

# Creating and Maintaining an Innovative Culture Through Continuing Education

*[Sandi Pershing | Assistant Vice President of Engagement, University of Utah](#)*



As non-traditional students become an increasingly visible segment of the student population, colleges and universities will need to rely on continuing education units to take a leadership role in innovating to meet their needs.

*Higher education is a constantly changing industry, but not all traditional colleges and universities view innovation as a watch-word for success. As Sandi Pershing points out, continuing education is often the department that bridges between old and new, and has a responsibility to serve as a vanguard for innovation and creative problem-solving. In this interview, Pershing discusses professional and continuing education's role in bringing innovation to the wider institution, and points to the roadblocks that can stall innovation in its tracks.*

**The EvoLLLution (Evo): How does an entrepreneurial mindset benefit a continuing education division and the university more broadly?**

**Sandi Pershing (SP):** Continuing education departments are driven to keep our universities on the cutting edge of innovation and relevancy. We're driven by the changing demands of our learners and our institutions.

Historically, professional and continuing education units have served as innovation incubators for the broader university: The business model of institutions as a whole often relies on professional and continuing education units to scan the horizon for new opportunities, new methods and new trends in higher education that have the potential to be applied to other departments and units across campus.

In CE, our learners' expectations are constantly changing, which requires us to approach things from an innovative mindset. We never truly catch up, but that's part of the culture.

At the same time, we are sometimes embedded in institutions that don't have the same adaptive and responsive approach that we do, which can be challenging. There's an economic benefit to supporting our efforts to open our institutions to new innovative and entrepreneurial practices.

**Evo:** You've raised two diametrically opposed ideas: On the one hand, you have CE divisions, which are entrepreneurial, innovative and forward-thinking, and charged with driving broader campus change. On the other, you have institutions themselves, which tend to be slower moving and more averse to change. How do you maintain that balance of being forward-thinking while managing anxieties about that very change across the rest of the institution?

**SP:** There is a real paradox in higher ed. We want to innovate in order to give people what they want, but we are also heavily steeped in traditional methods and practices.

The role of professional and continuing education units is to push the envelope, but we have to do it in ways that are acceptable to the wider institution. I find it's helpful to come to the table with data that proves CE's value, both on a national level—here's what other institutions are doing and here's how it works—and on an institutional level. We can tell how many students have their first interaction with professional and continuing education on our campus, where they've gone next and what they've gone on to achieve.

We also like to share how many matriculated students engage with continuing education while they are studying on campus, and who comes back to continuing education after they graduate. It's critical for us to understand and know the alumni and community partners that are engaging with continuing education. This important information can contextualize our value to deans, department chairs and upper administrators. If we present data in financial terms we are speaking their language, which helps them understand the changing landscape of higher education.

**Evo: What are some of the most common roadblocks that an innovative leader, particularly in a professional or continuing ed role, is likely to encounter when trying to bring innovation to campus?**

**SP:** There are four categories of roadblocks to innovation.

The first is financial. Sometimes to build something new, you need to invest in the technology or people power to launch it. Continuing education units are particularly good at finding ingenious solutions for innovating on a tight budget—in my department we call it MacGyvering. Sometimes you can pull together the right people and resources to launch something, but without financial wherewithal it may not get off the ground.

The second category is cultural, meaning whether an institution is ready to embrace innovation. Alternative credentials, for example, are something that can feel like a threat to the way things have always been done, and as a result, administrators may resist bringing them to campus. It's our responsibility to help address those roadblocks and bring market research to the table to help

administrators understand how critical it is to offer unique pathways to higher education.

The third category is institutional barriers, which covers quite a lot. Often, the institution has policies in place that can make it difficult for CE units to maneuver innovatively. These institutional barriers can also be technological. For example, you might try to run a class within continuing education that's outside normal semester timelines so it doesn't work with the traditional campus database. In situations like this, you have to build outside systems to work around the traditional system, which can be cumbersome.

Another institutional barrier, within the third category, is internal competition. When other departments on the campus are trying to do something similar, that can create confusion within the community about what the university should prioritize.

Still within the same category is the challenge of strategy: If continuing education is trying to do something that isn't clearly articulated as a strategic mission of the institution, it can be harder to gain support for it. Past history can also create trust barriers that need to be overcome.

Finally, the fourth category is systemic roadblocks. Continuing education tends to be agile and quick, but it's embedded in a system that isn't. It can be a real challenge to keep up with everything that's changing while also striving to bring the institution along for the ride.

How do we address those roadblocks creatively? How do we help our institutions understand the landscape of higher education as we see it? How do we keep our institutions relevant? How do we open the door to all learners? That's the unique role of professional and continuing education.

**Evo: You mentioned technological roadblocks. What are some of the constraints that limit CE divisions to using organizational approaches and technologies that are designed specifically for traditional, main campus students and administrators?**

**SP:** I'll give you an example. We're a PeopleSoft campus, and PeopleSoft is much more comfortable working within a traditional academic structure—that is, a course that runs 16 weeks, starts on this day and ends on this day; students pay their tuition by the deadline and receive their grades on a set day. For continuing

education, that structure just doesn't work. We might have a one-night jewelry-making class that runs during the semester break. PeopleSoft really doesn't understand what to do with that.

Going back to the MacGyver philosophy, we've had to create a shadow system that works behind the scenes to process these sorts of classes. The student doesn't realize what's going on, but that's how it should be. We should provide a seamless experience, even if we're working within a system that would not otherwise feel seamless. It creates extra work for us, certainly, but we want the student to feel that their enrollment process is as easy as buying a book off of Amazon: I did it, I'm in the class, it's done.

At the 2018 UPCEA conference, Simone Ahuja—who wrote a book called *Jugaad Innovation*—spoke about the idea of frugal innovation. That is exactly what it is like to work in continuing and professional education. How do we find an ingenious solution using what we have and what we know, and turn a challenge into an opportunity? How do we be flexible, and not allow constraints to keep us from giving students a great experience?

**Evo: You're trying to create an experience for students that looks and feels seamless, but it must involve superhuman efforts from your staff to bring those disparate pieces of information and processes together to build that experience. How do administrators create time and opportunity for their staff to be innovative, given how much effort has to go into creating processes that work?**

**SP:** It becomes part of the culture of the organization. A positive student experience is our top priority, so we build that into the way that the organization works and into our expectations of each other.

From a leadership perspective, we have to ensure that, whether they're building that shadow system or navigating students through the system, our staff's workload allows them to have the time and the support to get things done even in this more complicated structure. In some cases, the work-around systems are designed to make the process more efficient, so you might put a little more time into creating it, but at the end of the day it's making things cleaner and more efficient behind the scenes as well.

It's also important for a leader to be actively present in that work, to be focused on the goals, accountable for the results, and open to receiving feedback. The

leader has to create a sense that building new ideas and new processes is as important as the work that's already in place.

Involving internal and external stakeholders in the discussion, planning and implementation is also important because you don't want to create a system that creates havoc in different departments. For example, if the system adversely affects income accounting or financial aid, you should know before implementing it rather than after the fact. You need to have a guiding coalition of people who all stand to be impacted by the work. Again, that takes time up front but it leads to better results.

There also has to be a guiding vision of CE as the place to find creative solutions. "Here's our definition of creativity and success." I think if you define those guiding terms loosely and don't build a structure around what creativity looks like, it can leave the department rudderless.

You also have to create an environment where failure is an opportunity to learn. People can't be punished for trying something new — they should be encouraged to fail better the next time.

It's a very different mindset in continuing education. We want to be ten steps ahead of the institution in order to bring value to the table. At the end of the day, we're the front porch for our institutions. For many, we're the first stop into higher education. We have to make student interactions wonderful and seamless and innovative, and it's a responsibility we take very seriously.

**Evo: On many university campuses, the number of non-traditional students enrolling in what were previously thought of as traditional programs has grown, and so has the necessity for an understanding of what part time students need to succeed. As campuses start to look to their continuing education divisions for expertise in how to serve non-traditional learners, do you anticipate CE will start to shift into the center of institutional operations?**

**SP:** Yes. With online programs, alternative credentials and pre-college access work becoming the norm, continuing education is an increasingly central part of the discussion. We understand the important work of serving all audiences, not just traditional four-year bachelor's students. What do we need to offer to students across the lifespan so they can succeed? Administrators are starting to realize that CE brings that unique perspective, and that we should have a seat at

the table when it comes to changing our institutions to meet these new audiences.

**Evo: As continuing ed becomes more of a central part of the institution, will it be possible for it to maintain that innovative mindset?**

**SP:** I think so. Continuing education units operate differently at every institution, but at the end of the day our core mission is to be several steps ahead of our institutions and to keep them relevant in the changing higher ed marketplace. As we become more integral to our institutions, we're going to be motivated to be even more innovative. It's part of this profession, and part of how we approach our work. That won't go away, no matter how we're situated.

**Evo: Is there anything else you'd like to add about what it takes for a CE leader to maintain that innovative focus within their organization?**

**SP:** CE units are uniquely situated to bring innovation and access to our campuses while serving a broad set of audiences. With support from our institutions, and a focus on that creative jugaad mindset; with a constant scanning of the horizon and consultation of the data available to us, we can make smart, strategic decisions and create a culture of innovation, not only within our units but within our institutions. That puts us in a critical leadership position.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

<https://evollution.com/managing-institution/higher-ed-business/creating-and-maintaining-an-innovative-culture-through-continuing-education/>