

Transcription for



THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP 61: PUTTING CAREER READINESS AT HIGHER ED'S CORE

ANDY CHAN

CHRISTINE CRUZVERGARA

DOUG LEDERMAN

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and it's good to be with you.

In today's episode, we're going to return to the topic the we explored a good bit a few months ago, with a series of discussions about how to measure the value of a degree and the wisdom of judging colleges by the economic outcomes for their students. This remains contested terrain. Many employers and critics of higher education think many colleges and universities focus too little on ensuring that their graduates thrive after they leave and favor holding institutions accountable for how their students fare in the job market. That's unpalatable to a lot of academics who argue that college education is about a lot more than how much earned, and that some elements of higher education are unmeasurable.

Today's guests would like to move past that binary debate. In a new paper, Wake Forest University's Andy Chan and Christine Cruzvergara of Handshake endorsed the view that colleges and universities should be collecting and sharing data about how well they are preparing students for success in the workplace, given that that's the primary reason many students go to college. But the set of common metrics that they propose colleges use to measure their own performance is broad and it includes such data as how much institutions expose students to experiential learning while they're in college to graduates' satisfaction with their jobs once they leave.

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: The majority of students want to be able to have meaningful work, or need to have meaningful work after they graduate. That is just simply a reality these days. And for any institution to pretend that that is not the case I think is putting their head in the sand. The metrics that we've proposed allow for enough flexibility that institutions can still design what that means and how they might define that for their type of institution. But it doesn't get away from the fact that meaningful work is still now a huge piece of student success.

DOUG LEDERMAN: In the conversation that follows, Chan and Cruzvergara discuss the need for colleges, from the strategy crafted in the president's office to the learning that unfolds in every classroom, to prioritize their students' career readiness and to move beyond the tired debates that pit learning against vocation. Before we begin, here's a word from D2L, which makes this week's episode possible.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Joining me today are Andy Chan, vice president for innovation and career development at Wake Forest University, and Christine Cruzvergara, chief education strategy officer at Handshake, a career network for students, colleges, and employers. They just cowrote Outcomes and Metrics that Matter: Embedding Career Services at Higher Education's Core.

Andy and Christine, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: Thank you so much for having us.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You just cowrote this paper and I wondered if you could tell our audience a bit about what your goals were and the implications for university and college administrators and professors.

ANDY CHAN: Doug, thanks you for allowing us to join you today and I'm glad to be here with Christine. One of the really interesting books and concepts that is out in the world today is this idea of you measure what matters. And one of the things that we thought a lot about is are we really clear in world of career services, with the concept of career readiness, what are we really measuring? What outcomes are we achieving? In the academic world, we talk a lot about learning outcomes being really clear, about

what the learning outcomes are for every class, for every year in school, what we want them to really say are the competencies that they have when they graduate.

And one of the areas that we've been thinking a lot about is what does it mean when you [UNCLEAR] competencies? What are the measures? If you know what you're measuring, then you can figure out how to achieve them. And so that was really the gist of what we were thinking about here. And we were trying to actually write it and design it in a way so that it was not only just for the people who lead career services but actually for the people who lead the institutions-- the presidents, the provosts, deans, everyone who cares about the student experience and what matters most. And we know, as we wrote in the paper, students and their families really care about their outcomes as relates to careers, one of the top reasons why people go to college. And it's something that we have measured in some way, but not really as accurately as we think. I'll stop there and I'll ask Christine to add a little bit more on top of that.

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: I think that was a great synopsis. The only piece I would add on top of that is simply, as career leaders, you know, we want the attention of senior leaders at the institution, because believe that career education needs to be core and central to the institution's mission and to the student experience for every student. We don't want anyone to fall through the cracks. But in order for that to happen, we have to be able to elevate the most critical metrics and outcomes so that the school will pay attention, and that it's linked to the pieces that are most critical for every institution, when you think about their recruitment, their revenue, their retention. And so we wanted to put together a piece that would allow not only our peers and colleagues in career services to know what is perhaps most critical for their senior leaders to be paying attention to, but to give senior leaders a sense of this is what you want to pay attention to if you're not super familiar with career, you haven't perhaps thought about it before, now's the time, and here are some starting pieces that you can use to really determine is your institution on the right track.

DOUG LEDERMAN: When I think about this issue of measurement that you discuss, I've always thought that the precursor to figuring out what to measure is having the clearest possible sense of your mission and goals, and then determining how you might be able to capture that, and to the extent your constituents demand it, prove it. Too often higher education has let others define how to judge whether a college or university is effective. And when that happens, we tend to see most people define career success be purely economic in the federal government's college score card and elsewhere. How do you think about this issue about what to measure and how does that tie to what an individual institution or colleges collectively are trying to do?

ANDY CHAN: Historically, when we look at many student services, especially career services, what tends to be the outcome, where did you end up at or after graduation, and that's actually a statistic that historically has been very difficult for many schools to get in a very comprehensive way. A lot of schools say they're fortunate if they get even 30 percent of their students' actual outcomes. You have to put a lot of resources against it. And you have to have the institution actually really saying, we're going to work together to try to get the data on the outcomes.

Nevertheless, the thing, though, that is really problematic is that, one, like you said, are we getting actually enough data to be representative. And then two is, what other data could or should we be getting while the students are in school so that we can actually intervene and help them before they graduate. As we know, a lot of times what students do is they engage in this process till their last year of college, and by that time it's too hard to actually try any kind of intervention to help them be more strategic about what they might be able to get as outcomes.

The other thing that's actually really interesting is that, I don't mean to at all say that what we're getting in this college scorecard is not right. I actually think it is good to get quantitative data about outcomes, to be able to actually know where good students end up after you're done with school. We have to be careful, though, because sometimes what can happen is that we can sort of jump to the big number, which is how much are students getting paid, and all of a sudden the schools that look good are the ones that send students to white collar jobs, and so therefore that's where you want to go to school. And in fact, there could be a lot of other jobs and careers and graduate schools that students go to that are really more fulfilling and more meaningful.

What we're suggesting is a great addition to this, which is it really helps us understand what are the students learning, how much are they actually building social capital, which is very important as we all know with respect to [UNCLEAR] building our careers. And so these are things that we, I think could do a better job of, first, measuring, measuring accurately, and intervening earlier in the process.

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: Historically, if you take sort of a bird's eye view of career services and career metrics for an institution, other than outcome, there have really been no other common metrics that most institutions are sort of looking at. So it becomes difficult when you're trying to elevate this conversation and prioritize career education to leaders, some of whom know very little about career education and don't necessarily have a good gauge of how to perceive, how to view, how to hold accountable, how to think about the operation on their particular campus.

And so for me, now having worked outside of higher ed, I see that there are a lot of functions that actually have a pretty core common set of metrics that everyone, whether they work in that functional area or not is familiar with, right? And I think we would do our profession a huge service to have a common set of metrics that everyone is familiar with, understands what it means, knows how to collect it. And so when you are having those conversations with folks that are not familiar with career services, say, your president or your provost or your dean, senior administrators, there becomes a more common vernacular and language that everybody is sort of centering around.

And I think this is honestly just the first step, and Andy and I are not even suggesting all of the metrics that we have in this paper need to be common or standard. This is just helping us get to that point, so let's start the conversation and continue to whittle it down from there.

DOUG LEDERMAN: When you talk about doing anything common in higher education, you tend to get pushback from people who say, but our institution is so different. And there are definitely different institutional missions. And I'm curious how you think about this idea of applying something commonly to, say, the workforce part of a community college versus a liberal arts institution, where many of the faculty members, and probably some of the administrators would push back against that. Christine, you said the term career education as defining what they do makes me wonder that. How do you think about that tension, or do you think the metrics you're envisioning apply pretty equivalently whatever the institution's mission is?

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: Doug, that's such a good question. Having worked at a liberal arts institution and many other institutions, I can certainly attest to the fact that most institutions feel that what they do in their mission in their type of institution is different or special, so I certainly hear that.

Andy and I definitely took that into account as we were talking to different leaders. We wanted to make sure that we were getting a breadth of perspective. We wanted to make sure we were talking with folks across the spectrum to see are there commonalities actually. And different as some institutions are, is there a common foundation that many institutions either need to look at or their students care about?

And what I would argue is, while the way in which education is delivered looks different, the commonality that exists is that students, whether they are at two-year institutions, four-year institutions, a regional public institution, or an elite private institution, the majority of students want to be able to have meaningful work, or need to have meaningful work after they graduate. That is just simply a reality these days. And for any institution to pretend that that is not the case, I think is putting

their head in the sand.

The metrics that we've proposed allow for enough flexibility that institutions can still design what that means and how they might define that for their type of institution, but it doesn't get away from the fact that meaningful work is still now a huge piece of student success.

The past year has sort of taught us that equity is obviously a really huge issue. And when we think about educational equity, when we think about social mobility, there's the responsibility that we have being in education to think about that. And so the work piece is part of that conversation, is part of that equation. And to pretend that education is solely for the sake of learning, it is for the sake of learning, but it doesn't have to be solely for the sake of learning, would be a really privileged stance to take, because many of our students unfortunately don't have that privilege.

ANDY CHAN: I would just add that the AACNU and the National Association of College Employers, of which both composed of thousands of universities and colleges, have been talking for many, many years about the need for career readiness of our students. There are different ways that it can be defined. I think it is up to each school to actually define it well and measure it well, and so I do think that that would be, even that in itself, people could say career readiness is one of our top goals for every single student, and here's how we measure it, here's how we can prove to you that that actually happens would be amazing. Put together a leadership team, including career services, not only career services, to think through what does this really mean at your school. We're providing suggestions in our paper, but I do think no one is going to argue that this is not an important thing for every school to be thinking about.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: We're joined on The Key today by Andy Chan of Wake Forest University and Christine Cruzvergara of Handshake. What's your vision of how the data you talk about in this paper would ultimately be shared, and with whom? Is this for internal purposes, external purposes, accountability

purposes?

ANDY CHAN: first, internal, second, external, and then third I guess external for trying to compare yourself relative to everyone else. So first, internal, meaning that people internally within the institution agree that this is important, we're going to measure it. And we have our ways of talking about it and agreeing on it, very similar to what Christine said earlier that people are using the language, agree on the terminology, and understanding what we're trying to achieve. I think it's more important than ever. It's really clear in the article when we talk about the three trends and the changing demographics, especially in our real understanding that we have many students on our campuses who do not have the social capital, who have not had the historical experiences, or other types of resources that many other students have, and we have to help everyone. And I think everyone on every campus has a heart for that. And so if you could actually agree on that first internally and start to make it happen, that would be very powerful.

Then the second thing, I think, each school then could then think, okay, how now do we take this information and figure out how to talk about it with our external constituents, whether they be parents, alumni, prospective students, our own students? I do thing that that is an important step.

One of the things that I find that happens, it happens even on my own team sometimes, is we're afraid to get started because we're afraid of what we might find. And if we find that we're not doing such a good job with some set of students, uh-oh, we better not do this because it will actually uncovers something that we have to tell everyone about. Well, that's actually the purpose. You actually are trying to find where you're not doing quite a good enough job so you can actually do better. You have to go into this a little bit more like this is an exploration innovation, we want to get better project, not a we're doing this only so we can sell our school and say we're better than everyone else, to the extent of, oh, now we can compare from school to school to school.

I think that is going to take some set of schools who might come together and say, we're ready to be in a place where we can actually do the [UNCLEAR] the way we want to, or we can do it actually in a confidential kind of way that we can get better. I think that that's actually in some ways a lot more important, which is how do we maybe compare in a line showing at ten other schools like where we might get better, but not be about we have to be better than everyone else. Because then what happens is everyone gets afraid of doing it, and that's the last thing we want to have happen. Because we're in this for the student. We're not necessarily in this, again, we get a little twisted about, well, this is all about actually enrollment and making revenue. I think there's more than enough students out there for all of us to figure out how to serve. We're trying to serve the ones we have better.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Andy, you and others have been pushing for, or rethinking of career services and career readiness within institutions for some time now. I'm curious how much progress you think has been made, and what remain the biggest impediments to a full embrace of the status of career preparation and career readiness?

ANDY CHAN: The good news is that I think a lot of schools are talking about it. And I do think a lot of schools have changed their organization structure, hiring new leaders, trying to figure out a way to get more resources to career services. That's probably the biggest challenge, getting the resources.

I do think the biggest challenge, though, is actually having leadership really own it, not just career services, and so to the extent that this message that we're sending might help push that ball along, that would be really terrific.

o I do think like most change in the world, things happen in sort of bumps and starts, and then all of a sudden there is this huge step up or a big inflection point. I actually do believe that, for example, what Handshake is able to do has actually enabled us as universities and colleges to be much more efficient about how we work with employers and with our students, and so that's actually making us more effective. It's also allowing us to gather data that we haven't able have been able to have before, and do things with technology that we've never been able to do before.

So I do think that there is a tipping point and an inflection point that's about to come, and I do feel like this pressure is actually going to make that happen. So although, again, I think hundreds of schools are talking about it. I think of those, some subset is really making some transformational change. I think it's still yet to come. And I definitely not ready to give up. So I'll let Christine talk about what she sees at her end...

CHRISTINE CRUZVERGARA: And I'm glad you're not giving up yet. [LAUGH] We have a lot of work to do. And thank you for all the very ind things that you also pointed out about, obviously, Handshake and how technology can help to really like partner in this space. I think...

You know, Doug, similar to Andy I've been writing about sort of elevation of career services and the prioritization of this function for a long time. And I think my thinking and my observations have sort of

shifted a little bit over the years. I think when I first started writing about this, it was after the recession of 2008, and I think truly that was the first inflection point. It was the first time that legislators, parents, everybody was sort of saying, wait a minute... What's the return on investment here for my kid? What are we really getting out education, and is it really necessary, right?

And I think it was the first opportunity for many leaders in career services to say, hey, this is our moment. This is a chance for us to be more central to the institution's mission and to rethink how we've been doing our work, so that we're not just a peripheral student services office on the side, but instead really embedded into the fabric of the institution's experience for every single student.

And I think to Andy's point, you know, several hundred institutions at that point back in 2009, 2010 started to do this work. And for some of those institutions, they've made great headway in the past decade. But there are thousands of institutions. And I work with thousands of institutions, and it's still a struggle across many of them, because the level of prominent, the structure, the culture hasn't actually shifted just yet at their institutions. So there are bits and pieces of these conversations sort of starting, but there isn't a coordinated effort across the entire institution.

And I'm hopeful that we will continue to have these conversations, that this white papers, and quite frankly, everything that we've seen over the course of the past year and the pandemic will help to become another catalyst to really thinking about it.

But I think what has shifted for me is that it's not actually about a functional area any more. It's not about career services as an office. It is about elevating the concept and notion of career education for all students as a necessary outcome. And who is part of that conversation is not just the career office. They career office may lead it, the career office may coordinate it, the career office may be the main point of contact for all the various collaborators, but it actually is an institutional priority and institutional push. And you don't even actually need a lot of money to be able to do it. Financial restraint, or constraint is actually not the major barrier to this happening.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Can you finish that thought and say what is? Is it tradition, inertia? The more you're envisioning career outcomes and career education as part of the education, you obviously bring it more into the classroom, or at least more into the faculty realm. And I'm curious if you can talk a little bit about sort of what a vision like the one you just laid out requires that people who are charged primarily with instruction to do? What do you need them to do and how does it change their role, if at all?

CHRISTINE CRUZVER: The biggest impediments are structural, organizational, and cultural, not financial. So when you look at an institution, so often many schools are hierarchical in different way, right, and there is where the different types of institutions really comes into play, because different divisions, different hierarchy, different groups have different levels of influence depending on the type of institution that you are at.

If career or the person or persons that are helping to coordinate the overall institutional effort of career is four layers below the president, not at any strategies table, isn't part of the necessary committee task forces groups that are looking at this, or thinking about how it can be integrated or connected to the work that is happening across the institution, it's actually very hard for this to be embedded into the student experience, right? It's just logical. If you want it to be embedded, you have to make sure the person has a seat at the table.

So those are structural and sort of organizational challenges that can be fixed, and they can be fixed without money. It's making sure the right people are at the right table, it's making sure the right people are involved in the right conversations and decision making. That will also help to shift some of the culture.

Let me give you an example. You mentioned the faculty. I worked at a liberal arts institution, I worked at Wesley College, and proud, so proud to be a liberal arts institution, and I worked very closely with my faculty around the notion of career. And I think the biggest piece here is recognizing that for many faculty, they don't actually have to change much about what they are doing at all. The content, their expertise, is fantastic. Their pedagogy and the way they are teaching it is fantastic. But what we need to do is simply draw a harder connection between what they are doing in the classroom and how that is actually transferable or applicable to students beyond the classroom.

So I've worked with some of the faculty to simply say, you've chosen to have students do this group project. You've chosen to have them do a verbal presentation. You've chosen to have them do jointly written paper, right, as examples of pedagogy and how they have actually delivered or had students share back some of the content that they had learned in their classroom. None of that has to change.

But let's actually be explicit for 30 seconds or a minute when you are giving that assignment to students, tell them why you've had them do it as a group. Why do they have to work that out? Why have you

decided they're actually going to get a group grade instead of an individual grade? What are they learning in that process, right? Are they learning that in the world of work, almost everything you do is as a group and as a team, and at the end of the day, your boss or your supervisor or your company is likely to grade based on the outcome of that project, and not individually? Maybe, possibly... Those are some of the learnings that you get out of it. Will you work with people who are difficult, who don't always pull their weight, who don't always do all the work that you need them to do, and you have to still figure out to get the project done?

And so those are the types of things that are already happening in classroom across America. And so if we can simply help to make those connections stronger, we're able to embed and change some of the culture here so that we are not devaluing education as it is, or liberal education by any means, we're actually strengthening it, and we're coming alongside to complement it, because we know that it's so valuable. We know that so many different industries actually want to hire students across many different academic backgrounds, not just those that are specifically focused on sort of field-based training. And again, there's nothing wrong with that either. But it's really a both/and, not an either/or.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Not an either/or... If you walk away from today's episode of The Key with anything, that would be a good choice, the idea that paying attention to how graduates fare after they leave college doesn't by necessity diminish the value all the other things many of us things students can and should derive from a post secondary education. Of course, we'll get in trouble if we define career success too narrowly or try to measure it in an oversimplified way. But it would risky for college and university leaders to ignore the real expectations of students, families, policy makers, and others for evidence that institutions and academic programs are delivering on a primary expectation that most students have--for help on a path to a good job, a meaningful career, or a satisfying worklife. This a discussion that's too important for college leaders, professors, and others to leave to politicians and critics of higher education. That's why we'll continue to talk about this issue and others that matter here on The Key and on Inside Hgher Ed.

Thanks to Andy Chan and Christine Cruzvergara for spurring today's conversation, to D2L for sponsoring it, and to all of you for listening. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

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