A Conversation with Coursera's Marni Baker Stein

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Introduction

Coursera partners with universities and companies to offer online learning to individuals and organizations throughout the world. Coursera provides a range of learning opportunities—from hands-on projects and courses to job-ready certificates and degree programs. Learners complete online bachelor's and master's degrees or graduate-level certificates in subjects such as data science, business, computer science, information technology, language learning, health, personal development, physical science and engineering, social sciences, arts and humanities, and math and logic. Coursera offers learners access to community support resources for guidance on maximizing the community experience. These resources cover topics such as coursework and learner and career support. Many topics also align with active groups, which helps members of the community to find others who share their interests.

This interview with Marni Baker Stein, chief content officer at Coursera, was edited for length and clarity.

What is the nature of learn and earn at Coursera?

We offer introductory professional certificates that give learners the chance to try something new and potentially acquire new skills. In the courses created by companies, job tasks are embedded in the course work, and companies commit to hiring those who complete the course. The first certificate offered was a Google IT [Support Professional Certificate].

These asynchronous courses are free to take; a charge comes only if you need a completion certificate or want to take the assessment. You don't need to hold a degree or have a career before taking these courses, and you can try several before committing to complete any. The target audience is those who haven't started or completed a degree—career starters and career switchers.

In Coursera's Career Academy programs, courses are packaged into skill sets that increase employability and opportunities for promotion. We help companies help their employees grow and thrive by developing the skills needed in that organization. Coursera currently offers about 35 certificates in Career Academy programs.

Our programs can lead learners down a new path, sometimes building the necessary efficacy to pursue a degree. One in four professional certificate completers get[s] a new job, according to Coursera's *2023 Learner Outcomes Report*. Folks need to learn skills that they can use immediately, while recognizing that they are just getting started. With the world changing faster than ever, they will need to learn again.

What needs to happen next to improve opportunities for lower-income learners?

Since 2020, we have started working with universities who will give credit for content learned through our certificate programs. We need universities to get comfortable with the fact that though they didn't teach it, a student may still know it—and to give credit so that these learners can get high-quality credentials.

Coursera is working on pathways. We're encouraging universities to offer open content or professional certificates that stacks into degrees or that enables performance-based admission into degrees. Degrees need to change to work for more people, and pathways like these—paired with affordable tuition—can play a big role.

What are the particular challenges faced by lower-income learners?

One challenge is that employers typically look to traditional college graduates from top universities when hiring. But there are other potential employees out there developing the skills companies need. In fact, adult learners know how to work, how to think, and how to work together. One of the challenges, of course, is bringing learners and employers together. We have 129-plus million learners and thousands of employers on the platform. How can we connect them?

Moreover, companies need to give employees time and money to learn on the job. Time is the commodity. And learners need to earn while they learn.

Coursera Program Overview

Coursera partners with more than 300 leading universities and companies to bring flexible, affordable, job-relevant online learning to individuals and organizations worldwide. Coursera works with over 100 nonprofit and community partners to provide free education to underserved communities around the world, including refugees, veterans, people who are impacted by the criminal justice system, and underserved high school students.