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Why Is Building a Skills-First Learning System Suddenly A Conundrum?

Just when we were making visible progress to align postsecondary learning to workforce objectives, AI has challenged the paradigm. What is a skill? How could a university be relevant in a post-artificial generative intelligence future intelligence state where a machine can accomplish any intellectual task that a human can? Kathleen deLaski will share insights from her new book “Who Needs College, Anymore?,” which traces the rise and fall of the reputation of the university degree and now the rise of skills-based learning and hiring.

She will provide examples of how, in the US, some colleges are moving toward a “step-ladder” approach, so that learners can access an agile system with many short-term credentials and opportunities to pivot to new sectors. With talent shortages, universities and employers are designing “micro-pathways,” to shortcut the length and generality of most degree programs. Labor market data is informing a regional approach to job training, and providing useful skill requirements to design into micro-credentials. It is informing a host of career navigation tools built to provide agency for consumers.

But, amid this progress, it is also dawning on the field that AI clouds the usefulness of retrospective data and portends a potential apocalypse for entry level knowledge workers. Certainly, AI foretells the age of unbundled degrees, so we can better target the skills we need in a timely manner. But does it also suggest a new premium on higher order thinking, which was the original point of a liberal arts degree?