

## Meet the Next Generation of Lifelong Learners

by *Jonathan Tice, VP Marketing and Business Development, Destiny Solutions*

Higher education has changed – welcome to the “new normal”. The dramatic changes over the past few years have created a new knowledge economy, one that requires everyone to continually improve their skills and knowledge to get a job, and keep it. Consider the recent forces behind all of this: the latest economic turmoil, significant shifts in core industries, an aging population looking to work longer and a younger generation just entering the workforce that learns in radically different ways. Each member of this next generation of lifelong learners has different objectives, needs and expectations. Meeting them requires a new mindset, new ways of doing things, and new capabilities to get them done.

This is a “Perfect Storm” for higher education – a “\$400 billion business” according to a PBS Frontline special *College Inc.*<sup>i</sup> on May 4, 2010. This \$400 billion dollar jump ball has been tossed up, and everyone wants to come down with it. Schools are faced with an opportunity to change their mindset and grab a share of what is, in reality, a market made up of countless segments.

In my discussions with community colleges across North America, some issues have become abundantly clear. They all agree that there are some key, strategic capabilities needed to meet the demands of this next generation of lifelong learners. Specifically, they need to have a better understanding as to who their customers are in order to capture their attention. Learning goals, preferences, interests and context into previous interactions are all essential pieces of information to capture and manage.

With this understanding, schools need to be able to respond rapidly to their customers. They need to provide relevant course and certificate offerings, or tailored contract training. On top of that, they then need to be able to build and maintain loyalty with their lifelong learners. It starts from that critical moment of interest before their first enrollment, and carries on through the student’s lifelong journey with the school. To do this effectively, schools must be constantly on top of their students’ evolving interests and objectives with meaningful follow-up communications and course offerings that reflect their changing needs.

“Community colleges usually see more students during economic downturns, but this time students turned to community colleges in much greater numbers than they did in the past,” said Judy Jeffrey, Director of the Iowa Department of Education in a 2009 report<sup>ii</sup>. “Unemployed workers are fueling unprecedented growth and waiting lists for many high demand community college programs.” Based on my industry meetings, one thing is very clear: This time around it has been the continuing education and workforce development organizations within colleges that have been bearing the brunt of this challenge.

In their quest to capture lifelong learners, colleges have had to be dynamic and responsive, as well as manage their information in new ways. In the vast majority of situations, their current systems were not built for this. Additionally, with budgets being strapped across the board, colleges are loathe to purchase new systems, having already invested significantly with student and financial systems such as SunGard’s Banner, Oracle’s PeopleSoft or Datatel.

Instead, schools are looking to intelligently extend their systems with the student engagement capabilities described above. Done right, they can have multiple systems acting as one. As a result, schools get the best of both worlds: They maintain and leverage their investment in existing systems, and they get a dynamic, responsive continuing education, contract training and workforce development organization – all operating within a school-wide information governance environment that ensures consistency and accuracy of information. All of a sudden, the “new normal” seems like an opportunity easily tackled!

**Next generation intelligence for the new knowledge economy**

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<sup>i</sup> PBS Frontline: College Inc. (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/collegeinc/etc/synopsis.html>) – May 4, 2010

<sup>ii</sup> Community Colleges & Workforce Preparation, Fall Enrollment Report (2009), State of Iowa Department of Education ([www.iowa.gov/educate/ccpublications/](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/ccpublications/))

