Background for Guiding Principle 4: Engage Learners Throughout Their Lifetimes.

In 2025, we will engage learners throughout their lifetimes with content that is timely, topical, and relevant to their personal and professional wellbeing.

Summary:

*Lifelong learning* is a broad, generic term that is difficult to define with specificity. Its overlap, or its interchangeable use, with other closely related concepts, such as lifelong, permanent, recurrent, continuing, or adult education; learning organizations; and the learning society (society in which learning is pervasive), makes this even more true. For some it includes learning from childhood and early schooling, while others treat it in terms of the adult learning process. It has grown to a global concept, with differing manifestations that vary with national political and economic priorities, and with cultural and social value systems.

Most definitions of life-long learning includes several basic elements: (1) a belief in the idea of lifetime human potential and the possibility of its realization; (2) efforts to facilitate achievement of the skills, knowledge, and aptitudes necessary for a successful life; (3) recognition that learning takes place in many modes and places, including formal educational institutions and nonformal experiences such as employment, military service, and civic participation and informal self-initiated activity; and (4) the need to provide integrated supportive systems adapted to individual differences that encourage and facilitate individuals to achieve mastery and self-direction.

Lifelong learning crystallized as a concept in the 1970s as the result of initiatives from three international bodies. The Council of Europe advocated *permanent education*, a plan to reshape European education for the whole life span. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) called for *recurrent education*, an alternation of full-time work with full-time study similar to sabbatical leaves. The third of these initiatives, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, *Learning to Be* (1972), drew most attention and had the broadest influence. Commonly known as the Faure Report, this was a utopian document that used the term *lifelong education* instead of lifelong learning, and it foresaw lifelong education as a transformative and emancipatory force, not only in schools, but in society at large.

The following is an excellent summary article on the evolution of life-long learning.


University Partnerships for Life

Current perspectives in the advocation of life-long learning see colleges and universities as binding agents in this ever-fractured society. In the *Chronicle* article, “Reimagining College as a Lifelong Learning Experience,” the authors advocate that colleges and universities can be convening authorities to bring together people of talent at every stage of life, and that “college” be no longer a life stage or a credential, but a lifelong community of learners. In such instances, the distinction between student and alumni is blurred. For example, university admission could grant access to a lifetime of courses, with students able to return at any point to tackle new challenges and share their experience with peers of all ages. And with advances in online coursework and distance learning, it is now possible to imagine near-
continuous access to higher education, a truly "open loop" with no real limits on how much and how long a student could learn and contribute.

The article goes on to cite several other trends that bolster the case for a comprehensive look at life-long learning initiatives.

- The extension of the college experience is also being offered in the other direction, to prospective students. Several institutions allow potential students to complete a year of introductory classes online, for free, paying only for exams that lead to credit.

- Corporate investment in professional development has been declining for years, and colleges are well-positioned to step into the gap.

- Students are hungry for knowledge about careers and the workplace, and alumni are eager to give back in ways that go beyond writing checks. Boutique scholarship programs tout alumni connections and professional networking, but very few colleges make an institution-wide commitment to alumni involvement. Imagine a campus where alumni were a regular feature in classrooms or advising offices. Some of that can happen in person, but much of it is now possible remotely. And graduates of all ages would relish a deeper sense of connection.

- The Teaching Company (publisher of The Great Courses) and One Day University reap a great deal of money by rekindling the best of the college experience, selling their wares to an overwhelmingly college-educated audience. Colleges are missing the chance to fill that niche for their own alumni in a manner that’s more authentic than simply transactional.

In summary, the authors state that our lives do not fit into neat stages, and our capacity for learning even less so. It’s time for colleges to embrace lifelong learning as more than a rhetorical trope, building intergenerational hubs of knowledge and community. Technology makes it easier, and a real institutional commitment can make it meaningful.

https://www.chronicle.com/article/Reimagining-College-as-a/237588

Not Just Content Providers

In the article “Higher Education in a World Where Students Never Graduate” (Inside Higher Ed; Aug 2018), Chris Dellarocas focuses on the bonds that Universities create with its students, and how that bond can be strengthened, leading to a life-long relationship. He argues that, “A university’s strongest asset is the deep bond that we form with our students -- through our faculty, guidance counselors, student activities organizations, corporate partners, career counseling consultants and alumni organizations.” At the graduate professional education level, many universities seem to forget that we are in the relationship business and behave as if we are simple content/knowledge providers (i.e. We charge students for course credits. We advertise our graduate programs essentially as if they were products. When our students graduate, we bid them farewell and subsequently contact them primarily for donations.) This transactional way of thinking and acting leaves universities vulnerable to disruption.

Universities should strive to do more than simply offer new-style programs and credentials that 21st-century lifelong learners need to stay current. We should capitalize on the life-changing relationships we form with our undergraduate students and continue them after they leave our campuses. We should
promise such a relationship to any learner who joins our university family at any stage of their life and career (emphasis added). Lifelong learners do not just need to “consume learning in short spurts when they need it.” They also need lifelong advice about when it might be time to consider a change of career direction and, if so, how to best prepare for the next stage of their journey. They can derive value from staying connected to networks of fellow alumni, faculty and current students. Universities have a unique opportunity to become our learners’ hub of knowledge, mentoring and networking for life. Such a relationship is much more difficult to commoditize than one based on content/knowledge alone.

So how do we translate such vision into practice? Dellarocas provides the following suggestions on where to start:

- **Set the stage during the undergraduate years.** Undergraduate students should be taught to view their campus experience as the prelude to a lifelong relationship with the university and its alumni networks. We must therefore provide gateways for them to access relationships that provide ongoing coaching and lifetime mentorship (and to train them to be proactive mentees). One effective starting point for the university would be to offer current students practical opportunities to connect with alumni for career networking, experiential projects and ongoing coaching.

- **Adapt graduate education offerings to serve the lifelong learner population.** Graduate schools should be given assistance and incentives to experiment with unbundling their degree programs and offering shorter, blended learning programs that lead to valued workplace credentials. As universities collectively explore this new space, administrators should nurture a culture of experimentation and controlled risk-taking with tolerance for failure.

- **Offer technology-enabled lifelong mentoring to alumni.** Imagine an infrastructure that blends human mentors and artificial intelligence, harnessing the rich information universities collect about their students and alumni to offer them personalized career and continuing education guidance.

- **Engage alumni in multiple ways.** In most universities, alumni relations is kept distinct from academics and has fund-raising as its primary focus. For alumni/lifelong learners to become an integral part of a university community, we need to better integrate them with all parts of the university. Alumni will remain potential donors, of course, but they can be so much more: students in our lifelong learning programs, mentors and recruiters of our younger students and peers, sponsors or clients of experiential learning projects, and even instructors or teaching assistants for specialized courses that draw upon their unique expertise.

- **Consider alternative business models.** Current business models of charging graduate students by the credit hour reflects the premise that our primary value comes from content/knowledge. A university that operates as a hub of lifelong value-added relationships, should consider business models that align better with that reality. Several institutions are considering a subscription model. Furthermore, income-share agreements and payments from employers for successful learner placements are two other ideas that some are experimenting with.

Life-long learning is instilled early

While the non-traditional student population is growing, traditional students—18- to 22-year-olds in four-year liberal arts programs—are still an integral part of the campus classroom. In an article published in The Evollllution, Michelle Behr (Chancellor, University of Minnesota, Morris) discusses the lasting importance of the four-year college degree, and points to how the soft skills learned in traditional higher education can encourage students to pursue lifelong learning and position them for success in a constantly changing job market.

Among some key points made by Dr. Behr:

• The traditional four-year experience is how and where students develop habits of mind and curiosity, along with competence, resilience and a sense of openness. In order to instill those habits of mind that engender lifelong learning, we encourage students to engage with the wider world by offering internships and fellowships with external businesses so that students can see, first-hand, how people develop creative solutions to vexing problems. If institutions of higher education construct academic programs that feature multiple perspectives on problem solving, we can open students’ eyes to the complexity of big issues and the importance of bringing different perspectives to bear on solving them. That curiosity and open-mindedness is integral to lifelong learning, both in the classroom and out of it.

• If we’re doing what we ought to be doing as colleges and universities, then we make positive contributions to individuals and communities. If we provide a strong grounding for students, they will continue to be learners throughout their lifetimes. If we continue to offer strong, meaningful and relevant programs, they’ll want to find their way back to us. In a sense, this is a case of reaping what we sow: If we properly instill the values of lifelong learning in our students, then we will ultimately benefit when they return.

• A strong sense of connection is a key characteristic of the traditional-aged student experience that’s going to keep them coming back. We need to build lasting relationships between our students and faculty so that students want to return. Second, it’s important to integrate strong academic programs with meaningful co-curricular experiences. Higher education institutions offer a safe place where students can learn how to respect differences and work productively with people who have had different life experiences. This serves students very well, because it underlines not only how diversity contributes to the richness of our personal lives, but also how it makes for strong workplaces.

• Institutions must be good role models and engage the issue of lifelong learning in a meaningful, thoughtful way. A critical way of doing so is to invite students in and solicit their input, so that we can create solutions that work best for them.

https://evollllution.com/attracting-students/todays_learner/instilling-the-value-of-lifelong-learning-in-traditional-college-students/

What role might alternative credentials play?
In the article, Alternative Credentials: New Ways to Certify Learning, author David Schejbal discusses current trends in alternative credentialing in higher education. Key points include:

- Due to significantly extended life expectancy, people engage in higher education differently than they did in, say, the 1950s. Daniel Yankelovich in a 2005 article in the Chronicle predicted that, “We are rapidly moving away from the rigid sequencing and separation of schooling and jobs toward a new pattern in which higher education spreads out over about a 12-year period and is more closely integrated with work. This is not just prolonged adolescence. It is in many ways a new phase of life, in which young people experiment with relationships and career choices to find the best fit with their practical needs and with their self-expressive goals.”

- At the other end of the working-age spectrum are adults in the 55-75 age range. Some people in this category are early retirees; others are career changers looking for more meaning in their lives, but both groups seek more education to meet their needs.

- One serious challenge to increasing educational attainment in the U.S. is the higher education credential itself, i.e., the degree. At best, it is a very blunt instrument that signifies in very general terms disciplinary knowledge and skill. At worst, it is a document noting only that the holder spent time in college, but provides no information at all about what the holder actually knows and can do. Even in the best circumstances, however, degrees are expensive in both time and money, and they meet the needs of only a fraction of the population that requires more knowledge and skills to remain gainfully employed.

- Today a whole array of not-for-profit and for-profit providers offer credentials in nearly every discipline or skill. Yet no credential other than a degree has gained wide acceptance, and very few non-degree credentials are transportable across employers or employment sectors. Thus there is a disconnect between what is needed in the market and what is offered. One thing missing to enable the gap to be filled is a structure or framework that enables recognition of and trust in new types of credentials.

- Although the “credit-hour” is a standard unit of learning among accredited programs. However, credit hours to not translate well to non-accredited programs. Second, and more importantly, as the term implies, the credit-hour is a measure of time spent learning; it is not an indication of what a student knows or can do with whatever knowledge she has. Put differently, the credit-hour is a measure of inputs into learning; it is not a measure of outputs, and what most employers want is a clear indication of what students know and can do. Grades are not accurate indicators as well. Although grades are supposed to objectively reflect learning, it is hard to reconcile today’s grades with the research suggesting poor learning outcomes are widespread. Almost half of all undergraduate-course grades are A’s (in 1961, only 15 percent of grades were A’s).

- A potentially more useful indicator of knowledge and learning is that of competencies. Competencies denote what students know and can do with the knowledge they have. Competencies are understood both in industry and academia and can be applied in multiple contexts, making them a powerful unifying way to examine credentials.

- Lifelong learning is no longer a euphemism for learning in retirement; it has become a necessity for gainful employment. Many jobs require higher education knowledge and skills, and increasingly employers want evidence that applicants know how to use what they learn in applied, direct ways. Degrees continue to be important markers of educational attainment, but
they are expensive in both time and money, and they don’t meet the needs of those who want to learn a specific skill or knowledge set to apply to a new or existing job. Furthermore, there are many individuals who have degrees but need more advanced knowledge and skills outside of the traditional degree process.

https://unbound.upcea.edu/innovation/alternative-credentialing/alternative-credentials-new-ways-to-certify-learning/

Does this mean that alternative credentials will overwhelm the market space? Not so fast! There is still much debate on the beleaguered “credit-hour” In an article titled, Colleges Re-Bound? (Inside Higher Ed), Chris Gallagher outlines some of the pitfalls of “Entrepreneurial” sources of alternative credentials (and the notion that they will replace degrees from accredited institutions). Instead Gallagher advocated for the expansion of educational opportunities, rather than a replacement of traditional models.

• Gallagher notes, “We need high-quality educational and training options for those who truly don’t want degrees. But such options cannot replace degrees, and we should not use them as an excuse to ignore the social and economic inequities that make us believe that we know who the deserving are in the first place or that “desiring” a college degree is a purely personal and unfettered choice. Our goal should be to expand access to high-quality degrees and alternative credentials to as many learners as possible -- ideally in ways that promote the integration of learning across a variety of lifelong learning experiences and credentials.”

• Universities are beginning to envision personalized, flexible, lifelong educational experiences and services. In one sense, these future universities are “unbundled”: they involve suites of credentials and microcredentials alongside degrees. But at a deeper level, they are rebundled institutions, redesigned to integrate degree and nondegree learning experiences and credentials to help learners author their own coherent, integrated learning journeys.

• The colleges and universities of the future will continue to offer degrees, but they will be innovative and flexible enough to offer a variety of learning experiences and credentials when learners need them in formats those learners can fit into their busy lives. They will be responsible and credible enough to offer degree and nondegree credentials, perhaps in partnership with other institutional and noninstitutional providers, that learners and employers can trust. And they will be coherent and bundled enough to enter into lifelong relationships with learners, devoting their people and their technologies to guiding them on their integrative lifelong-learning journeys.


Information about Osher Lifelong Learning

Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI) offer noncredit courses, with no assignments or grades, to “seasoned” adults over age 50. The Bernard Osher Foundation makes grants and endowment gifts to colleges, universities, and other non-profit organizations in four program areas: post-secondary
scholarships, lifelong learning institutes for seasoned adults, select integrative medicine programs, and arts and educational organizations.


OLLI @ Penn State: https://www.oli.psu.edu/

Lifelong learning at University of Wisconsin

First, Lifelong Learning For The 100-Year Life by Jeffrey S. Russell, Dean of Continuing Studies and Vice Provost for Lifelong Learning, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Wisconsin lifelong learning initiative was inspired by The 100-Year Life (Gratton and Scott) and asks the question, “If you knew you might live to 100, how would you change your approach to learning?” Russell states, “To accommodate longer lives, we’ll need to develop academic programs that stretch from childhood into old age. This will require creativity in how we deliver courses, with an emphasis on flexibility and personalization. It will also require creativity in how we provide credentials, from degrees to certificates to digital badges.”

Wisconsin’s vision is a work in progress. To be learner-centered, universities must integrate non-traditional programs across a lifespan: precollege, undergraduate, graduate, and midcareer, all the way through to enrichment programs for seniors. In this way, people can access the university’s knowledge and experience as needed at different points in their lives. Being learner-centered also means providing an ever-expanding menu of flexible options. As a result, universities must offer more courses online, more opportunities for personalized learning, and more stackable credentials that help students acquire the specific skills they need in the workforce.

Recent examples of new programs include:

- **K-12 students** interested in a path to higher education can register for dozens of enrichment classes in UW–Madison Precollege and Youth Program.
- **International students** entering UW–Madison can take reading and writing classes for non-native English speakers in the International Student Summer Institute.
- **Low-income adults** facing barriers to a college education can earn UW–Madison credit in a weekly evening course from the Odyssey Project.
- Through online courses, **aspiring authors** from anywhere in the world can work one-on-one with instructors from the Continuing Studies Writing Program.
- **Mid-career professionals** can keep their full-time jobs while earning additional credentials in one of our flexible Advance Your Career programs.
- Through our Adult Career and Special Student Services unit, **anyone in the community** can consult with a career counselor, participate in a job support group, or take a career-planning workshop.
- **Wisconsin residents 60 and over** can audit UW–Madison courses for free in our Senior Guest Auditor Program.

https://evolllution.com/revenue-streams/extending_lifelong_learning/lifelong-learning-for-the-100-year-life/
Here is Wisconsin’s Lifelong Learning strategic plan


Examples of Lifelong Learning Initiatives at Other Universities

University of Georgia life-long learning initiative with case studies from several other universities.

https://www.usg.edu/college2025/executive_summary/lifelong_learning