



Closing The Skills Gap

Innovative programs being launched by
CUNY & University of Oklahoma

Contributors:



Martha Banz

Dean and Associate Provost, Extended Campus



Nakisha "Nikki" Evans

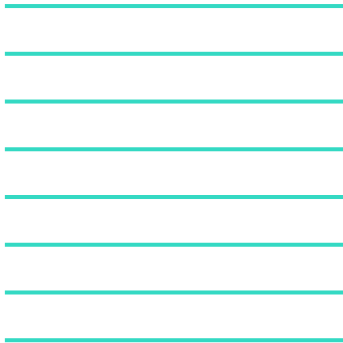
Director of the Office of Workforce Partnerships



JP Moran

Global Head of Channels & Coursera for Campus Americas





Millennial expectations and the need to upskill in today's workforce have been causing a shift to on-demand and online education for some time. Now, with the need to social distance and transform programs quickly, some school leaders are **taking advantage of this moment by launching innovative programs** that are designed for online and hybrid learning environments.

Additionally, the skills gap persists as a significant problem facing institutions and graduates.

"It's apparent that there's also a communication issue and understanding gap between higher ed and employers not actively communicating enough and collaborating with one another," said **JP Moran, Global Head of Channels & Coursera for Campus Americas**. "Even skills such as critical thinking have different meanings in academia versus corporate environments. **Only 34 percent of US college students feel prepared to enter into the workforce**, or almost half of those employers blame higher education for the skills gap."



Coursera is the world's largest global learning ecosystem, encompassing over 200 industry and university partners that create market line content. Coursera for Campus is designed specifically for colleges and universities. Since the fall of 2019, Coursera for Campus has been serving roughly 3,700 campuses worldwide, including 2.4 million campus learners.

Leaders at City University of New York (CUNY) and the University of Oklahoma are utilizing Coursera for Campus to launch innovative programs that are reinventing traditional education delivery as we know it. They're aiming to provide their students with the critical skills needed to enter the workforce and succeed professionally. Program leaders from these two schools **recently spoke live** to Verbit's higher education community on their respective programs and how they brought them to fruition to serve students in today's climate.



Deep Dive: University of Oklahoma's WorkSooner Program

University of Oklahoma Dean, Dr. Martha Banz, explained that the WorkSooner Program is part of the university's wider strategic plan focused on providing access to a much wider range of students.

Unemployment in Oklahoma went from 3.5% to 15% since the oil and gas market fell in April 2020, coupled with challenges presented by the pandemic. This reality resulted in a greater need for re-skilling and employment opportunities.



What is the WorkSooner Program?

This initiative is aimed at strengthening the **connection between what employers need and what higher education is providing** in both the non-credit and credit arenas.

"We are trying to do that by working much more intentionally with the state of Oklahoma, with our Department of Commerce and Department of Labor [and] with employers in the state to assess what their educational needs and requirements are and to develop programming that actually connects those with what we offer in a much more intentional way," Banz said.

WorkSooner is targeting three core populations:

1. Oklahoma's underemployed: a significant population who need skill development or who are trying to break out of the cycle of poverty
2. Lifelong learners
3. Those seeking career advancement

The primary purposes of the program are to provide short-term training and certification to students. The team worked with the state of Oklahoma to make sure courses match up with the larger employment ecosystems of the state and what's currently needed for the workforce to flourish.

"Our goal, ultimately, is both to provide the short-term training and begin ratcheting up the educational level for what's needed in the employment sector," said Banz.

The state of Oklahoma identified five core industries that are particularly important for the well-being of the state and region:

1. Energy sector
2. Aerospace and defense
3. Agriculture and biosciences
4. Transportation and distribution
5. Information and financial systems

How Oklahoma is Utilizing Coursera

The program aims to prepare students via courses, certifications and training for these five key industries. The university, however, didn't have the full range of courses to get skill levels where they needed to be, which is why Banz and her team turned to Coursera to access the content they needed.

Wraparound services post course completion

Students are also supported with wraparound services, such as career advising, monitoring, intervention support and instructional design. They are then connected with employers and partners to help them get hired once they've finished the relevant courses or certifications to ultimately ensure success.

Working to lower the financial barriers

Banz's team has developed a variety of alternative means to lower the financial burden on students so that everyone has access to resources.

This has been achieved in a few ways:

1. **Providing employer sponsorships:** Employer commits to paying forward the training that the student pursues, knowing that that student will later work for them upon course completion.
2. **The 'income share agreement!'** Rather than paying for the program upfront, the student is able to repay the cost over time once they've become employed.
3. **Flexible payment plans** so that students don't have to outlay the cash upfront.



WorkSooner is proud to be helping sustain the rising industries in the State of Oklahoma, and more importantly **helping students climb the ladder of educational success.**

The university is working to ensure the program is **scalable, collaborative** in nature and **data-driven** as it develops.

Deep Dive: CUNY's 90-Day Upskilling Challenge

The CUNY 90-Day Upskilling Challenge is part of a larger initiative around upskilling launched in response to COVID; particularly, its negative economic impacts on workforce and job losses across key industries, such as hospitality and real estate.

"What we're trying to do is to build an ecosystem of no-cost or low-cost trainings across multiple formats, virtual, hybrid and in-person - once we're allowed to be fully back in-person - targeting high growth sectors into careers, so that we can help CUNY students and alumni who may have lost their jobs or their job just simply isn't coming back in the same form that they originally had it, so they're able to gain the in demand skills and knowledge that will help move them into careers and opportunities that we know are growing in the time of COVID," Evans said.



"As I often say, when people say, 'What are you trying to do with WorkSooner?' I say, 'Well, our aspirations really aren't too high. We're just trying to change the world, and particularly the world in Oklahoma,'"

Banz said



Despite the furloughs, a lot of growth has been seen in the following areas:

- E-commerce
- Healthcare and healthcare IT
- Data science and analytics

With students at a loss of how to get a foot in the door, as well as employers having a hard time finding the right people, CUNY's 90-Day Upskilling Challenge was born. Employers were looking for individuals with very specific skill sets like SQL, software development, testing, debugging and digital marketing.



What is The 90-Day Upskilling Challenge?

Running from August 1st to October 31st, 2020, the initiative was constructed with industry and current trends in mind. It was designed to motivate and encourage people to learn new skills.

“This was also about helping folks stay engaged, stay connected to the labor market, even though there's a lot of uncertainty,” explained Evans.

The program targeted current CUNY students, alumni and New York residents and was designed in a way so that it was ‘self-directed.’ This meant that people could train safely at home and on their own schedules.

“Our goals were to virtually engage thousands of New Yorkers and then provide a variety of in-demand, no-cost skills-based trainings.”



More about the program

A centralized website acted as the front door for training information and registration. There, a list of training and courses was curated against real-time labor market data.

“We wanted to make sure the content that we were offering matched against what we were seeing in the labor market,” said Evans.

CUNY then utilized industry partners to offer incentives and prizes to help motivate partakers to complete the courses and added the challenge element to it. Finally, with marketing being key to the success of the program, the university worked with non-profits and city agencies to push the content out.

The training and content was organized into five distinct tracks displaying growth:

1. IT/Software Development
2. Business
3. Data Analytics
4. Health Administration
5. Professional Skills

How CUNY Utilized Coursera

The program involved training materials and a large number of practical courses, many of which were provided by Coursera. It included a number of tracks, such as business, digital marketing and data analytics.

The program's courses included:

- A virtual video-based course through a partnership with Accenture to help with resume writing, cover letters and practicing for interviews
- Practical career exploration
- Targeted skill development, especially in the area of digital skills
- Hands-on projects to build skills relevant to specific industry tasks
- Industry credentials and certifications

Evans mentioned that “the Upskilling Challenge really was the launchpad for starting to build out our digital infrastructure and to start thinking about ways of offering more of our own content, mixing them with industry content.”

Core performance numbers of the 90-Day Challenge:

- **50,000+**
unique website visitors
- **14,000**
registrants
- **7,000**
course enrollments
- **1,700**
enrolled were for Coursera with 1,250 course completions
- **37%**
completion rate to date (above the 20-25% industry average)

Adding the challenge element to the program, allowing self directed flexibility and lowering financial barriers were all key to the success of the program. It has now become a place where learners can add more skills or complete lifelong learning goals. CUNY's program serves as a means to better provide for and connect learners no matter where they are on their skills journey.

Keeping Equal Opportunities for Learners in Mind

When offering new courses and training programs to students in the online environment, it's critical to ensure all students are set up to succeed with equal opportunity. Feel free to contact us at: verbit.ai/contact-us to ensure you're meeting ADA compliance and offering tools like captions and transcripts within your materials and videos to help all students engage and succeed.