a great deal of expertise, and if you want them to be a part of the solution, then getting their input from the very beginning would be a really smart move. They'll likely have plenty of good information to add about how things should move forward and what the end product should look like.

Evo: Do you have any suggestions, advice or best practices that leaders can onboard to increase buy-in for innovation from their colleagues on the faculty side?

EL: Again, get faculty involved right from the very beginning. It's probably not the best approach to bring them onboard late in the process, drop something into their lap, and say that this is what we're going to do. By involving faculty from the very beginning, taking their input and ensuring that there's space for adequate back

and forth is probably the number one way get their buy-in.

That said, you're not going to get everybody's buy-in. But hopefully you can get a critical mass of faculty onboard. Everybody on campus knows which faculty members tend to be willing to take part of new initiatives. Find these faculty members who tend to jump at these opportunities and who enjoy being part of the process, and get them onboard right from the beginning. They can help bring along some of their fellow faculty members who might need a little more encouragement to get onboard.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about what it takes to make sure that faculty are actively involved in strategic decision making and direction setting for a college?

EL: When I was at St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, Florida—and I don't know if this is the case at all institutions—the president's cabinet had a faculty representative on it. During cabinet meetings, the faculty representative was there to provide faculty input, as well as take information from those meetings back to the faculty and share information with that group. She would also ensure that the faculty voice was heard in those discussions.

Having a faculty representative on the president's cabinet goes back to what I said earlier about keeping faculty informed. Faculty had a seat at the table, and not only did that make sure faculty were actively involved in strategic decision-making and direction-setting for the college, it also went a long way towards getting their buy-in on significant decisions.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Key Takeaways

- You can't ask faculty to do something without giving them support—try to make their jobs as efficient and stress-free as possible with the right systems in place.
- Keep your faculty informed of the process, but let them also have a voice in the decisions being made.
- A lot of problems can be eliminated when you begin to close the gap between the credit and noncredit sides of an institution and encourage more collaboration between them.

Growing Noncredit Enrollments at Community Colleges

Carlos Cortez

President

San Diego College of Continuing Education

Community colleges aren't used to distance education, and the pandemic has forced them to rethink their infrastructure around it. It isn't an easy step to take, but once you begin to reshape distance program offerings, your institution will reap the rewards. In this interview, Carlos Cortez discusses common challenges among community colleges when it comes to scaling noncredit programs, what it takes to create these offerings, and how to high learner expectations.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the challenges that community colleges face to manage and scale noncredit program access?

Carlos Cortez (CC): The primary challenge that San Diego Continuing Education has faced is the lack of infrastructure around distance education, particularly in light of the COVID-19 closures and having to move our program remotely, this reality has set in. When I arrived in July 2015, we had zero courses fully online. When COVID hit, about 10 percent of our course offerings were delivered in a hybrid or web-enhanced format. But still, zero programs were fully online. That said, we have been working for the past five years to launch a fully online division of our institution. The launch of ICOM Academy—the Interactive Competency-based Online Micro-credentialing Academy—coincided with the COVID crisis and propelled our institution forward. It pushed resistors in our institution toward embracing a paradigm shift in delivering adult noncredit. Academy—coincided with the COVID crisis and propelled our institution forward. It pushed resistors in our institution toward embracing a paradigm shift in delivering adult noncredit. The underlying challenge we've faced is that the majority of our career technical education programs have historically been offered in-person. Credit programs tend to be lighter on theory and heavier on applied laboratory learning and modalities. Those learning experiences are difficult to replicate online. People come to our campus and report that our facilities are par none, so why would a student want to take the class outside of that real world, state-of-the-art environment?

When we launched ICOM Academy, the expectation was that we were going to identify career educational programs that lent themselves to distance education. Now, we are moving programs like automotive, child development and healthcare into ICOM Academy's phase one year, which was initially unthinkable. It costs approximately \$50,000 to develop each course, and there are no resources available to us in our existing system to support us.

The second challenge is that all of our student services were historically offered in a brick-and-mortar format. Now, again with COVID-19 closures, we have increased interest in accessing the dynamic student services platform that we have built for the courses at ICOM Academy across all of our programs. When we return to some form of in-person classes, 90 to 95 percent of courses will likely be web-enhanced. Not only are we replicating every brick-and-mortar student experience online, we are adding new student services on our campuses.

We plan to create access to fee-based courses to those who live outside of the state of California, generating revenue that will then be reinvested into ICOM Academy to cover our subscriptions for 40-plus student services, tools and resources currently totalling over two million dollars annually.

A third challenge is that, because of the financial strains placed on districts, we are being forced to reduce traditional noncredit course offerings. As a result, many faculty members are being displaced. By adding fee-based education courses, we now can hire both counselors and faculty to teach these course sections.

Evo: What does it take to create highly-accessible noncredit offerings?

CC: Every state in the United States has an education trainer provider list (ETPL). These lists are composed of approved educational programs. Clients of public social welfare programs, like housing authorities, veterans' services, employment/development offices and workforce partnerships, provide stipends to engage in educational development. Often these students are looking for immediate opportunities to enroll in school. They walk into one of these social welfare providers and get approved for educational training. Due to the way community colleges are structured, there are not always multiple points of entry for a student to be able to begin classes immediately.

The reality is that they need to get into a class as quickly as possible—they do not want to wait, nor should they wait, until the course officially starts in an academic semester. By developing fee-based course offerings, there will be multiple points of entry into our organization. Within California, some individuals might have the state-provided resources to enroll in fee-based courses, but our intention is to enroll nationally and internationally. When I was at UCLA education extension, we offered similar types of programming. We went nationwide and international, and none of the programs we offered received any form of state apportionment. As a state university, fee-based offerings to the extension program were not funded in any way through the state, so they had to be self-sustaining, which is the same case with the fee-based course offerings we are expanding. Community colleges have not historically engaged in this marketplace. Many community colleges offer fee-based courses, but they offer them in partnership with third-party providers. These are companies that come in and provide fee-based courses through community colleges. Community college students think they are enrolling in my college, but they are actually not. We are simply an intermediary, and we get paid a small fee to place students in these third-party courses.

We want to blow up this model with the assumption that we can actually provide quality educational programming that meets or exceeds what is currently in the marketplace across all these higher education systems, and at a better price.

There is a level of inconsistency across the U.S. because every state's system is different. There are some states, for example, where community colleges do not receive apportionment. Even credit or noncredit offerings

have to be fully self-sustainable. It is worth noting that nomenclature varies as well. What one state might call credit or not-for-credit or noncredit or fee-based or contract education might have different meanings in a different system, so it is understandable that there is confusion among offerings. In our case, we are creating new self-sustaining course sections. They are in no way connected to our state apportionment-generating courses.

Evo: How are you guys working to deliver the experience that students are looking for without placing a huge burden on staff to scramble to bring together things from five or six different places to create that feel?

CC: My experience as a user does not mirror that of users of public education. When I attended these institutions, I was given the red carpet treatment, from orientation to enrollment to wraparound supports on campus. These institutions, particularly proprietary institutions, are designed around the client/user. It is unfortunate that public educational institutions have not grasped this reality because we are losing enrollments to organizations that are able to make these processes more seamless.

The work that we are doing with ICOM Academy, enhanced and accelerated by the COVID-19 closures, has moved us light years ahead. We have found ways to remove many of these obstacles. Students are not required to come onto campus to use support and resources. We are positioning our organization to be increasingly student-centered, and that is in direct response to our competitors who have already figured out how to do this work.

The challenge lies in the fact that we are large government bureaucratic institutions, and with those types of entities come a significant amount of red tape. I challenge myself to reinvent how we do our business before we go extinct because there will be others in the next ten years who will figure it out and do it for a cheaper price. And frankly, I have found that students are willing to pay a premium if their institution meets them where they are at.

Evo: Is there anything that you'd like to add about making continuing ed a strategic imperative?

CC: We are at a crossroad in higher education at this moment. We just had a meeting this past week with a major public entity in San Diego positioned to lay off 200 employees by December. These individuals have a strong work ethic, education credentials, resumes. They have shown an interest in caring for themselves and their families without relying on state assistance.

These are only 200 of the millions of hardworking Americans who are finding themselves in this situation right now, yet when we look at how our systems are designed, there is minimal to no investment toward providing rapid pathways for these individuals to move back into new career pathways.

Here in the state of California, only about 3 percent of our overall full-time equivalent student-funded apportionment is allocated to short-term noncredit career education, and that startles me. Within that, many do not lead to livable wages. It is a low percentage of the resources that we make available that provides free robust career education pathways to students. I would challenge our legislature to identify additional resources and to provide them to the states that find the 5 or 10 percent increase in apportionment. But to also hold the colleges accountable by solely putting the money toward developing short-term career education pathways, so the United States gets back to work.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Key Takeaways

- It's important to recognize that the institution must be designed around the customer. Students will look to other educational offerings from someone who will give them a seamless user experience.
- In having fee-based education offerings, faculty members don't need to be displaced—rather, institutions may need to look at hiring more staff.
- To make program offerings as affordable as possible, look which of your local resources can help provide these career pathways for adult learners.

APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Wednesday, 11th November 2020

Evolving Noncredit Programming in the Community College Space

Tracy Hartzler

President, Central New Mexico Community College

Erica Barreiro

Future of Work Strategist, Central New Mexico Community College

Community colleges are there to serve their community and get its members back into the workforce as soon as possible. Noncredit programming, although not usually seen in community colleges, has the ability to accelerate this process by getting students the right credentials for a specific job. Community colleges need to look to their learners who may not see themselves as “college material” and help them see the potential in these programs. In this interview, Tracy Hartzler and Erica Barreiro discuss the challenges of growing enrollments in noncredit, how colleges can scale these programs and tying noncredit into the lifelong learning model.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are some of the biggest roadblocks that tend to stand in the way of enrollment growth in noncredit, nondegree areas for community colleges?

Tracy Hartzler (TH): One of the biggest barriers is helping students access the noncredit, nondegree training that they need and the funding to pay for it. We all know how that works for high school graduates or even adults going back to college for credit certificates and degrees, but this is much less clear for noncredit, nondegree

education.

Each state funds and prioritizes workforce training differently. We have to look at the key partnerships that need to be engaged, leveraged, and developed, whether it's with our local workforce boards or our state or local agencies, to provide an easy path for people to get much-needed training. There's a variety of potential funding sources but we need to focus on funding noncredit training.

Erica Barreiro (EB): It's interesting because these barriers have existed for a long time, but national conversations on how to address them have only been emerging in the last three years. COVID-19 has accelerated and magnified these conversations. The idea of giving individuals universal learning credits or opportunities to access funding that they can apply to a wide variety of their learning needs wasn't even on the table as a consideration before.

But with the massive job displacement now, people are seeing the fractures and the fissures of the existing postsecondary and training systems—and that these fractures prevent people from accessing some quicker solutions and pathways.

Evo: How does it benefit a college to expand its nondegree offerings, especially when credit-bearing offerings tend to be eligible for financial aid, whereas nondegree offerings generally aren't?

TH: This is part of a larger national conversation for the last decade or so in the country and with large foundations. How do all states in the country move the needle on scaling up our workforce more efficiently and more effectively? That includes everything from traditional trades to students entering a two-year institution with plans to transfer to a four-year university. In New Mexico, there was significant movement through policy to promote credential and degree attainment. As a result, we've seen significant growth in post-secondary credentials and degrees.

We're also seeing a movement and need beyond formal degrees or certificates. There's a specific need for more accelerated skills-based training or retraining, in addition to having work-based learning opportunities. People value work-based and experiential learning, no matter the educational path chosen.

It's a part of our mission to serve the public good as a community college. We need to provide what helps our community members improve their household income and economic prospects. And we need to provide them direct access to careers that support our region's economic development needs, so we contribute to prosperity for all. Skills-based training is a natural extension of the community college mission. It's not an either/or. We have to provide the range of education and skills-based training to meet our diverse population. We still know that degrees and training pathways are needed for advancement. And we know we can provide greater resilience for everybody when we have well-defined

options in the various pathways as the economy changes over time, and as we experience incredible downturns.

EB: We're recognizing that a degree does not suffice anymore for a lifetime of work. Our federal financial aid funding was built to fund degree completion. But what happens once you've completed a degree? Oftentimes, you need to go back to get skillsets to stay relevant, especially with the pace of accelerated change that we're going to experience in the future. We'll have a significant number of individuals who need educational post-secondary educational services who already have a degree. They need a menu of options that suit them, as well as the financial support to pay for them.

Like many community colleges, we're really looking at how to develop credit for prior learning pathways that recognize what people have learned outside of formal education and how these experiences transfer into degree credits. We're also looking at how noncredit programs, certificates and courses that an individual may have previously accumulated grant them credits for what they've already learned and show them potential pathways to new careers. If you completed a program, course, or certificate in the noncredit realm, how does that translate to progress on an associate's degree?

Then there's community colleges' equity and social justice mission. We work with a significant population who doesn't see itself as "college material." This belief has been internalized. And noncredit can open a door for those individuals. Once they've succeeded in a noncredit environment attached to an institution of higher education, we have the opportunity to bring them into the credit environment. We can tell them that they've done college-level work so they're essentially a college student—why not come finish the rest of your journey?

Evo: How are you thinking about the evolving role of nondegree and noncredit programming within the context of the lifelong learning spectrum?

TH: Without a doubt we are thinking about this. If we think about lifelong learning, it just has a different connotation of life and mind exploration. What I'm finding at the community college level is a richer depth to the learning, and it's hands-on. There's an element that makes it feel applicable, valuable, and tangible. There are a number of four-year institutions beginning to look at experiential learning and how to supplement it. Or they are seeking ways to make sure bachelor's degree students seek that component in their education because they know how valuable it is to employers.

Also, programs should include hands-on, practical examples to help students make sense of the academic or theoretical lessons they learn. There's a blending of these efforts at many levels of post-secondary education, but community colleges are distinctly able to reach so many more people with broader skillsets when they're starting off.

EB: In regards to that point, community colleges are very well-versed in partnering with local employers to understand what their workforce needs are. We're really well positioned to serve as that hub for people needing to change careers. The statistic I've heard used by Heather McGowan is that today's college graduates will have 17 different careers across five different industries, so it goes back to seeing a very different relationship with colleges.

Evo: Does participating in a course marketplace replace internal efforts to scale and strengthen noncredit, nondegree and career programming?

EB: It absolutely doesn't replace but instead accelerates and scales what we are already doing. It offers us a chance to learn from other colleges and potentially share curriculum to enhance what we offer our local community as well as the marketplace. It strengthened our own internal efforts. We can see where there are gaps in the work that we need to do as we're offering something to a different marketplace. We're trying to communicate why there's a certain pricing structure for a particular course and how it differs from somebody else's pricing

structure. We know there are good reasons for that, but we've never had to communicate it in the ways that we are now.

All these translate into practices that we can bring back into our own internal efforts. It's also enhancing our efforts in student course access. It's just like Amazon: you set up an account, provide an email address, phone number and credit card, and you can purchase a course. It's so easy. So, what does that influence how we think about those transactions and making education easier to access from the first step for all students. Not that we don't need systems that gather additional information, but how do we take an experience like that and rethink how students interact with us?

Key Takeaways

- Although community colleges can offer great, flexible noncredit programming, their students continue to face the hurdle of paying for it.
- Degrees can't deliver a lifetime of work—fast, stackable noncredit programs are better suited to keep people in the workforce and up to date on their skills.
- To scale and grow noncredit enrollment, develop clear and seamless pathways from noncredit programs that allow students to move into the credit space if they choose to.

Offering Noncredit in Community Colleges

Toni Pendergrass

President, San Juan College

Adrienne Forgette

Vice President for Learning, San Juan College

Noncredit education isn't typically seen in the community college space, but it offers colleges a great opportunity to grow and expand their markets. Not structured to serve this type of programming, community colleges need to find ways in which they can best serve their students with fast and stackable programs. In this interview, Toni Pendergrass and Adrienne Forgette discuss community colleges scaling noncredit programs, what it takes to meet learners' needs in noncredit education and how to make it more accessible.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are some of the biggest roadblocks that a community college is going to face when it comes to growing enrollments in noncredit programming specifically?

Adrienne Forgette (AF): One of the roadblocks is that many of our noncredit and workforce programs tend to be the second thing that we do as a community college. They're not as well known to students as our credit offerings. But there's this sense that they are the first thing that we do—this is where we'll need editing, but students pick up on that message.

Toni Pendergrass (TP): Sometimes it's difficult to locate faculty to teach some of these noncredit offerings as well, like short-term IT programs that require a highly specialized skillset. It's sometimes difficult in a rural area to locate people with specific credentials on the noncredit side.

AF: Most of our employers are small to medium in size. They're not going to hire huge numbers of students out of any particular training program. So, how do we partner with them? How do we be there for our local employers and do it in a financially sustainable way?

Evo: Why is it beneficial for the college to offer programs, even though most of them aren't eligible for financial aid?

TP: That's what students are demanding. A Strada survey has been conducted since the start of the pandemic, and 62 percent of those surveyed indicated that they strongly preferred nondegree programs and skills training over degree programs. So that's where the demand is, and we need to strive to meet it.

AF: It's interesting that there seem to be two groups of learners here: those who need some basic job entry skills and a path to employment, and a group who already have a degree and are returning to acquire in-demand skills. And the second group, I think, is becoming a larger part of this noncredit market.

Evo: What does it take to deliver an experience that meets nondegree learners' expectations and market demand?

AF: In terms of student-centricity, most community colleges are not organized to serve noncredit, credit, online, face-to-face, and adult traditional students in the same way. We're very compartmentalized and segmented. Just this week, I've started thinking about implementing more of a one-door approach to how we operate, where everybody comes in and goes through a very student-focused admissions and counseling advising process

that helps them sort out where they want to go. Does it matter to us if it's credit or noncredit, online or face to face? I probably haven't thought about it nearly enough, but I think a lot of people are starting to talk about what it might look like when we blend these things more.

TP: I agree with Adrienne. It needs to be an integrated approach through which everyone receives wraparound support services throughout their entire college experience, regardless of whether it's credit or noncredit.

Evo: A common feature of the noncredit experience is that benefits or services aren't really accessible or they don't meet students' needs like they do in degree programs. What's at the heart of that divide?

AF: Part of it is a "follow the money" thing. Traditional students have access to financial aid that basically finances the whole college's infrastructure. On the noncredit side, financial support isn't there. For instance, we don't get the same level of state funding for noncredit offerings. Our students may qualify for programs like WIOA or some other benefits, but it's not the same. So, we're trying to do potentially high impact but on a shoestring budget.

We've actually made the decision to, at San Juan College, offer supports to noncredit students. They can go to the tutoring center; we don't have meal plans, but they're always welcome at the cafeteria; parking is free, so that's not an issue; and we'll also offer them our wraparound services in terms of food pantry and other supports like that. We don't draw lines, but it's only recently that we've been explicit that we will do these things. It's still a different outreach process for them. So, it's structural, financial, traditional—the kind of thing that we want to take apart and put back together in a different way.

TP: A lot of those offerings are short-term, so we don't always think through exactly what a student needs in that short amount of time. There's also another segment of our students on the noncredit side who are corporate training students. We have strong relationships with our industry partners, and these students are generally at the college for a short amount of time for very specific training. It may be just a one-day training to gain some experience that they need in their place of work. So, we probably don't think enough around what other types of support they need, too. That's profitable for us, but we are really focused on the time they are with us for and what experience they receive during it.

AF: Since those students are coming to us through an employer, they're typically better resourced than some of the other students that come through our center for

workforce development.

Evo: How would financial aid access to noncredit programming impact decision-making, both in terms of prospective students but also for colleges making programming choices?

TP: It would be extremely helpful to have sufficient resources for all of our students, but it's our responsibility to build packages, so that they all have options, no matter what they choose to pursue on the credit or noncredit side.

AF: It's a game changer, and it creates a lot of impetus for the college to change in response to that as well.

Evo: What's it going to take to make noncredit and career education a more central part of the strategy and focus of community colleges and those departments from being on the periphery of the institution to very much its core?

TP: Some institutions have adapted very well in recent years to offer more workforce development options. And you see it specifically in states where funding support has been reduced on the credit side.

We're very fortunate in New Mexico to receive the large portion of our funding from our state appropriations on the credit side, but we've had to diversify our revenue streams and really look to the noncredit side to bring in additional sources of revenue—on the corporate side, especially. It just depends on the college's financial situation, but I know that there are several community colleges that garner more revenue on the noncredit side. They've had to make strategic decisions based on what's best for their institution and their particular situation.

AF: Some of the baby steps in this process are making sure that there are clear pathways, so that course elements are designed to be seamlessly integrated into them, and students can start wherever they need to and go from there.

Our workforce students are on to something with their drop-in/drop-out approach. It's about being relevant to student needs. For instance, right now there's a huge demand for short-term programs. Before that, there was always a huge demand for four-year programs. What will it be like in the future, and how do we prepare for it? We're still figuring out how all those things work together and have some work to do.

TP: One thing that has been extremely successful for us is our boot camps. One of them has been in partnership with

an employer named PESCO—a manufacturing facility—here in our community. We've been able to design and partner with our workforce solutions department at the regional and state levels, so students learn while they earn. After the six-week boot camp, we guarantee that they will be interviewed by the employer, and every time we've offered this, they have hired every one of the graduates out of the boot camp.

Evo: How can colleges start to develop an ecosystem that places them at the heart of the working-and-learning pathway for learners?

TP: It just involves maintaining really strong partnerships with your community employers and local workforce development boards, working together to create innovative solutions that meet the demand. It's important that people have entry-level skills for jobs, but we can bridge them over so that they can have a certificate or degree. A lot of people need a position as soon as possible to provide for their families.

AF: There's always been this question of whether we are preparing students for work or for life. And it doesn't have to be that way. It's always a both/and, in my view. When you start thinking about what makes for meaningful work, you start thinking about what it means to be a good person, how work fits into a whole life. It remains really easy to separate those two, and one of the big potentials for thinking about more integrated approaches is how we hold onto both sides.

Key Takeaways

- There's a high demand specifically for fast noncredit training. Once community colleges get onboard, they'll see both learner and institutional benefits for serving this market.
- Community colleges aren't typically set up to serve noncredit training to non-traditional audiences; they need a seamless system that can integrate with their main campus system.
- All learners should be treated equally. Provide support and student wraparound services to noncredit students to help them succeed.

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