

D2L

A person with a bright green backpack and headscarf stands on stone steps, looking out at a city skyline. The person is wearing a dark jacket and jeans. The city skyline in the background features several tall buildings under a clear sky. The overall scene is in black and white, with the person's accessories providing a strong color contrast.

Continuing Education: The Guide to Getting Started

Discover how to harness the demand and boost enrollment in this comprehensive guide to continuing education for postsecondary institutions.



We all know traditional student enrollment numbers have been on the decline. Instead of lamenting over these losses, it's time to focus on the positives.

On the other hand, businesses want to help their employees grow. They're supporting professional development with education benefits and are looking to partner with institutions to build out workforce development programs.

In the middle is higher education. Nontraditional students' and growing businesses' wants and desires are united by the strategic continuing education offerings of higher ed institutions.

In this guide, we'll dive deeper into the rising demand from both nontraditional students and businesses for continuing education, showcasing it as an opportunity to increase access and enrollment. We'll also provide advice on how to grow or regrow these programs from people who've already started their continuing ed efforts—and seen success.

How Nontraditional Learners Can Boost Institutional Enrollments

With the critical eyes of [Gen Z turning away from higher education](#) in some cases, where do institutions look to fill their seats?

Colleges can pivot some of their attention to the parents, older siblings and even grandparents of traditional students. This audience represents a rapidly growing cohort—[nontraditional students](#).

“We have more nontraditional students in this country than we have traditional-age students. We have more people who are adult learners, who are working, who have families and need to access education,” said Dr. Thomas Cavanagh, vice provost for digital learning at the University of Central Florida, in a [D2L Teaching and Learning podcast](#).

Even with busy lifestyles, research shows many adult learners are more than willing to add education to the mix. And they’re looking to their places of work to pay for or provide it.

The D2L white paper [“Enabling Upskilling at Scale”](#) surveyed employees working in small and midsize enterprises in the U.S. and Canada. It found that 78% of U.S. and 72% of Canadian employees were interested in taking on training.



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The “Working Learner Index” by Bright Horizons revealed something similar. This study of 30,000 workers in the U.S. showed that:

- **82%** of respondents said the continuing education funded by their employers made them better at their jobs
- **65%** of employees chose education as their top voluntary benefit
- **more than half** said a tuition reimbursement program is one of the best benefits their employer offers

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario surveyed Canadian employers, prospective students and higher ed institutions to get their input on microcredentials. Research showed employers saw their value in the following ways:

- **60%** felt seeing a microcredential on a resume would boost their confidence in the applicant’s skills
- more than **65%** found microcredentials to be highly favored when they immediately related to the job in question or were based in competency or accreditation
- **69%** highly favored competency-based microcredentials for internal skills development and training

It’s clear that nontraditional learners are eager and ready to join the ranks of higher education and could help grow enrollments. But the interest of these students is only part of the puzzle.



Using Business Demand to Grow Institutional Access

Colleges aren't the only entities with a vested interest in continuing education.

The skills required to compete in today's job market are always changing. The **World Economic Forum has reported** that 44% of skills held by current employees will change by 2025.

The workforce is evolving and businesses want to keep up, so they're putting their money where their mouths are. In 2020, **47% of employers offered education benefits**—like undergraduate or graduate tuition assistance—to their staff.

Businesses are also more than willing to partner with colleges and universities to create programs to meet labor shortages or job demands. In **a survey of employers by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association**, 68% of more than 500 employers said they're interested in collaborating with a college to create a nondegree credential; 44% of organizations, however, said a higher ed institution has never reached out.

Many partnerships have already been established and seen success. Take, for example, **HACC, Pennsylvania's community college**, which worked with local businesses to create workforce development programs directly related to industry needs.

HACC doubled the demand for these programs and was able to exceed its annual enrollment targets.

Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education has announced that it will be creating a **user-friendly credential registry**. This online tool will help prospective learners sort through available professional credentials and educational offerings and even highlight skills that are in high demand by organizations. Details on which credentials can be grouped and stacked will also be available.

So, to recap: Nontraditional students want to further their education. Businesses are supporting staff with education benefits and looking to create new, noncredit programs with higher ed institutions. It seems like a win-win situation for all involved.

But how do higher ed institutions get continuing education programs off the ground or back on their radar?



Institutions can increase access by networking with local corporations and working together to tailor their continuing ed programs to their needs.



How to Start and Grow Continuing Education Programs

Some higher ed institutions recognize the need to grow their offerings for nontraditional learners and are making it a priority.

In the study [“The Big Bets University Leaders are Placing on Graduate and Adult Enrollment,”](#) EAB surveyed more than 60 university executives to get their takes on this market.

When asked about the priority of graduate and adult-serving program enrollment, 100% of presidents and provosts indicated its priority was strong or moderate.

Over half of the respondents—56%, to be exact—indicated they’d bolstered the number of programs aimed at graduate and adult learners since 2020. More than half of the respondents also said they’d seen growth in enrollment in these programs since then.

But where can higher ed institutions that are ready to ramp up their continuing education departments start? One place is by learning from those who are already forging a path for continuing education efforts.

INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

START SMALL AND BE REALISTIC TO GAIN FACULTY BUY-IN

Sarah Vanvooren is the director of [events and outreach at Southern Illinois University \(SIU\) Carbondale](#). In conjunction with her colleague Craig Engstrom, director of the university's [Center for Teaching Excellence \(CTE\)](#) as well as a faculty member in business communication, Vanvooren helps run the continuing education unit at SIU. Vanvooren's department facilitates registration, website builds, marketing and pricing for continuing ed courses. The CTE trains professors and uses its learning management software, D2L Brightspace, to create shells for its continuing education courses.

As described by Vanvooren, one of the first steps to take when growing continuing education at an institution is thinking about departmental structure and getting to know your target audience.

[Watch video >](#)

Taking another page out of SIU's book, a good way for institutions to get faculty on board is by supporting their ideas.

SIU was able to grow its continuing education offerings organically by embracing faculty who willingly showed interest in creating noncredit courses. Giving faculty agency in what courses they want to create secures their buy-in from the get-go. The role of the continuing education unit, then, will be to bolster, market and polish their ideas.

[Watch video >](#)

Applying existing data to popular for-credit courses can help narrow down which ones will gain traction quickly as noncredit options. Focusing on how to repurpose these courses can also help save time on course design.

INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

USE UNIQUE CONTENT TO CAPTURE ENROLLMENTS

The CTE provides instructional design support and training for faculty and staff looking to develop continuing ed programming. To stand out from the competition, universities follow in the footsteps of SIU and mine their faculty, staff and local communities for opportunities to develop courses with unique content.

One way to do this, as exhibited by SIU, is to find inspiration in existing for-credit courses that can be used to create noncredit courses. What doors of possibility does a continuing education course open—like including a weekend trip to Shawnee National Park—that a for-credit course can't?

[Watch video >](#)

Offering programming that can't be found anywhere else can appeal to nontraditional learners entering the continuing education space and help them get the most bang for their buck.

INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

STAND OUT FROM THE COMPETITION

As Engstrom points out, competition in the continuing ed landscape can be steep. The surge of interest from nontraditional students and businesses alike will be on the radar of many universities and colleges looking to increase their enrollment.

That's why the strategic positioning of any continuing education program is important. What faculty and staff have expertise that can be showcased and capitalized on? What niche courses can be created using their expertise?

[Watch video >](#)

It's also important to do research on the specific wants and needs of the students who are already taking or looking to enroll in continuing education programs. Dig deep, as Engstrom advises, to understand the target demographic and determine market personas. Developing programs that are tailored to their unique needs will better the odds of program success when being stacked up against the competition.

INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

LOWER COSTS BY REPURPOSING EXISTING MATERIAL

Carolyn Muller is former interim director of the [LX Studio](#), a facet of the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) that services both the institution and external clients in relation to building courses and programs outside traditional for-credit degrees. The LX Studio uses its proprietary learning environment modeling to strategically use concepts like design thinking to approach learning and how it's created and conceptualized.

Like SIU, UCO found success by using existing for-credit courses to develop continuing education offerings. Not only does this programming save time, but these offerings, like UCO's Academy of Contemporary Music continuing ed courses, can also come at a lower cost.

[Watch video >](#)

Noncredit courses can also act as teasers for degree programs housed within the institution. This can not only boost enrollments in traditional degree programs but also push the boundaries of what nontraditional students can achieve in their pursuit of lifelong learning.

ALIGN PROGRAMS WITH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

One concern of many higher ed institutions aiming to grow or regrow their continuing education efforts is competition. It can be daunting to enter the ring with online institutions or businesses that have experience selling continuing education.

One way for institutions to get a leg up on the competition is by creating programs tailored to business needs. Colleges and universities will be on the front lines when it comes to employees looking to upskill or nontraditional learners looking to make a career change.

[Watch video >](#)

Partnering with businesses in the community and strategically creating courses to meet in-demand skills can lead to enrollment and graduate success, just like that seen by UCO in its metropolitan area.

Improving Institutional Access and Enrollments With Continuing Ed

Traditional undergraduate enrollment numbers are dropping, and student demographics are evolving. Instead of sitting idly by, it's time for institutions to respond.

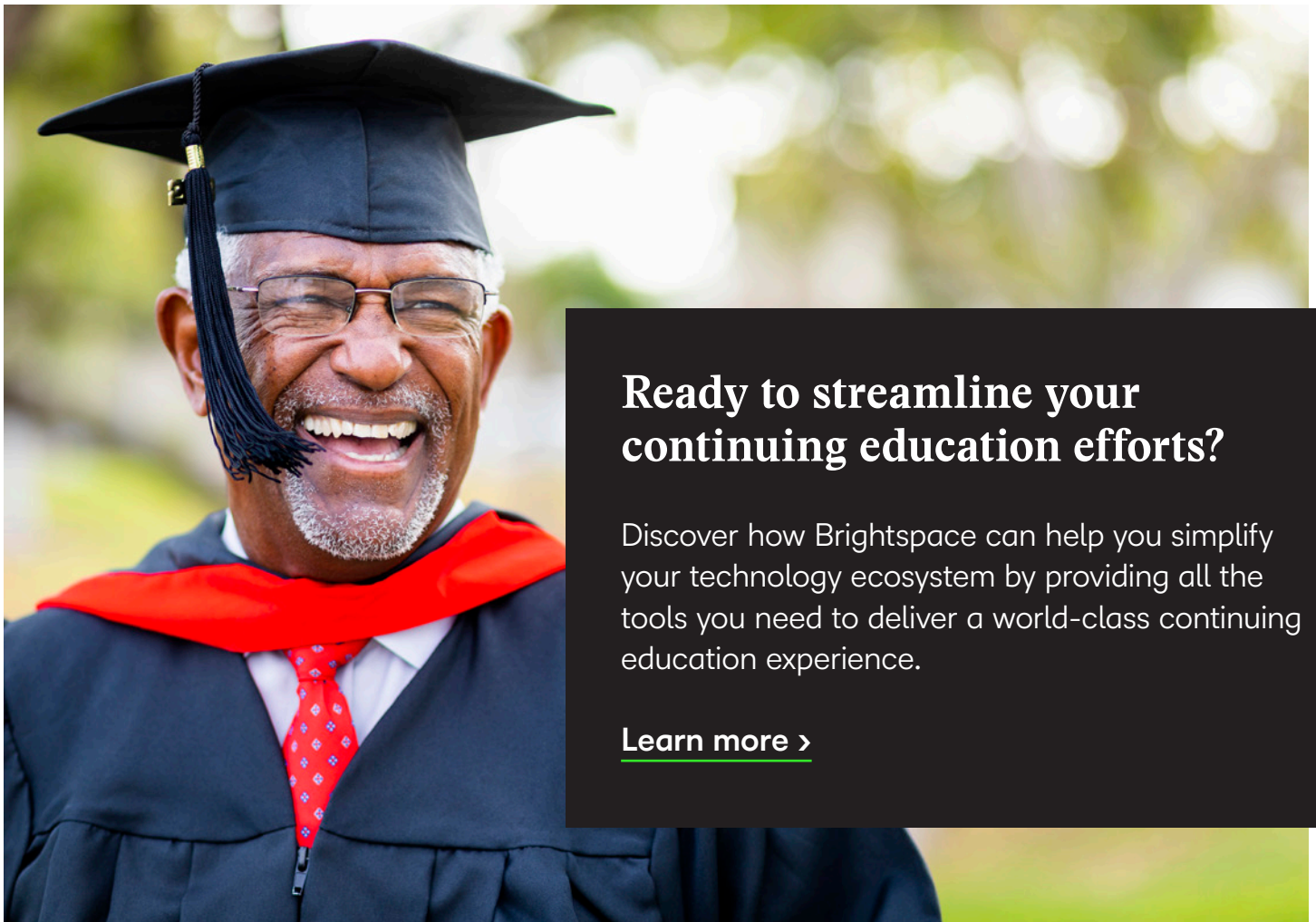
Continuing education can be the answer.

Nontraditional students are eager and ready to hit the books and add their favor to declining enrollments. Meaningful partnerships between colleges and businesses can boost institutional access by educating workers for in-demand jobs.

With the surge in interest for continuing education, don't get left behind.

Look to peers who are blazing a path for continuing education, and learn from their successes: Start small, get faculty buy-in, create unique content that stands out against the competition, make use of existing materials and meet the needs of local businesses.

Take the necessary steps today to get the attention of nontraditional students and business partners before other institutions snatch them up. Colleges need to lean on internal expertise and put together a solid plan to build a strong, recognizable continuing education brand tied to success that students and businesses will be clamoring to be a part of.



Ready to streamline your continuing education efforts?


Discover how Brightspace can help you simplify your technology ecosystem by providing all the tools you need to deliver a world-class continuing education experience.

[Learn more >](#)

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ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world. Learn more at [D2L.com](https://www.d2l.com).

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