Higher Education Reimagined: Embracing and Shaping the Future of Work

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Deloitte. ASU Arizona State University slack

In the US and globally, our work, workforces, and workplaces are undergoing drastic change – universities must not only adapt to, but drive this transformation

As the Future of Work continually evolves, so too must institutions of higher learning

Meet Maria. She's living in the year 2030.

Maria's work has shifted. Maria started her career as a *Data Entry Specialist*. Today, that position doesn't exist. Those who once worked in data entry now serve as *Data Engineers* who work in tandem with machines and cross-departmental stakeholders to identify how data analytics can help address their pain points.[1]

Maria is 36, though her age doesn't define her work. Maria is a Millennial among her perennial coworkers – their multigenerational team includes Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. In her perennial office, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion is paramount.[2]
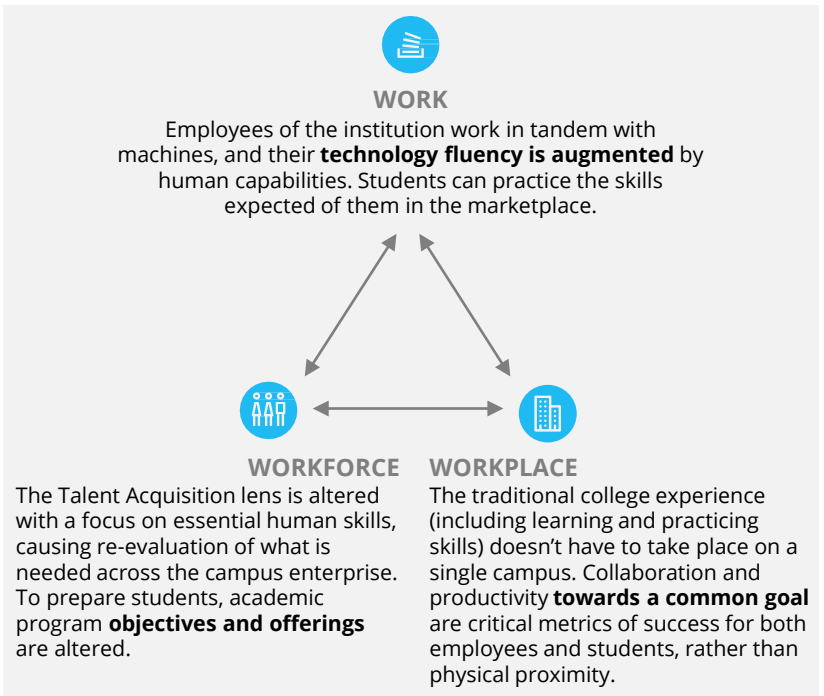
Maria is always honing her capabilities. Maria spent her late 20s reskilling through credentials and bootcamps. However, the focus on near-term reskilling has been replaced with long-term resilience.[3] Maria's company has great demand for human essential skills like creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.[4]

Maria takes courses at her local state college. Maria notices a growing number of middle-aged students as access to education and demands of the workforce influence the demand for postsecondary education.[5] Maria chose her current courses based on the instructors' collaborative styles and her ability to attend class virtually.[6]

Applying recent workforce trends, we can predict what Maria's life will look like in 2030. **How will higher education institutions start evolving *today* to meet Maria's reality of work, workforce, and workplace *in the future*?**

The next move for higher education

Because higher education has two roles to play in addressing the Future of Work – both in preparing the **Future Campus** and the **Future Student** – the change imperative is even more evident. Steve Hatfield, Deloitte's Global Future of Work Leader, explains this concept: "Humans [are going to be] doing things that are uniquely human – producing, creating, structuring, and managing. To what extent you mirror that in education becomes really critical to the success of someone who's going to be in that new workplace."[7] While proactively addressing campus and student needs has always been essential, the urgency for advancement has been accelerated by pressures caused by COVID-19. Now is the time for institutions of higher education to serve not only as incubators for changes to work, workforce, and workplace, but also as enterprises that prepare their students for careers that are adapting similarly:

WORK
Employees of the institution work in tandem with machines, and their **technology fluency is augmented** by human capabilities. Students can practice the skills expected of them in the marketplace.

WORKFORCE
The Talent Acquisition lens is altered with a focus on essential human skills, causing re-evaluation of what is needed across the campus enterprise. To prepare students, academic program **objectives and offerings** are altered.

WORKPLACE
The traditional college experience (including learning and practicing skills) doesn't have to take place on a single campus. Collaboration and productivity **towards a common goal** are critical metrics of success for both employees and students, rather than physical proximity.

Armed with insights from the Future of Work, we must return to the question at hand – *how will higher education institutions start evolving today to meet the realities of the future?* To create an environment and infrastructure that address the short-term and prepare for the long-term, institutions must **(1) reimagine both the content and means of effectively delivering 21st century educational value to students (2) equip students to enter the workforce through fostering tech fluency and lifelong learning** and **(3) build community and collaboration reflective of digital and societal evolution.**

So what do these principles look like in action? Arizona State University is well into its journey of preparing today for Maria's reality of the Future of Work by partnering with Slack, an online collaboration hub.

At Arizona State University, the recognition of change has already spurred innovation to develop the digital campus

Through its partnership with Slack, a channel-based messaging platform, ASU is embracing the Future of Work head-on and prioritizing resonant digital experiences and transformation

Focusing today on preparing for the future

ASU is no stranger to innovation – for five consecutive years, ASU has been recognized as the United States' most innovative university by U.S. News and World Report. "ASU's willingness to try new ideas is not a casual thing, but something intentionally built into the fabric of the institution. Unbelievable things can happen when you are curious and bold enough to make the attempt."[8] This innovative spirit inspired ASU to form a partnership with Slack in 2018. In less than two years, ASU has advanced this partnership to build an unparalleled digital campus.

> For **five** consecutive years, ASU has been recognized as the United States' **most innovative university**.[8]

Founded in 2009, Slack is a channel-based messaging platform designed for digital transformation that has enabled ASU to create the **Future Campus** and empower the **Future Student** through an infrastructure that supports centralized and focused communication and collaboration across students, faculty, and staff.
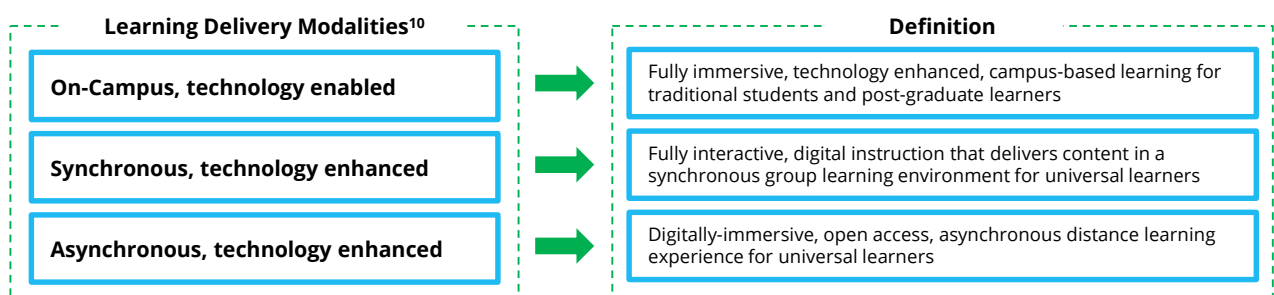

Through a "single pane of glass," ASU utilizes Slack to seamlessly integrate hundreds of apps, enabling campus in a number of ways:

- Course development & delivery
- Inter/intradepartmental collaboration
- Extracurricular communication
- Alumni & corporate engagement
- External partnerships & event execution

Slack's influence across ASU's operations, administration, and student experience is grounded in five tenants: modernization, real-time collaboration, reduction, shared affinity, and cross-functional collaboration. As ASU is a global university with over 140,000 students, 350 academic programs, and 4,800 faculty members, its focus on fostering an environment where students and campus can thrive is imperative.[9] So how is ASU utilizing Slack to achieve the three objectives set forth to prepare for the Future of Work?

(1) Reimagining both the content and means of effectively delivering 21st century educational value to students

ASU has deployed Slack to address the needs of the already emerging **Future Student**. According to a 2019 Lumina Foundation study, 37% of college students today are age 25 and older, 46% are first-generation college goers, 40% have a full-time job, and 24% have children or other dependents.[5] The resulting shift in the student demand for learning intersects with a growing employer demand for human skills. Steve Hatfield emphasizes this, saying "The new focus will be complex systems-thinking, hypothesis-driven problem solving, and human empathy, which is the new shift for learning. It's not about the knowledge – you're getting that through the course. It's about the capabilities you're developing through the search of that knowledge."[7] To meet the demands of ever-evolving students while delivering a timeless education, ASU designs instruction and learning around three delivery modalities.

Learning Delivery Modalities[10]	Definition
On-Campus, technology enabled	Fully immersive, technology enhanced, campus-based learning for traditional students and post-graduate learners
Synchronous, technology enhanced	Fully interactive, digital instruction that delivers content in a synchronous group learning environment for universal learners
Asynchronous, technology enhanced	Digitally-immersive, open access, asynchronous distance learning experience for universal learners

Each delivery modality addresses distinct student needs while facilitating a holistic and connected campus experience. Administrators in ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College turned to Slack to facilitate a synchronous student teaching experience as a result of COVID-19. From planning to facilitation, Slack was the vehicle by which interactions and communication were executed with site schools, making this learning experience, normally conducted over email and long in-person days, seamless and organized.[11]

(2) Equip students to enter the workforce through fostering tech fluency and lifelong learning

Just 41% of provosts rate their institutions as "very effective" in preparing students for work.[12] While some higher education institutions are more focused on workforce-ready skillsets than others, the use of Slack at ASU prepares the **Future Student** in two distinct ways: fostering tech fluency and creating lifelong learners.

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Tech fluency is a term that "like being fluent in a foreign language, encompasses a spectrum of proficiency…it enables employees to follow technology trends, differentiate between tech 'myth' and fact, and understand how the tools they use each day contribute, directly or indirectly, to business success."[13] ASU's expectation that students will communicate and conduct work in Slack sets up students for success in future jobs where technology fluency is the norm. This isn't constrained to the classroom – ASU student Mohit Doshi uses Slack as both a student worker for the University Technology Office and as a member of several campus organizations.


In the Software Development Association's "public" channel, students are able to informally engage with both alumni and recruiters. Says Doshi, "I've seen people use the channel to land internships or get a campus job."[14]
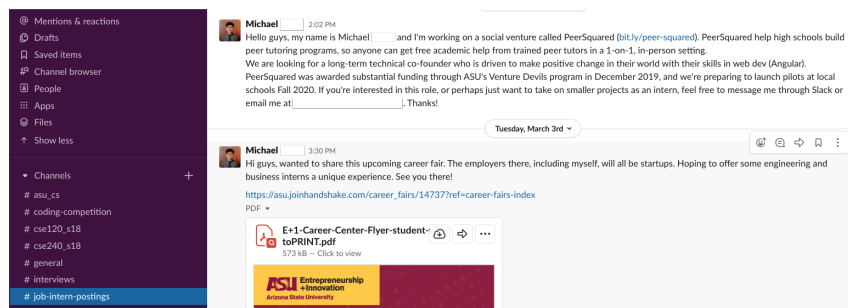
Entry into the workforce means embarking on a journey of lifelong learning. "Workers who are able to constantly renew their skills and learn new ones are those who will be most likely to find employment in today's rapidly shifting job market."[15] Punya Mishra, Associate Dean of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, identifies the flawed learning management approach that contradicts a continuous learning mindset: "*This assignment is over, which means we've figured everything out*' – no we haven't, but the discussion forum is now closed. [That] mindset is just wrong."[11] On the contrary, ASU's diverse use of Slack offers both the user simplicity and technological rigor that embeds the concept of lifelong learning into the student experience. This is achieved through enablement of a conversational learning structure – one where topics and discussions do not disappear following a submission deadline. As the workforce increasingly demands resilience and transformative careers, this establishment of a continuous learning mindset is not a nice-to-have, it's a requirement.

(3) Build community and collaboration reflective of digital and societal evolution

Both students and employees crave a sense of belonging and purpose in their respective domains.[15] This has become progressively difficult in the digital environment, where most work is conducted virtually. ASU has elevated Slack's informal and personalized interface to help students and staff alike to not only communicate about classroom topics and assignments, but also to develop a sense of camaraderie through connectedness. According to Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield, "Slack is designed to bring together groups of people who are aligned around the accomplishment of a common goal. This opens up teaching beyond the professor and engages the entire community in the learning experience - the class collectively advances."[16] As societal and workplace collaboration consists further of hybrid modes of interaction, the ability of the **Future Campus** to model a distributed yet connected community is paramount.
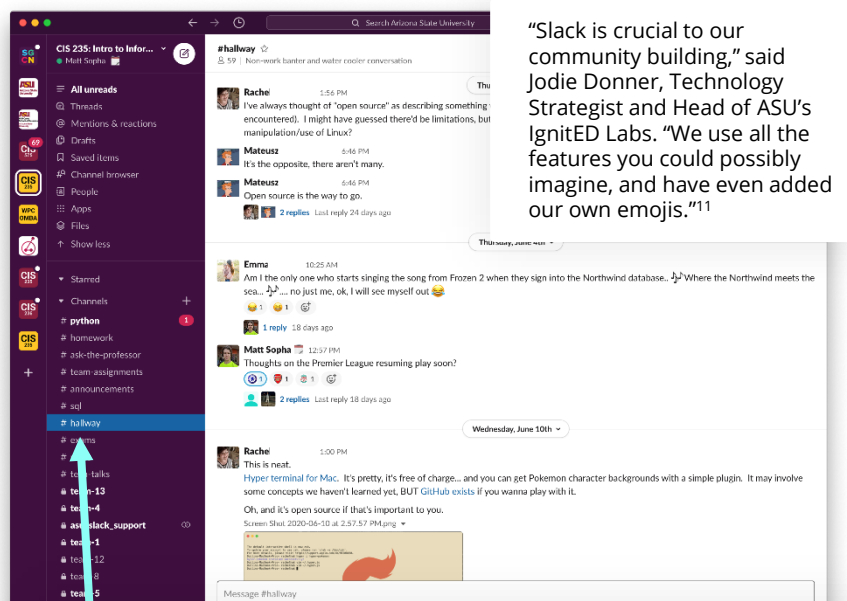
"Slack is crucial to our community building," said Jodie Donner, Technology Strategist and Head of ASU's IgnitED Labs. "We use all the features you could possibly imagine, and have even added our own emojis."[11]
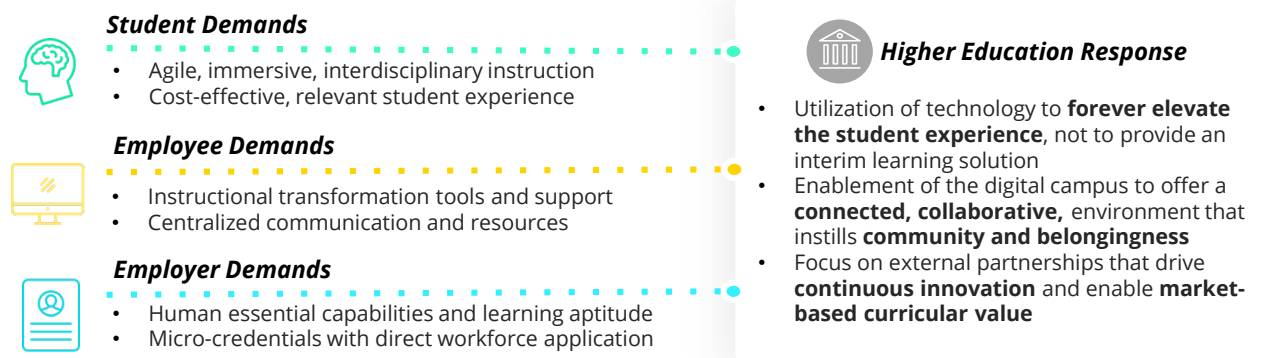
W.P. Carey School of Business Professor Matt Sopha uses the "hallway" channel to connect with students about non-classroom topics. Says Sopha, **"[Slack has helped to] limit the metaphorical distance that existed between not only myself and the students but the students and each other."** [17]

To secure a future in higher education, universities must embrace disruption

Disruptive forces impacting the relationship between digital and physical spaces create a blank slate for institutions to accelerate innovation

The bigger picture

ASU's configuration of the digital campus effectively addresses and mirrors current work, workplace, and workforce evolution while enabling continuous innovation in response to inevitable change. In the rise of the digital enterprise, an exciting opportunity exists across the educational ecosystem – colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to not only react to the Future of Work, but to *shape* it.[18] By listening and responding to stakeholder demands, institutions must act to secure their position as a critical tenet of educational and economic advancement.

Student Demands
- Agile, immersive, interdisciplinary instruction
- Cost-effective, relevant student experience

Employee Demands
- Instructional transformation tools and support
- Centralized communication and resources

Employer Demands
- Human essential capabilities and learning aptitude
- Micro-credentials with direct workforce application

Higher Education Response
- Utilization of technology to **forever elevate the student experience**, not to provide an interim learning solution
- Enablement of the digital campus to offer a **connected, collaborative,** environment that instills **community and belongingness**
- Focus on external partnerships that drive **continuous innovation** and enable **market-based curricular value**

ASU knows firsthand that the process of evolution is not one-size-fits-all – "learners and educators have agency to select the tools that work best for them."[19] While the journey may be different for every institution, the timeline of required response is shared – it's now.

All change begins with a first step
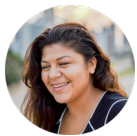
Remember Maria? Her workforce experience doesn't begin in 10 years – she's there now. And she's not the only one. As Maria and countless others face workforce demands that require additional learning investment, they'll have a decision to make. Will the **Future Student** turn to higher education to meet individual learning needs? Or will delays in the **Future Campus** transformation make room for existing competitors to thrive?

COVID-19 has accelerated the need for a response to the Future of Work in higher education, but this requirement for change is not a recent discovery. People like Maria have long faced issues such as the student loan debt crisis, the emergence of additional learning modalities, and the demand for college alternatives by employers that threaten the benefits of a degree program.[20] The Future of Work in higher education is less about navigating a discrete crisis than it is about enabling an enduring organization. According to the 2020 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, "organizations face a choice between returning to a post-COVID world that is simply an enhanced version of yesterday or building one that is a sustainable version of tomorrow. The risk is more than that of falling behind – it's the possibility of never catching up at all."[15]

This may seem a daunting mission. But as changes in work, workplace, and workforce continue to accelerate, the alternative to embracing disruption in higher education is one that makes the future a finite term. Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering lecturer Alex Mehlhase notes that the transformational learning curve is different for every educator, and she's still finding new ways to champion Slack.[21] Her experience is not uncommon among ASU faculty and students - it's this story of continual innovation that allows the university to achieve incremental and impactful change.

> So, the question remains – *how will higher education institutions start evolving today to meet the realities of the future?* **Institutions must shift the focus from "how"...to "today."** The journey begins not with a precise blueprint, but with boldness and commitment to a long-term future. And with the tools to enable unlimited creativity and innovation – it never ends.

It's time to address the **Future Campus** for the good of the **Future Student.** Deloitte research shows that recent student and faculty sentiments around course quality, student engagement, faculty training, and sufficiency of technology have emerged as largely negative.[22] But we also predict that "the discipline to change...will power the next century of education and innovation."[20] Life outside the classroom is not slowing down – it's time to create a campus that not only endures, but embraces the future.

Let's talk

Have an interest in innovation? We do, too.

Roy Mathew

Higher Education Leader

Deloitte Consulting LLP

rmathew@deloitte.com

+1.408.704.4527

Lev Gonick

Chief Information Officer

Arizona State University

Lev.Gonick@asu.edu

Jen Mingo

Global Head of Success Services

Slack Corporation

jmingo@slack-corp.com

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

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