Work Shift

OPINION

Broad-Access Institutions Could Lead Higher Ed's AI Future. First, They Need Resources

by **Stephanie Khurana and Philipp Schmidt**
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AI is remaking higher education at extraordinary speed, upending long-standing assumptions about how students learn, how institutions operate, and how careers take shape. The stakes are high, especially for students who pursue higher education in order to advance economically.

However, the conversation about how to adapt isn't yet being led by the broad-access institutions—community colleges, state universities, and predominantly online institutions—that educate the vast majority of undergraduate students and sit closest to the labor markets being reshaped by AI.

Unlike some organizations at the cutting edge of AI adoption, broad-access institutions can't afford access to the technology, lack sufficient technical support, and don't have clear examples of where AI delivers a strong return on investment. As a result, these institutions have no choice but to respond episodically and incrementally rather than as strategically and urgently as this moment demands. This has long-term implications for students' actual learning, workforce readiness, and economic mobility.

Yet this moment also presents something counterintuitive: **the institutions that are often overlooked may in fact be the ones best positioned to adapt and deliver the greatest impact. But they need two things— resources and ways to collaborate.**

Over the past year, our team at **Axim Collaborative** has listened to leaders of broad-access institutions. What they tell us, often bluntly, is that without investment from technology companies and philanthropies, they cannot responsibly integrate AI. The risk is not only slow adoption, but misalignment at scale: millions of students will be left without degrees, others will graduate unprepared for AI-transformed jobs, and the future of educational technology will be shaped largely without the institutions that serve the majority of learners.

Broad-access institutions are eager to partner with technology companies to integrate AI products, but companies need to provide more affordable enterprise offerings that are targeted at the specific needs of the broad-access market. Institutions need agentic AI solutions that they can adapt to their specific needs and which access institutional data in a safe and secure way.

And philanthropy needs to further invest in technology projects that build infrastructure and core capacity, where outcomes will take longer to materialize and may not fit into the traditional frameworks for social interventions. Efforts like **Opportunity AI**, the **Patrick J. McGovern Foundation**, and **Google.org** are building tools and offering capacity building for foundations that are interested in supporting the use of AI.

What if we pushed these efforts further? We envision institutions, technology companies, intermediaries, and foundations working together to build an AI starter kit. Such a network of institutions and partners would co-develop, improve, and share resources in order to give broad-access institutions the tools they need to accelerate the use of AI, building capacity through collaboration.

Collaborations across broad-access institutions and with employers are already cropping up. With concentrated investment, that connective work could be supercharged.

Community colleges are anchors in their local economies and have longstanding employer relationships that could enable them to quickly adapt programs by integrating AI. **Complete College America and Riipen** are experimenting with this by bringing employer-integrated work-based learning curricula to five community college systems to equip students with AI-relevant skills and experiences.

State universities are joining regional workforce development networks that offer insight into the real-world AI skills their graduates will need. Partnerships like that between **Charter Oak State College and Business-Higher Education Forum** show how institutions can deliver a skills-first, employer-driven education model with an AI-focused curriculum. College networks like the **National Applied AI Consortium** share curricula across institutions, partner with industry, and transform how AI is taught nationwide.

And broad-access institutions with large, flexible, digital-first models, such as **AlamoONLINE** and **Western Governors University**, have a proven ability to rapidly develop new credential pathways in response to changing student and workforce needs. They are activating innovative uses of AI in skills-aligned degree programs in collaboration with other education and workforce partners.

Intermediary organizations and consortia are positioned to provide connective tissue for such collaboration and fill capacity needs. **EdAdvancement**, the **American Association of State Colleges and Universities**, and emerging efforts such as **AI for Learning Network** are helping institutions build capacity, pilot shared solutions, shape common data and policy practices, and translate workforce needs into new degree and certificate programs.

Collaboration has long been central to how broad-access institutions adapt to change. By organizing experimentation across multiple campuses, it reduces risk for individual institutions, accelerates evidence generation, and creates clearer entry points for technology companies and education innovators seeking to partner at scale.

What's missing now is targeted support from technology companies and philanthropies.

With support and collaboration from technology companies and philanthropies, broad-access institutions can play a leading role in the AI transformation of higher education—ensuring that AI becomes a force for expanded access and mobility rather than a roadblock to student journeys.

Responsible use of AI not only prepares students for an uncertain future and helps institutions improve student outcomes, but also strengthens regional economies, builds a more reliable pipeline of industry-ready talent, and aligns educational opportunity with economic impact. In an AI-shaped world, those goals are inseparable, and the institutions closest to students and employers are best positioned to lead the way.

None of this will happen on its own. If we work together and invest with urgency, broad-access higher education can lead in this moment of transformation to close educational and economic divides and open opportunity for all.

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