IMPORTANT CHANGES IN OUR APPROACHES TO LEARNING after high school are being led by many college educators and urgently demanded by lawmakers, policy leaders, and the public. Institutional trustees, too, have a critical role to play — especially when it comes to clearly defining and holding institutions accountable for results that reflect a strong vision of quality and a commitment to more equitable outcomes.

This need for board leadership to drive both quality and equity is especially important in a climate of increasing skepticism about higher education. A recent Pew Research Center survey revealed that nearly two thirds of Americans believe that higher education is heading in the wrong direction. Even more think students are not getting the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Surely, these twin findings are related.

This is no surprise to many educational leaders and government policymakers, and many are working hard to address the mismatch between the skills needed and the design of postsecondary programs.

But as they support redesign efforts driven by changing economic demands, board members should make sure the work is grounded in a deep understanding of the changing nature of work and the dynamic demands of a global economy. Boards can and should ask tough questions about the quality of both their traditional and new academic programs. Do they prepare students for immediate workplace demands? How do they set graduates up for economic opportunity and social mobility over the long term?

Seeking Integrative Models

Some employers complain about very specific, short-term needs in terms of skilled workers. But many economic forecasters and business leaders acknowledge an even greater and additional challenge: The pace of technological change and the nature of global competitiveness put a premium on a blend of shorter-term skills and longer-term adaptability and the capacity to keep learning.

Graduates need both specific technical skills and broad, transferable competencies that enable them to understand the broader context in which they live and work and to pivot on the job and across their working lives as necessary.

This means all programs need to consider an integrative approach to program redesign. They should be combining real-world experience — through which students gain practical, technical skills — and broader liberal learning approaches that provide context and higher order capacities to think critically, communicate clearly using multiple data sources, and solve complex problems in diverse settings. This is true both for two-year technical degrees as well as general studies degrees designed for transfer.

Defining Quality for Today’s World and Today’s Students

In light of the changing nature of work and the diversity of today’s students, Lumina Foundation has articulated a vision of quality postsecondary credentials that prioritizes three things:
• We believe a high-quality credential in today's world has **transparent learning outcomes** so that students and those who may hire them have a very clear sense of what they have demonstrated to earn their credential in terms of knowledge and skills.

• High-quality credentials also are specifically designed to lead to **employability** in a tough global economy that is evolving rapidly.

• Finally, because of the changing nature of that economy, a truly high-quality credential also prepares students for **further learning** — either learning that leads to more credentials or to the continued learning on the job that is so essential as technology and work environments shift.

Board members can use a framework like this one to guide discussions on their own campuses about exactly how programs should be redesigned and what kind of data leaders should be tracking to hold themselves accountable to a vision aligned with their own institution’s mission. They also should keep a close eye on how their own redesign efforts intersect with other trends — including trends in credentialing and policymaking.

As we have witnessed the trends in the changing nature of work, a parallel proliferation of opportunities for learning beyond high school also has emerged. Most of these efforts are responding to needed upskilling in the current workforce and to those short-term skill shortages.

**The New Credentialing Landscape**

As stewards of and advocates for their own colleges, board members must pay careful attention to this proliferation of “competing” credentials. It is simply no longer the case that traditional college degrees — whether two-year transfer degrees designed specifically to articulate to four-year bachelor’s degree programs or technical degrees tightly aligned with specific workforce needs — are the only perceived avenues to economic opportunity and job preparation. Individuals can now pursue other kinds of credentials by attending coding boot camps or pursuing industry certifications or other workforce training opportunities that provide badges or certificates attesting to specific competencies. Many of these opportunities also can be integrated into more traditional degree programs.

Many commentators and policymakers believe that these innovations in credentialing hold great promise in helping meet the needs of today’s economy and helping more individuals gain quality learning beyond high school. What is largely unknown is exactly how one can best determine the quality of these new credentials — what is their lasting value to students and to the larger society? How can individuals judge what is the best path forward in this credentialing landscape for themselves and for their children?

Leaders at traditional community colleges are in an ideal position to help guide a national conversation about the quality of learning in all settings — and to integrate new innovative approaches into degree programs in ways that protect students and assure that they are getting the right learning building blocks to help them succeed in the long term.

**Understanding New Policy Environments**

Given their fiduciary responsibilities, board members also should be following closely changes in the policy environment in relation to quality.

Many states are beginning to track attainment of a much broader set of credentials from learning after high school. They are working hard to define which credentials really have value in the current and future labor markets. The U.S. Department of Education also has begun a process known as negotiated rule making designed to reduce and update regulations related to who has access to federal student aid. This effort may result in minor — or significant — changes in requirements related to accreditation and quality assurance processes that govern institutions of higher education. (See **Accreditation and Community College Trustees**, available at www.acct.org/term/reports-and-white-papers.)

In particular, the Education Department has cited the need for more innovation and attention to the expanding landscape of credentialing in announcing its efforts to negotiate new rules governing higher education. Board members should pay particular attention to how these shifts might change their own institutions’ internal quality review processes and how these changes may impact “competing” credential providers, which may gain increased access to federal financial aid.

In the end, regardless of which way the regulatory winds blow, board members can and should prioritize innovation in educational programs to better align with today’s students and today’s economy and vigorous, ongoing attention to the quality of their programs — what they produce for students in terms of learning and post-graduation outcomes.

It is only by attention to these twin priorities that governing boards will help regain the public’s confidence in institutions of higher education and assure that students are well served today and into the future.

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Debra Humphreys, Ph.D. is vice president for strategic engagement at Lumina Foundation. Hear more from her about this topic in episodes 12 and 13 of the "In the Know with ACCT" podcast, available at [https://intheknowwithacct.podbean.com](https://intheknowwithacct.podbean.com) or via the Apple podcast application or Google Play store.