

Jason Altmire (00:05):

Hello, and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I'm Dr. Jason Altmire.

There's been a lot of discussion recently in policy circles about outcomes measurement for institutions in higher education. There's a new organization called the Workforce Talent Educators Association, that is seeking to certify colleges and universities based upon their outcomes. This would be something that's voluntary for schools, they would participate and offer up their programs. We're going to talk more about that, but it's an interesting way to look at things. I think it's something that parents and students alike have been clamoring for. The issue is going to be are institutions going to want to participate in this and what are the challenges and barriers to entry?

We have as a guest today, somebody who knows more about this than anybody, because it's Jen Dirmeyer, she's the managing director and chief accreditation officer of the Workforce Talent Educators Association. Jen, thank you for being with us. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about why you were interested in this and what in your background prompted you to take this leap into starting this association.

Jen Dirmeyer (01:22):

Thanks so much, Jason. Really happy to be here. Yeah, I'll give you my brief personal history and that will help explain a little bit how we got here. I was an economics professor for about 12 years, taught at several different institutions and got tenure at my last institution, a fantastic place; Ferris State University in Michigan. It was an interesting road. Ferris was a bit of an eyeopener for me. I think like many people, I had a implicit idea in the back of my head that the level of your degree had some sort of correlation with difficulty or rigor or importance. Being at Ferris, it was so clear so quickly that that's just not true. We had everything from HVAC management degrees, to PharmD professional degrees and everything from associates to doctorates and every single one of those programs was valuable to students and was focused on getting students to work.

Just having that experience and really thinking about maybe having implicit biases questioned on my part was really a transformative experience for me. That, combined with starting to work more in administration and understanding the incentive structure that higher ed institutions are under from an infrastructure perspective, really also changed a lot of the way that I saw the world and realized that our higher ed infrastructure is not set up to reward schools that are focused on building career pathways for students. And that's a shame because that's why most students are in post-secondary education. So I wanted to figure out a way to change those incentives and the way that I chose to do it was Workforce Talent Educators association.

Jason Altmire (03:14):

One of the things I think is most interesting is if you look at the accreditation process and you've made clear that in the long run, one of the goals of the association is to get into the accrediting world. If you look at for federal funding right now, nine of the 10 indicators for accreditation are based on inputs, what's going into preparing the university to carry out their educational mission. What is not talked about are outputs, how successful are students once they graduate? Especially in their chosen field of study. I think for the work that you're doing, you've said that you don't have specific requirements or even an opinion on how the educational program delivers its curriculum. What you're interested in is focusing on objective outcomes measures, preparing learners for workforce success. I think that's something that is clearly missing out in the market today. How are you preparing your members, because this is a membership organization? How are you preparing schools to carry out that challenge?

Jen Dirmeyer ([04:22](#)):

One of the things that my partner and I, Joseph Kazusko, really challenged ourselves with early on, was to create a quality assurance process that was entirely outcomes and impact based. My line is no even opinion about how schools run their programs. This is like you've said, drastically different than what happens right now. I think that it's very natural for accreditation institutions, any sort of quality assurance organization certifiers to have in their heads the perfect program and then to want to make all their programs look just like that. I understand the impulse, we all have our pet favorites. But the reality is that we have such a diverse learning population and such a diverse set of workforce opportunities that if we try to make every institution fit into a particular frame, then we're just missing out on so much innovation that can get students to work, that can open new career pathways.

We're really challenging ourselves to not do any input based quality assurance, which I will tell you it's difficult. Obviously, we look at workforce outcomes and that's actually the most straightforward thing that we think about in terms of the outcomes, not inputs. Are students getting jobs? How much are they earning? How much are they earning compared to how much and how long it took them to get the certificate or the degree? Those are the straightforward outcomes measures. The things that start to get more difficult and more interesting and more valuable, if we can pull this off together, is thinking about instructor quality. Thinking about student success quality, thinking about career services quality. Those are the places that everybody wants to put in their preferred program design. Here's what your instructor qualification should look like. Here's how you should run a career services and we don't want to do that.

Because again, there's so many different ways to do great education. We don't want to preclude any of them, given our preconceived ideas of what makes sense. Thinking about those from an outcomes perspective, thinking about let's challenge our educators. Just running the workshops is not enough. Let's make sure those workshops are actually valuable to students, that they're having an impact. It's great that you have a career services that connects with employers. Let's track how often that leads to a job placement, let's track how often your employers are coming back and rehiring so that we can look at the impact of your career services, not just the fact of existence of your career services.

Then finally, when we think about the actual skills and competencies that students have coming out of this, it's up to the school to define the competencies, but then they need to validate those with employers to make sure that they're actually teaching the right thing. Then we need to validate that their assessments of their students guarantee that program graduates actually have those competencies. If you think about it right now, it is so difficult to know whether or not a school's program graduates actually have the competencies that the school is trying to teach them. That is a huge hindrance to employers, to students, to the educators themselves, because they can't prove that their graduates have the goods, so to speak. If they have that ability to do it's really going to open up doors for excellent career building educators. That's why we are absolutely obsessed with outcomes.

Jason Altmire ([07:58](#)):

And this is exactly where your organization comes in. You do what's called a career impact audit where workforce outcomes, quality measurement, the relevance to the curriculum, what you were just talking about, there's badges associated with verifying that they've met these criteria. Can you talk a little bit more about how that career impact audit works?

Jen Dirmeyer ([08:22](#)):

Sure, the career impact audit is our primary quality assurance platform. We have three different areas that we look at. Workforce outcomes, quality management processes, and the curriculum

relevance and fidelity. Each of those is what we consider absolutely essential parts of excellent career building education. The thing that we think about as we built this list, and as we continue to refine, is what would an employer need to feel confident hiring a graduate from a program that they may not have a lot of experience with? If you think about the way that our education employment infrastructure works now, employers are treating educators like a black box. They have no idea what's going on in there, they hope that it's working. Then they get out graduates and they hire them into the workforce and it's a fingers crossed moment.

Otherwise, it is longterm relationships, longterm reputational relationships built between employers and educator partners, which are fantastic. Except for that this is not working for a workforce environment that changes. If you need to be flexible and to be nimble, and to be able to find new education partners that are providing the workforce that you need going into new areas, you can't always rely on long relationships to get you there.

What it really ends up doing, requiring the deep reputational background to create good educational partnerships, what that ends up doing is meaning that schools that are ranked high for some reason or another, usually not for workforce outcomes, but maybe for something else, are privileged over new up and coming schools or schools that just maybe in less dense population areas. So a lot of great educators get overlooked because they don't have a way to show what it is that they're capable of.

Our career impact audit is really meant to serve two purposes. One: allow schools to demonstrate excellence in these areas and then two: to provide them with a continuous improvement process because every great educator I know is always looking for ways to improve. This is the thing that's always the funniest, the ones who are performing the best are always the most interested in these products. Not because they just want to show it off, but also because they want to find whatever gaps they still have. They always are looking for ways to improve. It's that continuous improvement commitment that has led them to be excellent now and it continues on.

Jason Altmire ([11:06](#)):

This is not the first time this has been discussed, clearly. You're not the first organization that has gone down this road. I think what's unique about the service that you're providing is what we're talking about with an outcomes based focus, to not look as much at the input and how they're getting to those outcomes, but what are the legitimate outcomes? Can you verify and certify them? The other organizations that have tried this, there are others who as I said, have gone down this road, but they've struggled to find institutions that are interested in doing this work and going through the process. How do you plan to change that?

Jen Dirmeyer ([11:46](#)):

I will just say that has not been our struggle. It might be our struggle as we continue on and keep growing and have more and more capacity. But at the moment, this is not a problem for us. I think that the reason is the outcomes focus actually, as opposed to the inputs focus. A great educator doesn't want to sign up to have someone tell them that they need to reorganize and change everything that they're doing in their program. They're trying to make it exactly what they want it to be now. They're not trying to find someone else to tell them how to deliver great education. But they do need someone to verify, independent third party verification that what they're doing is working.

I think that's probably the biggest difference in finding education partners that are willing to think about this processes. It provides a totally different experience. Rather than have someone come in and tell you, "Oh, you're not hiring faculty in the right way. You're not designing your curriculum the way

that we think it should be designed." Instead, having someone come in and say, "Okay, let's take a really rigorous look at the impact of all of your policies, let you know what's working and what isn't working. Then provide you with recommendations and third party verification that shows where you're excellent and where you could build on that foundation." I think it's a totally different proposition.

Jason Altmire ([13:11](#)):

One of your biggest cheerleaders is your charter member, the Texas State Technical College. I think it's really interesting if you look at what that is. That is a state chartered institution, chartered by the state legislature in the 1960s. What they have done is voluntarily tied their entire budget and state funding to graduates' job placement rates and salaries and they've thrived in this way of doing things. They don't get any public support for just moving people through the system. They don't get any public support for graduation rates or completing programs, 100% of their support is earned when the student gets the job.

I think that speaks to what you are trying to do. You're trying to have that be the end goal. Graduation is of course critical, completion rates are very important, but when a student enters a program, there's an expectation there's going to be a job associated with that on the other end. I think that speaks very highly of the work that you're doing. Maybe you can talk a little bit more about your relationship with the Texas State Technical College and how those conversations evolved into expanding the work that you're doing.

Jen Dirmeyer ([14:27](#)):

Yeah, I'll tell you that Texas State Technical College, we are also huge cheerleaders of them. I could not be more impressed with an institution every time I interact with anyone that works there. I visited the Waco campus recently and I was just blown away. I told one of the leaders there that at some point they're going to disappoint me because my expectations just keep rising higher and higher. They're so impressive. It's top to bottom, every single person there really understands that their mission is to open a career pathway for students, every single one. And their program leads think about employers and employer needs. They think about challenges for students along that path. Completion is an important benchmark typically for job placement. Of course, it's not always true. There are times that starting a program and getting a long way through is actually still helpful to getting a job. But completion, we think of it only as important in terms of being a way point to the job placement.

We really think job placement is the only thing that you should really think about at the end of the day as an educator. Are your students able to be employed? And TSTC has that model and they're the ones that asked for this funding model, which is so great. Who does that? Who goes to the legislator as a public institution and says, "We'd like to be held accountable for the employability of our graduates." I mean, it's inspiring in so many ways.

Early conversations with TSTC solidified our commitment to outcomes based and to workforce outcomes based quality assurance. They've been great thought partners throughout the entire process. They're going through our career impact audit right now. If you ask them why they're doing it, the answer is, "We want third party verification. We think what we're doing is amazing, but we want to know what someone else that isn't directly related to the institution thinks." So they continually ask for more accountability.

This is, I think, goes back to the question you asked earlier, is how will I found institutions that are willing to do this? The answer is there are institutions out there that are hungry for third party verification, third party validation. They know that what they're doing is working, they're tracking it, they're tracking their graduates, they're tracking their employers, but how do they stand out from the

crowd now? Similarly, we have another one of our founding members Reach University, a fantastic teacher's college, well, it's not quite right to call it a teacher's college. They have teacher administration leadership and also amazing teacher training programs and certification programs. Similarly, what they're doing is helping schools build their own teacher core essentially, with people that already work in the school. Same kind of conversations with them, happy to have that quality assurance that's focused on the things that matter to them.

I think that these conversations with our early members; Fullstack Academy, Nucamp, have really helped us hone in on where the value is for educators. What is it that a great career building educator really needs? It's not actually advice on how to build their program. It is accountability and third party validation that what they're doing is working and help understanding the gaps. Where could we improve? That's what they really need.

Jason Altmire ([17:55](#)):

How would a school that's interested in what we're talking about today, there's a career school out there, hundreds I'm sure, that would be interested in this type of third party validation that you're talking about. How would they get in touch with you? Would they begin the process of having you do a career audit for them?

Jen Dirmeyer ([18:14](#)):

Sure, my email is jen@workforcetalent.org. You can visit our website, workforce.talent.org. If you are a great career building educator, then you are our people. Come on over.

Jason Altmire ([18:25](#)):

What is your longterm goal? We talked in the beginning and I've read, and we've talked offline that longterm you would like to become an accreditor. What would that mean? Would financial aid, Title IV be tied to that in a way a traditional accreditor operates? Where do you want to go from here?

Jen Dirmeyer ([18:44](#)):

Yeah, I hesitate to say that is our longterm goal. Although, we do intend to seek Department of Ed recognition at some point, probably three years down the line, because that is not actually our goal. We think that it's an important part of accreditation today and it's important part of how educators do business, but it's not our longterm goal. Our real longterm goal is to create a world in which schools are judged by the workforce outcomes of their students. Schools are judged by how many career pathways they're opening for students. That's what we want to create and that means getting that information to employers, smoothing the process so that employers can more easily partner with educators who are doing this work well, and getting that information to students. So our real goal is to see a world where workforce outcomes drive decision making when it comes to partnerships in education.

Jason Altmire ([19:43](#)):

This has been a conversation with Jennifer Dirmeyer. She is the managing director and chief accreditation officer of the Workforce Talent Educators Association. Jen, thank you so much for being with us.

Jen Dirmeyer ([19:57](#)):

Thanks so much, Jason. It's been a blast.

Jason Altmire ([20:03](#)):

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