

TABLE of EXPERTS

# EDUCATION

## EMPLOYERS AND EDUCATORS WORK TO CLOSE THE SKILLS GAP



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**MODERATOR**



**Stacie Prosser**  
PUBLISHER/  
MARKET PRESIDENT  
**Kansas City  
Business Journal**

In her role as Market President and Publisher, Stacie Prosser leads the KCBJ team to execute our mission of helping local executives and entrepreneurs grow their businesses, advance their careers and simplify their professional lives. She has been with the KCBJ for more than 20 years and served in both sales and management roles prior to being named to her current position in 2014.

**PANELISTS**



**David Reid, AIA**  
PRINCIPAL  
**Gould  
Evans**

David Reid is a leader in the education design practice at Gould Evans, where he drives research relating to emerging trends and cross-disciplinary approaches. Currently, he's coleading an initiative to explore disconnects between education and the world of work, developing an information base from partners across both sectors and translating it into new design models for both schools and the workplace. Reid is also a cofounder of STEAM Studio, an experimental learning program housed in the architectural office of Gould Evans.



**Angie Besendorfer**  
CHANCELLOR  
**Western Governors  
University Missouri**

Dr. Angie Besendorfer champions college attainment for working Missourians who wish to pursue a bachelor's or master's degree. She leads efforts to connect students and community stakeholders with WGU Missouri's online competency-based model for increasing levels of higher education throughout Missouri.

Besendorfer has spent 23 years in the field of education in Missouri, implementing innovative and technology-focused learning strategies. Before joining WGU Missouri, Besendorfer was the assistant superintendent of Joplin schools. She was also an adjunct professor at Missouri State University.



**Darren K. Sharp**  
PARTNER, LITIGATION  
PRACTICE GROUP  
**Armstrong  
Teasdale**

Darren K. Sharp is a coleader of Armstrong Teasdale's higher education industry team and advises colleges and universities about Title IX, Title VII, ADA/FHA requests for reasonable accommodations as well as FERPA and Clery Act issues. He also routinely counsels colleges and universities concerning contracts with vendors and other third parties. Sharp has successfully handled bench and jury trials in state and federal courts, appeals at the state and federal levels, and arbitrations involving various business and employment disputes.



**Lorelee Stevens**  
BUSINESS LIAISON  
CONSULTANT  
**Johnson County  
Community College**

Over the past 25 years, Dr. Lorelee Stevens has been assisting students through her work in higher education — first in student housing and admissions at University of Kansas, then at Johnson County Community College (JCCC) as program director of admissions, managing the concurrent partnership program (College Now) and the College Close to Home satellite locations. In her current role in JCCC's Continuing Education division, she works to connect businesses and organizations with solutions-based training programs at JCCC. Dr. Stevens also serves as an adjunct instructor.

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ANDREW GRUMKE

**B**y 2021, 69 percent of employers expect candidates with data science and analytics skills to get preference for jobs in their organizations. Yet, only 23 percent of college and university leaders say their graduates will have those skills, according to a report by PwC and the Business-Higher Education Forum.

Talent shortfalls are not confined to data science. Employers express increasing difficulty finding the skills they need for many other positions in all facets of business, from the C-suite to manufacturing facilities. To address this and other issues affecting workforce readiness, the Kansas City Business Journal brought together several higher education experts in the Kansas City area. Publisher Stacie Prosser moderated the discussion about how employers and educators can work — and are working — together to close the gap between employer demands and the supply of employee skills.

**Stacie Prosser of the Kansas City Business Journal:** With the costs of higher education continuing to climb and the large number of underemployed

**graduates, what responsibility do institutions have to make sure their graduates are prepared to fill needs in the workforce?**

**Angie Besendorfer of Western Governors University (WGU) Missouri:** A university is only as strong as its graduates. But keeping education both affordable and of high quality is a battle. At WGU, we are able to do that. The employment rate of our graduates is above the national average. Within four years of graduating, our graduates are making \$19,100 more than they made before earning their degree.

The cost of WGU is about \$6,000 a year for all you can learn. Our students can move through as quickly as they possibly can, saving money and accelerating the start of their career. Our average time to a degree is not very long — two years and four months for a bachelor's degree. The return on investment is about two years. It is incredible what is happening for our graduates. We haven't raised tuition for nine years.

**Loralee Stevens of Johnson County Community College (JCCC):** Many community colleges are taking steps to keep tuition as affordable as possible.

JCCC, for example, created a “metro” tuition rate for residents in some areas of the Missouri side of the Kansas City metropolitan area. Our concurrent enrollment programs are also designed to help reduce the overall cost of higher degrees by allowing students to earn college credit during high school.

A student's educational trajectory may include grad school. That could be a long and expensive educational path. Somebody may ask where you went to law school or med school or where you got your MBA, but rarely will somebody ask where you got your first 24 or 48 credit hours of college. Students can save a lot of money on the front end by participating in dual and concurrent enrollment or beginning their studies at a community college, which will be more affordable.

JCCC's concurrent enrollment program is called College Now. I managed that program for about 13 years. We have had a lot of success helping students earn credits while they were in high school.

**Prosser: Do these programs help with completion rates, too?**  
Stevens: Yes, according to the

National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, students who participated in concurrent programs were 30 percent more likely to earn a bachelor's degree within six years and 23 percent more likely to enroll in college immediately following high school, which is huge. Students in these programs also earn higher grades and accumulate more credits in their first year of college.

These types of outcomes are what parents, students and those of us in higher education care about. We want to see benefits for students at all achievement levels. We are really proud of this program. It has been around a long time and is recognized nationally.

**Besendorfer:** We know from our research of our students that students who complete an associate's degree before transferring to a four-year institution are much more likely to complete their degrees at four-year institutions. So, there is a definite value in that. There used to be this stigma that if you were going to go to college, you needed to start off at a four-year university. But now with the dual credit programs, students can quickly get off the ground and have success. Then, they get to the university and can



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move quickly towards a degree, which makes their degree more affordable.

**Darren Sharp of Armstrong Teasdale:** Graduation rates, salaries, returns on investment — you'll hear these buzzwords from nearly every school these days because it is such a competitive environment. Schools want to attract students to their universities and colleges, so they have to be aggressive and market this way.

Recently, however, there has been more scrutiny of these practices and more discussions about borrower defenses to repayment. A federal rule that will go in effect July 1 allows students who participate in federal loan programs to petition the U.S. Department of Education to seek forgiveness of their loans based on misrepresentations by the institutions or breaches of contracts or promises. Institutions that are overly aggressive in their marketing of what they can do for students, or what their students will achieve, could face potential liability if a student ends up either

not graduating or graduating with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and can't find a job.

Typically, you see this in the for-profit industry, which are primarily the career colleges that you see advertising on TV. Fortunately, the two institutions here today are very credible and would not be involved in this.

I call it the US News and World Report rankings syndrome. Everyone wants to be number one on that list or at least in the top 10. So, graduation rates and salaries may be inflated. If students rely on that, take out loans and go to that school, they now have the ability to make claims against the institution and ask for the Department of Education to forgive those loans.

As an attorney in this sector, I have seen that not only is this possible, but I also expect an uptick in these types of claims, certainly for the for-profit career colleges. But it applies to all universities.

**Prosser:** We see many employers demanding higher

**levels of education for jobs, such as requiring an MBA for a job that a few years ago only required a bachelor's degree. Are we creating an environment that is destined to fail for all kinds of people, schools and employers?**

**David Reid of Gould Evans:** As an architectural firm, we work in both sectors of education and the corporate world. And as designers, we are trained to believe that we can fix a lot of the world's problems through better design because we know that environment can shape behaviors. I think one of the great success stories in bridging expectations between education and employers is the Missouri Innovation Campus (MIC) in Lee's Summit, where we served as the lead design firm. This is one of the few educational institutions that is using the business world to help write curriculum for accelerated-degree programs. They are evolving curriculum continually and matching internships with the degree programs for each student. So, you are getting workplace

experience with all the soft skill development.

From my perspective, there are two big conflicting issues for higher education. The first is that many of today's industries are asking for more and more specific skill sets in graduates, especially in IT. But education moves at a slower pace than business so it struggles to keep pace with these evolving skills requirements. The second and opposing issue is that businesses are saying they need more soft skills. So how do higher education institutions reconcile this and provide both?

Look at a program like MIC. By having internship programs and by changing the physical structure of the school — having learning spaces that look and feel like the workplace environment instead of classrooms — you begin to instill those workplace readiness skills while you are teaching applied knowledge and hard skills. By changing the physical environment of the school, you set in motion a

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learning experience that naturally draws on many of the skills essential to employers.

I am impressed that WGU students can get a bachelor's degree in two years and four months, because one of MIC's big claims to fame is accelerated paths to completion — two years after high school you can have a bachelor's degree. So, yes, I think more direct partnerships are certainly influencing that in terms of responsibility of employers.

**Besendorfer:** Working with employers to build curriculum is really important. You made the comment that the typical higher education institution doesn't change very quickly. To be more responsive and nimble, WGU is set up so that students can start on the first day of any month. Because of this, we can roll out a new version of a course or a new degree on the first day of any month.

We bring in hiring managers and members of the business community multiple times a year to discuss what needs to change

about each degree. We have retired degrees in the past because they were not getting people the jobs that will pay for their degrees. Degree programs still have to go through accreditation and all of that, so there are some wheels that have to turn. But we are able to respond to changes in industries much more quickly.

**Reid:** We sponsor the STEAM Studio, which is located in our architectural studio, and it provides a flexible learning environment where kids come in and learn as part of a team. The cofounders are folks from the IT sector who wanted to get these smart kids before they are taught bad habits in college. No offense, but these employers are saying they need to retrain them into such specificity anyway that they would rather get a really smart kid out of high school who knows how to code and train them to their particular program.

Now, that is kind of extreme, but I think it is also an indication of a trend that we are seeing, and it certainly leads to the notion of lifelong learning. I heard a quote recently that the illiterate in the

21st century won't be those who can't read and write, but people who can't learn, unlearn and relearn constantly throughout their lives. I think that is a wake-up call for all of us.

**Stevens:** Nimble is a word we use a lot. In the continuing education division of JCCC, where I work now, I have been impressed that not only can we adapt and offer a course based on feedback from the business community with short notice, but we can customize training for individual businesses at their location or on our campus.

The Kansas City Manufacturing Network (KCMN) serves professionals in many facets of the manufacturing industry. JCCC Continuing Education worked with KCMN to craft a program called Emerging Leaders specifically to meet their members' employee development needs. It has been extremely well received to the point that we have added three tiers of training and offer the series several times each year.

We can respond to requested changes in our courses as well as create individualized programs for

a company's specific requirements. I have been really pleased that we can provide that level of service for businesses in the metro area.

**Prosser: Not every high school graduate is an ideal candidate for college. Are you seeing more opportunities for people to get training in your industries outside of the traditional two- or four-year college experience?**

**Reid:** I am not seeing that much in architecture, but I have certainly seen it in a lot of other fields. Stanford's Open Loop University is an indicator of this as it gives students access to six years of learning over the course of their lives, allowing them to come and go without having to start over in the admissions process. It allows for built-in gap years. It also acknowledges that not everybody has the maturity to know what they want to do and start toward that goal right out of high school.

**Sharp:** The legal industry is similar to the architectural industry. You have to get your four-year degree before you can get

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accepted into an accredited law school, so you are looking at a minimum of seven years for getting your law degree. Within the legal education industry, though, there has been more of an emphasis on clinical training — clerking with law firms and judges before you graduate — so that you are at least exposed to what practicing law really involves.

You mentioned soft skills. When I hear soft skills, I think of people skills and emotional IQ as opposed to just being able to have a particular skill. Those soft skills are very important in a lot of professions. You need to be able to understand people and work in a wide variety of environments and with a wide variety of people.

**Prosser: What other skills do employers want?**

**Stevens:** I teach a class called Career and Life Planning and have taught it for about 15 years. When looking through my “what employers want in an employee” file while prepping for class, I mused over my historical

collection of resources and how those desired traits have remained pretty consistent over the years. For example, according to a 2001 Kauffman Foundation survey, the qualities employers desired were: participates as a team member, integrity, honesty and interprets and communicates information well. Again in 2008, a survey listed communication and a strong work ethic. Again in 2015: works collaboratively, communication skills, ability to work in a team and leadership. In many ways, the needle has not moved. We all want to work with nice people who come to work and can get along with others.

Several years ago, based on feedback from our advisory groups within our industrial technology areas, we implemented a required course called Workplace Skills that addresses those soft skills. It teaches how to get along with your boss and how to get along with your coworkers. We touch on diversity and sexual harassment — all these really basic things. Of course, a lot of people already

know some of it, but everybody learns something new from the class. It is a great class to teach and to take.

**Reid:** I was having a conversation yesterday with another company that sponsors an intern from MIC. These kids are juniors in high school. The work environment is foreign to them, and it takes them a year out of their three-year internship to adapt to the workplace setting. Comparing that pathway to classroom learning is interesting to me. There is just so much that we don't even think to teach but just comes out naturally through the internship program and mentoring.

**Besendorfer:** That may be one of the differences of our program, too. Because we were creating a whole new model, we had to hire third-party researchers to validate whether this approach was working. We found that 100 percent of employers say that our graduates are well prepared for their jobs, and 75 percent say they are very well or extremely well prepared. But it may be because we

also specialize in serving students between 25 to 45 years old. They have worked and realize they need additional skills to achieve their goals. Maturity may be a factor as well.

**Sharp:** Lorelee mentioned that they are now talking about diversity and sexual harassment in the workplace, which I don't think was really discussed or taught by schools several decades ago. That is where the law has perhaps pushed society in a certain direction.

As you know, Title IX is huge in the headlines these days. I would hope most colleges and universities have Title IX policies and procedures in place. If not, they certainly should. And students need to be trained. Incoming freshmen need to understand what the expectations are and what is and isn't acceptable behavior so that when they get into the workforce, this isn't all new. In fact, I would venture to say most graduating college students these days

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understand the workplace diversity and sexual harassment rules better than someone who has been in the workforce 40 or 50 years.

**Prosser: What kinds of things are higher education institutions doing to communicate with employers to make sure they are teaching the right skills? And what are they doing to make sure they are meeting students' expectations as well?**

**Besendorfer:** WGU was created by governors to support economic development. We partner with employers to find out what they need in the workforce. For instance, I am working with a Missouri company right now that needs to hire 1,000 IT people. They are not sure where they are going to find these people. That's hard, but right now, we have, 12,000 students in our IT college nationwide and 8,700 graduates. So, we have this big pool of students and graduates that may fit an employer's needs.

It is not just about providing the degree. We are listening to employer needs and creating programs that ensure that each graduate masters those desired skills.

But then beyond that, finding ways to respond to the current workforce needs is critically important, and we are constantly doing that. It is not something that you do and check it off. It is something that you do every day.

**Stevens:** I agree with Angie. A major key to success is listening to what employers really need. We will get an inquiry for training and then meet with the business to find out what they want. Ideally, employees would have all the soft skills and all the technical skills already. But often that is not the case. For example, one of the most in-demand certifications is our commercial drivers' license training. Companies want people who know how to drive a particular kind of truck, and we can do that. We can train their current employees. But when we ask a few more questions, we may find that they also need additional support

for their team or managers to maximize how their organization is helping newer employees feel part of that organization.

We also help advertise open jobs through our Career Development Center. We can post employee jobs for free on the website and then tweet them out. We help share information about vacancies.

JCCC has also partnered with the KU Edwards campus on the Degree in 3 program, which includes Blue Valley, Olathe and Shawnee Mission public school districts. Through this program, students can put together the courses that they need during high school, through JCCC, to earn about 30 credits. Next, they finish their associate's degree with us. Finally, they go on and complete their bachelor's degree at the KU Edwards campus and stay in the metro area. So, for example, they can continue internships that they started as part of Blue Valley CAPS while they are getting their associate's degree with us and their bachelor's degree at the KU Edwards campus. It is good for employers and students to be able to make those connections early. It helps with workforce development in the metro area.

**Prosser: Technology is obviously a game changer for higher education. How does technology create additional risk for colleges and universities?**

**Sharp:** We mentioned that having a diverse student body is important and that includes qualified people who have disabilities. These days, students have to access information for their courses, such as syllabuses and readings, online. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has really emphasized that if you are going to have technology available for everybody, you need to have it accessible for disabled students who have been admitted as well. Any school receiving federal money that doesn't take students with disabilities into account faces liability under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other federal laws.

One example would be e-readers. Many universities and colleges offered students e-readers and thought they were on the cutting edge and doing a good thing. But many failed to take into account the needs of visually impaired students who needed text-to-speech functions the e-readers didn't have.

Colleges and universities should consult with legal counsel

and make sure that their policies are compliant with the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act. During the past five to 10 years, many institutions have hired consultants to conduct IT audits to make sure that whatever technology they are making available to all students is accessible to disabled students or that they are at least providing an alternative that is functionally equivalent.

**Prosser: How does technology affect the physical campus?**

**Stevens:** The enrollment increases recently have been for online courses. Those are definitely attractive to particular populations, especially those who feel at ease with managing the rigor of online classes.

**Reid:** The role of the physical campus will probably evolve, and more collaborative spaces will likely replace classroom space. JCCC's master plan is looking at revamping a lot of its ground floor spaces into these collaborative spaces so that they are a magnet for students who might be taking a mix of online and physical classes to stay on campus longer. There is a direct correlation in student success and time spent on campus. So, as a commuter campus, it is important to have a place where students can have face-to-face exchanges and develop all those soft skills that the employers keep saying they want year after year.

**Stevens:** We opened up a new innovative learning space on our campus last year. The CoLab Collaboration Center has taken off. It is very visible. It is on the first floor in a building in the heart of our campus, and it is a place for students and faculty to work on projects together. It has innovative lab space for the stop-motion digital classes. It has a place where students can record music. It has small conference room spaces. We also host guest speakers there and provide opportunities for employers to come in and talk about their expectations. Business and marketing professors host networking events there, too.

**Besendorfer:** Technology also allows you to meet the needs of a variety of different types of learners. There is really a wide difference in how you interact with the learning in an online space. If you need to watch a 25-minute webinar lecture five times to master it, you can watch it five times. You can stop it and take notes. You can't do that in a face-to-face lecture. It is about finding the right way for you as a student to be successful.

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**Reid:** We have seen some interesting trends in which students are curating their own degrees. Students have gone out and taken courses at four or five institutions online and then they find a college that will recognize those credits and award them a bachelor's degree — all without ever stepping foot on any of those campuses. That is disruptive to higher ed, and I think it is pretty fascinating.

From the design perspective, too, we are interested in the future of the physical campus. A lot of what Loralee is saying is encouraging that there is still a role for architecture. But I think there is going to be an increasingly larger role in user experience design for online learning because so many websites are cumbersome and create barriers. Design consultants are working in the user experience field to help create this holistic college experience. And in the process, the physical campus experience needs to evolve as the online experience evolves — the brand should be consistent, thus one informs the other.

**Besendorfer:** I couldn't agree with you more. The online structure is critically important, but

our faculty is even more important. That one-on-one conversation that happens on a weekly basis with our students helps them be career ready and is critically important to their success in the workplace.

**Reid:** And how do you maintain soft skill development?

**Besendorfer:** We build that in. You have to go out in the community and do capstone projects in your degree that actually tie to the workforce.

**Prosser: How are federal or state policies helping or hindering the delivery of higher education?**

**Sharp:** I can't really comment on how it hinders or helps, but there is no doubt that state and federal policies and procedures can change the course of what a college or university does. Federal funding is a big carrot and big stick.

It used to be that education was mostly a state-level issue, even at the college level. In the past 40 or 50 years, it has become a federally laden issue, in part because the federal government is involved in student loans, federal money and grants.

**Prosser: Is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to add?**

**Stevens:** I would like to mention that we are building a new career and technical education building on our campus. We are very excited about it, and construction will begin soon. Dozens of businesses we currently work with and serve have provided input on the types of training and equipment that they would like to see in the new building.

**Besendorfer:** That's great. I would like to share that WGU has some new degrees that have launched recently to address workforce needs. One of them is a master's degree in integrated health care management designed to help health care leaders respond to the demands of a rapidly changing health care environment. We also have new bachelor's and master's degrees in data analytics, and finally, we have a new bachelor's degree in cybersecurity and information assurance.

**Reid:** I would like to add that aside from our work as architects on this phenomenon of bridging workplace and education, we are noticing how the future of our

capitalistic society is all about creativity. We are finishing up a book right now related to the STEAM Studio that presents some of our findings and outcomes. We have ended up really thinking this is about unleashing creative genius in our learners. A lot of our research, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels, shows that giving students autonomy is what makes them better learners. It is about allowing them to be creative in their learning. It is about allowing some self-direction and personalization.

**Sharp:** One of the things I have noticed is just how diverse the issues are with higher education. Because of that, there are so many legal risks involved — Title IX and Title VII, workforce and student population relations, real estate issues when building new facilities, cybersecurity and technology contract reviews, to name just a few. It runs the gamut with colleges and universities, which is one of the reasons Armstrong Teasdale has developed a practice in higher education and why I really enjoy this area.





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