



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 264

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

The third sector has a responsibility that borders on a moral obligation to provide the continuing education, the professional development, the lifelong learning that sustains and shapes society.

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:16):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 264 of the Leading Learning Podcast, the final installment in our seven-part series on the third sector of education. Jeff and I set up the series in episode 258, defining the third sector, which is comprised of diverse groups that serve the millions of adults who continue to learn and grow in the decades that follow their secondary and post-secondary education, and digging into the reasons for the sector's recent growth. I talked with Michelle Weise, author of *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs that Don't Even Exist Yet*, in episode 259, and Jeff spoke with Cassandra Blassingame, CEO of the International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training for episode 260.

Jeff Cobb (01:11):

In episode 261, Celisa and I talked about what we've learned from Michelle and Cassandra, and we pulled in perspectives from Dr. Anthony Carnevale, an economist and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Celisa spoke with Nigel Paine, an author, speaker, and thought leader in the area of corporate L&D and lifelong learning, in episode 262. And I talked with LaTrease Garrison, executive vice president of the education division at the American Chemical Society in episode 263.

Jeff Cobb (01:45):

In this final episode of the series, we'll reflect on what our conversations with Nigel and LaTrease added to our understanding of the third sector of education, and we'll look at the implications for the sector's growth and begin to unpack what a fuller awareness of the sector might mean for your learning business's strategy.

Celisa Steele (02:05):

The third sector of education is a term you coined, Jeff, and we've defined that term throughout the series. As a reminder, the first sector is the pre-K through high school system that serves children. The second sector covers higher education that grants degrees. And both those sectors are well known. The third sector of education is less familiar but definitely not new. That third sector serves the millions of adults who continue to learn and grow in the decades that follow their secondary and post-secondary education. We've mentioned that definition before, we've

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revisited it through the series, but it occurred to me that we should talk about why you felt the need to coin the term in the first place. After all, the concept of tertiary education has been around for a while.

Jeff Cobb (02:55):

That's true. It has indeed. But the third sector is really not the same as tertiary education. If we look at how tertiary education is typically defined, it emphasizes formal education. So tertiary education can typically be characterized as really more of the same—more time at the university, another more advanced degree, a specialized certificate. And, of course, those advanced degrees and specialized certificates are part of the third sector, but they're just slices; they're not the whole story. The third sector, as we define it, also encompasses more informal and shorter burst learning—single courses, workflow learning, social learning, and so on. And, of course, this really is a market as well that we're serving, which often isn't taken into account when you're talking about tertiary education.

Celisa Steele (03:45):

And I think there's a set or prescribed path in tertiary education. Usually, it's an increasingly deep dive into a specific area of expertise, where a BS in biology leads to a master's in biology, a PhD in marine biology, and then a post-doc studying marine algae. But the third sector isn't always about going deeper. Sometimes what a third-sector provider offers is *broader* learning, rather than *deeper* study. And that came up in your conversation with LaTrease Garrison.

Jeff Cobb (04:18):

That's right. The American Chemical Society doesn't just offer chemistry courses. They also get into the so-called softer skills, topics like communication and critical thinking, because they, as a provider in the third sector, recognize that chemists need more than a knowledge of chemistry to succeed and to thrive.

Celisa Steele (04:38):

The World Bank's 2019 annual report is titled *The Changing Nature of Work*, and that report focuses on the future of work. And it finds that, in part due to the increasing role of technology in the world, lifelong learning is becoming increasingly relevant and important for workers competing in the labor market. One of the seven chapters in that report is, in fact, called "Lifelong Learning." And I mention the report because there's a quote that I want to share that speaks to what you're talking about, Jeff: "The demand for advanced cognitive skills and sociobehavioral skills is increasing, whereas the demand for narrow job-specific skills is waning. Meanwhile, the skills associated with 'adaptability' are increasingly in demand. This combination of specific cognitive skills (critical thinking and problem-solving) and sociobehavioral skills (creativity and curiosity) is transferable across jobs."

Celisa Steele (05:42):

Now, LaTrease talked about the American Chemical Society seeing itself as a resource to help individuals as they ponder their next career move, whether that's moving up the ladder that they're already on or shifting to a new field. And so, when a provider has a broader focus, as ACS does, then it's better positioned to help individuals throughout their working life.

Celisa Steele (06:05):

And a little later in that chapter on lifelong learning, the World Bank report says this: "Education systems, however, tend to resist change. A significant part of the readjustment in the supply of skills is happening outside of compulsory education and formal jobs."

Jeff Cobb (06:27):

That point gets again at why the third sector exists and is needed, not just the more narrowly defined tertiary education. Society needs the providers and the players who can see a need and respond to it. And that came up in your conversation with Nigel Paine. He made the point that he thinks it's essential for the third sector to remain diverse, with lots of players. And he talked about not wanting to see the third sector go the way of social media, where a few big players gobble up all the others, in part because the smaller players have a first-mover advantage. They can be quick and nimble and respond to a need they see emerge. So, again, this speaks to the way the third sector is different from, bigger than tertiary education.

Celisa Steele (07:19):

And if you're looking for a partner to help you be nimble and respond to the needs you see, check out Blue Sky eLearn, our sponsor for this series.

Amanda Davis (07:30):

For nearly 20 years, Blue Sky eLearn has been transforming the way organizations deliver virtual events and educational content. Blue Sky's customized, cutting-edge solutions connect hundreds of organizations to millions of learners worldwide. These include their award-winning learning management system, Path LMS, Webinar and live streaming services for short events to multi-day virtual conferences, and learning strategy and development solutions. These robust, easy-to-manage solutions allow organizations to easily organize, track, and monetize educational content.

Jeff Cobb (08:09):

You can learn more at blueskyelearn.com.

Jeff Cobb (08:16):

There's great potential in the third sector, many opportunities for those who know how to strategically pursue them. Celisa, when you spoke with Dr. Anthony Carnevale, he talked about how the third sector is getting a lot more attention than in the past.

Anthony Carnevale (08:29):

It used to be that K-12 is what people talked about. It's not anymore. K-12 is now forgotten—that got too troublesome for everybody. So now the focus, both politically and otherwise, is on post-secondary education or training. You're not supposed to call it higher education anymore because there's a lot more than colleges. So that shift in focus has recently resulted in a spike in interest in training, including short-term training. So there's going to be a fair amount of money around, fairly soon. There's a bipartisan agreement on the Hill already. One, if you look at the Democratic Party's Higher Education Act draft in the House of Representatives, we have, for the first time, created something that politically would have been impossible 10 years ago, and that is we're going to have Pell Grants for training, not just for education. We're going to have loans for training.

Anthony Carnevale (09:38):

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So that there is a shift towards training and short-term training, training as little as eight weeks. The issue there is how we're going to make that training accountable. We don't want to build another 3,000 Trump Universities. So, in the end, training is up. And a lot of people are trying to stop that because they believe for-profit outfits will get too involved. But it can't be stopped; especially with COVID, the need for short-term training is tremendous. And, if we get an infrastructure bill, for instance, we're talking about a huge increase in the number of people who need high school plus short-term training. So short-term training, if this is the stock market, that's where you put your money down.

Celisa Steele (10:42):

And that attention, which brings more money, attracts more providers. Tony talks about some people being concerned about for-profits getting involved in. And you talked about the sector being a bit of a Wild West in your conversation with LaTrease, Jeff.

Jeff Cobb (10:58):

Yeah, and when I spoke with him, Liam O'Malley of Blue Sky mentioned providers flooding the space in the early days of COVID, sensing opportunity. Amanda Davis, also of Blue Sky, talked about the noise in the space too. And Nigel mentioned confusion when you talked to him, Celisa. The sector can be overwhelming and confusing to learners. Choice is great, as we've already talked about—Nigel wants choice, thinks choice is part of a healthy third sector—but it can be hard for learners to navigate when there's so many choices. And going back to the first interview of the series, Celisa, you and Michelle Weise talked, spent time talking about that difficulty learners are having navigating the sector.

Celisa Steele (11:40):

Right, and we talked about the need for on- and off-ramps to be built so adults can get the learning they need when they need it, without major disruption to their careers and family life. And that reminds me that Michelle also commented on how frustrating it has been for her to see in her work duplication of effort—different providers doing the same work, oblivious to the fact that someone else is addressing, or trying to address, the same problem.

Jeff Cobb (12:09):

And that duplication of effort isn't just bad business and poor use of finite resources; it's arguably amoral when you think about the truly important, truly fundamental role of the third sector in society. The third sector has a responsibility that borders on a moral obligation to provide the continuing education, the professional development, the lifelong learning that sustains and shapes society.

Celisa Steele (12:36):

Which means understanding the sector and the other players is key to a learning business's success and value.

Jeff Cobb (12:45):

And it's why we wanted to dedicate this series to unpacking the third sector. This series is a primer on the third sector, and it's a starting place for learning businesses who want to better understand the landscape in which they exist. Too often organizations are too focused on themselves, their learners, their stakeholders. But organizations, of course, don't exist and do their work in a vacuum. Their learners and stakeholders are likely tapping other third-sector providers, and so it behooves them to be aware of those others.

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Celisa Steele (13:20):

And so, Jeff, what are your thoughts on what happens after the awareness? I'm thinking partnerships may be an avenue many learning businesses want to pursue. I'm thinking of partnership in many different forms, informal and formal, and where your partners could be employers, academic institutions, other third-sector providers serving similar or adjacent audiences to those you serve, members—I know LaTrease brought up partnering with members in your conversation with her, Jeff.

Jeff Cobb (13:55):

Yeah, she talked about partnering with members who serve as subject matter experts. That partnership helps the American Chemical Society provide and own top-notch content, and it raises up the profile of those SMEs, so it's really a win-win. And partnership might also be around sharing data, information, and insights, rather than and/or in addition to co-developing or co-offering specific products or services.

Celisa Steele (14:22):

Yeah. Michelle Weise mentions data trusts in her book *Long Life Learning*, and I think those are really interesting partnerships because they allow organizations to share data that informs and deepens the understanding of individual learners or, more broadly, a field or a profession.

Jeff Cobb (14:40):

So much potential there. For one thing, it helps with what we've called the "impact imperative"—being able to show the results that come from learners engaging with your offerings. So many learning businesses have difficulty seeing the translation of learning to the job because they often don't have direct oversight of the learner on the job, so they don't have that data.

Celisa Steele (15:03):

Right, and accreditors can even be seen as partners, as came up in your conversation with Cassandra Blassingame from IACET. So that's partnership that you can use to stand out in this competitive, noisy marketplace that we were talking about. That's a take on partnership as a pathway to credibility and trust.

Jeff Cobb (15:27):

And then competencies may be foundational to better, more fruitful, deeper partnerships.

Celisa Steele (15:34):

Oh, and I remember that competency-based learning came up when you and LaTrease talked. So maybe say a bit more about competencies and what you see as their partnership potential.

Jeff Cobb (15:47):

There's a lot to unpack in that, but a competency framework gives partners, it makes sure that they have a common reference point and a shared understanding about what's important, what skills and knowledge build on what other skills and knowledge, and how it all fits together, particularly in the context of a specific profession. A competency framework can allow different players to own some parts of that framework and then look outside to satisfy other parts. But really, most fundamentally, it's that common point of reference. You can think, for example, about the relationship between say, an association, for example, that might have a competency

framework in place, that really defines the essential skills and knowledge for that profession. Well, let's say you cross-walk that into, you map that into the major job roles in the profession. And then you map that into your job boards, which are often a revenue source, an important service that associations provide. And that, in turn, is mapped into what employers are actually looking for.

Jeff Cobb (16:56):

If employers know that people that they're accessing through your job boards are mapped to the essential skills and competencies that the profession needs, that goes a long way towards addressing some of those skill gap discussions that we're having out there right now. It really positions an association or whoever is behind that competency framework. It adds a tremendous amount of value to the profession because it is valuable to the job candidates, to the employees in the profession, and it's valuable to the employers in the profession. So that's an example of using a competency framework as a baseline or foundation for a very powerful type of partnership.

Celisa Steele (17:50):

In episode 258, the first in this series on the third sector, we posed two reflection questions to hopefully get you, dear listeners, thinking about the implications of what we've been talking about for your learning business and your strategy. The first question was simply a question to gauge your current awareness: "What's your learning business's awareness of the third sector of education?"

Jeff Cobb (18:16):

And hopefully your third sector intelligence quotient has gone up as you've tuned into this series. And hopefully this series added some nuance and depth to your awareness of the sector you're part of. The second question we posed was "How might a deepened awareness of the third sector help your learning business?" And answering that question may have implications for your strategy.

Celisa Steele (18:41):

More or different partnerships, as we've just been talking about, may come to be part of your strategy. Thinking about implications also reminds me of something Tony Carnevale from the Georgetown University Center on Education in the Workforce said. I asked him what words of advice he had for those working in the third sector about how they might go about thriving. Here's what he had to say.

Anthony Carnevale (19:08):

Connect to the labor market. It's really that simple. It's what the higher education system is being forced to do, unless you're Harvard. It's what one of the issues will be, that there'll be a lot more competition from the higher ed system because it is in receipt of public funds, and it is going to be in receipt of more public funds in mandates for easier access, maybe free college, maybe free community college (we already have that in 22 states, basically). So the competition from the education side is going to be stern, and they're being pushed into a regulatory environment where they're going to have to be transparent and accountable for whether or not their programs, not their institutions—stitutions matter less and less. It's programs that matter because we're measuring the economic opportunity at the program level now. I don't care if you went to Harvard; I want to know what you took. So there'll be stiff competition from

there. But clearly, if you're thinking of this as a business, or if you're not-for-profit, and you want to expand your revenue base, connect to the labor market. That's the answer.

Jeff Cobb (20:27):

Connecting to the labor markets, connecting the dots to show that what you're offering is resulting in positive outcomes, that you're moving the needle in the field or profession or industry you serve is absolutely critical. We've long believed that. And, as Tony said, the scrutiny is only going to grow. The insistence on accountability and transparency too. And that's a good thing for learners and learning businesses, as long as you get your ducks in a row and know what it is you're really doing and delivering through your learning products and services.

Jeff Cobb (21:11):

This is the last episode in the seven-part series on the third sector of education. We hope you've enjoyed the series, and we'd love to hear your feedback and suggestions for the future. You can leave a comment at leadinglearning.com/episode264 or e-mail us at leadinglearning@tagoras.com.

Celisa Steele (21:32):

We'll resume releasing episodes of the Leading Learning Podcast with a new series starting in April 2021. In the meantime, the archive of past episodes is available on the Leading Learning site, and, at leadinglearning.com/episode264, you'll find show notes, a transcript, other resources related to this series, and options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the new episodes, we encourage you to subscribe. And subscribing also helps us get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb (22:06):

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Celisa Steele (22:28):

And we encourage you to learn more about the series sponsor at blueskyelearn.com.

Jeff Cobb (22:35):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode264, you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (22:46):

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

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