

A Needed Shift in Defining Higher Education Value: Using Data to Both Create and Prove Value

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Data can drive success in more ways than one. Institutions can leverage data to improve the student experience and learning outcomes, which impact their outcomes metrics, which can then be used in outreach efforts to attract new students while affirming the positive impact of the institution itself.

Securing a higher education today—whether it is for a degree, a certificate, or just a few courses—is a cost born by students across the nation. However, the

previously perceived *invaluable* investment in formal education is facing new harsh criticism as the cost of college and university tuition has risen significantly faster than inflation. Americans are increasingly questioning the return on higher education against its cost. In fact, **recent Gallup polls** reflect that:

- 80 percent of Americans agree or strongly agree that colleges and universities need to change to better meet the needs of today's students.
- Only 6 percent of Americans with degrees strongly agree that college graduates in this country are well prepared for success in the workplace.
- 79 percent of Americans do not think that education beyond high school is affordable for everyone in this country who needs it.
- Only 50 percent of university graduates believe that higher education is worth the cost.

In understanding the path to where public perception now lies, and where higher education is increasingly less of a common rite of passage, it will be the role of higher education leaders to help facilitate a turning of the tide and to reinvigorate the notion that formal education is a key factor toward professional and personal goal advancement. However, in today's new world of electronic monitoring, where information spreads in nanoseconds, this cannot be done just through the traditional lens of what has been the historic components of higher education quality.

Academic quality is still largely evaluated by the most well known rating agencies and among most higher education stakeholders using only institutional inputs. This includes factors such as percentage of tenured faculty, rigor of institutional entrance requirements, and scores from peer evaluations as their predominant measurements.

However, if the American public is to understand the true value of education, it would seem that more importance should be placed on clarity and transparency on student outcomes.

That objective can be met in a variety of ways. At Colorado State University-Global Campus, an institution created to serve non-traditional learners toward workplace success through education, we focus on using inputs as well as outputs to build quality programs that are both academically rigorous and career-relevant. Inputs include curriculum that imparts both academic theories and workplace application of such theories; faculty with industry work

experience in their areas of expertise; acquisition of skills and abilities leading to industry certifications; and 24/7 free access to live tutoring, technical support, career services, library databases and career and writing coaches.

Our outputs include above-industry student retention towards graduation; high learning outcomes achievement; 95 percent alumni satisfaction with their CSU-Global education; and 98 percent employer satisfaction with CSU-Global alumni employed at their organization. Additionally, nationally normed assessment scores reflect that our student move from the 46th percentile before starting our programs to the 74th percentile when they graduate. Finally, CSU-Global alumni have demonstrated consistent salary increases each year since 2012 based on four-year graduating cohorts from when CSU-Global first opened its doors to students in fall 2008.

The university's dogged tracking of student engagement and learning from initial enrollment through graduation, and its ongoing monitoring of alumni workplace success, is what we widely share in an effort to demonstrate the impact of our education and value proposition to prospective, current and graduating students, as well as to key stakeholders.

Not only can a focus on these metrics impact public perception of educational value, keeping the institutional focus on these outputs can also drive strategic direction and individualized student support. This more holistic approach to qualitative and quantitative improvements should play a larger role in the student experience for education, and we can see the impact of this work elsewhere. In the private sector, for example, corporations use a blend of qualitative and quantitative outputs to drive customer satisfaction, which has a significant impact on customer retention over time. In the same vein, we continuously monitor all areas of our organization to ensure that we are delivering the highest quality end product.

We do this in a few ways. Some examples include regular assessment of academic programs and student learning outcome achievement, which become actionable curricular improvements through our 18- to 24-month program review cycle. Faculty and students are monitored for course interactions to proactively intervene when potential at-risk situations arise, and students are provided with opportunities to evaluate faculty after each term to ensure their expectations are being met.

Operationally, CSU-Global uses data-based practices to ensure scalability of staff, faculty and budgeted resources to optimize performance based on forecasted student growth, persistence and retention. As a state university that does not receive state appropriations, this is essential in our ability to stay financially viable with a sole mission of increasing student success.

CSU-Global's significant engagement and retention of students since 2008 affirm the effectiveness of our embrace of new technological and data-based approach to quantifying ROI for its students and stakeholders.

As we cannot turn back the clock nor stop the progression of technology-based tools, it would seem that, as an industry, we should leverage these metrics to our collective advantage. We too can learn!

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