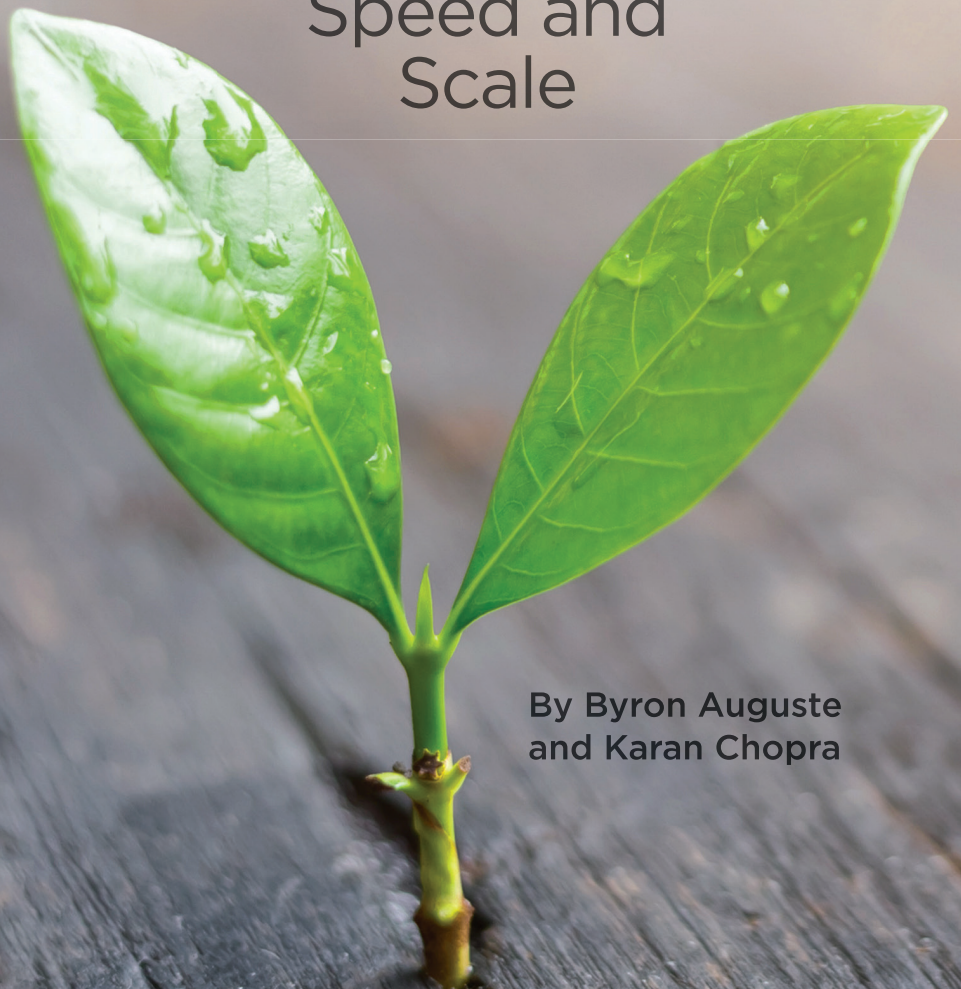



# Lifelong Learning

Higher Education  
for a World of  
Speed and  
Scale



By Byron Auguste  
and Karan Chopra





**S POWERFUL FORCES** of economics, demographics, and technology converge, higher education institutions across the globe face a moment of peril, promise, and paradox. Graduates' return on investment for a university degree remains high almost everywhere, but public funding for higher education is under stress in many countries. Stagnant or falling birth rates may reduce enrollments in the years ahead. Yet more people need more education—for more of their lives—than ever. Rising life expectancy means that graduates will live, and perhaps work, for many decades, but the life cycle of knowledge is shorter. Will higher education be victim or victorious?

The outcome depends on whether institutions of higher education adapt to help more people than ever realize the promise of learning—and to do so across their lifetimes. Institutions must focus on learning as their true measure of success. How have they enhanced people's knowledge, capabilities, and judgment? Institutions must pierce the veil dividing learning from working so that individuals can work and learn throughout their lifetimes. And institutions must work to identify and deliver on the talent development needs of employers, establishing colleges and universities as the premier engines of delivering talent in a world

where human capital will be the basis of competition.

With changes in business models and technology making old job skills superfluous and generating demand for a plethora of new skills, the world needs more higher education, not less. When lifelong opportunity requires lifelong learning, the ingrained practices and assumptions that restrict access to higher education are untenable barriers to building an inclusive and innovative economy. If there is to be a brighter future of work—defining problems and equipping both people and machines to solve them in a humane way—then society needs higher education to get to work.



Gatherings like the TechHire roundtable last fall in Chicago enable workers to connect with opportunities to gain new skills and meet with others who are navigating the ever-changing labor market.



## A Rapidly Changing World

There are work-arounds in the existing system of higher education (see “Our Stories” on page 32). But today, more than ever, the system needs to evolve to allow everyone to be able to work, learn, and earn to their full potential in a dynamic economy. As such, institutions of higher education can and should continue to step up and take positive action to ensure success for students.

The power of educational institutions can unlock the full economic potential of many who can take advantage of lifelong learning. Educators can fuel a talent boom, enabling millions of people to acquire skills they need to thrive in the modern workforce. They can encourage and support people in all stages of their careers as they seek new capabilities, helping them continue to reskill as technology demands increasingly complex skill sets. And they can collaborate with other colleges and universities, nonprofits, and employers to develop innovative ways to finance education—both from the student’s and the institution’s perspective—allowing people from all backgrounds to participate in one of the world’s main engines for economic mobility.

Yet, many of these potential gains are currently left on the table, creating a challenging reality. The global labor market will stagnate without robust pathways for individuals to constantly upskill and reskill throughout their careers. While some international institutions are hard at work to address this problem, education institutions globally can and should do more to ensure a bright future for all adult learners.

## Learning vs. Selection: The Role of Higher Education

Besides the vital missions of research and scholarship, higher education institutions effectively play two major roles in society: to help students learn, improving their skills as thinkers, communicators, and problem solvers both broadly and in specific disciplines; and to sort, credential, and signal their graduates’ status with degrees, rankings, and academic pedigree.

Right now, colleges and universities are incentivized to focus on the latter role. Along with students and parents, some institutions of higher education are overly responsive to an entrenched set of college rankings led by publications in the United States and abroad. The emphasis on rankings that sort based on exclusionary criteria can and have, in many instances, led colleges and universities to focus on incentives that are perceived as counter productive.

College rankings can encourage universities to focus on selectivity, even as society needs to impart skills to millions more people than are currently a part of the higher education system. Imagine a college or university that chooses to expand its enrollment to lower-income students, investing in more teaching faculty instead of buildings, amenities, and laboratories. It will have driven up its acceptance rate, thereby risking a fall in the all-important rankings.

## BEST PRACTICES

How to build an outcomes-focused higher education ecosystem encouraging lifelong learning:

- De-emphasize college rankings that reward low acceptance rates; instead, invest in access, enrollment, faculty, and systems that enable more students to learn and succeed.
- Create programs compatible with lifelong learning, including flexible schedules and competency-based, rather than credit-based, degrees.
- Connect with and solicit feedback from employers on which skills are most valuable to them.

Arizona State University (ASU), under President Michael Crow, has taken significant steps toward extending higher education to more people, making it easier and less expensive to attain valuable skills. By incorporating online courses, as well as new technological solutions for advising current and prospective students, the school doubled its enrollment in the past 10 years, reaching 100,000 in 2017. At the same time, ASU has attracted top research academics, multiplied fourfold its National Science Foundation grant awards, and created a top-ranked honors college—all disproving the fallacy that scaling up must mean dumbing down.

ASU has also improved student outcomes, while rapidly expanding access, by investing in clear pathways to coherent learning and valuable degrees. In just eight years after the launch of eAdvisor, its online advising program, ASU achieved more than a 50 percent rise in its four-year graduation rate for students with family incomes below the U.S. median. The university's dedication to inclusion and innovation has also positioned ASU as a magnet for international students looking to prepare to participate in a global workforce. ASU's extensive support programs, including tutoring and advising, as well as job placement assistance, are a major draw for international students and have led international student enrollment to more than double since 2010.

## Lifelong Learning for Lifelong Success

The other piece of the equation, balanced with improving access, is focusing more energy on what should be higher education's primary mission: providing an education that's valuable to students throughout their lives. This goal takes on another level of complexity and more urgency in a world where the pace of change in the skills required is rapid. It can take students, and the university staff who support them, time and resources to find the right fit that will allow students to be as fulfilled and as productive as possible. Colleges and universities provide an essential service to help students gain skills that will lead to a meaningful career where they can contribute their maximum potential.

The boundary between learning and working is porous; the two areas are interdependent, they start early, and they continue through a student's entire working life. Students expect to enjoy the tangible rewards of a higher education throughout their life, in addition to valued intangibles. The demarcation between vocational learning and academic learning has long been overblown. This false distinction is now actively damaging the ability to equip students for the world they enter upon graduation. In an industrial economy, the distinction between learning to be a skilled and efficient worker on the factory floor and learning to become an architect of the assembly process had validity. In a knowledge



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## OUR STORIES

### Byron Auguste

As a child, I attended parochial and public schools in Detroit, Michigan, and Phoenix, Arizona. In college, I studied many fields, but knew I wanted to explore the discipline of economics more deeply, but was not sure whether to pursue a doctoral degree or a “terminal” master’s degree, which was the choice I faced in the United States. Looking abroad, the postgraduate education system in England included master’s programs (MPhil) in which I could complete advanced coursework—then mutually decide whether to pursue a doctorate by researching and writing a dissertation. After two years, I did pursue and earn a doctoral degree, but would I have made that four-year commitment all at once? Access to international education options reduced the risk I perceived, allowed me to pursue my learning on my own terms, and unlocked my full potential.

### Karan Chopra

I went to a high school in Ghana that is well respected but was not a feeder to any particular higher education institution. In order to study in the United States, I needed a way to demonstrate my aptitude, a way to learn what it would take to demonstrate that aptitude, and support with the application process. Luckily for me, there was the SAT, a prep book for the SAT in the high school library, and a family friend studying in the United States who was willing to mentor me on the college application process. I later found myself studying electrical engineering at Georgia Tech, but the factors that led me to this are not systematically available to millions of people today.

economy, however, personalization, rapid reconfiguration of systems, and ubiquitous innovation is essential. As a result, hallmarks of liberal education such as critical thinking, clear communication, and research are vital for all workers.

Institutions of higher education can contribute to developing and scaling these solutions with their expertise, resources, and authority. Adopting methods like these at scale wouldn’t just benefit society at large—it would benefit colleges and universities in the long term. In a time of declining enrollment for higher education institutions in the United States, these solutions would expand the revenue base. The upside for global institutions is that a more effective education system could draw more dollars from sources like government agencies, alumni networks, and impact investors that respond to quality outcomes and could fill crucial funding needs.

Because of the rapidly evolving and iterative nature of the new knowledge economy, effective solutions will need to dramatically reassess how and when people turn to educational institutions. Rather than viewing higher education as a discrete event that occurs between the ages of 18 and 24 and prepares students for their entire working lives, a long-term view is needed in which an educational journey runs parallel to a career. Students,

educators, and employers can substantially benefit by updating their definition to reflect our modern reality: since the economy is constantly changing, jobs are too. And as jobs transform, people need to constantly acquire new skills in order to keep up.

Supporting programs that make it easier to continually learn will help immensely in making higher education more responsive to a person’s lifelong education needs. Southern New Hampshire University, through its College for America (CFA) program, has partnered with more than 100 employers and community organizations around the country to offer working adults affordable education programs that are compatible with the lifelong learning model. CFA offers competency-based education, predicated on the mastery of workplace-relevant skills rather than on credit hours. The entire CFA program is designed to fit into, support, and improve the life of a working adult, with flexible online courses that make CFA a practical program for people at all stages of their lives and careers.

### Learning for the Changing Demands of Today and Tomorrow

Cooperation between employers and educators should play a key role in any solution that seeks to provide students with access to an education that prepares them for lifelong learning and a meaningful career in the new economy. Institutions of higher education can better serve their students and ensure positive outcomes by reinforcing the feedback loop with employers. These institutions can and should communicate directly with employers to discover which skills will be most likely to land graduates a well-paying job and put them on a rewarding career trajectory—then relay that message to students and encourage them to study those in-demand fields.

Aside from the individuals themselves, employers are perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of institutions that train new talent, but all too often, a false distinction is made between discussions on how to make education more effective in preparing students for their careers and discussions about how to connect more people with meaningful employment opportunities. Rather than considering these two complementary components as discrete goals, employers should work with education providers to signal which skills are most valuable for today’s and tomorrow’s careers.

In Nigeria, the West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE) partnered with Lagos State Office of the Special Adviser on Education to deliver education for market-relevant and in-demand skills in Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital with an estimated population of 17



million. WAVE piloted an innovative career readiness program across a selection of tertiary institutions (universities and polytechnics) in partnership with employers and the state government

Working alongside WAVE was an audacious project called Ready.Set.Work, which bridged the education-to-employment system by training 450 youth in 2016, and then 2,000 the following year, in employability and entrepreneurship skills. The program connected participants to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities post-training. WAVE developed and delivered the employability curriculum in partnership with employers and delivered it through the existing university system.

Having young professionals from different industries teach the classes made the content even more engaging and relevant, and further contributed to breaking down the traditional boundaries existing between higher education and the labor market. Sponsoring companies that had committed their employees' time to volunteer to teach also provided internships, paid for by the government for three months, to graduating students.

### Creating an Inclusive System

No one comes to the talent development discussion with more credibility and respect than educators. They have the expertise and experience to implement systemic change, and their

continued efforts to work within their own ecosystems and partner with other organizations is crucial.

Many people stand to gain from a more inclusive, outcomes-driven higher education system. Many more people stand to lose if the world's higher education institutions fall into irrelevance or, worse yet, disdain, because they fail to meet the needs of a wide swath of our society. It's time to consider ambitious solutions on an ambitious scale. ■

**BYRON AUGUSTE** is CEO and cofounder of Opportunity@Work.

**KARAN CHOPRA** is executive vice president and cofounder of Opportunity@Work, as well as cofounder of West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE). Don't miss "Quick Questions" with Auguste and Chopra on page 16.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Opportunity@Work

[www.Opportunityatwork.org](http://www.Opportunityatwork.org)

Arizona State University

[www.asu.edu](http://www.asu.edu)

College for America

[www.collegeforamerica.org/about-college-for-america/](http://www.collegeforamerica.org/about-college-for-america/)

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