The Role of Higher Education in the Changing World of Work

The changing world is a universal topic of interest, with particular resonance to higher education. Colleges and universities research change, teach about change, and often impact current and future change. To support students to live in this ever-changing world, those of us who work in higher education strive to provide solid, relevant preparation at the baccalaureate and graduate levels. We proactively and thoughtfully integrate and rely on educational technologies—in curriculum and instruction, labs, assignment design, libraries, support services, and more. But increasingly, employers tell us that our graduates are not adequately prepared for the changing world. Why? Because the “world of work” has also changed, and these changes are not always configured as one would expect.

For example, while it is true that manufacturing has been diminished both by technological advances and increased global competitiveness, this sector remains a significant component of the U.S. economy in many regions, including Southern California. Indeed, manufacturing itself has evolved to become what is now referred to as “advanced manufacturing,” which relies more on the smart use of technology (requiring graduates who are comfortable working with emerging technologies) and a focus on innovation, solution design, agility to respond quickly to changing markets and opportunities, global and national supply chains, and more. These changes have resulted in a transformed world of industry and manufacturing.

Similar fundamental changes in most fields and industry clusters have influenced what employers need and expect from the workforce, particularly those workers who hold a college/university degree. Colleges and universities must stay attuned to the evolving needs of regional employers in order to remain vital drivers of the U.S. economy.

As I explored further why employers now feel that college and university graduates are not ready to work, here is what I learned:

- Employers expect a graduate and new hiree to have the refined and agile communication skills needed to work successfully in an organizational context with a wide range of stakeholders. They expect the hiree to be able to understand the perspectives of these various stakeholders and to shape communications accordingly to make them effective and purposeful for the organization’s advantage.
- Employers expect the graduate and new hiree to use technology easily and comprehensively in all aspects of work and to participate in a knowledge/data/information-based economy in order to purposefully and strategically advance the organization.
- Employers expect the graduate and new hiree to know how to work in diverse project teams (in-person or virtual), representing specific fields of expertise, levels and kinds of experience, gender and age, socioeconomic and ethnic background, learning and working styles, global context, and more. In these teams, they expect the hiree to foster innovation, develop viable solutions to challenges, and recognize and respond to emerging opportunities.
- Employers expect the graduate and new hiree to know how to think at an advanced level about challenges and opportunities from a variety of perspectives, questioning traditional organizational and industry assumptions and introducing and exploring new possibilities as both industries and markets change. The new hiree must also foster excellence in others and be a part of talent development within the organization.
- Employers expect the graduate and new hiree to have command of the discipline in which he/she earned a degree. Employers expect that the hiree will have the preparation, experience, professional values, and connections needed to stay current and engaged in the field and to link those forefront industry models and practices to the advancement of the organization.
- Employers expect the graduate and new hiree to know how to think at an advanced level about challenges and opportunities from a variety of perspectives, questioning traditional organizational and industry assumptions and introducing and exploring new possibilities as both industries and markets change. The new hiree must also foster excellence in others and be a part of talent development within the organization and contribute to the purposeful evolution of the organization by regularly adding value and capabilities.

Not that long ago, organizations might have expected these capabilities only from their more senior leadership hires. This is one of the more profound changes in the contemporary world of work: employers need leadership abilities, advanced conceptual skills, technology-enhanced learning, and high-value professional capabilities from all college/university-prepared hires and not just from a few.

In many ways, we in higher education know this, but we have
not been able to consistently craft an effective and more complete response to this new situation. Among the changes that higher education leaders may need to consider are some that we at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) have been making to better ensure that our graduates are indeed prepared to work:

- Link research to instructional strategies so that students work closely with faculty to develop research skills at the forefront in the field and learn to work in diverse teams to apply research to practice: solution design, innovation, and creation.
- Ensure that all students understand the importance of group, as well as individual, efforts and that all students have an opportunity to learn team dynamics, including how to form teams, how to manage them, and how to measure their success.
- Make assignment design a high priority so that students receive a better awareness of the current realities in their field, fostering students’ capacities to make positive contributions early in their careers. Increase opportunities for students to work in diverse in-person and virtual project teams, fields, and disciplines.
- Expand sustained conversations between university and college administrators, faculty, employers, regional economic and community development leaders, and national and global thought leaders about talent/workforce development for the region so that deans, department chairs, and faculty have an ongoing sense of the current work realities of their fields. This enables colleges and universities to make the curricular, assignment design, and instructional strategy changes needed to ensure an increasingly strong connection between the preparation they provide and what will be expected from graduates.
- Ensure that educational technology continues to be widely and thoughtfully used in all aspects of the college/university experience and that students have the opportunity to add to the institution’s technical capacities through their own innovative uses of technology in their coursework and projects.
- Expand meaningful access to college/university preparation for traditionally underserved populations—benefiting not only employers and their workforce needs, since these students represent a growing percentage of future wage earners, but also all students who learn cross-cultural competency in multifaceted learning environments. This enriches the educational experience and training for all students, who will bring this multicultural dexterity to employers.
- Refine liberal education content, structure, and strategies so that there are tighter links between breadth of knowledge, modes of reasoning, and depth of understanding across time, cultures, and the disciplines provided in the liberal learning components of the curriculum and study in the major.

As I have considered the challenges that higher education faces today in educating the talent and workforce needed by the United States and across the globe to ensure the viability of our economic future, I find myself thinking that we need to push ourselves even further. We need to look at the wider range of options and possibilities, paying particular attention to social justice, sustainability, and our shared global community. For example, we need to become very good at putting together diverse teams to innovate and design responsive solutions.

We also need to increase our agility in ways that expand access to and use of the core strengths of our traditions: teaching, learning, scholarship, creative work, research, and the ability to transform lives. We need to prepare today’s students to assume leadership roles. We need to create a tighter and more engaged connection between graduates and the ongoing educational and research work of colleges and universities across the career span.

Technology will play a significant role in our ability to achieve these aspirational but increasingly vital goals. By harnessing the possibilities of technology and by implementing curricular and organizational enhancements, we can amplify the transformative power of higher education as we prepare our graduates for future success in the ever-evolving world of work.

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