



Why Associations Are (Still) Education's Sleeping Giant

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 460

Celisa Steele: [00:00:03] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:10] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] We want to talk today about something that's been on our minds since coming back from ASAE Annual 2025 in Los Angeles: the role of associations in learning and education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:30] If your learning business is part of an association, this conversation is especially for you. Associations have a unique role to play in educating the workforce and in supporting lifelong learning. It's a role that may be more important now than it's ever been.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:46] We're calling this episode "Why Associations Are (Still) Education's Sleeping Giant" because associations' role is sometimes under-played, and, when it's played, it may go under-recognized. The potential is there, and the power is there, but too often it's dormant. Our goal with this conversation is to help us all be awake to this potential.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:08] We're going to explore how, while associations are a major player in learning and education, they haven't always been recognized as such or played the role authoritatively, how they can change that, and the impact that doing so could have—not just for associations but for learners, employers, and society as a whole.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:30] And because this is fresh on our minds from ASAE Annual, we'll also pull in some examples and themes that we heard there that underscore why this matters.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:40] Before we go any further, we should pause to make sure we're clear on what we mean when we say "learning" and "education" because understanding that distinction shapes how we think about associations' role.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:55] In episode 397, Jeff, you and I talked about the difference between learning and education, and we're going to link to that episode in the show notes for this episode in case any of you, dear listeners, want the fuller explanation. But we'll offer a CliffNotes version now. Learning is the broad category. It's the umbrella. Learning encompasses formal education but also informal experiences, like mentoring, peer-to-peer sharing, problem-solving on the fly, or even reflecting after a project is done.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:30] Networking at a conference, for example. Education is a subcategory of learning. Education is structured and organized. It's designed to lead to a particular set of outcomes, and it's often packaged as a course, program, workshop, or credential. It has defined parameters—who participates, what's covered, when it starts and ends.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:53] All education is learning, but not all learning is education. Learning can happen anywhere. It can be that conversation in a hallway or at a conference, as you just said, Jeff. It can be troubleshooting a problem at the office with one of your colleagues. It could be reading a book or article.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:10] We're not just splitting hairs here. This learning-versus-education distinction is critical. When leaders think about their association's role, they have a tendency to default to formal education: the annual meeting, online courses, or certification programs. Those are important, but they're only part of the picture.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:32] Associations can also play—and most already do play—a huge role in fostering informal learning. They create the spaces, connections, and resources that allow members to learn from each other and from the broader community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:47] In today's world, the lines between formal and informal learning are blurring. They've been blurry for quite a while now. A learning experience might start as a structured course but then spill over into ongoing discussions in an online community or spark a peer mentoring relationship.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:05] That blurring might be what's going on with my eyesight. I seem to have more trouble seeing things now.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:10] You must be learning a lot then.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:11] That's what we can hope. When we talk about the role of associations in learning and education, we are talking about both the structured, planned offerings and the more organic, less formal opportunities.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:26] Keeping both in view allows associations to think much more expansively about their impact and to see themselves not only as education providers but as learning catalysts.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:38] Next, let's look at why this moment feels so right for associations to lean into their role in fostering learning and education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:48] To start with, there are big-picture forces at work—forces shaping careers, industries, and society in ways that make lifelong learning essential.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:59] Yes, shaping and reshaping those careers and industries and society. The nature of work is changing faster than ever. We have automation. We have artificial intelligence. We have global competition. We have new technologies that are shifting what's required in nearly every job, from entry-level positions up to the executive level. Reskilling and

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upskilling aren't just nice to have; they are essential for staying relevant and employable in today's job market.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:29] Careers are no longer linear. Many professionals will move across roles, industries, even switch entire fields multiple times. Every shift requires new knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking—in other words, new learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:46] At the same time, we have trust in traditional higher education and in the value of traditional higher education eroding. Enrollment numbers are down. People are questioning the cost, the time involved, the return on investment, and whether or not what's taught is actually aligned with what's needed in the workplace.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:07] That opens the door for new thinking and for other credible providers. And associations are uniquely positioned to step through that door.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:16] Associations tend to have deep and sustained relationships with their members in the fields that they serve. Many associations have been around for decades. That longevity can build trust. Trust, in the context of learning businesses, is really important, has real value, is a real currency. In a session at ASAE Annual, Denise Roosendaal, the executive director of I.C.E. (the Institute for Credentialing Excellence), cited an Independent Sector finding that associations are bucking the trend of distrust in many institutions. We have pretty high levels of distrust among U.S. citizens in things like government, big business, and media. About 57 percent of Americans report high trust in nonprofit organizations, including associations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:09] Associations are mission-driven, existing to serve members and their fields. That alignment can make learning feel like a shared investment in the profession's or field's future rather than a simple transaction.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:23] Associations usually have unparalleled subject matter expertise. They can tap into thought leaders, innovators, and practitioners in ways that often other learning providers can't match.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:36] They also have built-in communities of practice. Members aren't just passive consumers of education; they're potential mentors, collaborators, and co-creators of knowledge.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:47] And, unlike higher ed institutions, associations can move more quickly because they're not bound by semesters or lengthy curriculum review processes. When a new regulation comes out or a skills gap emerges, associations have the potential to respond in months and sometimes even shorter timeframes, weeks.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:08] In that same session where Denise Roosendaal mentioned associations' trust advantage, Letty Kluttz of APIC (the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology)—that's hopefully the last time we'll have to spell out the acronym—talked about three microcredentials that they've launched in 2025. Three in one year.

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Celisa Steele: [00:08:32] Associations are uniquely positioned to combine the rigor of formal education with the relevance and immediacy of workplace training. Those three microcredentials from APIC that you just mentioned definitely fit that bill.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:46] We're seeing really smart approaches, things like microcredentials tied to emerging competencies or created to address skills gaps and partnerships with employers for career pathways.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:59] Associations have credibility not just with their learners—they tend to be trusted also by employers, by regulators, by policymakers. They can bring relevant stakeholders together to help ensure that the learning has real-world value and is recognized in the marketplace.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:19] Several ASAE sessions focused on how associations can help with workforce development. Associations can also be part of workforce policy. Which dovetails nicely with education. If you're influencing standards, you can align your offerings directly with them.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:35] The opportunity is big, it's multifaceted, and it's here right now. But the important part of today's conversation—or an important part—is that it's not entirely new. This potential has been here for decades.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:50] That raises a question. If the potential has been there all along, why hasn't it been fully realized?

Celisa Steele: [00:09:57] That's what we want to talk about next because understanding the barriers is going to be key to making sure that this sleeping giant doesn't roll over and hit the snooze button again.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:10] If this opportunity for associations to be recognized as big players in the education and learning space has been here for years, decades even, why haven't associations fully stepped into it?

Celisa Steele: [00:10:24] I don't think there's a single reason why, but culture and identity definitely come to mind as potential barriers. Some associations still primarily identify as conveners or communities—places to gather, network, and share—but not necessarily as learning providers. That mindset can limit then how much they invest in education as a strategic driver.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:49] Another big barrier is internal. Many associations, especially larger ones that have departments, have silos that keep education disconnected from other parts of the organization. Education staff may work largely apart from membership, marketing, advocacy, or technology teams.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:08] And that separation can lead to missed opportunities. If your membership team isn't feeding insights about member needs to your education team, you risk

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developing offerings that are out of sync with what's needed and what's most relevant. If your education team isn't telling membership about what it's developing, then the education offerings, even if they are in sync and relevant, might be underused.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:31] Another factor is resources. Even when leaders *do* see the opportunity, budgets and staff capacity can be stretched thin. When you're juggling an annual meeting, member services, and advocacy work, education can become one more item on a long to-do list.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:47] Then the default often becomes sticking with what's familiar: the same annual conference format, the same Webinar approach, the same template for online courses. Without innovation, what you're offering may not meet evolving learner needs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:02] There's also the pull of legacy formats and models—things like credit-hour requirements or long-standing curricula that are slow to change because of external accrediting bodies or internal governance.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:15] Another challenge is that many associations are product-first in the way that they think rather than audience-first. They design the course or program and then go looking for people to fill the seats in that offering, rather than starting with that deep understanding of learner needs and then building educational products or learning opportunities from that deep understanding of learner needs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:40] In some cases, associations have simply underestimated their own value as educators. They might think, "We're not a university; we don't have a campus. We can't compete with Coursera or LinkedIn Learning."

Celisa Steele: [00:12:52] But the reality is associations don't *have* to compete on those terms. Their value can lie in niche expertise, in credibility, in community—advantages that big, generic providers like LinkedIn Learning can't easily replicate.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:09] And one more point. Sometimes there's a lack of data—or a lack of the right data—to make the case for investing more in education. Without metrics that show the connection between learning and member engagement, retention, or revenue, education can be seen as a cost center rather than a growth engine.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:28] That ties back to the silos that we mentioned earlier, Jeff. If education and marketing and membership aren't talking meaningfully and regularly, you probably can't see the full picture of how learning drives membership and advocacy and vice versa.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:42] So the bottom line on why this opportunity has often been missed? It's a mix of structural, cultural, and strategic barriers, but they're not insurmountable. That said, they do require intentional effort to address.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:57] Which is where we're headed next: What associations can do to better seize the opportunity to be—and be recognized as—major providers of learning and education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:08] We've talked about the opportunity in front of associations and why it hasn't been fully realized. The next part is arguably the most important. What can associations do to seize that opportunity?

Celisa Steele: [00:14:21] Every organization's situation is unique, but there are some common approaches that we've seen work. They're not particularly complicated, but they do require commitment. We're going to talk about six things that we think associations can do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:37] First, elevate education and learning in your strategy. That means making them central to your mission, not just a byproduct of events or a line item in the budget. If you're an association leader, explicitly name education and—probably even more importantly—learning as strategic priorities.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:57] This can be as concrete as including learning-related goals in your organizational scorecard or more broadly ensuring that your mission statement reflects your role in developing your field's knowledge and skills. The point—in either case or anywhere along that spectrum—is to make the role that you play in education and learning visible and to make sure that there's some accountability around that role.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:22] Second, take an audience-first approach. That means starting with a deep understanding of your learners—their needs, challenges, and aspirations—before you design anything.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:36] That can mean investing in formal needs assessment. It can mean investing in member surveys. But it also probably means listening in informal ways: paying attention to discussion threads in your online community, debriefing with volunteers after events, asking open-ended questions in one-on-one conversations or at the end of a course evaluation. As with so much these days, AI can probably help you. It can help you find trends and common threads in the data that you have, both quantitative data like Likert ratings of courses and qualitative data you might get from phone interviews.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:15] I'll stress that none of this means that you're just being reactive to your market, that you're taking what you're hearing and turning around and producing based on that. It's your job as an association, as a leader, to lead learning. That's what we're all about here at Leading Learning. You're taking that data, you're taking that information, but then you're infusing that with your own knowledge, your own vision, to set the pace for your profession or your field with the learning experiences that you're helping to catalyze and facilitate. Remember that your audience isn't just individual members, even if you are an individual member society. Employers, industry partners, regulators are part of your learning ecosystem too, and understanding their needs can help you design offerings that are valued by learners and, importantly, in the marketplace.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:06] The third thing we'll suggest is consider partnerships. You don't have to do everything yourself. Partner with employers to co-create training that addresses specific skill gaps. Collaborate with universities on credit-bearing programs that might connect with your

niche expertise and connect that to a broader academic credential. Work with vendors, and maybe embed some of your learning resources into tools that your members are already using. Maybe you can work with other associations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:38] Partnerships can also help you scale. If you're resource-constrained—and so many associations are—leveraging the marketing reach, brand, content expertise, or technology platforms of a partner can let you do more without overextending your team.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:53] Fourth, we'll suggest that you invest in the infrastructure needed for education and for learning. I'm using "infrastructure" to refer to systems, processes, and frameworks that make your educational offerings sustainable and adaptable. I'm thinking about content governance, data strategy, competency frameworks.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:16] For example, a solid competency framework gives you a blueprint for aligning all your learning—from Webinars to conferences to certifications—so that everything builds toward clearly defined capabilities in your field.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:30] Content governance means that you know what you have. You're going to then be able to—based on that knowledge of what you have—keep it current. You're going to be able to tag it and organize it so it can be potentially reused, remixed, and delivered in multiple formats. And then, when the time comes, it can also be sunset and retired from your catalog.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:51] A data strategy ensures you can measure not just participation but impact and use that insight to improve and to make the case for further investment. We'll include links in the show notes to some past episodes on measurement and evaluation—in particular, conversations with Alaina Szlachta and Will Thalheimer.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:14] Fifth, embrace flexibility in format. The days of one-size-fits-all education are over—if there ever really was a day when one size fit all. Be thinking about shorter, modular learning alongside potentially offering some deep-dive programs. You want to make it possible for learners to engage on their own schedule and on the devices that they use every day.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:38] To be clear, we're not saying you should abandon your in-person events or longer programs. It means thinking about the total mix—how your offerings work together to meet different needs and preferences. Think about how your offerings compare to other options your learners have. Online and shorter options may stand out if your learners are comparing those to semester-long, on-campus courses, for example.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:04] Sixth and finally, advocate for learning inside your organization. Sometimes the biggest barrier is getting your own leadership or board to see education and learning as essential to your mission and sustainability as an association.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:21] We feel it is fundamental to member value to be cultivating and facilitating learning. That's what people are looking for these days. And that's where your data, stories,

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and learner feedback come in. Share examples of how learning—whether it’s formal or informal—has helped members advance in their careers, how it’s influenced policy, or how it’s driven revenue and retention for your association.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:47] Because, when you connect the dots between learning, member value, and organizational success, you’re making it easier to get the buy-in you need to be able to grow the impact that you’re having with your education and learning offerings.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:01] Of course, you don’t have to do all of this at once. Start with leverage points—the changes that can create momentum in multiple areas. For some associations, that might be building a competency framework. For others, it might be piloting a partnership with an employer.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:16] The key is to start. Waiting for the perfect moment or the perfect plan means that you might let opportunity slip by.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:25] And, when you start, you begin to shift culture. Which is so important. You shift from seeing education as an obligation or a side benefit to seeing it as a core way you deliver on your mission.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:40] Which brings us nicely to the final part of our conversation: What happens when associations fully seize this opportunity? What’s the impact for the association, for learners, and beyond? Let’s talk about what happens when associations step into this role fully, when they make learning and education central to their mission and strategy.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:05] The most immediate impact is usually on the association itself. Learning becomes a driver of member engagement, loyalty, and retention. When members see clear value in your educational offerings and the broader learning that you’re making possible—whether that’s helping them advance their careers, meet requirements, or solve real-life, day-to-day problems—they have a stronger reason to stay connected to your organization. Scott Wiley, the CEO of CoreNet Global, told me that he believes, “The future of associations lies in flipping the script—from leading with membership to leading with learning. When education becomes the front door, membership walks in naturally.” Well put, Scott.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:51] Yes, I like that idea of education being a front door—that’s very nice. Seizing this opportunity also diversifies and strengthens revenue. Education can become a reliable income stream that supports other parts of the organization. That helps reduce dependence on, say, a single big event, exhibit show, or membership dues alone. Erin Pressley, senior vice president of Education, Training & Events at NRECA (the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association), was at ASAE Annual. She’s been on the podcast before, and she loves to say that she loves to make money for her association—because that money feeds mission. It allows NRECA to better deliver on its mission and better serve its members.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:39] And there’s the reputational impact. Associations that lead in education and learning are seen as thought leaders and as the go-to resources in their fields. That can

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translate into stronger advocacy influence, better partnerships, and greater visibility with funders or sponsors.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:56] For members and for the learners, the impact is personal. They get access to trusted, relevant learning opportunities that help them do their jobs better, that help them advance their careers, that help them adapt to changes in their industry.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:11] And, because associations can combine formal education with informal learning opportunities, members can build skills in ways that fit their lives—whether that’s a structured program, a peer mentoring relationship, or a quick just-in-time resource.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:25] Of course, employers benefit too. They get a more skilled, adaptable workforce. That can mean higher productivity, fewer mistakes, better compliance with regulations, and a stronger talent pipeline.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:39] When employers see that an association is helping solve real workforce challenges, they’re more likely to support their staff’s involvement—through memberships, event attendance, or sponsoring educational initiatives.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:52] Lastly, we would be remiss if we don’t mention the societal impact. Think of fields like healthcare, engineering, law, public safety; in those fields, better learning and education directly affect public well-being. Even in less obviously high-stakes industries, stronger professional competence benefits the communities that those professionals serve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:17] In other words, when associations seize the opportunity and embrace the important role of being providers and leaders of education and learning, they’re not just serving members; they’re serving the broader public interest.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:30] And all of this reinforces the association’s mission, making it more resilient, more relevant even as the world changes rapidly.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:45] We’ll finish in just a moment with a recap of what we’ve discussed in our look at why associations are (still) education’s sleeping giant.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:53] At leadinglearning.com/episode460, you’ll find show notes, a transcript, options for subscribing to the podcast, and links to some other episodes and articles related to what we discussed today.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:06] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please share this episode or another with a colleague or co-worker you feel would appreciate and get value from it.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:16] We covered a lot in this episode, starting with the distinction between learning and education, then looking at the opportunity associations have right now to more fully embrace their role in leading learning and education, some of the barriers in terms of why they haven’t been able to fully realize that potential, and then what to do to help them better realize that potential.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:26:40] To recap, we believe associations are uniquely positioned to lead in both learning broadly and education because of their credibility, community, and potential for agility. The opportunity is here, but it's been missed or not fully realized in the past due to silos, resource constraints, legacy models, and a product-first mindset.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:04] To better seize the opportunity, associations can elevate learning in their strategy. They can make sure that they're taking an audience-first rather than a product-first approach. They can partner wisely. They can invest in infrastructure. They can embrace flexible formats. And they can advocate internally.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:23] And, when they do, the benefits ripple out, from stronger member engagement and more revenue to delivery on mission to employer partnerships and societal impact.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:34] Thanks again—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]