



Peanut Butter and Chocolate: Workforce Development and Credentials

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 302

Celisa Steele (00:00):

I must confess I've been thinking of peanut butter and chocolate, like those old Reese's commercials. Peanut butter and chocolate are both fine and good on their own, and sometimes that's just what's needed. But they can be extra tasty when combined, and, in the same way—or at least kind of, if you'll run with me on this metaphor here—workforce development and credentials can do good work on their own, but they take on a richer flavor when combined, a sweeter flavor. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb (00:33):

I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele (00:41):

In this episode of the Leading Learning Podcast, number 302, we're going to talk about workforce development and credentialing. Both have been the focus of recent episodes. We talked about credentialing and the potential for credentials in the current moment in episode 295, and we looked at workforce development in the here and now in episode 297.

Jeff Cobb (01:06):

And we've also had the opportunity to talk recently with four individuals for the podcast who deal with credentialing and/or workforce development. And so we want to draw out some key points and takeaways from those conversations.

Celisa Steele (01:19):

We didn't set out to treat these episodes as a series, but they've naturally coalesced around some common topics and issues, and so we want to make sure to get as much benefit as possible from the different perspectives on and experiences with workforce development and credentialing.

Jeff Cobb (01:36):

And one of the first takeaways we'd like to highlight is the simple fact that workforce development and credentialing often fit together. Credentials often speak to career- or job-readiness. They serve as a clear indicator that a candidate has the necessary skills or knowledge to perform certain roles.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode302.*

Celisa Steele (01:55):

Right. And workforce development offerings often lead to a credential that becomes that indicator that the individual has the necessary skills or knowledge for needed jobs.

Jeff Cobb (02:07):

Now, that said, workforce development and credentials don't always go together. Sometimes to address a worker shortage, a credential really isn't needed. Maybe would-be workers just need to complete a short course or training, and that's sufficient. In North Carolina, for example, where Leading Learning is based, our governor, Roy Cooper, has created the Finish Line Grants program, and it's a workforce development initiative, but it doesn't have to do with credentials, at least not directly. The grants help community college students who face unforeseen financial emergencies like medical bills or car repairs and childcare costs to stay in school.

Celisa Steele (02:45):

And it's maybe easier to think of examples the other way. That is, many credentials exist that don't tie to a workforce development initiative. Jeff, your master's degree in comparative literature and mine definitely weren't workforce development-related.

Jeff Cobb (03:02):

Definitely not, especially given that neither of us put those degrees to use in the actual workforce.

Celisa Steele (03:07):

And my Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace Certificate, which came from the University of South Florida, didn't help me get a job, and it wasn't tied to a clear advancement in my role either. But very often, a credential is tied to workforce development and vice-versa. And I must confess I've been thinking of peanut butter and chocolate, like those old Reese's commercials. Peanut butter and chocolate are both fine and good on their own, and sometimes that's just what's needed. But they can be extra tasty when combined, and, in the same way—or at least kind of, if you'll run with me on this metaphor here—workforce development and credentials can do good work on their own, but they take on a richer flavor when combined, a sweeter flavor.

Jeff Cobb (03:57):

I'm trying to picture workforce development and credentials bumping into each other on the streets, mixing with each other. Even in cases where workforce development and credentials aren't tied, they could be and, arguably, should be. And I think a big part of the scrutiny that higher ed is under, for example, is because there isn't a tighter connection between that college credential, that degree, and employment. And so there's a lot of tension there now that we're spending a whole bunch of money to put people through these four-year, often five-year or more educational experiences, whole lot of money, and then, coming out, having a lot of debt and not necessarily getting...still getting employment—I mean, it's still advantageous, the stats show it, to go to college, but, still, there's a lot of skepticism now about is it really the right path, and is it really getting the return? Is it going to continue to get the return? So there's that mismatch between the credential and what the workforce seems to need. Employers are complaining that they're not getting students out of college who are actually prepared to do the work that they need to do, and that's going to need to be reconciled. And I think, as you said, that's a big tension in higher education right now.

Celisa Steele (05:08):

Well, and your comments there put me in mind of a report that came out recently from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. We've mentioned that Center before. We've been lucky enough to have Anthony Carnevale on as an interviewee in the past. But, recently, they put out a report called "Ranking 4,500 Colleges by ROI," and it's the 2022 version. And so they use data from the College Scorecard to rank colleges and universities by return on investment. And really what they looked at was, 10 years after leaving a higher education institute, what were those people making compared to folks who only had a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment. And, on average, people do make more with a college education. And, in fact, it was on average, 60 percent of college students across institutions earn more than a high school graduate after 10 years. But that tells you that it's not 100 percent. It's definitely not a shoe-in.

Jeff Cobb (06:14):

No. And it's skewed, as I'm sure you're going to tell us.

Celisa Steele (06:16):

Well, yeah, there's definitely some.... The Center there at Georgetown University is trying to dig into why. And part of what they think explains at least some of the disparities are gender and race and ethnicity. And a lot of higher ed, because it is so expensive in terms of actual dollars and in terms of time investment as well, it really can be more difficult for certain groups to actually take advantage of that.

Jeff Cobb (06:44):

Yeah. And higher ed, obviously, not our real focus here, but still very telling. People do expect to get a return off of a credential, whether it's a degree or any other kind of credential. Employers expect it to have some value, if it's going to be that signal out in the workplace that the credentials so often are. And so, if you are a learning business, and you're offering training, and you're offering some form of credential to go along with whatever you're doing, or you're offering a certification that helps to cap off training that people may be getting someplace else, you do need to be paying attention to what kind of return the recipients of that credential are experiencing and what kind of return the employers, if it is a workplace-oriented credential, what kind of return are those employers getting in the end off of hiring the people that have got your credential.

Celisa Steele (07:43):

So the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce is doing its research and really digging into this. There's another center for education and workforce that I'll mention. This is from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and, really, they have a portfolio of workforce projects because they really want to help make sure that Americans have the right skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow, as they put it, and then that the economy has the skilled workers that it needs in order to grow.

Jeff Cobb (08:16):

Yeah. And the Chamber's been a real force in this, as you would expect, I think, a U.S. chamber of commerce to be, because it does relate so directly to what their members need and want. It's an area that Josh Goldman, who leads up our consulting, he's been very involved with the

Chamber and the work that they're doing. And I know they have a number of different initiatives in that sort of portfolio of workforce projects that they're putting out there.

Celisa Steele (08:42):

Yeah. One of them is the Talent Pipeline Management initiative, and I think that's the one that perhaps Josh is most involved in. And it's described as "an employer-led strategy to build real career pathways aligned to dynamic business needs." And so you can hear in just that little synopsis it's this tight alignment with employers. It's trying to really be attuned to what are the actual, real-life, real-world career pathways. And then it's also acknowledging that business needs are changing, that they are dynamic. And so this initiative is about trying to address that and provide a framework that can be used for it. And, at this point, more than 3,000 employers in the U.S. and Canada have implemented the strategy. And I had an exchange with Josh about TPM, as it's known for short, the Talent Pipeline Management framework, and he really pointed to the fact that it really does engage with employers very directly so that they can really look for what is the problem that they want to collaborate on to solve for the industry.

Celisa Steele (09:54):

Sometimes it's just they need more talent, plain and simple, and they just got to get that through the pipeline. And an example of that is the nursing shortages that we're facing in this country. But sometimes it's the employer needs different skills. So this is where then credentials can really help there because they can have a lot of value in closing that skills gap quickly. And then the other things, a few of the other things that Josh pointed out to me, is that this TPM really provides a structure and a process. And that can be so valuable when you're really trying to partner with employers to have something that helps you identify, quantify, qualify the challenge that the employer is facing.

Celisa Steele (10:40):

And then too it creates this system that can then help get the workforce that is needed for employers out there. So, in general, we'll include some links in the show notes about that TPM framework and that initiative because I do think it is a concrete, real-world example of how you can really tightly align with employers to understand what is it that they need workers to be able to do and where there are training or skills gaps.

Jeff Cobb (11:09):

Yeah. And really it's an approach, and it's a framework for education providers, training providers, learning businesses to know about. And there are good number of supporting materials that go with it that organizations can leverage. Josh was selected to attend the Talent Pipeline Management Academy—that's the academy that trains business, workforce, and economic development leaders on TPM, on that approach, as a strategy to create those pathways for students and workers, to create those talent pipelines. It's something that we've begun recommending in a number of situations in consulting for organizations to engage with that process and to engage with employers, which we keep talking about again and again, and convening groups of employers to really talk about what the needs are, to talk with each other, because, even though there can be competitive elements when you're talking about a field or an industry, there are usually common needs that need to be met, and that's what workforce development is about.

Jeff Cobb (12:09):

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And, as an education provider, as a training provider, if you're in a position to help facilitate those conversations and to do it in something like the context of the TPM, the Talent Pipeline Management framework, you're going to be seen as playing an incredibly high-value role, and you will be playing an incredibly high-value role. And this again comes back to matching up of credentialing and workforce development. If you're able to bring your credentials into that conversation and whatever support you can provide around those credentials, again very, very high-value stuff.

Celisa Steele (12:41):

We wanted to revisit our recent episodes on workforce development and credentialing to make sure that listeners see the connection between the two, this chocolate-and-peanut-butter complementarity.

Jeff Cobb (13:00):

We're grateful to BenchPrep for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. BenchPrep is an award-winning learning platform purpose-built to help learners feel confident and prepared to take difficult entrance, certification, and licensing tests by delivering an intuitive, efficient, and engaging study experience. BenchPrep helps you accelerate test prep revenue growth by offering the tools you need to create market-ready products and data to improve your content and understand learner behavior. Many of the world's leading associations, credentialing bodies, test providers, and training companies trust BenchPrep to power their online study programs, including ACT, the Association of American Medical Colleges, CFA Institute, CompTIA, GMAC, McGraw-Hill Education, AccessLex, and more. More than 8 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain academic and professional success. To discover more, visit leadinglearning.com/benchprep.

Celisa Steele (14:00):

We recently spoke with four individuals for the podcast who deal with credentialing and/or workforce development, and so we want to draw out some key points and takeaways from those conversations. For episode 296, Jeff, you talked with Clare Marsch. She's senior vice president of training and development at the American Bankers Association, and Clare and ABA are thinking about developing the banking workforce of today and tomorrow. And then, for episode 298, you talked to Jim Fong, and he's the chief research officer at the University Professional and Continuing Education Association. And I know that unbundling education is top of mind for him, and his group does a tremendous amount of research on trends and developments in higher ed.

Jeff Cobb (14:52):

Right. And, Celisa, you spoke with Van Ton-Quinlivan in episode 299, and she's a true workforce development expert, currently serving as CEO of Futuro Health, which is heavily involved in credentialing and committed to growing a network of credentialed allied healthcare workers. And then, in episode 301, you talked to Jenna Cohen, workforce product manager at ACT, which offers a National Career Readiness Certificate as one of its portfolio of workforce development initiatives.

Celisa Steele (15:26):

And so, when we looked back at those four conversations collectively, five things bubbled up for us. First, do your research, and use data. Second, make learning achievable. Third,

partnering is powerful. Fourth, the pandemic will have lasting impact on lifelong learning. And, fifth and finally, do things differently.

Jeff Cobb (15:53):

So let's talk about each one of those. First, that do your research, and use data. Of course, data comes up again and again when it comes to just understanding your market as a learning business, as a credentialing provider. It definitely came up in my conversation with Jim. Jim is really all about research. That's the huge part of what he does at UPCEA. They do a lot of partnering with organizations, both employers and vendor-type organizations that are serving the same sort of market UPCEA members are ultimately serving. UPCEA members are concerned with the continuing education, the professional development of adult lifelong learners, so they really have to understand what's going on out there, what the needs are out there. Jim does a lot of work to do things like create personas.

Jeff Cobb (16:47):

He's done some very interesting work in these studies that we're referencing around personas of different types of lifelong learners right now and how they might fit into this bigger picture of what's happening in society, what workforce development needs might be out there, what credentialing and associated training and education needs might be out there, and what then the implications are. And he's concerned primarily with academic continuing education, so continuing education, professional development, executive education type units at colleges and universities, but really everything he's covering, if you are in the business of educating and supporting adult lifelong learners, the types of data that Jim is coming up with are extremely important. And if you are in that business, you should obviously be engaged in efforts to collect your own data, to understand very clearly, obviously, what your learners need.

Jeff Cobb (17:47):

There's always a lot of conversation. We do a lot of work around learner needs assessments, market assessments, but also employer needs and just the general evolving needs of the profession and the industry that you're serving. And that has to be an ongoing research initiative. It has to be an ongoing effort to gather and analyze data, not just the one-shot thing. We talk about this a lot, where you send out the survey once every five years or something like that. That's not going to get you what you need in today's environment. Research and the continual use of data should be an ongoing thing for any serious learning business these days.

Celisa Steele (18:27):

Absolutely. And that definitely came up in my conversation with Jenna Cohen of ACT. They are a research organization in many ways. And she, similarly, is all about following the data and listening to the market and then, of course, using that market research, using that data to then drive decision-making. And, for her, she really talked about her own personal role as a problem-solver but really ACT's role as an organization as a problem solver, really trying to look out there. And, again, we know them because of that college entrance exam—that's I think where most people know ACT—but they have this huge set of program and initiatives really focused on that workforce development and workforce readiness as well. They have Work Ready Communities. They have their WorkKeys assessments. They have that National Career Readiness Certificate.

Celisa Steele (19:24):

And so, for them, it really is looking somewhat broadly, especially for the WorkKeys, what are the basic skills that really do make someone ready to enter the workforce and then assessing that. And then, of course, assuming that the assessment comes out well, that indicates that the learner has actually mastered those competencies, those skills, that knowledge, then that they can earn that certificate. And so I think it's very much in keeping with what you were saying about your conversation with Jim. Jenna just reinforces all of that. Again, know your market. Really dig into problem-solving with the employer so that you understand their issues and then offer a solution.

Jeff Cobb (20:07):

Yeah. And that came through clearly in the conversation with Clare Marsch as well. She really emphasized that know-your-audience component. And she and the American Bankers Association really are exemplars of what we're talking about in terms of being that organization that's collecting data, that's doing research, that's in contact with employers in the marketplace, that's in contact with all of the different sort of segments—in their case, members—that are in different employment roles in banks and really understanding their situation and what they can provide in terms of both training and credentials to support that. And then the other point she made was really taking measured risk because a lot of times you can send out the survey, you can have the conversation and get an idea of what's going on out there, but, until you can put something out there for people to respond to, you really don't know. That's often one of the best ways to get the data that you really need to make the right decisions.

Celisa Steele (21:05):

And then I have to think of my conversation with Van Ton-Quinlivan as well. And again, just being able to see the market and then see what's needed. With Futuro Health, it really is this huge shortage of allied healthcare workers. And so, when you see that need and when you see the scale of that need, then that begins to tell you some things about what would a potential solution look like, given the scale of the issue. I know that it pushed Van towards, "Let's partner." No single organization is probably going to be able to do this, and how can we do it as quickly and efficiently as possible because things tend to get bogged down. So, when you see the market and understand those needs, it begins to tell you something about what your solution should look like. So that's the first takeaway: Do your research, and use data. The second is make learning achievable.

Jeff Cobb (22:02):

Right. And this is one that, again, certainly came up with Jim Fong, and I think it relates back to the situation that higher education, in particular, finds itself in right now, where the commitment to a full degree, particularly if you're an adult learner, a non-traditional...those are increasingly becoming the traditional learners. But, if you're already a working adult, you've got different responsibilities in life, it can feel daunting to pursue a degree or even to pursue a full-blown certification or larger credential of some sort. So how do you break it apart? How do you get it into chunks of activity, of achievement that feel manageable for that adult lifelong learner? So unbundling what you have, making it possible to stack smaller credentials, smaller achievements into larger achievements, and just, in general, making it feel more possible for that adult lifelong learner to engage with you.

Celisa Steele (23:03):

That reminds me Jenna Cohen used the metaphor of how do you eat an elephant? It's one bite at a time. And so this idea of unbundling, so that then it does become these bite-size,

manageable pieces of learning and then a credential to go with that. And then you can take your next bite and move on and eventually eat the elephant. One of the things that stood out to me, though, in my conversation with Van was just that you also have to have supports to go along with the learning. Unbundling is part of it because it lowers the barrier in terms of the time required, the time investment required and then also often the money investment that goes with that. But adult lifelong learners tend not to exist on their own.

Celisa Steele (23:54):

They tend to have other responsibilities—jobs, family, life. And so a big part of what Futuro Health is thinking about is what are the supports are needed? And this is a big focus of workforce development in general. You really treat the learner as that whole human. And so, yes, they need to be able to understand the concepts that are being taught in a course, for example, but they also need to have their childcare costs covered, or they need to have a way to go show up for that class if it's a place-based class.

Celisa Steele (24:27):

And you mentioned those Finish Line Grants that Governor Cooper here in North Carolina has put in place. That's all speaking to this idea of supports and what do lifelong learners, adult lifelong learners need, in addition to access to the content, to really be able to learn. And so that's the second take away: Make learning achievable. Think about what you can do to make the path and the steps along the path as easy and clear as possible. The third takeaway we got from these interviews is that partnering is powerful.

Jeff Cobb (25:03):

Right. And this was something that, again, well, it came across with everybody, as you're saying, but, in my conversation with Clare, one of the things I was struck by there is the potential for partnering that goes beyond just being able to determine what's needed right now. Obviously, if you're in good conversation with employers and employees and potential employees, then you know what's needed right now, and you can develop the right offerings, whether that's the training and education or the credentials or both to go with that. But a lot of workforce development is really future-focused. You're looking at how the whole field, the whole industry is evolving. And Clare talked about really seeding the future workforce, figuring out what those issues in the future are going to be, what talent needs to look like in the future, which you only figure out through close partnerships with the people who are doing the employment, the people who are on the front lines doing the work.

Jeff Cobb (26:03):

But she's concerned not just with people who are on the job market and who are employed right now. Obviously, that is a concern, but she's also looking out into the future and thinking about things that are happening. Like the fact that so many of us are now working remotely, and we're not tied to a specific location, for example. So how does that change how you do things and meet needs in the future? And, again, it's through the partnerships and the continuing dialogue that she and ABA are able to figure that out.

Celisa Steele (26:34):

And, for Van, the power of partnership really becomes apparent when you think about what problems can you not solve on your own? What problems do you really need a partner for? Because those are going to be the ones then where there's a strong, compelling reason for the

partnership in the first place. And so that's a key ingredient to a strong partnership. I think another key ingredient that Van pointed to is that partners need to bring what they do best to the table. It's this idea of merging strength with strength. One organization's going to be really good at marketing. Another one's going to be really good at content development.

Celisa Steele (27:13):

Whatever it might be, but, when you really understand the strengths that each partner is bringing to the table, then you know how to organize the partnership to get as much as possible, as much value as possible out of it. And then for Jenna, they work very closely with employers at ACT, and she described it as peeling the onion of the problem statement. An employer might say, "We don't have enough workers" or "We don't have enough skilled workers," but you really have to engage in conversation. You really have to be a good listener, ask good questions, hear what the employer is saying to really begin to understand, okay, well, what will it take then to address that problem of not enough workers or workers without the right skills or however you can really boil that problem statement down.

Jeff Cobb (28:00):

We're emphasizing employers a lot as partners here. They're certainly not the only option. They shouldn't be your only choice of partners. If you're in academia doing more academic-focused continuing education, looking at what the trade and professional associations in the worlds you're trying to serve are doing and figuring out ways to partner with them. Conversely, if you're a trade or professional association, forming those partnerships with academia that can often help you take your content, your brand, and other elements to new levels. Looking at regional partners in the areas that you're trying to serve, often nonprofit or governmental organizations to partner with. But, all that said, employers obviously are extremely important in this because most of the people who are going to be listening to us are serving a profession, an industry, a trade.

Jeff Cobb (28:46):

So it does ultimately track to employment. And you've really got to have that partnership with employers. With that in mind, I'll once again mention the U.S. Chamber of Commerce initiative around the Talent Pipeline and the resources that we've already referenced there. Certainly something for all listeners to take a look at, and we'll make sure that they are links to those resources in the show notes. Now, so far, we've talked about data and research. So important. We've talked about that in many instances and many situations before. Making learning achievable, partnering, those are perennial. Those, I think, have always been there around really serving the workforce well, both employers and employees.

Jeff Cobb (29:27):

But we've had some significant change recently that's disrupted how we look at everything, and that includes of this whole topic around workforce development and credentialing. So our fourth big takeaway is that the pandemic is going to have a lasting impact on lifelong learning.

Celisa Steele (29:43):

Definitely. And I think it's a little bit like the peeling the onion of the problem statement I was just alluding to from the conversation with Jenna. I mean, it's understanding what is the lasting impact in your field, in your profession, with the learners that you work with. I know that Jenna pointed to the need for ongoing convenience and flexibility, that she really thinks that's

something that's going to stick around, that so much became possible to do remote to keep up with remote workers, as you also mentioned, Jeff. And that's the kind of thing that's likely to carry forward, even when it's not technically needed anymore, for reasons of safety, for example, but that people have gotten used to that. And so keeping convenience and flexibility and remote options in mind, that's the kind of thing that's likely to stick around and probably likely to stick around pretty much across the board.

Jeff Cobb (30:43):

Yeah, definitely. I think another thing that's going to reverberate, we mentioned in the conversation with Jim Fong, some of the turmoil that traditional higher education seems to be in at this point, particularly around degree programs. And this was happening before COVID came along, but COVID has accelerated it. A lot of institutions were really impacted by the fact that students can no longer come to campus. We saw declines in enrollments. We saw people who were enrolled not continuing enrollment anymore. And there's a question out there: Are folks going to come back? And, to the extent that they do, what does that look like?

Jeff Cobb (31:19):

Are we seeing a fading away of traditional degree approaches and accelerating more towards alternative credentials of various types? If that happens, and they do seem to be headed in that direction in many ways, that's going to change the face of higher education, but it also changes that whole credentialing and lifelong learning marketplace, and it opens it up a lot of who can play what role in terms of providing credentials to the current and the emerging workforce. That's going to be a big, long-term, potentially a big, long-term impact.

Celisa Steele (31:54):

And when I think about the pandemic, I just have to note that Futuro Health launched a couple of months before the pandemic hit in the U.S. And so, unlike some of these other organizations, they perhaps had the benefit, perhaps had the disadvantage of being born during the pandemic. And so they had immediate huge challenges and huge shifts. Health went to telehealth pretty much overnight. That changed much of what was needed by the folks that they're out there to serve, these allied healthcare workers, and that they're trying to train. And I think it also speaks to perhaps the ongoing value of partnerships. Part of what Futuro Health did was, okay, we have to pivot, given where we're headed with COVID. And so they immediately found good partners. And so they were able then to train over 4,000 healthcare workers in 20 states within two and a half weeks—

Jeff Cobb (32:52):

That's amazing.

Celisa Steele (32:53):

—to prepare for that first COVID surge. That's just remarkable, right? This idea of how much something like the pandemic can shift an organization and then what the opportunities are. And, in their case, I think it was a strong argument and opportunity for really deep, profound partnership. And I think that that need for partnership will continue because when you really think about the big problems, like a huge labor shortage in any particular field, odds are, there's not going to be a single organization that's going to have all the resources or all the abilities needed to actually address that. And so partnering just makes complete sense in that context.

Jeff Cobb (33:34):

Yeah, absolutely. And, as you noted Futuro, for better or worse, they were launching when all of this hit. So, in some ways, they didn't have a past that they had to now adjust to this new model. But, of course, that wasn't true for so many organizations. I think probably for most of our listeners that was not true. You were probably already doing tons of face-to-face stuff, big annual meetings, those sorts of things. Suddenly, everything had to go online. I can remember talking to Steven Schragis at One Day U (we'll link to that episode as well), but that whole business model was face-to-face. It was placed-based, and, within a matter of weeks, they had to flip everything to virtual. And Clare Marsch, the same point at the American Bankers Association. They, like so many organizations, had to virtualize everything when COVID hit.

Jeff Cobb (34:21):

But then she also made the point that I think many leaders of learning businesses, learning business professionals are feeling right now. Some of what they ended up doing online was actually more impactful. It actually created opportunities for impact that they hadn't even realized were there before, and, as she put it, they're not going to let that go. They're going to continue pursuing that, getting those benefits out of distributed learning programs and of hybrid models—they're pursuing some hybrid models in what they're doing. This was a pivot point when it came to digital education. It took it completely mainstream to the extent that it hadn't been already. And a lot of organizations are now really—we've talked about the great rebalancing of portfolios at this point, and that's not going to go away. I think that's a permanent part of the landscape going forward. So that actually points well to the fifth point that we took out of these conversations that we've had, and that's that we need to do things differently.

Celisa Steele (35:21):

Yeah. And Jenna Cohen at ACT made the point that you have to be careful not to be solving the problems of the past. So you really have to keep up to date on the market and the data. So this goes right back to that first point we made around knowing the market and using data, but she also pointed to something that was interesting, which is that you can't always provide a baked solution, as she called it. Sometimes you just have to respond. You don't have time to analyze it thoroughly. You just have to take what you do know and run with it. And I think, again, the pandemic was an example of that for so many organizations, where you just had to act. You just had to figure out something that worked. It may not have been the best solution.

Celisa Steele (36:14):

A lot of those initial virtual conferences weren't necessarily the most captivating or well prepared, but they served an important need in that moment. And so there's a little bit of a balancing act here between doing your research, knowing the market, but also being prepared to act and not being too caught up in, okay, this is problem I know, this is the problem that they need, and cling to it when maybe the problem's changed. Because I think for a lot of organizations, the pandemic is an example of that changing what their learners needed, again, kind of overnight.

Jeff Cobb (36:53):

Yeah. I think that jibes well with what Clare Marsch emphasized about measured risk. Oftentimes taking a measured risk means realizing that there's a problem or an opportunity there that needs to be addressed, that you can't just sit still on it. You might have your hand

forced a little bit. But, in the context of the pandemic initially hitting, taking your annual meeting fully online, which a year earlier would've sounded like an absolutely crazy idea, suddenly became a measured risk because it was probably riskier not to do that if you wanted to remain engaged with your members and your customers.

Jeff Cobb (37:32):

And then Jim Fong, of course, made the point that academia, higher education, really probably doesn't need to be wed to the 120-credit degree, which has been the traditional path. Again, we need to look at unbundling and not being sort of lulled into complacency by the way we've always done it. And, of course, that applies to anybody who's offering a hefty certification that requires years of experience and education and everything else. You may need to back up and say, "Okay, how do we break that down and do things a little bit differently here, so that we're really, again, able to serve our learners where they are?"

Celisa Steele (38:16):

And so that's the last of the five takeaways that we wanted to highlight from these conversations. They are takeaways that we think are of value to almost all learning businesses, and they read fairly generically. So it's all about digging in to really understand how these statements apply to your learning business and what they might suggest about what you do differently, what you continue to do the way you're doing, and just to see challenges and opportunities before those challenges overtake you and before those opportunities get snapped up by someone else. So the five takeaways are, first, do your research, and use data. Second, make learning achievable. Third, partnering is powerful. Fourth, the pandemic will have a lasting impact on lifelong learning. And, fifth and finally, do things differently. That's it for our deeper look at workforce development and credentialing and lessons and takeaways from some of our recent conversations. For full show notes and other resources, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode302.

Jeff Cobb (39:33):

In the show notes, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we hope you will subscribe if you haven't yet. Those subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (39:45):

We'd also be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts, especially if you enjoy this show. Jeff and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review.

Jeff Cobb (40:03):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode302, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (40:14):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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