

# The Learner Revolution

AND MOVING TOWARD AN AGILE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

*Part Two of Three*



ACADEMIC  
PARTNERSHIPS™

## Key Findings

**The admissions process for graduate degrees** hasn't changed much from the days when programs were more academic in nature. The common measures still used—grades, test scores, and recommendations—can't really tell how far applicants will go, whether they will stay enrolled, earn a degree, and find meaningful employment.

**A new admissions system is likely to emerge in the coming years** and while officials lack consensus on exactly what it will look like, there is agreement that it must meet the applicants where they are, define success metrics, and provide flexible admissions by program.

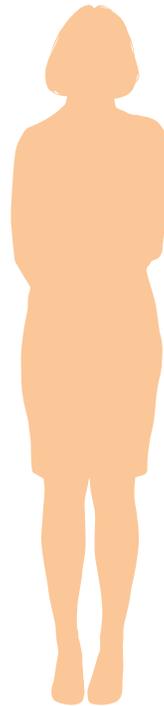
**Today's learners are more discerning** about what they want from education. Students who feel their demands are not being met will go elsewhere.

**Institutions need to harness the data** they have collected on students and use the data to develop specific programs based on what learners want.

**Flexible designs are needed across a range of graduate programs** to unbundle programs into their individual parts and help learners get what they need in the moment, knowing that they can come back at any point to get more education and training.

**Technology allows universities to rethink the very idea of admissions**, and instead, institutions could allow learners to try out online classes and then fully enroll after they successfully complete them.

**A blended undergraduate and graduate experience** could be developed by combining, for instance, a liberal arts bachelor's degree earned face-to-face with a professional master's degree taken entirely online, roughly within a time frame of four years.

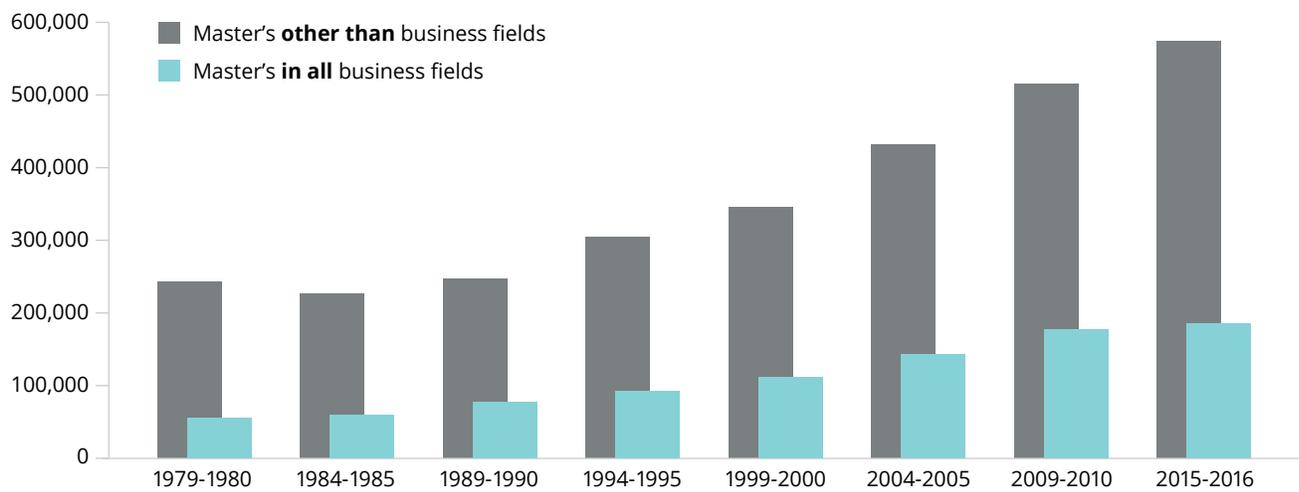




WAYHOME studio/Shutterstock.com

FIGURE 1:

### A Quarter of the Master's Degrees Earned in 2016 Were in Business



Source: U.S. Department of Education

## Introduction

The admissions process at colleges and universities has long acted as the gatekeeper to the higher education system.

From the time American colleges were first established in the colonies and throughout much of their subsequent history, entrance standards were minimal—students were essentially hand-picked and admissions was limited by class, gender, and race. But during the last century in the aftermath of World War II, with returning GI's flocking to college campuses and democratizing higher education, institutions began to require achievement tests to control the influx of students.

**Over the following decades,** debates ensued among college leaders and policymakers about how best to serve a growing population knocking on the doors of higher education. There were concerns that with growth would come a reduction of quality. In Florida, for instance, a task force in the 1950s concluded that the state would need to accommodate three times the number of students within twenty years. Such projections alarmed the group's members. In their minds, there was a limit to the size of a public university, and they were quickly on their way to reaching it.<sup>1</sup>

Florida eventually built new universities to accommodate demand, as did other states in the 1960s. As enrollment continued to climb in higher education, the admissions function of universities grew with it. No longer were admissions deans borrowed temporarily from the faculty; now they were full-fledged administrators with sizable staffs and marketing budgets. In the 1970s, colleges created enrollment management divisions with even more staff to oversee admissions and financial aid. Those positions have only increased since then as technology and Big Data have come to play a much bigger role in admissions.

Such was the evolution of admissions, mostly at the undergraduate level. Rapid changes in the field, however, didn't always cross over to the graduate side, which is largely the focus of this paper. Until the 1970s, graduate programs were seen primarily as training grounds for would-be researchers and professors. The master's degree was a sleepy academic backwater in much of higher education—a rest stop on the way to a Ph.D. or as a consolation prize for those who fell short of a doctorate, with some exceptions.

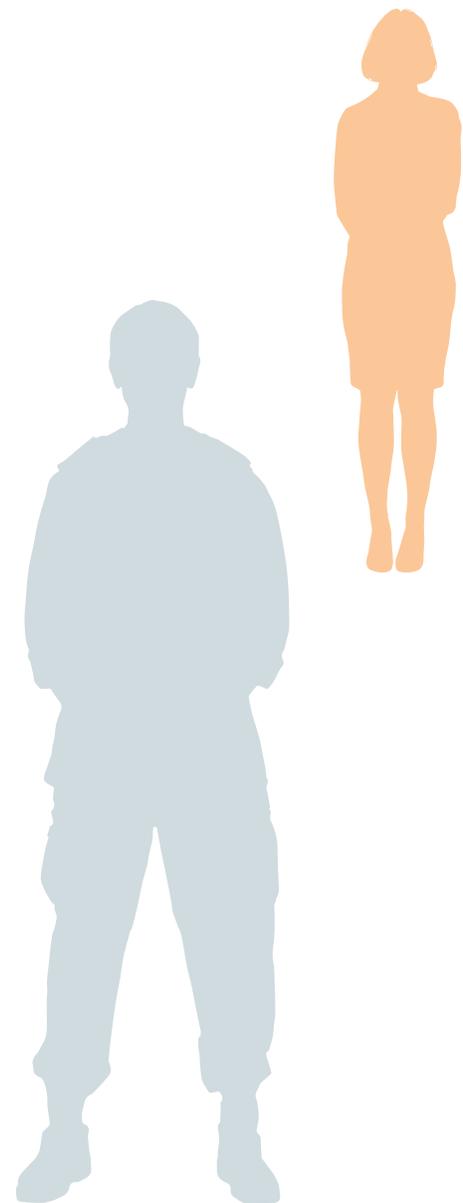
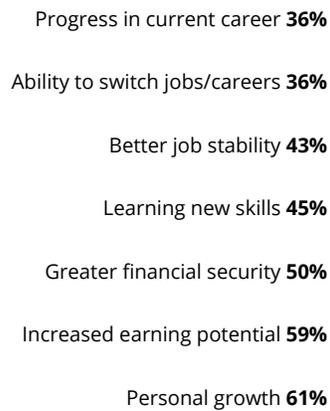


FIGURE 2:

## Why Students Want to Pursue a Graduate Degree...



Figures add up to more than 100% because respondents could choose multiple answers.

Source: Harris Poll, 2018

## ...and the Hurdles to Doing So

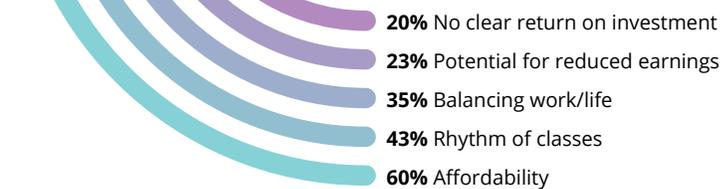
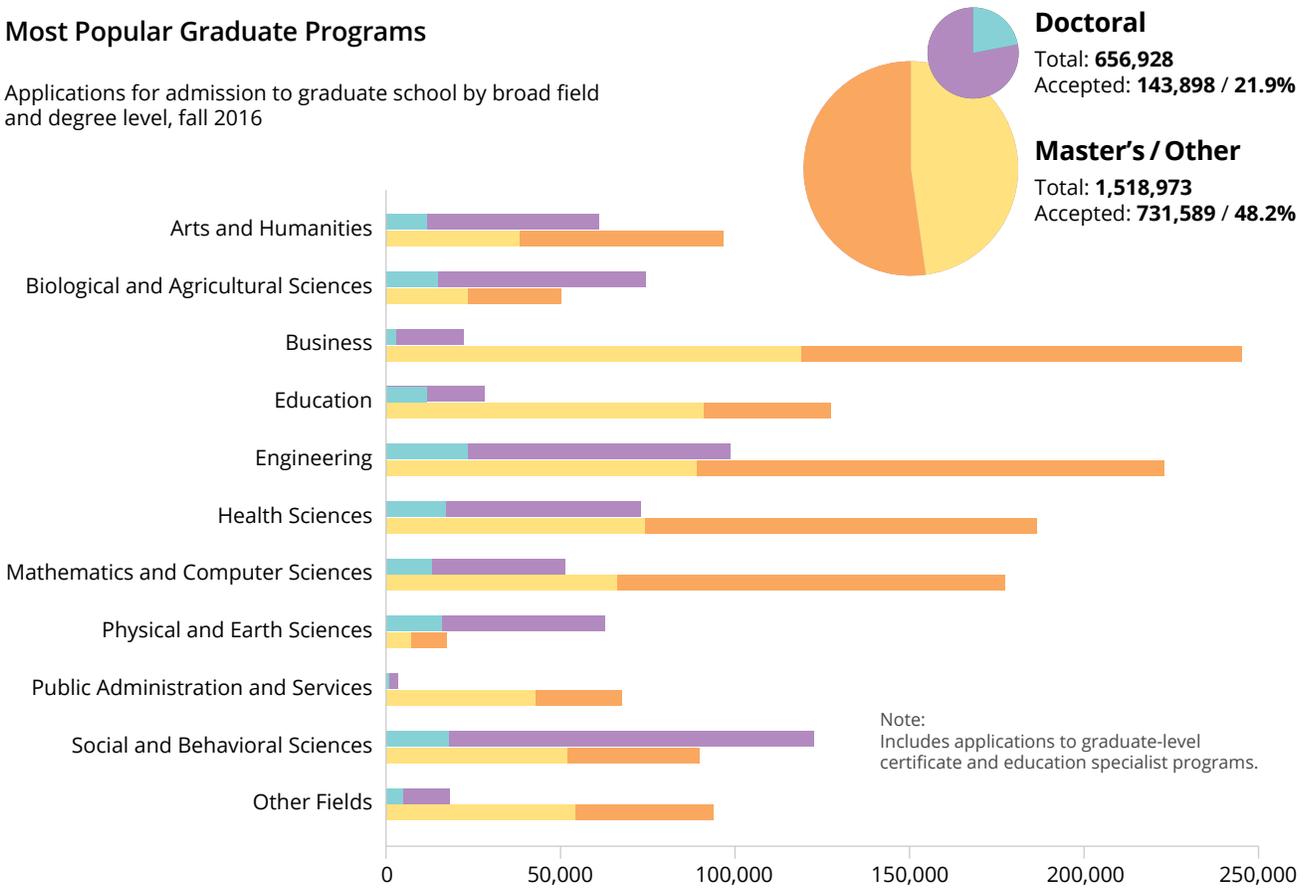


FIGURE 3:

### Most Popular Graduate Programs

Applications for admission to graduate school by broad field and degree level, fall 2016



Source: CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees

But as the bachelor's degree became more essential in the job market in the 1980s and 1990s, enrollment in master's programs surged. It started first with the master's in business administration (M.B.A.) as institutions added full-time degrees, as well as a host of part-time, online, and executive programs to attract busy professionals. The success of the business master's led other academic disciplines to design professional master's degrees aimed not at students who wanted to go on for a doctorate, but for those who wanted to get a leg up in the job market.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the admissions process for graduate degrees didn't change as quickly from the days when programs were more academic in nature. In many cases, the new professional programs simply adopted many of the same standards as their undergraduate counterparts—essays, test scores, and recommendations. Such measures couldn't really tell how far applicants would go, whether they'd stay enrolled, earn a degree, and find meaningful employment.

"For a long time, graduate school admissions was inseparable from that of undergraduate admissions," said Len Cassuto, an English professor at Fordham University and author of *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Harvard University Press, 2015). "The two really require different approaches. Even within graduate programs there are differences between professional students who want jobs in the corporate world and those who want to become academics. The question now is how should universities respond."

### New Methods for a New Generation of Applicants

What would a better process for graduate admissions look like? Are there ways to improve a system that university officials describe as outdated and burdensome for working adults who, after all, are the largest group of prospective students out there? What if universities evaluated applicants using standards very



shurkin son/Shutterstock.com

different from those used to judge teenagers applying for undergraduate admissions?

Some university deans are calling for even more revolutionary change: *What if they did away with past academic performance measures like undergraduate grades and evaluated candidates based on their professional work? What about eliminating the application altogether?*

At a time when universities are already experimenting with multiple start dates for master's programs, competency-based degrees, and rapidly building new curricula based on a changing economy, admissions remains stuck in the past. Few universities seem willing to stray far from the pack and think differently, fearing applicants will flee. And no matter what, a seven-letter word—*quality*—seems to hang in the balance of every decision made on campus about admissions.

But some admissions deans are willing to admit that the current system is not always defensible in its evaluation of applicants. "It's our dirty little secret," Boeckenedt, an associate vice president at DePaul University, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. "There's very little we collect at the point of admission that tells us how someone will do, but we repeat the process over and over again for absence of a better solution."<sup>3</sup>

A better solution will come sooner or later, and a new system will take hold. There seems to be consensus among university officials that change will occur, but not on what the new structure will look like. Still, there is agreement among the admissions leaders interviewed for this paper on what the goals of a new system should be.

## The Primary Objectives of a New System

- **Meet the applicants where they are.** Understand that many applicants to professional graduate programs are working adults, so an admissions system must be crafted that recognizes their unique needs. Many of these applicants haven't completed graduate admissions tests, or if they did, it was years ago. Transcripts from undergraduate colleges or previous graduate degrees are often difficult and expensive to obtain. Meanwhile, other applicants are testing the waters of graduate education and a cumbersome application is likely a turnoff, particularly if it's unclear why something is required.
- **Define success metrics.** Know why students in your professional master's programs succeed and what happens when they don't. If the original applications of current students were evaluated again when they graduate, what common markers would signal why they succeeded? Find ways to evaluate those factors in future applications and eliminate superfluous questions and requirements.
- **Provide flexible admissions by program.** While admissions requirements might differ by school within a university, they don't differ as much by program. Yet each academic program has unique needs. Tailor the application process by program to determine whether a prospective student can do the work.

How applicants find their way through the admissions funnel is critical for college leaders to understand as they imagine what their institutions will look like in the next decade. Much as the first part of this three-part series laid out the ways the networked world is fundamentally changing how we teach and learn, this second part of the series will look at how admissions needs to shift to prepare for the Learner Revolution, where traditional and nontraditional students will have more control over how, when, and where they learn.



Filip Ocheretnyi/Shutterstock.com

## The Agile Admissions System

In the U.S., prestige in higher education is often measured by how many students a university rejects. While the philosophy on Wall Street is that growth is good, within higher education the prevailing wisdom is that increased size comes at the expense of academic quality and reputation.

But in reality, the admissions standards universities set are artificial. They are meant to control the size of classes. Many universities could enroll twice as many students without an appreciable impact on their academic rankings. "It's like if Apple and Samsung only produced enough phones to meet 5 percent of global demand—they'd go out of business" said Ben Nelson, the founder of the Minerva Project, a start-up university that aims to become an elite liberal arts institution where all students who qualify are accepted.

If higher education is going to serve more students and remain relevant to the needs of the workforce, colleges and universities must become more agile, adaptive, and imaginative in how they serve their gatekeeping function, especially when it comes to professional master's degrees. Much of higher education is "using old formulas and methods developed for a different era," said Alberto Cardelle, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts. "Colleges claim to be on the cutting edge when we market to students, but not in how universities operate their admissions offices."

Based on interviews with some two dozen chief human resources officers, workplace experts, and college officials, including graduate admissions deans and faculty members, here are four strategies that higher-education institutions can follow to better serve students for the learner revolution. While most of these approaches are focused on learners returning to school for graduate degrees and certificates, the interviews revealed ideas that could also be applied earlier in the education pipeline.

**1** **Revise recruitment practices and develop programs that appeal to learners** by “segmenting” prospective student markets. Right now, many institutions think of the adult market through a single lens: age. This approach has led universities to transfer the structure of traditional undergraduate education to the graduate level with a few tweaks, namely putting degree programs online.

While this design led to big gains in graduate enrollment of time-pressed, place-bound adults, there is now more competition in the online space, and learners are more discerning about what they want from education. In today’s higher education market, students who feel their demands are not being met will go elsewhere.

“It used to be that if universities put on-campus degree programs online, students would find you,” said Nancy Albers, dean of the College of Business, Education and Human Development at Louisiana State University at Shreveport. “Not anymore. Prospective students are overwhelmed by the choices, so every university seems alike unless they’re offering something unique, like a concentration or flexible course options.”

The path to developing a unique enrollment strategy requires institutions to segment their learners in order to build academic programs and personalize recruitment. At its best, segmentation—used throughout the economy to sell everything from mobile phones to automobiles—“is all about helping students and institutions find a better fit,” said Kim Reid, principal analyst at Eduventures, a company that provides research and advisory services for higher education. By identifying the motivations and mindsets of learners, Reid said, “Institutions pivot to serving the students who are actually out there, and not the students who they *want* to be out there.”

To do this well, institutions need to harness the data they have collected on how students interact in their learning environments and marry that with surveys of students about their experiences. Taken together, these data points can paint a picture of today’s learners that offer strong hints about the goals of prospective students, how they approach learning, how they want education delivered to them, and what success looks like to them. That information will enable officials to develop specific programs based on what learners want.

Take price-sensitive students, as an example. These students who might worry about returning to school later in life or are unsure if a degree will result in new skills could be reluctant to commit to an entire program. A flexible option that provides short-term certificates after just a few classes might be the incentive to get them to enroll.



ImageFoto/Shutterstock.com

**2** **Abandon legacy academic structures** by unbundling offerings. When students apply to a university today, they typically must choose a certificate or degree program in which to enroll. They can’t, for instance, take an individual class or sit in on a semester-long course without being officially part of a degree program.

This bundled approach to selling a product has long been the norm in almost every major industry. Not anymore. Today, consumers have choice with their telephone services and almost every major utility. When they fly, they can decide if they want to pay extra to check a bag or have a meal. And no longer do consumers buy entire albums at a record store to listen to one song; they now create their own playlists on their digital devices.

In higher education, it was massive open online courses (MOOCs) that brought the unbundled concept to the sector earlier this decade. With MOOCs, learners could sign up for individual courses and sample class content because they were free. While traditional academics bemoaned the low completion rates of MOOCs, what they failed to understand was that many learners wanted only to watch a specific class or get access to a reading list. In other words, they preferred the unbundled option to curate their own experience.

The problem in traditional higher education is that the basic data infrastructure doesn’t allow universities to input student data without its being connected to a degree program. The entire university is established around the currency of the degree, from department structures to how budget dollars are allocated.

That said, unbundled programs are slowly gaining legitimacy as universities experiment with alternative methods for delivering degree programs. One such experiment is a MicroMasters degree being offered by a handful of universities, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Pennsylvania, and Boston University.

The design of the degree lets anyone take a suite of courses across a range of more than three dozen programs, including supply-chain management, entrepreneurship, and solar energy engineering. Those who do well and pass a set of proctored exams can earn a MicroMasters, roughly equivalent to between a quarter and a half of the course material of a typical master's degree. Top performers could then apply for slots in a full master's degree program from the universities. If accepted, they would be only a semester or two away from finishing a regular master's degree.

The next step is for universities to adopt a more flexible design across a greater range of graduate programs. Doing so could assist institutions in getting new classes up and running more quickly than in the past and teach students the basics for getting a promotion or starting a career. To develop a strategy on this front, university leaders might consider taking a page from the playbook of community colleges. Nationwide, many two-year colleges have started fast-growing certificate programs that form the building blocks of a full-blown degree program. Unlike an associate degree, the goal of these programs—which are offered in short time periods that last only a few weeks—isn't to teach students everything they need to know to be great in a job. They teach just enough to get students started because they can always return later for additional classes.

Such pathways appeal to a set of learners who are unsure that another degree is right for them, said Michael Hoffman, executive director of continuing

education at Des Moines Area Community College. Students who enroll in college later in life, "often need a job tomorrow or a promotion next week, not a few years from now." <sup>4</sup> The issue with traditional degree programs, he said, is that they require learners to make a commitment of time and money that some are unwilling to do without knowing if the outcome will provide a return on their investment.

An unbundled experience that permits individual classes or courses can help learners get what they need in the moment, knowing that they can come back at any point to get more education and training.

**3 Reimagine admissions requirements** to allow learners to "try before they fully enroll." Many graduate programs have simply adopted the calendar-based admissions process of their undergraduate counterparts.

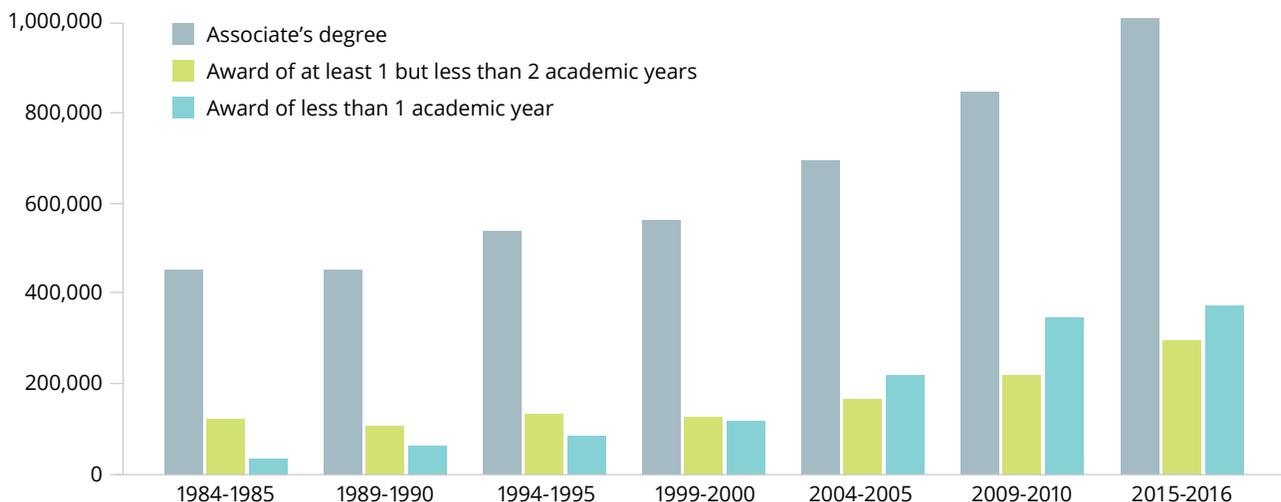
This process is driven by a series of dates and a list of requirements much more attuned to assessing the academic talents of teenagers rather than the mentality or discipline of working adults.

While online graduate programs have partly broken free of those practices by waiving testing requirements or setting up multiple start dates, the gatekeeper function remains, thanks arduous admissions requirements. These standards are often little more than a convenient vehicle to acquire critical information, such as undergraduate grades, test scores if required, and recommendations.



FIGURE 4:

### Learners Want Short-term Programs Such as Certificates to Make Up a Greater Share of Credentials



Source: U.S. Department of Education



Kzenon/Shutterstock.com

With advances in technology, perhaps it's time to rethink whether the application and the requirements are even needed for working adults. Instead of waiting for applications to arrive, institutions could allow learners to try out online classes and then be fully admitted after they successfully complete a few classes. So instead of students applying to graduate programs, getting accepted, paying a lot of money in tuition, and only then taking classes that they might end up failing, students get to try out college first with less risk.

Such a scenario is just one of many that could turn the current admissions system on its head. Another idea advanced by several deans and education thought leaders is that admissions could be based on the massive amounts of data and information already collected on learners rather than focused on a snapshot made in one moment in time for an application deadline. For professional graduate programs, admissions could become something akin to how employers search LinkedIn and other online databases to recruit talent to their organizations rather than waiting for an application to arrive in response to a job advertisement.

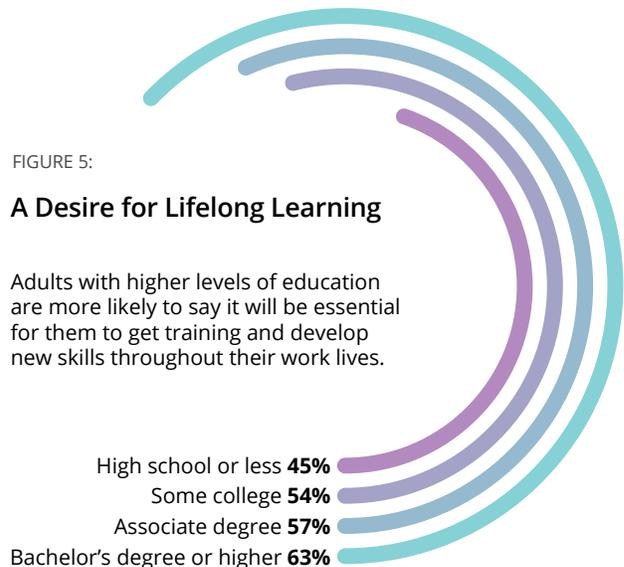
If LinkedIn can help better connect talented workers with employers or Match.com can help two people fall in love based on a short questionnaire, we should be able to design a better method for a much higher stakes and time-consuming decision: matching students with universities.

# 4

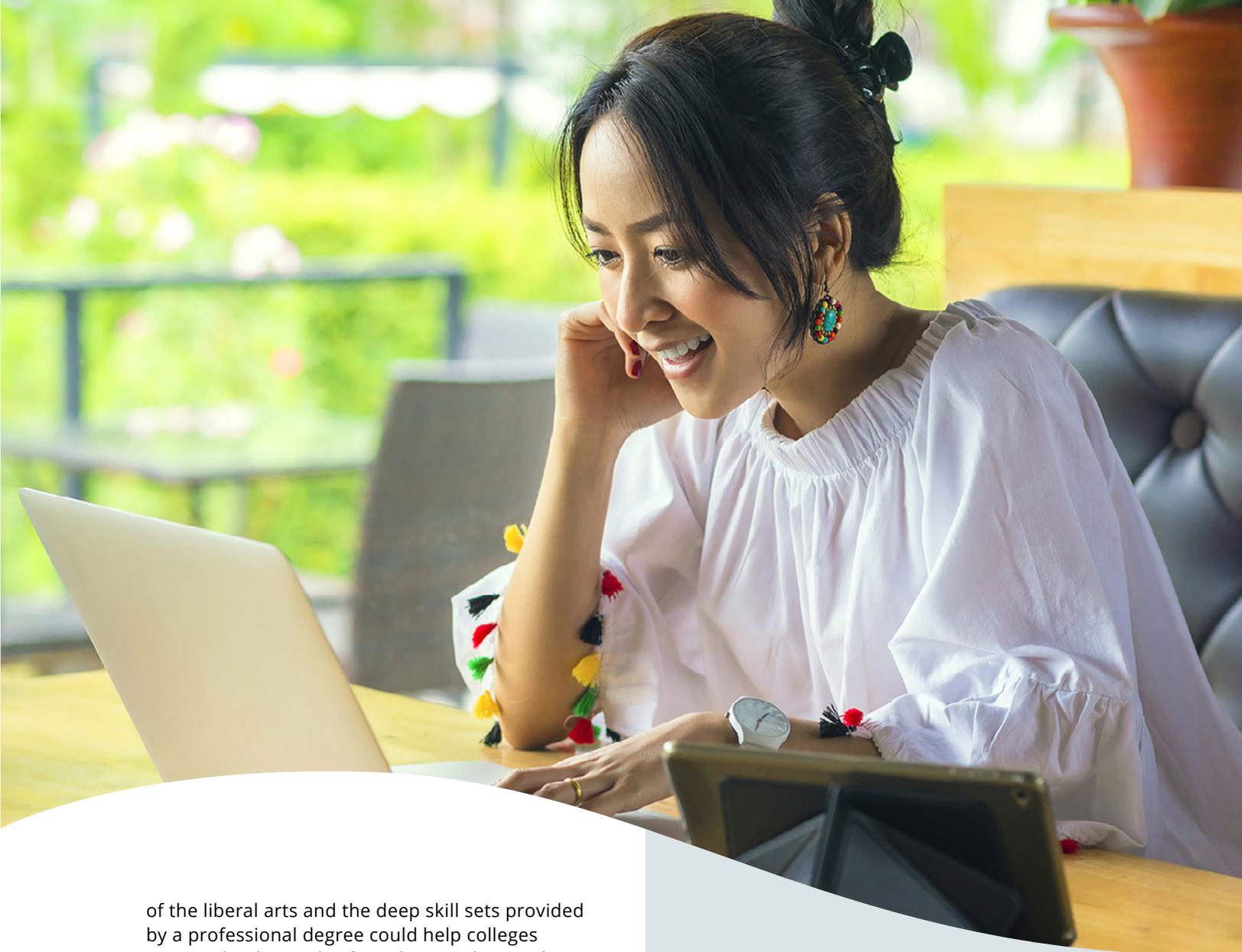
**Blend undergraduate and graduate education** by developing a hybrid of the two. Universities could combine, for instance, a liberal arts bachelor's degree earned face-to-face with a professional master's degree taken entirely online, roughly within a time frame of four years. Several colleges already offer combined degrees, of course, but they typically take five years, and the master's experience is usually bolted on at the very end, or they are only in specific fields to assist with licensure, like nursing.

In a true blending of the two, the entire track to the degree would be different. The model? One integrated experience, where undergraduate studies shrink over four years as the work associated with the master's grows. Faculty members would identify the competencies students need to learn, whether in a fraction of a course or outside the walls of the university in jobs or apprenticeships. Mixing the two degrees in both their delivery and in their curricular elements fulfills two key opportunities for higher education.

First, earning two degrees in the time it normally takes to earn one and doing so without taking up more physical classroom increases the throughput of students in the system. At a time when state investment in higher education is not keeping pace with enrollment, doing more with less is critically important. Second, a mix of the broad knowledge



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 25-June 29, 2016. "The State of American Jobs," Pew Research Center



of the liberal arts and the deep skill sets provided by a professional degree could help colleges answer the demands of employers who say they want workers with both breadth and depth. Few degrees are neatly packaged for the jobs of tomorrow; a blended degree offers students perhaps the best chance for standing out in a competitive economy at a reasonable cost.

Colleges and universities have lasted for centuries by adapting to the changing needs of society and the workforce. The technological and global forces bearing down on both education and the world of work are creating complex problems that can only be solved by rethinking our legacy admissions systems and our approach to the gatekeeping function of universities. Innovation around the edges isn't enough; the future of education requires greater substantive changes.

*In part three of this series on *The Learner Revolution*, we will look at the future of credentials and how their signaling function in the job market is shifting.*

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> Aaron J. Brumbaugh and Myron R. Blee, *Higher Education and Florida's Future: Recommendations and General Staff Report* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Sean R. Gallagher, *The Future of University Credentials: New Developments at the Intersection of Higher Education and Hiring*, Harvard Education Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Eric Hoover, "College Admissions, Frozen in Time," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 26, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in "The False Promises of Worker Retraining," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2018.



### **About Academic Partnerships**

Academic Partnerships is a leading online service provider for higher education. The company assists universities in converting their on-campus degree programs into an online format, recruits qualified students for those programs, and supports enrolled students through graduation. Serving primarily public, not-for-profit universities, Academic Partnerships is guided by the principle that the opportunities presented through technology-aided learning make higher education more accessible and affordable.

The company was founded by a group of social entrepreneurs who have spent nearly 20 years developing innovative learning solutions to improve education. More information may be found at [academicpartnerships.com](http://academicpartnerships.com)