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ACCESSIBILITY

Addressing Equity Challenges in the Digital Environment

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Higher education has been facing large inequity gaps for learners and it's time to put the right system in place to address these issues. Institutions must change their mindset and begin to tie continuing ed and non-credit divisions into their main infrastructure. In this interview Charla Long, discusses the inequity challenges higher ed is currently facing, the role continuing ed can play and what the future of higher ed can look like.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the inequity challenges that higher ed institutions, and higher ed as an industry, currently face?

Charla Long (CL): Stephanie Krauss had a great piece called "How competency-based education may help reduce our nation's toughest inequities" a few years ago, and it's guided our work. There are probably four that we tend to focus on a lot. First would be that we have a skills gap. Individuals are leaving programs with a mishmash of skills that are needed for the jobs available today. And though 96% of CAOs and provosts say, "Our learners leave our institutions fully prepared, workforce-ready," employers aren't saying that. So, learners are investing in college, but the skills gap does not allow them to get the employment opportunities they need

and want. And we see that skills gaps are even more broadly pronounced with learners of color.

When we look at learners starting college and the attainment gap, 40% of students will not have graduated within six years. When we look at those who do graduate, they tend to come from wealthier, white backgrounds. Men of color are the worst hit group of all. And yet we don't see enough institutions taking that as seriously as they should.

When we look at achievement gaps, roughly half of white high school learners show college readiness while only one in five Latino learners and one in eight Black learners perform at that level. Achievement gaps from high school are coming into the college environment and not getting the kind of support they need to complete credentials.

Part of the challenge is an opportunity gap. We fund our public schools through that area's tax base. So, poorer communities get poorer schools. Wealthier communities get better schools. And that opportunity gap just gets wider and wider and wider. The quality, the quantity of opportunities, the supports available. So much depends on where you live. Those are probably the four that we look at the

most: achievement, attainment, opportunity, and skills.

Evo: Why was this the topic that you wanted to discuss at IMS Global?

CL: I've been troubled by the lip service that it seems we give to equity. Though we've spent decades of research and investment, education remains deeply inequitable, with many solutions tinkering around the edges. We need to move the needed. In the competency-based education movement, we have long said that our movement is about serving those underserved today in higher ed. And the question is, are we doing this? Are we tracking the data needed to determine this? Are we being intentional in our efforts?

Jobs for the Future and C-BEN decided to partner on a project in 2021 called the CBE Equity Collaboratory. We believe that by focusing on teaching and learning we can drive strong job and career outcomes for students, and as a result increase equity. For many, CBE is a significantly better approach to teaching and learning than traditional postsecondary education. We must expand the number of quality CBE programs, and the number of students served.

So we built the Equity Collaboratory to help institutions intentionally approach CBE program design with a commitment to driving equitable outcomes. When you think about what it takes for an institution to do CBE well, they need

technology and infrastructure. We really believe the work IMS Global does, in particular around interoperability and open standards, helps to create what can be a new currency of learning, one based on competencies.

In a traditional program, you either have the credit or you don't. You've either had intro to communication or you haven't. But when we talk about learning in terms of competencies, do you have the ability to interact one-on-one with another individual? Can you read the other person's body language and adjust your message according to the nonverbal communication you're receiving? When we start talking about competencies, we realize that everyone has knowledge and skills to offer. By recognizing everybody brings something to the table, we can empower more learners from the start. If we were to move to a system anchored in competency, we would need technology systems to talk to one other, connecting learning across all environments. So, we see IMS Global's work in this area to be crucial to our desire to make CBE the go-to approach for next-gen learning.

Evo: How do you see the role of continuing ed units and non-degree education providers starting to shift?

CL: First of all, I think we need a mindset shift. Often, institutions view their workforce development arms, their non-credit counterparts, as less-than-for credit education and place this work in a separate silo. On

campuses, we must recognize the move toward learning in the flow of work and connect the leaders of workforce development with for-credit academic leaders. Together, they should work on connecting their areas around shared competencies. For example, a student might come in to the institution through a workforce development offering because they need a short-term credential. These areas should work together to create a pathway where this learner can embed her short-term credential into an academic program. To make this happen, the two areas should use the same competencies, same definitions, same performance expectations. Wouldn't that be the learner-centered thing to do?

And there are schools doing just this. Lisa McIntyre-Hite with Guild Education and I wrote a piece called Gearing Up: How Competencies Enable the Agile Work-Learn Model to show how it can be done. When we use competencies, we really offer learners just what they need, when they need it while allowing all learning to be counted. Let's help learners get what they need right now to get back to work. When we look at the pandemic's effects, complete industries have been decimated. Many people need a completely different skill set to get re-hired. At this moment, many don't need a whole degree; right now, they need to get food on their table. Let's help out by developing programs with the needed skills so they can get back to work. But, let's just make sure these non-degree programs don't lead to a dead-end.

Evo: What are the biggest obstacles that stand in the way of establishing that consistent environment with open standards and interoperable systems?

CL: First, we lack an overall shared language. What is a competency? What is a skill? How do we define each discrete competency or skill? How do we describe what successful performance looks like at different levels of mastery? Good news is that many people and organizations are working on this. The Open Skills Network is working on their repository of skills. They're using rich data descriptors to describe what a particular skill means and what an individual with this skill can do. You've got Credential Engine's transparent repository of credentials, that stores and shares the components of a particular credential across systems.

Next, we need to get our higher ed systems talking with one another, and to our employer partners' human resource information systems. Wouldn't it be great to even connect to our military learning systems too? Most are keeping extensive records on training and academic learning, yet our systems struggle to communicate that learning outside our setting. Wow, when you think about the loftiness of the goals of open standards and interoperable records, I don't know how Mark Luba and the folks over at IMS Global don't just bang their head on the wall all the time, because the challenge is so large, and it's hard for people to wrap their mind

around such a complex solution. If we can exchange data and connect learning in a really powerful, integrated way, this will help lead to removing inequities in our work and education environments.

Evo: What is your vision on the future of higher education?

CL: I wish I could say firmly what I believe the future of higher education looks like. I just hope we don't miss this opportunity in time to seriously evaluate what we do today. We should keep what really works and leave behind what doesn't. Now is the time for the next generation of learning. I believe that if we focus on teaching and learning, it will lead to strong job and career outcomes for all students, and we will increase equity in our society. I believe that competency-based models are what's needed to really advance improvement. Inequities have existed for decades, and we can't think the same model that led to these inequities will be the solution to these inequities. We need to get comfortable with change so we can better serve our students and the learners who need us most. Yet, this change is difficult to achieve.

And so, I'm not sure I can tell you what the future looks like. I can tell you on behalf of myself and our organization that we're committed to scaling competency-based education, to working with institutions and state systems to build these kinds of programs, even offering them in non-traditional places like community-based organizations, so we can

better serve all learners and help get students on the path to economic mobility. My hope is that this message resonates with institutional leaders and faculty and many more will get on board with the competency-based movement. And that's our hope—that we'll use this moment to change the future.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recognize that everyone brings something to the table—having technology that can speak to each other and individuals is important in communicating the right message.
- Having great data is critical but only when your institution's systems are able to share that data with its other systems—a consistent environment is key.
- When it comes to redesigning your infrastructure, you don't need to start from scratch. Evaluate the systems and processes that work for you and throw away what's holding you back.