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Corporate Market Critical for College Competitiveness

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The following interview is with Richard Novak, vice-president of continuing studies and distance education at Rutgers University. Higher education leaders are constantly on the lookout for new marketplaces in which to open up new revenue streams, and one rapidly growing market is corporate training and professional development. In this interview, Novak discusses changing attitudes toward this market and shares his thoughts on strategies higher education leaders can put into place to better serve individual working adults and larger corporate partners.

1. Has interest in serving the corporate market changed among higher education leaders in recent years?

There has been a change; higher education leaders are still interested, but it's become more challenging ... for a number of reasons, not the least of which has been what's going on with the economy. A lot of corporations are sitting on a lot of cash and they haven't been investing it in professional development and continuing education. It's been challenging to make the convincing argument about why this is important and why it does help the bottom line.

The other lesson we've learned over the last several years is that public-offering, open-enrollment



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Succeeding in the corporate training market is critical for institutions that want to remain competitive over the next decade.

non-credit continuing education is a slog. It is just really tough business and the better option, the more successful opportunity, is to tailor programs to the corporate market, make the convincing argument of how this helps the bottom line, do it on location [and] provide contract training and even degree programs.

2. How have the needs of working professionals changed over the past 10 years?

We really need to take on the lens of the customer, the working professional; what are they facing?

We certainly are aware, and hear stories all the time, that people are being asked to do more with less.

We know one of the reasons many corporations are sitting on a large amount of cash is because they haven't filled open positions. It's a smaller number of people that are doing the same work as before.

Another big aspect is that the impact of technology is pervasive. It impacts everything we do in higher education, but it also impacts the businesses and working professionals we're trying to attract to our programs. The same pervasive technology they're working with — there is a level of expectation that we will incorporate technology as well for program delivery, for program marketing, for customer service options and so on.

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The needs have changed, but also the expectations have changed. There are greater customer demands for the university to be more customer-responsive. People are expecting a certain level of customer service. They expect it in all areas of their life; the university is not immune.

3. Looking to the future, what do you think will be the most significant changes continuing education units will make to serve working professionals?

Changes have to be made. If the university wants to be competitive in the future, it has to be more responsive, it has to be more customer-centric, it has to be much more flexible — and the flexibility is in all areas. For example, the timing of programs, the duration of programs, the location, the implementation of technology to offer at least a hybrid solution if not a totally on-line solution.

I think the topical areas, as well, will be a changing area. It's not going to fly to simply offer programs that faculty want to teach. It is only going to work if we are offering things that are responsive to what the customers want, what working professionals are looking for and things that are more related to job advancement as well as supporting career changers. This may be a degree program, it may be a second bachelor's degree; it could be a tailored master's program. But it might just be a certificate program [or] a non-credit certificate program directly tied into what working professionals need to advance in their career, or perhaps even change their career.

4. Along the same lines, what changes will institutions have to make to pursue corporate training partnerships in the next decade?

It is, first and foremost, convincing these large corporate players we're responsive, we're listening and that we go in and we ask, first of all, "What do you need?" Then we are looking to design based on expressed need rather than, "Here is what we have. Which of these do you want?" That's the first case that needs to be made.

Second, and it's related to that, is to demonstrate we really are responsive as an organization. We can be flexible. This is not to suggest we simply throw out all of our principles, ... policies and procedures. We've got to demonstrate a level of flexibility in response to understanding what these corporate partners are looking for.

Third, ... what we're offering needs to retain that high-quality approach we have been known for and it needs to maintain that academic integrity of the offering. But even within those parameters, there's the opportunity to be much more flexible, to be much more dynamic, to be looking at models not just restricted to [classes that are] face-to-face, on-campus [and] at this block of time. We can look at flexible models. We can look at programs, both credit and non-credit, where some of the instruction is done by working professionals who have knowledge and can marry theory and practice.

5. Is there anything you'd like to add about the value of the corporate training market to higher ed institutions and whether more institutions are going to enter this marketplace going forward?

This market is critical to higher education, especially to larger higher education institutions. It is beneficial for a number of reasons and that includes the ability to have a relationship that can extend over a long period of time; where we may have a place for some of our graduates to land, we may have opportunities for internships, we can sustain our on-campus continuing education business, we can perhaps attract some of the folks back to complete ... another degree with us.

The goal is to develop that lifelong relationship, and with the whole organization, because in a university that has many different schools and many different departments, there are opportunities to connect with that corporate partner in a lot of different disciplines. We need to be thinking more broadly about how that works.

I think those who are serious and want to be competitive will jump in. From my own personal perspective, I hope they don't, because that's more competition for us.

Key Takeaways

- Entering into robust, flexible and responsive corporate training partnerships is critical for institutions who want to remain competitive in the coming years.
- Institutional leaders must be vocal about the value of corporate training, as many employers are not spending as much on training and development as they once did.
- Institutions must think beyond academic programming and provide a high level of customer service to their corporate partners.