

Predictions 2024

Insights for Online & Professional Education

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INTRODUCTION

Taking Action with Courage and Confidence

The maturation of online learning, the explosion of AI, the continuing declines in enrollment, and the rise in the importance of ROI, for students and institutions – these are among the converging factors that are shaking up the status quo in higher education. Wait-and-see is no longer a viable strategy.

Online and professional continuing education is poised to play a significant role in the recasting of higher education. Working side-by-side with the leaders and innovators in the space, our UPCEA experts are ideally positioned to bring clarity and understanding of the trends, issues and events driving disruption and change. *UPCEA's 2024 Predictions for Online and Professional Education* captures their insights to help you understand the impact on your organization and your career as you prepare for the year ahead.

In the pages that follow, explore what 2024 has in store for online and professional education, and use the 16 expert insights to gain an understanding of what it means for you and your organization.



PREDICTION

More Campus Leaders Will Embrace Business Model Transformation to Spur Innovation in Serving Today's Learners

By Robert Hansen, Chief Executive Officer, UPCEA

As the base of residential students continues to erode at many institutions, campus leadership will increasingly turn to those who understand how to build and manage units that serve today's learners through a combination of online degree programs (undergraduate degree completion, professionally oriented graduate programs) and quality non-degree credentials.

Relatedly, there will be an increasing recognition of the entrepreneurial skill sets required for success in both online learning and credential innovation. To be successful, campus leaders may have to choose between business model transformation and legacy structures that do not translate to the complex marketplace of serving today's learners.

PREDICTION

More Chief Online Learning Officers Step Up to Senior Leadership Roles

By Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online and Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA

In 2024, I think we will see more Chief Online Learning Officers (COLOs) take on more significant roles and projects at institutions.

In recent years, we have seen many COLOs accept provost positions. The typical provost career path that runs up through the faculty ranks does not adequately prepare leaders for the digital transformation occurring in postsecondary education.

As we've seen with the professionalization of the COLO role, in general, these same leaders proved to be incredibly valuable during the pandemic due to their unique skills: part academic, part entrepreneur, part technologist, COLOs are unique in higher education. They sit at the epicenter of teaching, learning, technology, and sustainability. As institutions are evolving, look for more online and professional continuing leaders to take on more senior roles on campuses.

PREDICTION

Increased Cross-Pollination of Financial Models Between For-Profit and Not-For-Profit Higher Education Institutions Involved in the Online Space

By Kathleen Ives, Chief Business Development Officer & Senior Vice President of Member Engagement, UPCEA

By 2024, there will be a blurring of lines between the operational models of for-profit and not-for-profit higher education institutions, especially in the online learning domain.

As not-for-profit online higher education institutions increasingly adopt ROI models to ensure sustainability and growth, they will begin to integrate strategies and best practices from the for-profit sector, known for its efficiency and scalability.

However, this doesn't mean that not-for-profit higher education institutions will shift their primary focus to profit. Instead, they will aim to balance their mission-driven approach with strategic financial planning, ensuring that revenues are reinvested in ways that align with their online educational missions. This cross-pollination of ideas and strategies will be facilitated by cross-functional ROI teams comprising members from various departments within higher education institutions, fostering a more collaborative and holistic approach to online learning.

This convergence of models will result in a more diverse and adaptive higher education landscape, where institutions draw from a broader toolkit of strategies to achieve both financial stability and academic excellence.

PREDICTION

'Synthetic Human' Technology Will Be Applied in Higher Ed, With the Potential to Enable Engaging 'Student-to-Student' Interaction in Self-Paced Online Classes

By Ray Schroeder, Senior Fellow, UPCEA and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, Springfield

For the past quarter of a century, I have wanted to create a self-paced online course that would match the quality, engagement, and level and range of discourse that students experience in regular online and on-campus courses. The key obstacle to achieving this higher-level critical thought, analysis and synthesis is the lack of a way to offer student-to-student discussion and interaction in a self-paced course. This is because no student in a self-paced offering is in the same place in the course at the same time as other students.

It appears this may change in 2024. A New York company called Fantasy has created what they call “synthetic humans.” Writing in *WIRED*, Will Knight reported, “Fantasy uses the kind of machine learning technology that powers chatbots like OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Google’s Bard to create its synthetic humans. The company gives each agent dozens of characteristics drawn from ethnographic research on real people, feeding them into commercial large language models like OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Anthropic’s Claude. Its agents can also be set up to have knowledge of existing product lines or businesses, so they can converse about a client’s offerings. Fantasy then creates focus groups of both synthetic humans and real people. The participants are given a topic or a product idea to discuss.”

Using this approach, one could create a class of 20, 30, 50 or more synthetic human students with differing views and opinions on topics covered in the class. These synthetic humans could respond to the “real” human student as well as the other bots in topical discussions. These engagements could be thought-provoking and informative. They could challenge the critical thinking of the students enrolled in the self-paced course. In some ways, this could be superior to traditional discussion and discussion boards in higher ed classes. Synthetic humans could be programmed to espouse views and perspectives that do not come up in all classes where there may be a lack of diversity. I predict that this technology will be applied in higher education in the coming year. It will enhance discussions and provide exposure to a variety of viewpoints. For the first time, we will be able to effectively deploy online self-paced classes that will challenge and reinforce students.

PREDICTION

Welcoming Online Learning to the Campus Leadership Table Becomes a Double-Edged Sword

By Aaron Brower, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA; Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Fellow with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education

Leadership in online learning will continue to become increasingly of interest to central campus administration. It's become clear to almost all institutions that traditional revenue models based on traditional students will continue to decline. This is especially true as state funds continue to decline for state institutions.

This increased attention from a campus's central administration will be both a blessing and a curse. Lots of attention will spotlight our work. More and more deans and directors of professional and continuing education units will be invited into the inner circle of the president's/chancellor's cabinet. Most institutions of higher ed will build into their formal strategic plans alternative educational formats that serve alternative audiences. This is, in fact, already happening on many campuses across the country; my prediction is that these dynamics will snowball.

But lots of attention also invites lots of cooks in the kitchen. And more scrutiny. Most professional education units will easily withstand this scrutiny: they are already working under transparent and financially stable business models, so they'll have nothing to hide. However, it will also be the case that other units, and central administrations, will want to change business models in efforts to squeeze more dollars out of these units. As a result, leaders of professional and continuing education units will need to be extra clear in their abilities to advocate for what works and what doesn't, and for the resources (planning and people, as well as money) needed to grow and thrive on behalf of their institution.

PREDICTION

Growth in Interest from Faculty and Students Leads to Growth in Experimentation with a Variety of Course Modalities and Structures

By Derek Bruff, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Visiting Associate Director, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, University of Mississippi

As [Beth McMurtrie reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently](#), classroom walls are shifting. That is, there is both an increasing need and an increasing capacity for colleges and universities to offer learning experiences in a variety of modalities.

Adult students have been pursuing modalities other than the traditional on-site synchronous course for decades, and now traditionally aged college students are [increasingly looking](#) for online and asynchronous options. This is partially a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which opened the eyes of students and parents alike to non-traditional modalities, but also a response to the growing skepticism of the value of higher education. This is leading students, both traditional and otherwise, to pursue more workforce-focused educational opportunities.

A key part of the capacity to offer alternative modalities (as well as alternative credentials) is faculty readiness. Recent data indicates a [growing interest among faculty in teaching online](#), a trend that was undoubtedly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I've talked to numerous faculty who "flipped" their classes in one way or another back in 2020 and are now far more comfortable teaching in non-traditional modalities and/or using technology in their teaching. Where many faculty in 2019 would have scoffed at the efficacy of an online course, many of those faculty now have firsthand experience teaching effectively online, particularly at institutions that prepared faculty well for the 2020-2021 academic year.

The combination of the need and the capacity will lead many colleges and universities to experiment with a variety of course modalities and course structures in 2024, building on recent experiments across higher education in these areas. For some institutions facing the coming "demographic cliff," these experiments will help them face existential crises.

PREDICTION

Continuing and Professional Education Will Be the Entry Point for AI at Many Institutions

By Marie Cini, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Provost and Chief Academic Officer at University of The People

There will be a great deal of hyperbole about artificial intelligence (AI) and its immediate impact on higher education. Much of it will be overstated. A great deal of it will also be true. Results will vary by institutional mission, size, and funding model.

Those institutions with a more traditional mission, smaller size, and sound finances may not feel the need to introduce AI. These institutions will be few and far between, however. Most institutions will face severe headwinds including enrollment drops, inflationary pressures, and funding gaps. AI will likely be adopted first in the operations, enrollment, and student services areas, which will benefit from increased efficiencies, reduced FTE headcounts, and better service to students.

Adoption to improve learning will be slower, primarily due to lag times in faculty adoption, and the barriers inherent in changing an entrenched learning model. However, non-university learning organizations will quickly adopt and apply AI, creating an enhanced learning experience. Most have already done so.

Continuing and professional education departments tend to be the “innovative fringe” in many universities and should take advantage of AI and large language models (LLMs) to increase business efficiency while also improving the learning experience and student support. Many of these departments will be the entree for AI in academic affairs in terms of innovation adoption.

PREDICTION

Centralization vs. Decentralization of Online Education and Microcredentials Unit Structures Will Undergo Re-examination

By Stacy Chiaramonte, Senior Vice President of Strategy and Operations, UPCEA Research & Consulting Group

We've experienced reorganizations, centralization, decentralization, etc., since prior to the pandemic. This will continue into 2024, as a result of the renewed focus on generating tuition revenue from sources other than traditional undergraduate programs.

Universities are seeking to grow graduate credit-bearing, non-credit, and microcredential programs as sources of revenue, and online and professional continuing education units have historically delivered very strong results. I predict there will be a renewed focus on the internal structure of the units that are supporting online education and microcredentials. Universities that may have decentralized or broadened the scope of their online and professional continuing unit will take another look at those organizations and potentially revert back to some previous models that were successful. We can anticipate seeing more exploration of the centralization of administrative services with a decentralization of the academics. This model seems to be emerging as the premier way to build a strong infrastructure to support post-traditional students, while ensuring that the faculty, schools, and colleges remain strongly engaged in the program development and delivery.

PREDICTION

Online and Professional Education Units Will Take on a More Strategic, Expansive Role in Reshaping Institutional Models

By Susan Catron, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Dean Emerita from University of California, Davis

The confluence of trends in higher education will intertwine online and professional continuing education units and their campuses in more strategic and expansive ways, with 2024 as a tipping point in reshaping institutional models.

With increasing saturation of online programs, undergraduate enrollment declines, shifting learner demographics, deepening institutional financial challenges, and the movement toward credential stackability, online and professional continuing education units offer the agility and organizational competencies universities will rely on to navigate the coming revolution in higher education.

The issues that intertwine our futures will only serve to bring us closer to the core campus mission. Accelerating online education in a hyper competitive market. Navigating the intersection between microcredentials and the degree enterprise. Addressing the shrinking half-life of degrees and growing demand for lifelong learning.

Forward-thinking campuses are viewing online and professional continuing education, often seen as chiefly an administrative service provider, in a new strategic light—a third pillar in the teaching mission that provides the stickiness to achieve authentic lifelong learning relationships with alumni, not just a donor pipeline.

One way this is already playing out is the restructuring of these units into umbrella organizations with more expansive and strategic roles at the enterprise level. Two recent cases in point: Georgia Tech's new Division of Lifetime Learning and Oregon State's new Division of Educational Ventures. Not surprisingly, it is often the senior executive of online and professional education we find at the helm of these new ventures. I believe 2024 will see broad institutional changes in structure and mission; something we'll recognize as a watershed moment for online and professional education as we reflect on this juncture in the years to come.

PREDICTION

Online and Professional Continuing Education Will Help Fortify Institutions in the Face of Declining Enrollment Trends

By Jay Halfond, Vice President, Institutional Planning, UPCEA, and Professor of the Practice Emeritus at Boston University

I anticipate that recent enrollment trends will continue. Mega-institutions, flagships, and selective private colleges and universities will thrive – at the expense of regional public four-year, community colleges, and small, less renowned colleges. We will see more consolidation, mergers, elimination of majors, and closures. This will displace students and upset alumni. The public will pay for this in a loss of institutional diversity and community pride.

However, academic institutions with a dynamic professional and continuing education presence and a robust set of online offerings can fortify themselves. Universities firmly committed to adult learners, both on-campus and online, will be far better off than those now just exploring new sources of students.

PREDICTION

Major Employers to Begin Requiring Prompt Engineering and Related GenAI Skills for White-Collar Jobs in 2024

By Ray Schroeder, Senior Fellow, UPCEA and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, Springfield

Generative AI exploded on the higher education scene this year. While it has been years in development, the November 2022 release of ChatGPT by OpenAI took the world, including higher education, by storm. The competition to develop this technology is fierce and frenetic. Yet, the implications are transformative. As Senior Fellow at UPCEA, I have researched, written and presented on the implications of AI for higher education since August of 2022. The epiphany came to me when I first encountered GPT-3, even before the release of ChatGPT and wrote the article [“Higher Ed Meet GPT-3: We Will Never Be the Same!”](#)

The intervening year and a half has shown the advent of GenAI to be profound in higher education. While the early concerns were for academic integrity and student misuse, the real impact is in the workplace that our degree and certificate holders will confront. It is clear that the vast majority of business and commerce will employ GenAI to provide more expansive services at lower cost and with fewer staff members. In fact, the [New York Times reports](#) that the technology will require reskilling or upskilling for 75% of college graduates. It is incumbent on those of us in higher education to assure that all of our degree and certificate holders have the most current skills in utilizing this key new technology.

In September of this year, I wrote in Online: Trending Now on the topic of [“Preparing Students for the AI-Enhanced Workforce.”](#) It is essential that we provide all of our students with e-portfolios in which to document and highlight their GenAI skills for HR departments that, increasingly, are giving preference in hiring to those with such skills. I suggest that we consider creating badges and other relevant credentials for current students to demonstrate their abilities. In the article, I provide a step-by-step plan to implement such a program.

I predict that most major employers will require demonstration of prompt engineering and related GenAI skills for most new hires in white-collar jobs in 2024. The universities that provide an opportunity to document GenAI skills through e-portfolios, certificates, or badging will enjoy significantly higher successful placement rate for their graduates and certificate-completers than those who do not.

PREDICTION

External Forces Will Impact Online and Professional Learning in a Variety of Ways

By Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA

Events the world over – climate change, international conflicts, the 2024 US presidential election – will undoubtedly impact campuses in the year ahead, with specific implications for online and professional education.

Red and blue states alike are pivoting away from degree requirements for entry-level hiring for governmental roles. This jettisoning of this long-held standard gateway will give way to skills-based hiring and an expansion of the candidate pool. If elections in 2024 tilt the US toward Democratic control, spending for state-based alternative credentialing initiatives will increase.

Climate change is absolutely affecting demand for skills-based learning, and enrollment in agricultural and environmental programs, for both traditional and shorter-term credentials, will only increase.

In terms of internationalization, study abroad and international learners' trajectories are changing, as the number of host locations narrows amid increased unrest in a growing number of areas. This is coupled with a growing desire by US institutions to create access for adult learners to engage in skills that study abroad, exchange, and/or global learning bring, and is supported by the recent joint statement by the U.S. Departments of State, Education, Commerce, and Homeland Security on a renewed internal climate in support of international education.

PREDICTION

Generative AI's Limitations Will Trigger New Tech Customized for Specific Uses within Higher Ed

By Derek Bruff, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Visiting Associate Director, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, University of Mississippi

The current batch of generative AI technologies (ChatGPT, Google Bard, DALL-E, Midjourney, and so on) have captured the attention of faculty and administrators at colleges and universities. However, these technologies currently have important limitations that will motivate a new set of technologies for development and use in 2024.

One limitation is that the security and privacy policies of current tools are not sufficient for certain kinds of applications, particularly those with sensitive user or enterprise data. The University of Michigan has launched a campus-hosted ChatGPT alternative designed to get around this limitation. This alternative provides "appropriate security and compliance assurance, allowing it to be used for teaching, learning, research, and many other use cases." Expect to see more such generative AI technologies hosted and secured by colleges and universities, enabling a new set of AI-powered applications around a variety of institutional strategic goals.

Another limitation is that general-purpose AI technologies such as ChatGPT and the like do not exhibit specific mastery in most domains. Expect to see the development of a host of domain-specific large language models in 2024 that are trained on curated and sometimes proprietary data sets. These technologies will be far more useful and reliable than general-purpose tools in the domains in which they are trained. Not only will higher education start adopting domain-specific tools for research and administrative purposes, there will be a need to prepare students to understand and use these tools in their future careers.

PREDICTION

Institutions Without a Strategy for Adult Learners and Alternative Credentials Will Struggle

By Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA

Amid the “demographic cliff,” which persists alongside a growing disinterest in higher education by the general populace due to rising costs and uncertainty about the ROI of a degree, institutions which do not have the adult (or new majority) learner and alternative credentials as part of their strategy will struggle to gain purchase.

As inflation and interest rates rise, so does tuition. Amid waning public support for the investment of a degree, and simply fewer humans of college-going age, the value of higher education has never been more challenged. The conundrum is that we are seeing fewer persist to credential at a time when lifelong learning has never been more needed, as the world of work evolves exponentially. A generation ago, humans were estimated to change jobs two to three times during their lives. It is now estimated that we’ll change careers – not just jobs, three to six times during our lives. What makes those shifts possible? Learning.

Institutions that prioritize “learner trust,” specifically with regard to creating learner records that reflect a larger scope of what someone can do and has done (skills-based versus credential-reporting), will create a competitive advantage. As skills-based hiring increases as a way to grow our talent pool and employers lessen their dependence on the degree as a marker for job-readiness, the demand for workforce-centered alternative credentials will increase as a path for adults to upskill or pivot careers.

A recognition, driven by the forced online learning of the pandemic, that the convenience, flexibility, and efficiency of online learning is now part and parcel of higher education will set the stage for who succeeds with today’s learner. Winners will be learners and employers, who are being courted with more opportunities that suit their needs, and institutions that can embrace these demands.

PREDICTION

Gainful Employment Rule Will Lead to Greater Attention to Earnings-Outcomes, Including Non-Degree Credentials

By Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online and Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA

With the recently released Gainful Employment rule, I think we are going to see greater attention to earnings-outcomes from all higher education credentials, inclusive of non-degree credentials. The key to federal funding for short-term programs is outcomes. Look for more attention to learner outcomes within the context of earnings, even in the non-degree credential space.

As many accreditors have signaled, the quality of non-degree credentials is on their radar. I think we will see more calls for specific outcomes and ROI for learners and institutions. Postsecondary leaders in this space should start having conversations about non-degree credential data now and consider altering what information they collect from learners so they are approaching some known data requirements. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) requirements are a good jumping-off point.

This helps us in another area. For some time there has been an assumption that non-degree/alternative credentials create new pathways into degree programs, lead to higher salaries, and address the needs of those who have not been served well by higher education in general. There is no better way to test those assumptions than by actually collecting the data necessary to prove or disprove them. This is not without problems, as non-degree learners are notoriously skeptical of any requests for personal information, “Why do you need to know my personal email address and the last four of my Social Security number for this 3-hour Advanced Excel class?” Further, many of our non-credit registration systems treat these registrations as simple financial transactions, so in some cases, collecting this information is only possible via system customizations. There is a heavy lift here, between our registration system providers and the purveyors of data that help show the impact of these programs (labor and employment data systems). Thankfully there are several higher education organizations, inclusive of UPCEA, that are trying to move the needle in this area.

PREDICTION

As Alternative Credentials Continue to Evolve as the ‘Next Big Thing’ in Higher Ed, Those with a Thoughtful Approach Will Gain the Advantage

By Aaron Brower, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA; Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Fellow with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education

Alternative credentials will continue to evolve as the “next big thing” in higher ed, with all the pluses and minuses that come with that.

On the plus side, it’s going to be seen as a way to cross political boundaries, both at the state and federal levels, since it promises greater access to a wider range of students/citizens, increases affordability by being priced at market rates, and addresses workforce readiness and skills gaps. Alternative credentials also promise an additional revenue stream for institutions struggling with declining enrollments in their traditional students. To a public skeptical about the value of higher ed, it’s a way institutions can show that they’re “acting like a business” while also being more relevant and accessible to a wider range of stakeholders.

However, you can’t just hang out a shingle and expect instant return. Institutions will find that the alt-cred market is already full, highly competitive, and that an institution’s regular practices (marketing, program development, business models) don’t necessarily work for this particular market and arena.

Institutions that succeed will do so because they’ve created long-term strategies that identify their unique niche and value in the marketplace, supported by deliberate business models for long-term, progressive growth.

There is lots of opportunity in the alternative credential arena, particularly workforce-related and direct-to-business. But again, real success will require long-term and careful strategy that plans for long-term, progressive growth.

Conclusion

2024 promises a thrilling ride. It will be bumpy for some, particularly for those who have taken a conservative approach to transformation. Those who have embraced innovation – from technology to financial models to credentialing – will be rewarded.

Whether you are ahead of the curve or playing catch up, now is the time to lean into strategies that draw upon the advantages and solutions online and professional continuing education brings to the future of higher education.

Contributors

Aaron Brower, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA; Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Fellow with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education

Derek Bruff, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Visiting Associate Director, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, University of Mississippi

Susan Catron, Strategic Advisor, UPCEA, and Dean Emerita from University of California, Davis

Stacy Chiaramonte, Senior Vice President of Strategy and Operations, UPCEA Research & Consulting Group

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Robert Hansen, Chief Executive Officer, UPCEA

Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA

Kathleen Ives, Chief Business Development Officer & Senior Vice President of Member Engagement, UPCEA

Ray Schroeder, Senior Fellow, UPCEA and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, Springfield

Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online and Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA

UPCEA – The Go-To Community for Those Who Are Reinventing Higher Education

UPCEA is the online and professional education association. Our members are continuously reinventing higher education, positively impacting millions of lives. We proudly lead and support them through cutting edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy. Our collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes.

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Reach out and let us know how UPCEA can help your organization.

EMAIL: info@upcea.edu

PHONE: 202.659.3130