

HIGHER ED RESPONDS TO SHIFTING WORKFORCE NEEDS

Higher education has long been a field of constant change. In the past few years, the rate of change has accelerated with the pandemic as the driver. The pivot to virtual courses was just the tip of the iceberg. For many schools, this wasn't a huge change—they'd been offering online learning for years, and they had online platforms like Canvas and Panopto in place that could accommodate a broader shift.

But the pandemic also disrupted the market that higher ed institutions primarily serve: employees, both current and future. Even with coronavirus infection rates generally in decline, Minnesota employers are having to adapt to a new normal of workforce shortages, hybrid workplaces, and higher turnover. All this affects how regional colleges and universities deliver education.

Colleges and universities are grappling with fundamental questions: How can degree-granting programs or certificates adjust to the current needs of the labor marketplace and of the employees



that companies want to hire and keep? How can higher education continue to fulfill its mission of providing practical education while broadening students' outlooks on life as well as on work? And with enrollments declining, how will postsecondary institutions attract students to their programs?

Two local higher education leaders share their thoughts and visions. As business and workforce development needs evolve, Minnesota's colleges and universities are changing along with them.



LARRY LUNDBLAD

Executive Director for Workforce and Economic Development, Minnesota State

In this labor market, employers are recruiting hires who need further training. Colleges and universities are in the position to not only serve as a source of new talent, but as a partner to develop the specific skills employers need from new grads or current employees. This is a growing need, and we encourage Minnesota State colleges and universities to be attuned to the local employment market and to help employers solve their hiring difficulties.

Partnerships include employers offering internships or "earn and learn" programs that combine education with hands-on work experience. Another option is tuition reimbursement that encourages individuals to gain employable skills. Employer funds can be used to match the state's Workforce Development Scholarship program to make education affordable for those who don't think they can afford college, while recruiting students to high-demand sectors of Minnesota's

economy. Lastly, we encourage employers to serve on advisory boards to inform curriculum or donate equipment, so students gain experience on relevant or advanced technologies.

Minnesota State colleges and universities have partnerships like those I've described with more than 7,000 employers across Minnesota. These partnerships are win-win-win—employers take an active role in educating the talent they need, colleges offer relevant education, and students and workers develop skills needed for current and future jobs.



MICHELLE WIESER, PH.D.

Dean, School of Business and Technology, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota

The world of higher education has experienced a disruption similar to that of other industries. Colleges and universities across the country were already planning for a future enrollment cliff—fewer people in the traditional student demographic and shifting demographics resulting in heightened competition for

high school students making the leap to college. Enter a global pandemic, and we now have a greater sense of urgency to innovate or be left behind.

Although innovation in higher education can take many forms, today's challenges point to the need for new types of programs that lead to rapid reskilling or upskilling.

At Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, we have met these challenges with stackable credentials at the master's level, additional online degree options, accelerated bachelor's to master's pathways, and an exciting new digital badging strategy. This student-centric approach has allowed students to rapidly attain marketable new credentials at a far lower cost and time commitment than a full degree program.

FALL ENROLLMENTS IN MINNESOTA POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

	2018	2019	2020
Undergrad	237,616	231,246	219,643
Graduate	44,577	43,485	43,192

SOURCE: MINNESOTA OFFICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION