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College programs can help firms build for the future

Larry Mandelberg

Finding ways to anticipate the future is one of the most valuable things a business can do. [Yogi Berra](#) summed up the problem when he said "The future ain't what it used to be."

But seeing the future — not to mention shaping it — requires a special talent. Businesses should recognize that universities are the first place to look for the kind of creative intelligence they need to adapt, evolve and prosper amid rapid change. And universities must work harder to be relevant to business needs.

A classic example of failing to anticipate the future can be seen in the recent announcement of [Steve Ballmer's](#) departure from Microsoft. Ballmer's blindness led to a 44 percent loss of value for Microsoft stock. Some examples: Ballmer once called Google a "one-trick pony." In 2007 he declared, "No chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share." His failure to recognize the future allowed more forward-thinking companies like Apple, Google, Amazon and Facebook to knock Microsoft from its position of dominance.

Rebuilding the dominance Microsoft once had will require a much more accurate vision of the future and the expertise to help create it. That will require new knowledge, new skills and the ability to use them.

Great wealth has been created in recent years both personally and professionally from ideas dreamed up in college environments. Universities have proven to be a rich source of creativity that has changed the world in profound ways. [Bill Gates](#) imagined Microsoft as a student at Harvard. [Steve Jobs](#) imagined Apple as a student at [Reed College](#). [Sergey Brin](#) imagined Google as a student at Stanford. [Mark Zuckerberg](#) and his friends imagined Facebook as college roommates at Harvard.

Many of those efforts were launched unofficially, with little help from faculty. This points to a challenge that many critics, including President Obama, have recently issued, urging universities to find new ways to add value to their degree programs. One of the strategies with proven success is the co-op model, in which students are required to work in the real world for actual companies like yours.

Nowhere is this program more important than [Drexel University](#) in Philadelphia, where it is central to the educational mission. [Sandra Kirschenmann](#), associate vice provost and executive director of Drexel University's Sacramento campus, is planning to bring the program here.

“Higher education needs to provide students with an authentic connection to work experience,” she wrote in a Sacramento Bee op-ed piece last month.

Students are hungry for these programs because the experience they get helps them become stronger job candidates and stand out professionally. They’re students who know what they want to do and are charging into that uncertain future while honing the skills required to succeed.

At Drexel, co-op programs aren’t internships. They’re paid, full-time employment for six months in a formal arrangement with the university.

Of course, co-op programs only build on a critical foundation of learning. The advanced teaching techniques of a university environment help develop knowledge, skill and the ability to use them in ways that just can’t be found elsewhere:

- Universities have good insight into changes in the business environment because they’re actively engaged in finding employment for their students.
- Seasoned research abilities and professors teaching with real-world examples help universities identify coming trends.
- Universities typically are as interested as you are in the success of students who will become your employees.
- Your business will benefit from hiring students who have experienced your environment, know it’s the job they want to do and are preparing themselves for it. When you need talent, look to the places where it’s being built — look to universities. The next person you hire could be the one who helps design your company’s success as it moves into that uncertain future.

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