

49 Employer-Driven Universities with Innovative Solutions for Adult Learners



In Episode 49 of Ready for Work, we continue our series of FRED Talks from the ACT Workforce Summit. Tracy Robinson from the University of Memphis shares her experience working with adult learners and the challenges they face in balancing education with other life responsibilities. The University of Memphis has made significant changes to accommodate adult learners, just in time for employer giant FedEx to seek the university's help. It's a successful model that the University replicated with the City of Memphis, a regional hospital chain, and Nike, among others.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 48



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Transcript of Episode 49

[Opening Jingle and Music]

Tracy: We had some conversations and they were hard conversations. It really began to make us think differently about adult learners. We can fit into their world as opposed to them fitting into ours. Now, it kind of came to a full circle moment.

Jasen: Coming up on episode 49, Tracy Robinson from the University of Memphis joins us from the FRED Talks stage for insights on Employer-Driven Universities with Innovative Solutions for Adult Learners

[Podcast Open] Ready for Work is a podcast from A-C-T! spotlighting excellence and innovation, throughout the workforce ecosystem! Jason Jones hosts this journey, with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential.

[Jingle] Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: When we think of workforce development in higher education, we typically think of two-year community colleges. Employer-facing workforce solutions are not as common at four-year colleges and universities as often as community colleges. That is not the case in the Memphis, Tennessee region.

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Tracy: Good morning everyone. I am Tracy Robinson. I am director of professional and continuing education at the University of Memphis. We're just down the street, I think this way. About three hours. over in West Tennessee. So, so happy to be here. this morning. This is a picture of our campus. I invite you all to come and see us. I have been at the university for 23 years and have had the opportunity to do a lot of great work. I think I'm in the best period of work, right now. And I'll tell you a little bit about that this morning.

So yesterday in the opening session, Jane Oates mentioned something about finding meaning in your work. And so, for me, that meaning has come from working with adult learners. For the majority of my 23 years at the university of Memphis, and early in my career, I was an academic advisor, and I got to sit across from students, mostly adult learners, as they were trying to figure out how to fit school into their life.

As we talked about how they schedule their classes, how they fit all of the things that they need to do for education and all the other things in their life. It became more and more apparent to me how difficult that was. We were asking them to fit into our world and the way that we had always done things in higher education.

Luckily, with the support of a very great boss and some innovative thinkers on our campus, we were able to slowly start changing things. some of those things we started with, we had credit for prior learning on our campus for a very long time, but it was it was a disjointed system. Not many students were using that credit for prior learning of courses.

That opportunity for our students to demonstrate their learning, that has taken place outside of our classrooms through workplace training, through certifications, through other experiences, really meaningful experiences that deserve academic credit. So, we kind of, with the help of a great partner in CAEL, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning revamped our credit for prior learning programs.

We realized also doing 15-week sessions doesn't always work for everybody either. So, looking at changing things into seven week sessions, starting to offer online, not just online classes, but online degrees, began to change the culture on our campus and began to change the way we were serving our students.

In 2018, we got a knock on the door from one of the largest employers in our city. Fedex. You might have heard of that little small logistic company, headquartered in Memphis. and they were at a crisis. What felt like a crisis to them, which was that in their hubs, the folks throwing the boxes, working very late shifts overnight, very often were turning over. Employee turnover was almost at 100%. and they began to really think about what's going on here.

What can we do differently? They also at the same time, looked at their tuition assistance program and realized that the uptake of that was in the single digits. Less than 5% of their employees were taking advantage of tuition assistance. And so, the knock on the door came to us, honestly. It went to somebody else on campus. It took them about three different offices to actually get to us, but we answered the door.

We had some conversations and they were hard conversations. It really began to make us think differently about how adult learners can fit into. We can fit into their world as opposed to them fitting into ours. And we realized all of those changes that we had begun to make, those credit for prior learning changes, those online degrees. Now, it kind of came to a full circle moment.

We didn't know that's what we were doing at the time, but all that work was paying off. And so, we launched a partnership with Fedex in 2018. We did it in six months. I don't know how many of you come from the higher ed space. Raise your hand. Have you ever done anything brand new and launched it in six months?

There were a lot of late nights. There are some hard conversations. And there were there were changes that we made on both sides. We made changes. Fedex made changes as we really talked about the barriers that their employees were facing. One of the first ones is when you're asking hourly employees to up front a full semester of tuition and then get reimbursed for it later.

That just doesn't work. We changed to a direct to bill system. So now we direct bill Fedex. Employees don't have to pay anything up front. Worked better for them. Now they get one bill from us with a whole lot of employees instead of a whole lot of employees sending them individual bills. It's it. Remove that barrier for the employee.

We also looked at, they have pretty extensive training program. We said, hey, we'd like to take a look at that. We'd like to evaluate that for credit. We'd like to make this a seamless process for the employees so that they could hand over, that training, a transcript. We can tell them how much that credit may be worth if they've got certifications or licenses.

They've done outside of your work. Hey, like the NCRC credential, like so many others. Let's make sure they know how that will relate to academic credit. So, we really developed this partnership that is a what feels like a very true joint partnership. We made changes. They made changes. We now, we started in their first hub.

They also said this needs to be an online program exclusively. And we're in their orientations every new employee orientation, we have somebody, they're there on our campus doing recruiting events. We have a brand that we put together for them so that there's ownership. This is truly a way for us to work together differently and serving everybody in a different way and a better way.

So that partnership has led the way to others. Now you'll see, we also have a program with our city of Memphis, employees called COMPETE. Everything has an acronym. There's a lot of little words under there. That's what we do in higher ed. We also have Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, one of our largest regional medical facilities in the Memphis area. We have a program with them. We also have, Nike online for every one of them has their own brand, their own name. We have an entire team that supports these individuals from the time that they express interest all the way through until they are admitted, till they're advised, till they graduate. We call it a concierge approach because we want to be their people.

We want to help them with whatever they need. All of these are completely online programs. We have other partnerships, but these are the ones that that we have. in my division as well. All of

these include Noncredit as well as credit programs. and we're also part of a national network called Ed Stride.

So, we are really excited about where this is going, what we can do, this is why we do it. These faces at graduation, these smiles, these many, we have hundreds of their employees and our classes. We're now in every hub across the country with Fedex. This is a nationwide program for us. These employees are not only finishing credentials. Again, noncredit or credit, but they're getting upskilled, they're getting promotions.

They're going into advanced degrees with us at the university and others. It's really a win-win. I don't want to say it was easy and it's not. And it takes staff to put this together. But when it's a true partnership and the conversations you're willing to have, are the hard ones, and the easy ones. It can be done.

So, I will leave you with just a little encouragement to just do it as our Nike partner often says, when that phone call comes or the knock on the door, whether it's a student, whether it's a community partner, whether it's an employer, answer the door. Have the conversation. You never know where it will lead. Thank you all. I appreciate the time.

Jasen: We'll feature more FRED Talkers from the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville on upcoming episodes of Ready for Work. Registration is open for the 2024 Workforce Summit and we hope you'll join us in Mid Town Atlanta, October 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. Check out the speaker lineup and more at [A C T dot org slash workforce summit](https://act.org/workforce-summit).

We are excited to partner with Opportunity at Work for the 2024 Workforce Summit! We invite you to share success stories and testimonials from your working learner STARs and champions throughout your workforce ecosystem. These stories will be celebrated at the Summit in Atlanta and beyond, in collaboration with Opportunity at Work. We'll also feature a Poster Exhibition highlighting successful Work Ready Communities. To learn more, please reach out to us via email to [wrc at act dot org](mailto:wrc@act.org).

[Podcast Closing and Jingle] Thanks for listening to Ready for Work, from A C T, your partner in Workforce Solutions and Work Ready Communities. [Subscribe in your favorite app, or learn more at A C T dot org, slash, ready for work podcast.](#)



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