



WEDNESDAY MAY 27, 2020

TODAY'S LEARNER

Leading Higher Education's Emergence Post COVID-19: A Call to Action

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Novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) has forced the United States to push the 'pause' button on life as we knew it. While corporations and small businesses were forced to cut production, hours or close entirely, those in education transitioned quickly and emerged more versatile and nimbler than anticipated. They were able to adapt to one of the most challenging periods in our nation's history.

Although the country may have been paused, many post-secondary education providers never were. While some have contended that higher education is 'a change-resistant enterprise,' Pittsburgh Technical College (PTC) proved that we can – and did—move at the speed of thought. Our higher standard was evidenced through planning and upholding our mission of empowering students to succeed, no matter the obstacles.

Pittsburgh Technical College is a regionally accredited leader in private non-profit higher education and is committed to student-centered learning. PTC consists of nine academic schools and over more than 30 career-focused programs awarding certificates and associate and bachelor's degrees in competitive fields.

All across America, COVID-19 forced colleges and universities to quickly transition to virtual classroom learning. We needed to anticipate every possible scenario and then envision new possibilities.

As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout our country and our lives, campus administrators everywhere are unsure what lies ahead—or when traditional on- the-ground learning will return. Once normal education resumes, what will be required? What does this mean for fundraising and endowments? How do we build our pipeline of students without being able to use our traditional approaches to contact them? How will enrollment be impacted?

These are great questions, and the answers will require a re-imagining of education and an ability to seek out the opportunities hidden within the chaos. As Jose' Saramago wrote, "Chaos is order yet undeciphered;" it will be our task to decipher the chaos.

COVID-19 has created the opportunity for us to think differently about college education. Questions regarding value and cost have persisted for years

and COVID-19 has, in many ways, forced a reckoning. Our traditional approaches to strategic planning, enrollment management, financial models, instructional modalities and student services must now be reconsidered through a new lens.

How will higher education respond to and lead us through this period, keeping our organizations focused and moving forward together? How will we reckon with this demand for immediate change, fewer resources and an even higher level of scrutiny and accountability? How will our structures and missions evolve to better align with the needs of those we serve and gain increased relevance with business and industry as new jobs emerge?

Leadership matters

In short, it will require bold and competent leadership, comprehensive and integrated communication strategies, increased collaboration and compassion. During this period, visionary and entrepreneurial leadership make the difference. As colleges work through the uncertainty, there is an opportunity for them to reimagine and create innovative partnerships, expand research, develop and train students for jobs of the future, professionally develop faculty and college teams, redistribute the higher education infrastructure, and launch innovative curriculum post COVID-19.

What has become abundantly clear is that there is an opportunity through leadership to define our future by design and redefine our role in the new normal.

As a provider of rigorous education and training for the middle-skilled workforce, colleges like PTC have the unique opportunity – in fact, the responsibility – to own a leadership role in rebuilding our communities, states and nation as we emerge from this global pandemic. I contend that through effective leadership and planning, technical and applied educational institutions will find a welcome home in the new normal as the preferred curriculum, due to its alignment with industry and employment expediency.

We don't know what long-term effects COVID-19 will have on the workforce issues of supply and demand. What we do know is that the employers' needs will be different. We can anticipate that unemployment rates will remain high for some time, different ways of working will emerge, and a differently trained workforce will be required.

To lead, we must move quickly; there is no time for 'pause' buttons. Colleges that focus on technical and applied careers must understand the emerging needs of employers. We cannot prepare students for today's

jobs; we must prepare them for tomorrow's jobs. To do so requires understanding how workforce needs are changing, and gaining that understanding requires listening to employers. We must elevate public and private discourse and partnerships.

The convergence of academic and applied careers has created hybrid career paths designed to build a modern workforce prepared to fill a growing need for knowledge-based, technology-driven job creation. At PTC, over 300 prominent employers comprise 17 advisory boards that help shape curricula that reflect industry demand and ensure that we are preparing our students to be sought-after, contributing workers.

Working with these employers helps to ensure the academic programs are driven by project-based, hands-on experiential learning with state-of-the-industry technology that mirror workplace scenarios. It is through the input of our advisory boards' input that we have introduced programs of study, such as network security and forensics, smart building technology and our curriculum for licensed practical nurses to earn an Associate of Science in Nursing degree.

Our national initiative and the guidance of our advisory boards, combined with PTC's culture of excellence and accountability,

make us an educator of choice and contributes, in large part, to 96% of our 2019 available graduates working in-field, either full time, part time or on a freelance basis.

By continuing our rich history of experiential learning, and by building upon the quality and alignment of our academic and workforce programs, we are serving workplace needs, which will fuel our region's economic redevelopment, while concurrently positioning our students to succeed, no matter the obstacles.

When the current crisis abates, our region, our nation and our world are going to need to rebuild. New technologies and associated jobs will be emerging, and employers will want the credibility and proven skill set that come with having the appropriate certification and degree.

Pittsburgh Technical College is ready to educate students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in their careers from day one. Whether day one is in two years or 20, schools like ours can—and do—adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

Forging a new future

So where do we go from here? Today's colleges must collaborate with workforce leaders to understand what they anticipate lies ahead. Armed

with the knowledge we can gain from employers, we can create programs and training that will equip our graduates with the skills for future workforce demands.

When we step out onto the other side of COVID-19, we will likely find that what we once regarded as 'normal' is gone. It is up to us, academic administrators, to assume the leadership roles in guiding our communities, states and nation in emerging from a global pandemic. It will be challenging, but we anticipate it. And we will adapt and advance the training and experience needed in the next workforce.

I encourage you, my colleagues and friends, to carry beyond the classroom the message training for middle-skills careers is critical to defining the new normal. Carry the message to congressmen and corporations, to mayors and media, to elected officials and opinion-shapers.

To advance our cause, I have initiated a number of actions to include:

- Meeting with local, state and national elected officials to discuss higher education's role in retraining the workforce and supporting economic development post COVID-19.
- Serving as a champion for equitable access to effective workforce training and career

pathways on the Career Ready Pennsylvania Coalition.

- Initiating a virtual think tank for college and university leaders to share creative ideas and strategies as we reimagine higher education.
- Introducing a national engagement initiative to build a pipeline to attract, educate and retrain job-ready graduates.

I urge you to heed this call to action and consider comparable measures, as appropriate for your mission and community. Join me in ensuring how colleges and universities can lead higher education's transformation. As our world emerges from this pandemic, colleges and universities must also be ready to reimagine, rebuild and support the economic development of our future redefined.