

Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 90

HOW COLLEGES ARE DEFINING AND MEASURING THEIR VALUE

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(MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Colleges are under growing pressure to prove their value to students, parents, legislators, and others. The scrutiny can be uncomfortable, but more are responding with serious efforts to measure and explain their value. Hello, and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, Inside Higher Ed's editor and co-founder, and it's great to have you here. This episode is the last in a three-part series on value in higher education. It looks at the data and metrics we're using now, and those we maybe should be using going forward to gauge the value college and universities are providing to their students and other constituents. I'm joined for these conversations by Michael Itzkowitz, Senior Fellow in Higher Education at the center-left think tank Third Way, José Luis Cruz Rivera, President of Northern Arizona University and a member of the Postsecondary Value Commission, and Pamela Brown, Vice President for Institutional Research and Academic Planning for the University of California President's Office.

In the first part of the episode, I talked with Michael Itzkowitz and President Cruz Rivera about Third Way's method of calculating the return on investment for specific colleges and academic programs, and about Northern Arizona's plan to center its new strategic vision around delivering what it calls equitable postsecondary value. Then I'm joined by Pamela Brown to discuss UC's recent research effort to define and measure the value of a degree from the 10-campus university system. Before we begin, here's a word from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which sponsored this episode and the three-part series.

SPEAKER:

This episode of The Key is brought to you by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, working to ensure that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are no longer predictors of educational success. Learn more about the foundation's work to improve digital teaching and learning, advance institutional transformation, and more at [usprogram.gatesfoundation.org](https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org).

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Now, here's my conversation with Michael Itzkowitz of Third Way and José Luis Cruz Rivera of Northern Arizona University. Michael and José Luis, welcome to The Key. Thanks for being here.

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

Thanks for having us.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Michael, you were last here on The Key last spring, and you were talking about the price earnings premium that you and Third Way had developed as a way to measure value in higher education. Can you give us a quick overview of how you've seen those data and other efforts to measure postsecondary value influence, both the public conversations about higher education and, to the extent you've seen it, the behavior of colleges and students?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

Yeah. I think over the past year specifically, perhaps following the pandemic, we've seen an increased uptick in students and families wanting to know what type of return on investment they're going to get from their college education. So in 2020 we released a paper, which was a new way of evaluating

institutions of higher education. Specifically, we were looking at the cost that students pay out-of-pocket to obtain a specific credential, whether that be a certificate, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree, relative to the earnings boost or premium that they obtain by attending a specific college. And we defined earnings boost as the amount more that they are making beyond the typical high school graduate within the state that their institution is located. And what we did is we took these two numbers, and when we have the earnings boost relative to the cost, that we can take that earnings boost and get a better understanding of how long it takes students to actually recoup their educational investment after they attend a specific institution. So over the past few years, we've really seen institutions, and I think the broader higher education community, latching onto this narrative just to get a better understanding of whether or not specific institutions, and even college programs, are paying off.

So following this institutional analysis, we actually looked at program-level data, and it looked at specific programs within an institution. So we actually have data from the U.S. Department of Education that allows us to look at, if you study engineering, or social work, or psychology at a specific institution, what's your sort of ROI that you're getting, looking at your costs that you pay relative to the earnings boost that you're obtaining? So we've definitely seen students and families using this information, but we've also heard from institutions that are now, I think, just starting to understand that the data is there, and really showing an interest in the program-level data in terms of how they improve their programs and all of their offerings writ large.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

So José Luis, you were a member of the Gates Foundation's Postsecondary Value Commission when you were president at your last institution, Lehman College. And since you've been president of Northern Arizona, since last year, you've made delivering equitable postsecondary value, that's a quote, a key part of the university's new strategic vision. Can you tell us why you've made that a focus, and give us an initial sense of how you're defining that term and, to the extent you are, how you're measuring that value?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

Northern Arizona University is 123 years old, and it has a long legacy of providing opportunity to higher education within Arizona and beyond. And as we were starting our 17th Presidency, we had an opportunity to have a university-wide conversation about how we wanted to ensure that the excellent education that is provided by our university was made available to more students inside and outside of Arizona. And as we were having those conversations, it became clear that the concept of equitable postsecondary value would serve as a good North Star. If you look at our newly approved vision as a university, part of our NAU charter, the vision calls on us to become the nation's preeminent engine of opportunity, vehicle of economic mobility, and driver of social impact by delivering equitable postsecondary value to the people of Arizona and beyond. It is really a way for us to capture the fact that we need to ensure that more Arizonans, in this case, have an access to an excellent postsecondary education, that the quality of our programs and the way that they are designed and aligned with workforce needs, is such that they will provide them economic mobility, and that we do not lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day, in addition to the individual or private gain that our students, as they graduate, will have from their degree, that at the end of the day, as a public university, we're also very much about driving social impact.

And so the way we go about educating our students and the careers that we educate them for has to be accounted for as well as value to the people of the state, not just as value to the individual students.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

How do you define value when it comes to what you're trying to do at NAU?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

So that's a great question. And we are, in fact, in the process now that we have developed this new NAU charter, focused on value, of defining some institutional metrics that will also factor into the way the Arizona Board of Regents measures the ability of NAU to advance this work. From the perspective of the individual students, we're of course looking at everything from our ability to expand access in Arizona, right? So the enrollment and the types of students that we're admitting, all the way through persistence and graduation, and then postcollege outcomes, their labor wage data. We are looking at the Third Way index, another economic mobility indices, we're looking at the IHEP equitable postsecondary value explorer, but we're also looking at our total number of graduates, for example, in areas like social work, like teachers, early childhood caregivers, and mental health specialists, and nurses.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

One of the interesting questions around this is how, quantitatively, we should be able to measure certain things, and higher education's never been terrifically good at measuring its impact, but we've never really had good ways of measuring learning. Career outcomes are measurable, and we've seen a lot of movement by governments and by organizations like Michael's in driving those data forward. We are, right now, pretty dependent on postcollege earnings to define value, and that makes a lot of sense given what we know about, as Michael said, the fact that that's a primary, if not the primary, reason that many people go on to get education and training. How desirable is our current primary dependence on career outcomes to define value in higher education? Is it how we want it to be? Should it remain the dominant definer, Michael?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

I'd say it comes from which perspective that you're looking at this for. So I specifically focus on federal policy. I want to help ensure that federal taxpayer dollars are being used effectively and efficiently, and that students have at least minimally good outcomes to where they're not worse off after they attend a federally-funded institution or college program. And I think that the bar has so low, if almost non-existent, in terms of how we measure college programs on institutions based off of outcomes, that this is really a very low hanging fruit and a very reasonable starting point depending on how you look at it. For example, we can see that there are 6,000 college programs across the United States to where their graduates, two years after they've graduated, are still earning less than the typical high school graduate in the state that their college is located. Now, just to think about how low this is, this sort of ranges from as low as \$22,000 in some states and not much higher and many more.

And thinking about you've paid this money, whether through personal finances or loans, you've earned your credential or degree, and you're still making below that minimal threshold. Now, if you ask any student or any family whether they would be comfortable taking out loans and using their taxpayer grants and/or personal finances to have this sort of outcome, I almost guarantee that 98% would say, "No, I'm not comfortable with this." And literally we have almost nothing in place in terms of economic outcomes, at least as a starting point. And we know that so many more institutions and college programs are going to supersede this minimal threshold. So I think it's very reasonable depending on

how you're looking at it. Number one, it helps you identify the most risky programs, which is really something that I'm really interested in and that I would say is rather easy to see through the data. Once you get past those programs that do pass this minimal threshold, then it becomes more of a question of how do we address college effectiveness?

We can see social work programs that run across the gamut in terms of outcomes, teacher programs that run across the gamut. And how do we look at the specific types of students that they serve, where they're located, and whether or not they're actually producing the outcomes that we want in higher education?

DOUG LEDERMAN:

The tricky part is that once data are out there, it's very difficult to limit, control, influence how they're used. And the use case that you described, kind of inarguable in many ways, where I think it gets tricky is when you start seeing politicians say, "Well, why are we supporting social work programs?" It is all about how it's used, and to me the question is, given the bar that you just described and the use case that you just described, it's what else do we do to enhance and flesh out the discussion about college quality and college value?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

I really look at it as a digging deeper starting point. But I still will mention that we literally have almost no safeguards in place for students and taxpayers on the economic outcomes that a certain college program and/or institution produces. There's some talk of it, but right now, there's almost nothing, if not nothing altogether. So you have this data, and I think with any federal policy, if that were to be put in place, you kind of put the data out there, and this has been put out there for a very long time, right? Everyone has access to this. As you said, Doug, you can use it in a bunch of different ways, but it's out there, and if you're a college administrator, you do know about this data or you should be aware now. Now, if I was an administrator, just for an example, while there are still no strong safeguards in place, federally, let's just say I'm a community college president or college president, I have data on all 50 of my programs. I can see that 40 of them are working really well.

I can see that five are sort of on the fringe in terms of economic outcomes, and I can see that five are actually leading to the majority of my graduates not even earning as much as a typical high school graduate where my institution is located. This is really a good starting point to start asking questions in terms of, is my program not working the way that I think it is? Is my curriculum not matching up with the skills that are required in terms of being successful, economically, within the field that we're preparing students to enter? Is there something going on with my career service center, as we're not matching graduates as effectively as we should be? Or, which is oftentimes the case, are we offering credentials where there aren't jobs within the geographic region where we're offering them? So I think that this is actionable information that allows administrators to constantly iterate, at least as a starting point, to dig deeper, to start asking these questions and continuously improve their institutions as a whole.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I'm speaking in today's episode of The Key with José Luis Cruz Rivera, President of Northern Arizona University, and Michael Itzkowitz, Senior Fellow for Higher Education at Third Way. José Luis, as you're starting to develop and collect data and metrics that you want NAU to be judged by, what else is in that mix, and how do you think about career outcomes as part of the larger whole?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

There's various aspects to that. The first is as we're looking at the economic data, we're also working here at NAU to better understand the non-economic social value aspects of our degrees in the work that we do. We want to look at civic engagement, voter behavior, cultural and artistic contributions, contributions to innovation and science, basic and applied. So, there are various metrics that will balance, if you will, the overall contribution that NAU, in this case, makes through its graduates to the state. Setting that aside for a second and focusing solely on what the data would allow us to do as administrators and leaders of these institutions, and I think Michael presented a good way of thinking about it, which is, it's an entry point into better understanding how your academic programs, your portfolio of academic programs is faring. Not only for individuals but also to the communities they represent. And I'll give you one example. If we look at our portfolio of programs right now and try to think about the quality, if you will, or the importance of those programs purely from the perspective of premium earnings of our graduates, our teacher's program would not be faring very well, because we're in a state that ranks 50th out of 50 in teacher pay.

And so, what that tells us is not that we're going to shut down our teacher's education program, certainly, there will always be opportunities to better align that with the needs of the students in Arizona, but beyond that, it also causing us to think more strategically about the cost of those programs. And that is something that I'm proud to say that NAU and Arizona as a state has been working on for the last several years. We have something called the Arizona Teachers Academy, which will provide students tuition-free teacher prep degree, provided they commit to staying in the state and teaching in a school in the States for the same number of years that they get this scholarship. For us, it's less about what are the low-performing programs on this metric, and more about how do we ensure that this is a viable program from an economic perspective to the individuals, knowing that we do need excellent teachers out in our schools.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I want to stick, for a minute, on this question of some of the non-purely economic outcomes, because I think some of the bristling that I see people in higher education doing is because of this sense of lowest common denominator and a sense that we're oversimplifying it and judging on too narrow metrics. Some of it, though, I think is not liking to be asked hard questions. And I think we are in an era of evidence, generally, from which we're not going back. So when you think about some of these other non-economic factors, do you think they are calculable? And do you think it's incumbent on institutions not just to say we encourage philanthropy, or more voting, or better health outcomes, but to prove it, which I think a lot of institutions have been disinclined or not prepared to do?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

Yes. I think there are ways to capture that. In fact, at NAU we appointed, for the first time, a chief economics advisor to the president, who is designing some studies that will allow us to get at some of those non-economic value metrics, if you will, from the standpoint of what Arizona, in this case, voters and taxpayers would be willing to invest in in order to get those non-economic outputs available to the state. I also think that we need to remember, as we think about public institutions, particularly four-year public institutions, is that we're called upon to do many things. We have to expand access, increase retention rates, improve learning, increase graduation rates, prepare graduates who are workforce ready, push the frontiers of knowledge, create more inclusive environments and economic development

in our communities, et cetera. So we need to make sure that our portfolio of metrics captures everything that we are entrusted to do on behalf of a state.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

And Michael, that's bringing it back to you, you're a hundred percent right to raise the various prisms that we might look through. And I don't see the federal government ever trying to come up with a way of measuring overall contributions by institutions to society. That's not really its job. Pulling back the frame, and for you, do you see the accountability sort of part of this pretty much stopping at the economic outcome level or do you think there are other ways that governments should be, and again, with your particular interest in the federal government, thinking about the institution's contributions?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

I think most of us engaging in this topic have probably attended a four-year school and we have this idea of what that means. We're thinking about students hanging out on the quad, and engaging in really cool ideas, and having Hare Krishna lunch, and going and critically thinking in all of the classes that they may take. And this comes from a sociology major right here. And a lot of institutions are less than four-year institutions, and they're specifically focused on offering career-oriented programming that leads students to acquire a specific skillset and enter the workforce immediately. And what we can see through data, specifically, is that disproportionately, these shorter term programs are oftentimes the most likely to have economic outcomes that raise a flag, that we can see as troublesome. And the way that I define it, of course, is not meeting that's very minimal economic threshold. So that's just something to take in mind is that we have to think broader than four-year institutions when thinking in terms of accountability.

To your point, Doug, it's very difficult to ask institutions to report more information, to think about some sort of nationally reporting structure that gauges them on civic engagement, being involved in the local community, being an active citizen, and contributing to a society the way that a lot of us think they should and that we value, specifically, thinking about the teacher example that José Luis brought up earlier. Oftentimes, people are worried about liberal arts majors that engage in these conversations, and I can see that liberal arts majors, oftentimes at four-year institutions, they have some sort of ROI, and we do know that the ROI will increase after a certain amount of years. They may not have it immediately in terms of how much they're making, but we can see an exponential increase in their salary after the first few years. And I can see teachers too as well, a very high proportion of programs are at least leading to some sort of economic mobility. The worries for some of these four-year programs aren't as big as they're presented, but we do need to think broader in terms of accountability.

And also keep in mind that a lot of programs are not four-year programs. They are career-oriented programs, and that's really important in terms of accountability writ large.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I want to press on that just for a second, because we had an accountability regime put in place during the Obama administration. The Gainful Employment Rules applied only to the most directly career-relevant programs. And I think there's a fair bit of discussion about whether there ought to be, use a tagline, gainful for all. Kevin Carey just proposed in a piece over the weekend, gainful for graduate schools, graduate programs, not for your undergraduate programs. Do you desire, and do you think it would make sense to have some kind of floor even for the non-purely vocational programs?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

Look, we do need to just look at the data and understand the facts. And students, whether they attend a public, a private, or a for-profit institution, oftentimes that is still their number one concern. For greater employability and to have a financially-secure future. I don't think that this necessarily just applies to students in career-oriented programs. So a few years back, Lamar Alexander did propose something called gainful for all. And he was proposing something based off of loan repayment rates. Now, our loan system is kind of all over the place right now due to the recent announcement on forgiveness, and I think that's another reason to look at employability as a floor. What we can see is that most programs and institutions are going to hit this floor without a problem. Now, right now, the way that it's written into law, gainful employment, that regulation specifically is to cover all for-profit programs and career-oriented programs at public and private nonprofit institutions.

I think that there is some discussion in terms of how we can actively implement this floor for all institutions. I think that the department is strapped right now in terms of statute, and what they can and what they can't do, but they are interested in putting out this information to where I and others can use it. And, hopefully, it'll spur some conversation. We have heard groups on more conservative sides of the aisle say we do want gainful or something like that for all. We haven't really seen a lot of proposals follow that rhetoric. So I'm interested in seeing if there's legitimate metrics or ways to create a minimum floor that can be looked at from both sides of the aisle, to actually move this conversation forward, which will ultimately be better for students and taxpayers alike.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

José Luis, how do you think you would react, and how do you think some of your colleagues might react, to a proposal that would ask all programs to meet the kind of floor that Michael's talking about?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

Well, I think accountability is important. The details are also important to see how that accountability is being defined, and how nuanced it is, and how much space it provides institutions to contextualize any areas in need of improvement. Welcome the conversation. I think that in the meantime, there's a lot that our accreditation agencies can do, to at least without hard floors, be able to encourage the continuous improvement that is needed across particular programs within a broader portfolio in a particular university. With respects to the situation where you have certain professions that perhaps the earnings are not commensurate with the cost of acquiring that degree, I think that there is a lot of introspection that we in higher ed need to do. And then as I mentioned with the case of teachers, there's a lot of innovation that can be tapped to ensure that these very critical types of disciplines and jobs are actually bringing the types of resources that are needed to ensure that they are economically viable for individuals.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

One of the in-betweens, between government regulation and a wild west, is greater agreement among institutions, themselves, about how they should be judged. And you're putting together your own set of definitions and set of metrics. One of the reasons I think we've seen higher education come under increasing scrutiny is because I think the industry hasn't been as forthright in, and as aggressive in, explaining how it wants to be judged, what it thinks it does. Do you think there would be benefit to trying to get a coalition of institutions to being willing to publish common information, and judge

themselves in somewhat the same way to give comparable information, even without maybe, maybe with a government nudge, but maybe not with a government stick?

JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA:

I think there's an opportunity for that. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, AASCU, has put together a group. There's approximately 10 institutions right now in that group that are working through the implications of the equitable value movement, if you will, and the data that is available to our institutions to think through how we can come together and present a common way of presenting ourselves for accountability. So I think that we're in the midst of that right now. And I think that over the next year, also with the funding of and backing up the Gates Foundation, there will be new ways of thinking about this and, hopefully, it will be such that it will attract more institutions, in a voluntary way, to present their own data.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Michael, beyond whatever you think should happen from a federal regulatory perspective, do you think there's opportunity for governments and other organizations to influence how colleges behave?

MICHAEL ITZKOWITZ:

As you may recall, 2013 was the initial scorecard that was put out, which is all the higher education data. And I think it was August, 2013, President Obama at the time made a speech that said, "We might actually use this data to do something like rate institutions." And for the next two years, institutions let everyone know, specifically the federal government, that they were not a fan of this. And if they want it to be rated, oftentimes, it's just they want to be rated on what they're best at in terms of metric. I think that just the first reaction is, "Absolutely not." That's the first reaction in terms of when you engage in this conversation, and then it's, "OK, the data's there. We're going to be looking at it regardless of what we think anyway." Then I think the data's at a point now in terms of how do we use this for continuous improvement, or it's getting there. It's slowly getting there as a tool to really work on continuous improvement. And I think from an administrative perspective and from a national perspective, from a college perspective, a lot of the folks in higher education are there for a reason, and it's because they want better outcomes for students.

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SPEAKER:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

We just heard from José Luis Cruz Rivera, President of Northern Arizona University, and Michael Itzkowitz, Senior Fellow for Higher Education at Third Way. Here's the second part of today's program, a conversation with Pamela Brown, Vice President for Institutional Research and Academic Planning in the University of California President's office. Pamela, welcome to The Key. Thanks for being here.

PAMELA BROWN:

Thank you for the opportunity.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

So the UC President's Office recently undertook a major project to define and show the value of a degree from the university. Can you tell us, briefly, why the office undertook that, and share with us a couple of the most important takeaways for our listeners?

PAMELA BROWN:

We had gotten some data from the State Employment Development Department which allowed us to get a better understanding of postgraduate earnings for our alumni, and it was a way for us to take a look at things like debt-to-earnings ratios and what happens after, whether or not students go on to graduate school. There were a number of different kinds of questions that we could answer, but we realized that that view was narrow and that alumni outcomes are much greater. So my team took a look at different frameworks that were out there, and we landed on looking at something called the Post-Collegiate Outcomes Initiative, which was something that a number of college associations, including the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities, pulled together, which gave you a framework to take a look at public and private benefits along an economic and well-being measure. And so, the team took a look at each of these quadrants that have different measures. And we looked at what was available nationally, and what we could do specifically for UC students, and it gave us a much broader appreciation of the importance of a college degree and what it means. A couple of the things that stood out to me, some of them falling back on the financial measures, was the importance of economic mobility and how earnings continued to rise after students graduated from the University of California.

In particular, when you looked at Pell Grant recipients, you'd see this intergenerational mobility where, five years after graduation, they'd earned more than their families did as a whole. For first-generation students, it was seven years. That was very important to think about, that return on investment, particularly when 40% of our students at the university are first-generation. The other thing that really stood out was the important role that our graduates play in job creation. So getting a UC degree didn't just mean that you got yourself a job, but oftentimes, you were creating jobs that would then employ others. When we went in to take a look at examples of them, you could also see the role that UC research was playing in the development of those companies. So it could be something related to smart agriculture, where they're reducing insects without using pesticides, but having drone technology to be much smarter about it. There was this interesting combination of data and then stories that could illustrate the importance of it to a wide range of audiences.

Could be the public, could be legislators, could be our board, it could be parents and students themselves.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That's actually right where I wanted to go next, which was who is this for, and from what directions is an institution like the University of California feeling pressure, motivation to answer some of these questions? Higher education for a long time didn't always get asked the hardest questions. There were a lot of assumptions that it was just a good thing, and we are absolutely seeing some increased questioning now. For whom is this done?

PAMELA BROWN:

Well, many audiences, right? The question kept coming up and we knew it would continue to come up, and so we thought that instead of approaching it in an ad hoc way, it would be good for us to do research, research that could benefit our campuses in being able to respond to questions along these

lines. The report that we've produced, 'What is the Value of a UC Degree?' is in part to support them in being able to communicate out the value, but also to support other colleges and universities that are looking at trying to do the same thing. We've shared the resources that we used as kind of roadmap to help them be able to do it. There's no question to me, after having done this research, about the really important value of getting a college degree, and particularly with the University of California. There are a number of ways where you see the benefits that alumni have. There are other places where it highlights if we do more work and support, we can better improve those outcomes. And so, I look to a couple initiatives that we have within the University of California that we're prioritizing, in part, based on this research to take a look at reducing the time to get a degree, particularly for what we're calling new generation students, or Pell, first-generation and underrepresented students that are the majority of the public high school students in California. If we looked at the outcomes that we had, students that graduate in six years instead of four, left with \$7,500 more debt.

And over 16 years of working, their earnings were 200,000 less. There's a economic impact about the longer time to a degree. So we're focused on efforts to provide more support for timely graduation between Pell, Cal Grants and the Blue and Gold program. We have more than half of our students that leave with no debt, but we are looking at ways to create debt-free pathways that will reduce the debt that students have, which on average is \$18,400. So it's a lot much lower than the national average.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

More broadly, do you think that the questioning about value is fair, reasonable, understandable? You talked early on about your sense that the economic outcome prism was too narrow to capture it all. It sounds like you agree, it's got to be an important part of the total picture. But what are the sort of key things that you think institutions should be doing for themselves to assure they're providing the value that they purport to and for their constituents?

PAMELA BROWN:

I think there are basic things to take a look at. Do your students graduate? How long does that take? Do they leave with debt? How much is that? Are they able to get employed? Is that employment sufficient to be able to repay the debt and move up to the middle class, if not beyond that? So there are a number of different ways to be able to look at it. I think what we found is that some of those simple measures can provide a baseline to start with, but the things that we found even more interesting were when we looked into things that aren't as easy to quantify and are more illustrative. So, for example, we got access to LinkedIn data to try to understand occupation, which is really hard to get. We can get an understanding of industries and other things from public sources. What specific jobs alumni had is a more difficult. And so, we did a very muddy project to pull that information together for every UC campus, their alumni that work at different major companies, including Google. And when we did that and we looked at undergraduate alumni, graduate alumni, we could start to talk about the kinds of jobs that they played and we could talk about the kinds of roles that students in arts and humanities played, which often were leadership positions, either management or C-suite offices.

And that gave us a different way to think about it. I think oftentimes you think STEM means tech, but tech has a lot of different kinds of students that they need with different backgrounds. And so, there was a way for us to better talk about what the outcomes would be that I think is more fair than just a number that says, "This is what you'll get." The one other thing is that, oftentimes, the measures that we have are just after graduation. And as we're continuing to collect data, we're seeing the trajectory of

incomes continue to rise, so it doesn't stagnate. That's really important. It happens across all disciplines. Between 2 and 10 years, earnings double. And then, as we continue to go on, we start to see that they even merge closer together.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

How do you think about and protect, at least, potentially, from quick judgment about their value or lack thereof, programs that are really designed to lead to fields that are notoriously low-paying, like social work and education and some others? And as you said, majors produce students who go off in lots of different directions, but a lot of the discussion about measuring value is focused on career preparation. And there are fields that are pretty, they're hardly vocational, but that are more vocational than my sociology major or the English major and, yet, instead of producing people for computer science, produce people for fields that we don't, as a society, value through pay as high as some other. So, I guess, I'm just curious how you think about the importance of this task for those fields, in particular. And do you feel that they are vulnerable to hard questions?

PAMELA BROWN:

Again, I think it's an importance of communicating out what the value is, and there are a number of different ways to do it. First, I think STEM majors benefit from having training in arts and humanities fields. There's a need for them to be able to communicate, to be able to work with others. They, often, are taking courses in those majors to be able to broaden their experience. So I think no matter what program you're in, you are likely having some exposure to those fields, which is really critical. Then if you think tech, we've got numbers of examples of how arts and humanities, and social science majors, are benefiting the technology industry that's there. The other thing I'll say is that many times, especially when we're talking to state legislators, their background is in those fields, right? It is social science, and arts, and humanities. And, again, if we show what happens and now we've got longitudinal, like decades of earnings from some of the data, we do see a continued increase for those in arts and humanities.

So I think that longitudinal view of what it means is not only that you can have a stable life, but you can do quite well.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Having gone through this exercise, which I imagine will be a work in progress and will probably never be finished, do you come away feeling more confident than you might have been 10 years ago, when most of what we were thinking about the value of a degree was kind of in our hearts and in our guts? Do you think that the sort of data that you're producing, framework you're building, make a strong case and enhance the way people might think about the value of a UC degree?

PAMELA BROWN:

Yeah, I definitely do. I mean, I think we're able to answer some of the basic questions that people have about what happens? Will I earn enough to be able to pay for my college and to have a good life? We can answer those sorts of things. I think the other thing that we can do is we can demonstrate why, back to the founding of the University of California, why it's important to have an educated citizenry. We can show that there's increased volunteerism, there is an increased likelihood of people that are voting, participating in public service roles that are critical to society. And especially in communities which are going to grow and where economic opportunities are not as great, the role that our research universities are going to be able to play in those areas is going to directly align with increasing economic opportunity

and social mobility, and I believe that this kind of information demonstrates why it's important and what it can do as we see those institutions continue to grow in stature and size.

So I think it's really valuable and important to do. It's been a really interesting project, and you're right, it's not done. So we'll continue to add on it to learn from other institutions about the approaches that they're taking and, hopefully, be able to demonstrate where we can do better as institutions and why education is really important for all of us, not just individuals, but society as a whole.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That was Pamela Brown of the University of California President's Office, adding her perspective to those of Michael Itzkowitz and José Luis Cruz Rivera from the earlier conversation. If I were to humbly try to sum up the nature of today's conversation and the rest of the episodes in this series, it's that A, Americans are asking harder questions than ever before about the value of higher education and the value of degrees. B, that most of the efforts to define and measure value revolve around graduates economic outcomes, which are hugely important, but almost certainly only part of the story of what higher education contributes to individuals and to society. And, C, that colleges are late to the game, but finally starting to come around to the idea that they have to engage with those who want them to define and prove their value. This is likely to be contested terrain for some time, especially to the extent that calls for evidence might be linked to government dollars in what is likely to be a time of constrained resources.

But the pressure is unlikely to abate, and it's heartening to see some institutions addressing these questions directly and striving to bring their colleagues along with them. That's all for this week's episode and a wrap on this three-part series. Thanks to all of our guests and to the Gates Foundation for its support. I'll be back with a new episode of The Key before you know it. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next time, stay well and stay safe. (MUSIC PLAYS)