



THE EVOLUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

A CUSTOMER-FIRST APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONS



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This is not our grandparents' campus—or is it?

The 2008 recession, shifting demographics, a highly competitive job market and heightened financial pressures—while acutely felt by millennials and Generation Z—are not necessarily unique events from a historical perspective. Earlier generations experienced similar challenges, so why do higher education institutions find it increasingly difficult to attract, retain and graduate the best fit students? And why have past solutions proven ineffective in the current environment?

In short, it's because the “jobs to be done” have changed, and not all institutions are adequately responding. “Students now expect colleges and

universities to do more than help them earn degrees. They expect experiences that help them grow as individuals, develop the necessary skills for thriving, sustainable careers and ensure financially stable futures. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, the need for institutions to differentiate their value proposition to a more demanding set of education customers becomes even more urgent,” said Peter Stokes, a managing director in Huron’s higher education business.

For institutions to rise to this challenge, leaders must reimagine the educational experience and focus on the “jobs” that students and other customers, are “hiring” them to do.

JOBS TO BE DONE 101

Renowned Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen's jobs-to-be-done framework offers a process for understanding a customer's underlying needs. The process goes beyond taking what customers say they want at face value to examine their true motivations and behaviors on a functional, social and emotional level:

- The **functional** aspect of a job—what the customer wants to accomplish.
- The **emotional** aspect—how the customer would like to feel.
- The **social** aspect—how the customer hopes to be perceived.

WHAT JOBS TO BE DONE ARE

- Focused on what an individual seeks to accomplish in a given circumstance.
- Considerate of the experience an individual is trying to create.

WHAT JOBS TO BE DONE ARE NOT

- Driven solely by student characteristics, program attributes, new technologies or industry trends.
- Simply about functional needs.

Henry Ford famously said, “If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” The quote exemplifies a product-driven mindset rather than an outcome-driven one. Until the automobile was invented, the only way to get someplace more quickly (the underlying motivation) was often by a speedier steed. Ford’s approach didn’t rest on what prospective customers said they wanted but instead focused on the problem they were trying to solve, finding a more efficient form of transportation.

When applied to higher education, jobs to be done could look like this:

- **For students:** Help me feel included in the campus community so that I not only earn a degree but develop meaningful relationships along the way.
- **For faculty:** Help me understand my students’ individual needs and provide them with the tools and real-world experiences needed for long-term success.

Beyond students and faculty, a variety of customers are important to institutions, including employers, alumni, local communities, parents and donors. All should be considered when applying the jobs-to-be-done framework.



THREE DIMENSIONS OF JOBS TO BE DONE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

When analyzing customer needs, institutional leaders will want to equally consider the functional, emotional and social aspects underlying each audience's expectations.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

As an example, an institution might find that graduate enrollment is declining. Data may indicate that these students are gravitating toward short-term credential opportunities in lieu of a traditional master's degree. How do we apply jobs to be done to help understand and attract this audience?

- **Functionally**, students may want a more targeted level of instruction

in a particular subject or expertise with a tool, or they may desire an expedited educational journey that helps them enhance their careers more quickly.

- **Emotionally**, students may want confidence in a specific and potentially marketable skill when seeking a new career path or promotion, hoping to avoid the anxiety of being unable to find work or meet their goals.
- **Socially**, students may want to be seen as forward thinking, taking the proactive step of learning new skills and tools as opposed to a more conventional (and potentially outdated) approach to education.

INSTITUTIONS DEVELOP NEW FRAMEWORKS

The jobs-to-be-done framework can help higher education leaders identify creative solutions and growth opportunities, including joint ventures, strategic partnerships and shared services agreements.

An example of the latter can be found in the Washington D.C. area, where the Capital CoLAB launched in 2018. The partnership brings together regional institutions including Georgetown University and Johns Hopkins University, with employers from Amazon Web Services to Exelon, to build a technology talent pipeline that meets future demand. Together, the group launched a Digital Technology Credential, a program connecting students at member institutions with area employers to develop skills in cybersecurity, analytics and other technical competencies.

THE FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

Faculty members also have a variety of functional, social and emotional needs to fulfill. Consider the needs of a faculty member at a major research university:

- **Functionally**, the faculty member may want to equip students with an understanding of how to apply their skills in an academic research setting, and in specific non-academic careers.
- **Emotionally**, they may feel like they could have a greater impact if they could spend less time on administrative work, and more time mentoring students.

- **Socially**, they may want to be perceived by colleagues and administrators as being personally invested in their students' success and having the outcomes to demonstrate it.

At many institutions, factors from course loads to time-consuming administrative processes can detract from the time faculty members spend coaching students outside of formal classes. The jobs-to-be-done framework can help institutions take a more targeted approach to reducing these obstacles and facilitating more dynamic relationships between students and faculty.





ASSESSING THE PRICE OF STATUS QUO

To meet the new realities of higher education, leaders might consider rethinking institutional strategies to address customer demands as they are today, as opposed to what they have been, according to Scott D. Anthony, a senior partner at Innosight, a strategy and innovation practice at Huron.

“What a leader needs to do is step back, look at the underlying forces that are taking place in an industry, sector or context and help the people on his or her team imagine what the future looks like if they don’t do

anything differently,” said Anthony. “Higher education, like other sectors of the economy, is facing a significant amount of change, and if institutions don’t adjust their approaches, there will be problems related to sustainability and impact.”

Chief among these challenges are missed opportunities to attract and retain the best fit students. Students who desire experiences personalized to their needs will find them elsewhere in a competitive environment. Industry competition is no longer limited to traditional institutions vying with historical competitors for a shrinking enrollment pool. Colleges and universities face threats from emerging alternative education providers and

online “mega-universities,” as well as broader developments that may impact student choice including the free college movement and new tuition models intended to liberate students from a lifetime of debt.

Transforming to overcome and capitalize on an unpredictable landscape will not be a one-time fix; colleges and universities will need to be nimble, adaptive and receptive to constant industry pressures. The jobs-to-be-done approach increases the staying power of institutions’ strategies because decisions will be based on customers’ underlying motivations, and unsolved problems, rather than on historical precedence.

Student demographic changes are transforming the higher education landscape and creating new competitive pressures. Institutions must embrace this change as an opportunity to grow, transform and better compete in the future.

- **Nationally, full-time undergraduate enrollment fell 9% between 2011 and 2016.¹**
- **Enrollment is expected to rise slightly through the mid-2020s, yet certain regions—the Northeast and Midwest—expect to lose 5% of their college-aged populations.²**
- **Beginning in 2026, the number of college-aged students will drop almost 15% nationally, and up to 20-25% in some areas, yet others like the Rocky Mountain region will see increased demand.³**

REDEFINING CUSTOMERS

While all customers are important to consider, the exercise can often yield significant impact when framed from an external perspective. The jobs-to-be-done framework sheds light on the diverse needs and intentions of institutions' different customers. Rather than narrowly viewing students as degree earners or employers as hiring partners—and pushing a pre-defined “product” to them—institutions can create customized offerings that address each audience's distinct motivations.

Consider, for example, the needs of a mid-sized regional employer seeking to hire well-rounded undergraduates who can make an immediate impact, versus a large multinational employer looking to infuse a data analytics skillset into a handful of its business units. Both seek talent. The regional employer, however, may need graduates who have real-world experiences that promote critical thinking, while the multinational employer may need a convenient, flexible way to build new competencies among its existing employees.

THE PERILS OF SIMPLE CORRELATION

Big data capabilities, machine learning and artificial intelligence help organizations collect and process vast amounts of customer data, but such technologies present a downside, Christensen and his co-authors argue in “Know Your Customers' Jobs to Be Done.”³ They write that “most of the masses of customer data companies create is structured to show correlations... [Although] it's no surprise that correlation isn't causality, we suspect that most managers have grown comfortable basing decisions on correlations.”

The authors explain that “we've come to the conclusion that the focus on correlation—and on knowing more and more about customers—is taking firms in the wrong direction. What they really need to home in on is the progress that the customer is trying to make in a given circumstance—what the customer hopes to accomplish.”

Disruption theory doesn't tell you how to create products and services that customers want to buy. Jobs-to-be-done theory does. It transforms our understanding of customer choice in a way that no amount of data ever could because it gets at the causal driver behind a purchase.”

Clayton M. Christensen

Supporting distinct audiences requires different structures, processes and policies. It requires institutional and academic leaders to question:

- Who are our customers?
- Whom will we serve in the future?
- What methods do we use to serve them?
- Is our institution successful in addressing their needs?
- What's unique about what we have to offer?

“For any customer, their true need transcends earning a degree or sourcing employees. The essence of each can be distilled into the functional, social and emotional realms, which are at the heart of the jobs-to-be-done framework,” said Chris Slatter, a director in Huron's education business.



EXECUTING THE VISION

After creating a strategy rooted in jobs to be done, the next big hurdle is implementing it. Leaders will have to develop the approaches, tools and support needed to manage generational, demographic and technology transitions. “As leaders face the challenge of implementation, they’re trying to balance an established way of doing business with often a more siloed focus between schools and departments, even in the way they budget,” said Phil Strzalka, a managing director in Huron’s education business.

While a CEO has final say over high-level decisions in certain organizations, higher education leaders are more likely to share decision-making authority with faculty, boards of trustees and other stakeholders. Accordingly, it may be easier to build a shared vision for change around common goals.

“Universities frequently have compelling missions, which balance teaching, research and sometimes public service or patient care,” said Kurt Dorschel, a senior director in Huron’s education business. “A compelling mission can be a strong way to unite people around a vision and goals to create purpose.” The jobs-to-be-done approach can further these missions by focusing on each customer’s distinct motivations,

engaging stakeholders in the process up front so their voices are heard. This ultimately creates a shared sense of investment in the path forward.

Still, staff and departments at decentralized institutions often have a natural resistance to major changes, and understandably so. Transformation is hard, but it is critical to perceive change as an ongoing process, not a strict set of procedures, according to Strzalka. “What we are finding is that what drives the change isn’t the tactical things. What we see as driving sustainable implementation of any disruptive change is **change leadership**. This means continuously acknowledging that our audiences’ needs are evolving and modeling a commitment to adapt.”

FOUR IMPERATIVES FOR INITIATING CHANGE

1. Don’t assume that a customer will perform a certain action or purchase a product just because you believe they should.
2. Avoid grouping people by demographics, but rather by motivations.
3. Solve customers’ underlying problems vs. designing solutions to fit a specific product category.
4. Use customers’ actions as indicators of their needs and preferences.⁴

CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The challenges facing higher education today may not be new, but solving them requires different thinking. The jobs-to-be-done framework provides the structure that institutional leaders need to uncover meaningful insights about who they serve and deliver transformational change.

The framework centers on understanding the underlying

motivations of students, parents, faculty and industry partners, treating them as customers who possess a range of needs—rather than as static demographic profiles. Audience-specific insights can be used to reimagine the educational experience and institutions' value propositions, revealing opportunities for innovation and realigning processes, policies and tools to ensure sustainable success.

It's a critical time for higher education leaders to plan, champion and execute strategic change. By applying the jobs-to-be-done framework and adopting a change leadership approach, leaders can pursue initiatives that meaningfully redefine their institutions' value on customers' terms.

SOURCES

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