

10 Trends Ahead for Continuing Education

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Introduction

Continuing education schools—meaning university extensions and schools of continuing and professional education—are poised for a breakthrough. They rapidly become a key place to experiment with new learning models, build bridges with industry partners, and develop innovative programs that generate revenue. Continuing education turns into a critical force to keep universities relevant and thriving.

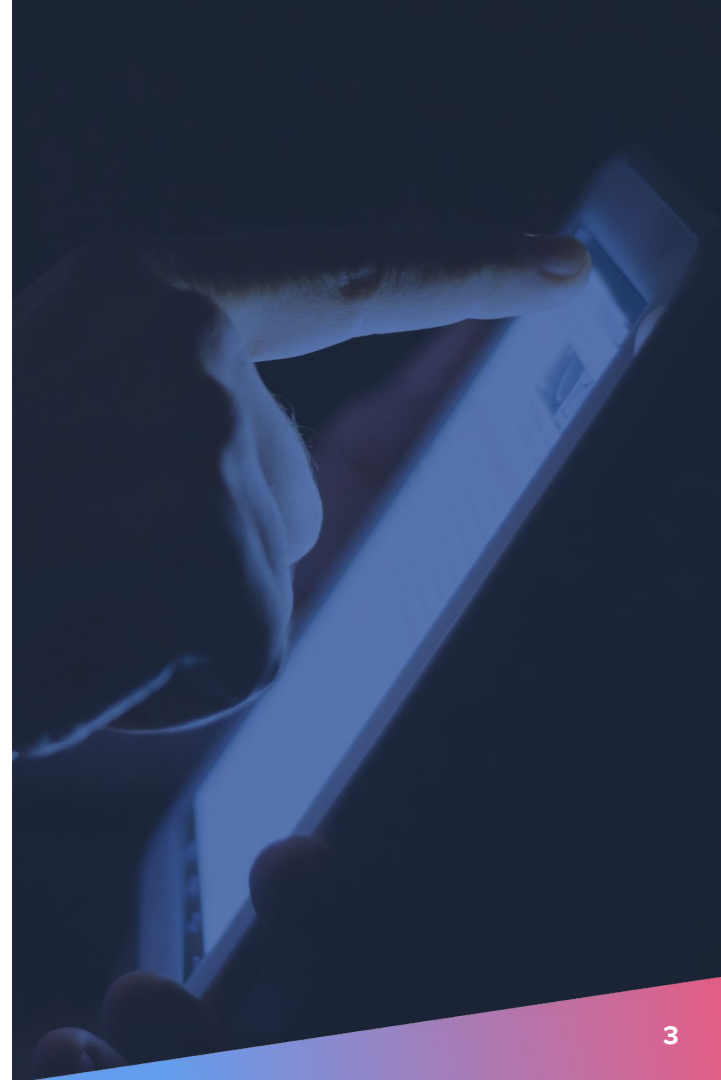
Continuing education programs are relatively autonomous from their parent universities. In particular, they are less regulated, more responsive to industry and consumer needs, have less restrictive budget policies and procurement systems, operate under lower political pressure, and are often infused with the “startup mentality” throughout the organization. Research shows that this autonomy is critical for responding to and pioneering disruptive innovations.

Universities must leverage this autonomy and make their continuing education schools a key part of their innovation strategy—not just for the continuing education school itself, but for the overall university. Continuing education programs must be empowered to make strategic investments in new program creation and new learning models. This report describes emerging trends—and opportunities for innovation—that will define the leading continuing education schools of the future.

① Continuing education programs will support on-demand learning

Many adult learners have little patience to wait a few months for a new program to begin. They seek on-demand learning through courses and programs that are flexible and immediately accessible. As such, continuing education programs supporting on-demand learning will gain a critical competitive advantage in the field.

Coursera and other MOOC providers already offer fully online, self-paced programs that allow students to enroll and start learning in a matter of seconds. [CU-Boulder Continuing Education](#) also offers traditional online self-paced programs with rolling registration; students can begin at any time and complete programs in as little as two weeks or as much as six months. Leading continuing education providers will adopt similar models or redesign hybrid and in-person programs that incorporate a self-paced component. This type of program may begin with a fully online, self-paced introductory module followed by an immersive, in-person or live online cohort that begins every few weeks.



② Continuing education schools will offer creative financing options

In order to increase access for low-income students and drive enrollment growth for the university, non-degree programs must significantly expand their financial aid options. Leaders in continuing education will work with the next generation of private lenders (e.g., Affirm, Climb Credit, Earnest, Pave, and Skills Fund), experimental federal financial aid programs (e.g., [EQUIP](#)), potential state financial aid programs (e.g., Cal Grants), philanthropic sources and employer-provided educational assistance programs in different combinations to support low-income students. On the other end of the economic spectrum, successful programs will find ways to capture funds sitting within dormant and/or underutilized 529 plans.

The School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) at Loyola University Chicago offers a generous [tuition matching program](#), for example, that doubles the financial contribution committed through employer tuition assistance programs.

The SCPS Fellows Program matches an employer's tuition contribution up to \$5,250 per academic year for qualifying students. In addition to funds awarded through the program, students may also apply for and receive state and federal aid.

For programs with low marginal costs, schools can develop a differentiated pricing and discount strategy. For example, [Online Learn on Demand](#), part of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, keeps costs to students low by offering fully online, self-paced courses. Students not only have the option to begin when they want, but they can also choose to pay for an entire course or a single module. Modules, or “chunks” of courses, allow students to pay a fraction of the cost of a full course and learn a specific topic or skillset in a fraction of the time. Students can also combine modules to build customized courses and earn certificates and degrees. Continuing education programs can borrow from innovative models like this.

③ Continuing education programs will adopt competency-based models

Competency-based learning, in which students advance upon mastery of a concept, not based on a time-based measure such as the credit hour, stands to benefit continuing education programs in at least three ways. First, it lays the foundation for programs to personalize learning for students, such that they enjoy a more customized experience allowing them to accelerate learning if they have mastered content and skills as a result of prior experiences. Second, continuing education programs can directly align competency-based certificate programs with the competencies employers need from their employees. Because students will only graduate upon mastery of the required competencies, this approach stands to improve graduates' performance in jobs and bolster employers' recruitment and promotional decisions. Finally, competency-based models are both easier to measure and iteratively improve than traditional time-based programs.

The [University of Wisconsin Flexible Option](#) highlights many of the aforementioned benefits. By focusing more on learning than on class time, the UW Flexible Option allows students to start when they want, move through the program at their own pace, earn credit for what they already know, and advance in the program as they master competencies. The UW Flexible Option is distinct in that it encompasses both undergraduate degrees and certificate programs.

④ A new mainstream credentialing system will emerge for continuing education sector

Leading continuing education schools will drive the development of a credentialing system for non-degree programs. A widely-accepted credentialing system would validate the academic rigor—and therefore augment the value of certificates and other non-degree programs to employers—by verifying the competencies that graduates acquire. The credentialing system will also encourage greater usage of industry-wide benchmarks such as standard assessments for core engineering skills. Over time, credentialing terminology will likely evolve and standardize. There are currently various terms used to describe an array of non-degree programs. Examples include mini-degrees, micromasters (MIT), and nanodegrees (trademarked by Udacity). These terms are arguably interchangeable and confusing to consumers. A widely accepted credentialing system could standardize often confusing continuing education terminology.

Recently, six of the nation's top universities came together to offer a new credentialing system that may become the standard in career-focused, skills-based training. Georgia Tech Professional Education, UCLA, UC Davis Extension, UC Irvine Division of Continuing Education, University of Washington Professional and Continuing Education, and University of Wisconsin-Extension launched the University Learning Store. The University Learning Store enables students to earn an affordable, relevant, and industry-validated credential in less time than traditional programs.

5 Continuing education schools will dramatically improve career services

Leading continuing education organizations will develop employer networks that support the career advancement of their non-degree graduates. Academic institutions can collaborate with employers to identify salient competencies, build relevant assessments, and piece together the corresponding curriculum. Continuing education programs will also increasingly utilize instructors from industry-run, employer-provided capstone projects and offer internships as an integral component of non-degree programs.

In particular, university continuing education programs will emulate the career placement practices used by coding bootcamps. Through strategic employer networks and industry-informed curricula, coding bootcamps boast high job placement rates and starting salaries for graduates. Hack Reactor, for example, is known for its high starting salaries—the average graduate earns \$104,000—alongside a transparent methodology for reporting student outcomes.



⑥ Continuing education schools will partner with companies to create custom employee training programs

As companies increasingly realize the value in investing in talent development, most will seek an educational partner to create and operate their corporate training programs. The best employer-university partnerships are vertically integrated in the sense that they cover all levels of training, from onboarding and skills development to mid-management and executive programs. To meet corporate needs, universities must support multiple delivery models (e.g., in-person, self-paced online, synchronized online, and hybrid), heavily customize their programs, and occasionally develop custom programs from scratch. eCornell, for example, offers companies off-the-shelf certificate programs as well as customized programs based on the specialized needs of employers. In order to develop deep corporate partnerships, continuing education programs need to build professional corporate sales teams or find outside help to drive the sale of custom programs.



7 U.S. continuing education programs will serve significantly more international students

Just as degree programs in the United States increasingly enroll international students, so too will continuing education programs. Early growth of this trend is evident in Figure 1. Adult international students, in particular, are attracted to non-degree programs because they are cheaper and shorter. They offer comprehensive visa support, particularly for Optional Practical Training (OPT) opportunities, which have increased in importance as the H1B route has become more competitive. For international students, non-degree programs also offer the same value proposition as traditional programs—the opportunity to break into the U.S. job market or obtain a significant career advantage in their home countries. UC Santa Cruz Extension’s [international program](#), for example, offers full-time certificate programs to students from over 30 countries. With a new permanent presence in Silicon Valley, UCSC Extension connects its international students with internships and OPT opportunities at local companies.

Figure 1: International students by academic level

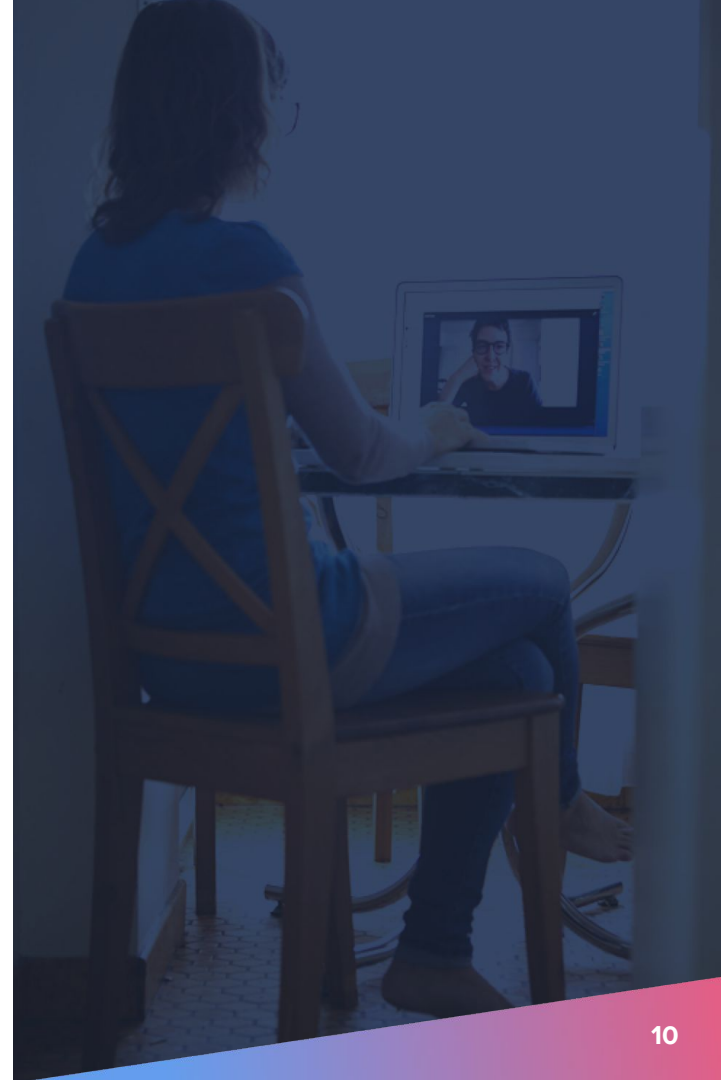


Source: [Institute of International Education, Open Doors Data](#)

To increase international enrollments, continuing education programs need to establish partnerships in the local international markets through academic institutions, employers, and agent networks that can send students to the United States. In addition to this channel-driven approach, they must master international online advertising for a direct-to-learner enrollment strategy. They must also expand their housing options, as short-term adult students’ needs differ significantly from traditional college populations. Intensive English programs such as [EC English](#) are known for thoughtful housing solutions and can serve as a model.

8 Continuing education schools will master social advertising and conversion optimization

The initial growth of online and non-degree programs was driven largely by established advertising channels, such as TV, Google search, public transportation ads, and direct mail. As these channels become more competitive and expensive, continuing education schools need to discover and implement new distribution strategies. Emerging opportunities exist in social advertising platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, mobile ads, and modern display advertising techniques such as retargeting and real-time bidding. It is not enough, however, to simply implement an advertising strategy that drives cheap and targeted traffic to program pages. Instead, continuing education administrators must also master conversion optimization and adopt A/B testing as a regular part of their workflow. They must also rethink their enrollment model and invest more in information sessions and trial experiences. Albeit early, Facebook Live looks particularly promising for hosting and promoting “open day” livestreams for academic programs.



9 Continuing education schools will support transformation efforts throughout universities

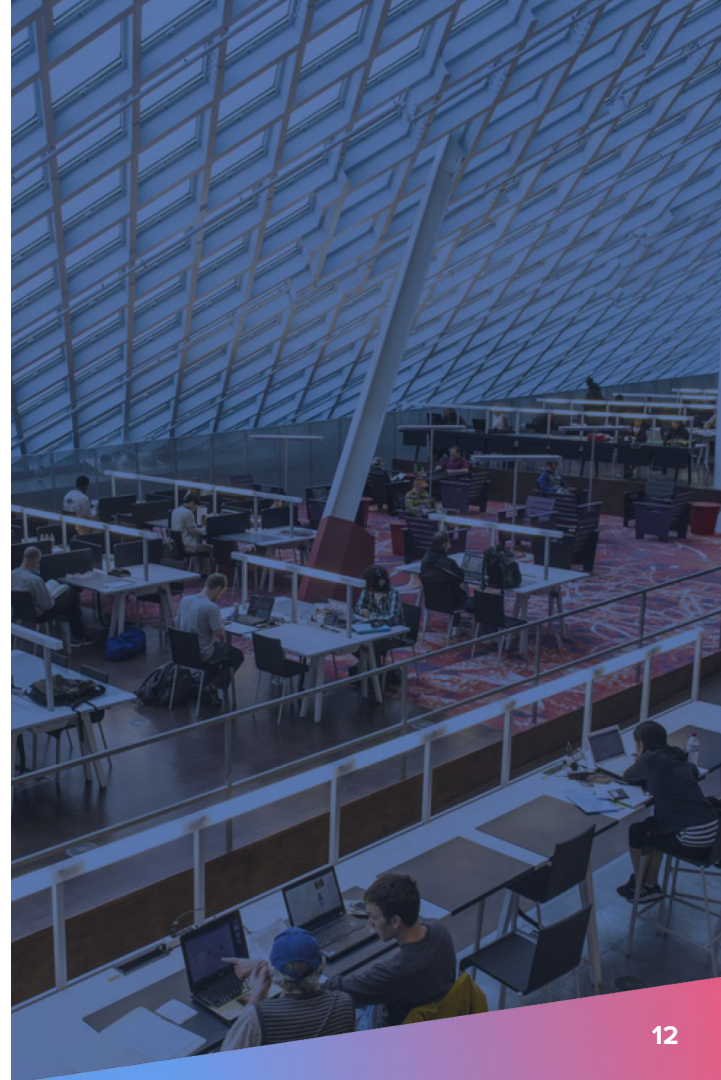
To help advance the parent university, continuing education schools can also leverage their autonomy to run training programs for academic leaders, act as internal consultants, jointly operate innovative programs with individual departments and schools, and potentially absorb underperforming programs from the main campus. Given their agility, continuing education programs can test new educational practices—from on-demand learning to competency-based education and from alternative credentialing to innovative partnerships with employers—in non-degree programs first, learn what works, and then gradually bring the best solutions to the undergraduate and graduate levels.

For example, UC Berkeley Extension led the creation of the Berkeley Resource Center for Online Education (BRCOE) as an effort to share promising practices in online learning with other academic departments across campus. BRCOE facilitates online education activities across campus by helping departments and faculty develop, expand, and/or improve their online courses, programs, and business models.

In a similar effort, the Division of Continuing Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison empowers faculty and staff to develop and deliver new degree and certificate programs for nontraditional students. The Educational Innovation Program Development team leverages the expertise of the Division of Continuing Studies to offer a variety of internal services, including academic planning, marketing strategy, online course development, and multimedia production, to academic departments across campus.

10 Continuing education schools will cultivate strategic public-private partnerships

Leading continuing education schools will collaborate with private companies to develop and scale the next generation of continuing education programs. Public-private partnerships combine strengths from both sides. Universities bring domain expertise, faculty members, facilities, and a respected brand, while private partners bring best-in-class market research, advertising, sales, delivery technology, technology-driven instructional models, and analytics. Private partners can also offer risk capital to underwrite investments in continuing education program creation. At the same time, universities will learn their lessons from Online Program Management providers such as 2U, Bisk, and Pearson Embanet, and will retain more control and revenue in these partnerships than in a typical OPM contract.



Authors



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