

# The Gig Economy: What's the Role of Higher Ed?

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A new economic reality presents an interesting challenge to educators and educational institutions alike. How can they best prepare students for success as the very definition of work continues to shift?



The future of work has arrived, and one of its monikers is the Gig Economy. Spawnd by the rise of the Millennial population and the 2008 economic downturn, this emergent labor market is characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work rather than full-time or permanent employment. Roles in the Gig Economy span a variety of scenarios, including the work-on-demand roles characterized by driving services including Uber and Lyft; self-employed creative professionals and technologists; and companies of all sizes that embrace contract workers rather than hiring long-term employees. This new economic reality presents an interesting challenge to educators and educational institutions alike. How can they best prepare students for success as the very definition of work continues to shift?

## Connecting Aspiring Entrepreneurs to Campus and Community

One answer can be found on the campuses of community colleges. They offer a practical, skills-based approach to learning that helps students become more marketable in an era in which the distinction between "employee" and "business owner" is blurred. More specifically, some community colleges appear especially well poised to help students develop an important (yet often overlooked) skill linked with success in the Gig Economy: entrepreneurship.

[Red Rocks Community College](#) (RRCC) has made it a priority to help students become more entrepreneurial by establishing an [Entrepreneur Center](#) on its Lakewood, Colorado, campus. With RRCC colleagues, Center Director and business faculty member Donna Armelino identified the need for a dedicated resource after observing a trend among students: "We started to see a number of students who were interested in learning how they could take or supplement their existing skills to start their own businesses." At the same time, students weren't always able to generate the momentum to convert their initial drive and passion into concrete action. As Armelino says, "I learned that students could get started on an idea, but then the pursuit would slow to the point where they lost interest."

Armelino and her colleagues came to recognize that fostering student entrepreneurship went beyond teaching topics such as marketing and finance. In other words, the development of concrete business skills, while important, was not enough; students needed to change the way they thought about entrepreneurship. Armelino explains that "entrepreneurship is more of a way of thinking: 'How can I capitalize on those opportunities? How can I expand my talents? How do I make my life better by being in an entrepreneurial mind-set?'"

This knowledge strongly informed the planning the Entrepreneur Center, and Armelino and her faculty peers were fully prepared to lead this endeavor, given their extensive experience as small-business owners as well as their connections with the thriving Denver business community. Armelino leveraged this collective experience to develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem that extends beyond the campus. Students can connect with the center at any point, whether they have a business idea or simply are interested in how entrepreneurship fits with their side hustle idea or their future career.

Once they've brought an idea to a certain stage, they can continue to benefit from community resources. Community ties, in fact, play an essential role in instilling a mind-set that sustains budding entrepreneurs' interest beyond the initial excitement of ideation.

Fortunately, the Center offers a plethora of opportunities for students to build on their ideas and capitalize on connections with the local organizations:

- Sponsored networking events foster relationships and mentoring opportunities between students and small-business professionals.
- Workshops help students develop their elevator pitch and practice their delivery in front of seasoned entrepreneurs.
- Students receive membership to the local chamber of commerce.
- Students have access to an experienced and well-connected business coach, who provides just-in-time advice and insights on product or service-related business plans.

All of these efforts enable ideas initially incubated at the center to grow and prosper beyond the academic environment.

Armellino believes the center is well positioned to impart the philosophy of flexibility and adaptability needed to hone an idea and sustain that vision over time. But her goals extend beyond reaching potential startup founders and future small-business owners. "We want to expand to the entire school population because we now live in an ever-expanding Gig Economy and our students will have to be resourceful—both soon after they graduate and in the decades to come," Armellino says. "They need to learn how to successfully differentiate themselves in the marketplace."

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