THOUGHT LEADER FORUM

Higher Education

No doubt, it's an unusual time in education. Historically, when the economy is struggling, demand for higher education soars. People who can't find jobs often opt to pursue a degree or workforce training until the labor market heats up.

These days, however, with the economy humming and employers hiring, enrollment at colleges and universities has held steady — even as higher education costs continue to rise.

Another interesting development in higher education: the growth of partnerships between higher education and industry. And then there's the contributions of tech schools, coding academies and other alternative pathways to advanced training and careers.

The Portland Business Journal recently gathered thought leaders in education to discuss these developments and others designed to provide students with the skills that Oregon employers need.

In the room were Naomi Haslitt, partner with Miller Nash; Oregon State University College of Business Dean Mitzi Montoya; and Erik Gross, co-founder of the Tech Academy.

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THE PANELISTS

DR. MITZI MONTOYA
Sara Hart Kimball Dean
of the College of Business at
Oregon State University

Dr. Mitzi Montoya became the Sara Hart Kimball Dean of the College of Business at Oregon State University in August 2015. She is responsible for leadership of the college, which emphasizes entrepreneurship, analytics and ethics in all academic programs. The college serves more than 4,000 students in undergraduate and graduate business majors and minors.

ERIK GROSS
Co-Founder of The Tech Academy

The Tech Academy is an award-winning, licensed career school that trains students in computer programming and web development.

Erik has been working in technology since the 1980s. As a nuclear reactor operator and teacher in the Navy, he mastered a multitude of technologies. His years of experience as a senior-level software developer were key to the development of The Tech Academy's boot camps. In his role as Co-Founder of The Tech Academy, Erik assists in curriculum development, public relationships and technical advice.

NAOMI HASLITT
Partner, Miller Nash
Graham & Dunn LLP

Naomi advises public and private higher education institutions and public school districts on employment, accommodation issues arising under state and federal law, student, and other federal and state compliance issues. In addition to educational institutions, she defends employers in all areas of employment and labor law. She regularly counsels employers on day-to-day personnel issues and provides training to managers and employers. Naomi's practice focuses on defending claims for employment discrimination, disability discrimination and accommodation, wrongful discharge, and wage and hour, as well as other tort claims, in litigation and administrative agency proceedings.

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ERICA HEARTQUIST: What are some of the greatest challenges facing education today?

MITZI MONTOYA: Access. Relative to inflation, the cost of higher education has tremendously increased as Oregon has reduced its support for the public universities. As a result, cost is definitely a barrier for many families — especially moderate- to low-income families.

ERIK GROSS: In the area that we work in, which is very often people in their career transition, or trying to learn while they're working, that itself is also tremendous fear: "how do I maintain a family or my other obligations while I'm learning?" — so we and many other organizations have become very flexible in how we deliver education. So it puts the burden of responsibility for the student outcomes even more on the institution. We have to serve that population and it's a different model. You have people with different schedules and different rates of learning. Everything no longer starts and ends at the same time. Now, obviously, you're seeing more creative programs. We have to serve that population. And it's a different model. We call it varied access.

NAOMI HASLITT: A significant challenge that we have observed is educational institutions being able to nimbly conduct and adjust the work of the institution and its programs to meet the often changing needs of students and the challenges that the students may face while also navigating increasing and sometimes shifting compliance and other legal requirements.

MONTOYA: We need to be thinking about different formats, not just flexibility of time of day, but different ways to credential. That's a significant change for universities. We need to figure out how to create access to education in the form of microcredentials - and then allow a continued and smooth pathway to the pursuit of additional or stackable credentials. And we have to do a better job partnering across institutions to make transfer easier.

GROSS: Have you attempted any partnerships with any coding schools or schools that are alternative and different learning institutions, has Oregon State gone down that route?

MONTOYA: We have partnerships with several community colleges and with academies and camps. These partnerships work best when the faculty collaborate on design so students and credits transfer easily.

HASLITT: We have seen growth in public-private partnerships. It can be challenging though, to navigate the differences in traditional structure and regulatory obligations of public entities and marrying those with the private model. But when successful, these types of projects and programs seem to maximize institutions' ability to be responsive to students needs and provide "value add" programs. Making it work requires flexibility and creativity on both sides.

MONTOYA: In higher education, we see a growing number of public-private partnerships for services. So, think residential or dining or health services. It's not uncommon to see a public-private partnership there in higher education. The challenge in doing these deals is usually that public and private entities have different risk appetites, with the private sector having a much higher risk appetite than the public sector. But we are seeing new creative partnerships all the time.

GROSS: We have a partnership with Concordia University, and it's gone very well. But there's this impedance mismatch - like how easily or difficult things flow on either side. The thing that has been a complete eye-opener, is the degree to which higher education seems to have these legal and state mandated walls, regulations and requirements that are stunning to watch. How do they even get work done?

MONTOYA: We have a partnership with Young Entrepreneurs Business Week (YEBW), a non-profit that serves and mentors hundreds of high school students from all over the state. They host camps on campus that give students hands-on learning and training in business and entrepreneurship, and we award OSU credit to camp completers. We just recently received a grant that will provide even more support for low-income students who attend our summer camp and go on to enroll at OSU. It's a great example of how we have been able to partner with an organization who shares in our mission.

GROSS: Essentially then, the public would view you guys as an extension of the state and then in comes the whole legislative body and its ability to dictate how you are and how you do things. I am really excited to see these things happening, the partnerships between public and private. But you're right, there's a world of difference between those two areas and it's beautiful when they can work together, cooperate and produce some synergy; some hybrid thing. But it's not easy.

HEARTQUIST: Studies show that the demands for new workforce preparation and the makeup of that workforce are changing rapidly and at a rate most higher education institutions cannot match. What can colleges and universities do to create alignment between employment and education?

MONTOYA: Part of the challenge for higher education is that we don't change quickly. And, the problem has become amplified in recent years as the pace of change in industry and technology is accelerating. At the same time, the lifecycle of companies has significantly shortened. I think what you have to do in higher ed is you have to build flexible, co-curricular experiences that run alongside curriculum. Experiences that work in tandem with the classroom experience to prepare students for the workforce — skills like leadership, communication, professionalism, and intercultural fluency. Optimally, these co-curricular experiences are required because it's the best and the brightest who tend to opt in to these things. Yet, those who need these experiences the most and who have the most to gain from them, but who don't know any better, won't participate unless required.

So, in the ideal world you create a flexible structure that provides a degree while also developing experiences that can readily and directly respond to workforce needs. In the OSU College of Business, we have something called the Blueprint model, for example, which was designed to do just that and is very uncommon. It's a co-curricular spine that runs alongside our business degree. And inside it, there's a lot of professional development, interaction with industry and career and major exploration. The key is partnering with industry. Industry is getting much more demanding about what they expect from higher education and from recent graduates. Companies need to engage and partner with us if they want to drive change. And higher education institutions need to embrace those partnerships and create structures that allow for the blurring of boundaries so that industry can be part of the educational process.

In my experience, as it has gotten harder for firms to hire, the tighter the labor market, the more industry is receptive to engaging with higher education — they're motivated to get access to a strong talent pipeline.

HASLITT: From a personal perspective, the skills that I found imperative in my profession have changed over time during my career. Part of the value of the higher education that I received was providing tools to understand and adapt the learned skills to different operating environments and needs of clients. Teaching students to become life-long learners and to be flexible in the face of change — particularly in light of the seemingly rapid pace of change in work environments and expectations that we are experiencing currently — is a critical component of obtaining a degree.

MONTOYA: So that's a really great point. I think we have to embed much more experiential learning into the curriculum, because the more you work on messy problems, projects without a clear answer, you have to discover the questions to ask that will allow you to reach a solution. This

kind of experience teaches students flexibility, adaptability and resilience. And that's very different from black and white answers in the back of the book. We know we're educating for a future where we don't know what the jobs are going to look like. So we have to teach students how to learn. Embedding real applied project experience into the classroom is good for the faculty, because it keeps them current and it's great for the students. It's also great for the companies that are getting fresh eyes on problems. Baking experiential learning into the curriculum takes work because higher education hasn't historically approached teaching this way. It's also another reason for higher education to partner with companies.

HASLITT: There is a common perception that legal issues should just have a straightforward answer that can be looked up in a legal resource; to the contrary, much of the work is problem-solving.   Having an eye toward that skill as a fundamental or building block in post-secondary education is so important. In most fields, if a person isn't comfortable with identifying issues and creative solutions, as opposed to expecting "black-and-white" or "yes and no" solutions it is going to be challenging to advance and stay relevant in the role. The latter can happen but seems to be the exception, not the rule.

GROSS: One of the things I appreciate seeing here is the commonality of the world of higher education, these for-profit essentially technical trade schools. It's really heartening to hear this acknowledgement and willingness to grasp that fundamental importance of, you've got to get your hands dirty and you have to have a practical real-world problem. We have it easy. We have this little microcosm of, "Give us four to six months of intensive time, you're not really going to be learning anything else and you're just going to be learning to code." We've got this captured, tightly constrained time period.

And we get to do that. We get to give them real-world projects and gradually take off the training wheels and make them confront coming up with their own ideas. We know it works well and it's a great model. But we also acknowledge what we're missing. Because it's a four to six-month process, we're missing so much that the person is going to have to learn on their own down the line, and higher education of course can give that to them. But higher ed has some difficulties with that real-world piece and it's so neat to see that.

I have this vision of hybrid degree programs where you can integrate both well, but it's tough. And, to your acknowledgement, the pace of change is tough. It's especially tough in technology. For a web developer for instance, the core five or six technologies used for that position change every three to six months. So how do you teach someone enough of the fundamentals that when they graduate a year or two down the line, they can actually navigate it?

MONTOYA: To your point, our assumption is that the software may change before they even graduate. We have to teach state of the art techniques and tools, but our real goal is to teach them to learn.

HASLITT: Yes, to create lifetime learners as opposed to, "This is what you got, and this is where you are today."

MONTOYA: It doesn't matter what it is today, it's going to look different tomorrow. It's fascinating. I would say this generation is much more receptive to needing to become lifelong learners because they've grown up with, "this is version 7.0, or whatever, and next week will be version 8.0." What higher education can do for students is reduce the fear of the unknown while enhancing the ability to recognize, "Hey, I know how to tackle this problem because I know how to solve problems in general."

GROSS: Obviously, to be able to do that, they're going to learn the abstract concept of, "What is a blank?" Okay, sure. Maybe they don't know which version of "blank" it'll be when they graduate, but to understand the concept of what that tool is and the instances which it might be needed is key. If you teach people how to learn and give them a higher level conscious of things, they can do it.

HASLITT: As you are working with people coming to your institutions for a second career, have you noted any particular programmatic impacts and successful strategies or programs in that context?

MONTOYA: Universities used to be most responsive to the needs of 17- and 18-year-olds who are seeking a residential experience. But, our world has changed. While we still have recent high school graduates, of course, we are now seeing many students who are in their 20's, 30's or more who have never

been to a college or university before, or they have attended community colleges and other educational institutions. This change in student demographics has required a lot of adaptation on the part of universities. A major part of that adaptation has been to adjust our format, offering hybrid and online degrees, as well as adaptive learning courses, where students complete the material at their own pace.

GROSS: What we're seeing on the coding boot camp end of things is that it's a different mindset for the 35 to 55-year-old person. We see people between 18 and 25 who have just finished high school and maybe some community college. And then we have a whole segment sometimes 35 to 55 years old and sometimes older. And as they start getting to be 40 or 45 years old, and they walk in the door to a bootcamp, honestly a lot of times they're motivated by fear. It's the fear of "I have got to

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do something or I'm never going to have that retirement" or whatever it is. But they've also got a whole sense of fear about learning coding and not having grown up as a digital native. So it's one of the challenges we have. It's painting that picture of "Don't worry about that part. Learn about being adept at problem solving in the environment you're in and navigating that. Frankly, I'm trying to build a school to help create that culture. That's part of what we see is there is a lot of fear. So, that's part of our job is to show them the data and help alleviate that fear. There's also the fear of switching careers and taking a pay cut. Luckily, my business partner Jack and I picked a sector to work in where the introductory wages are quite good. Our graduates make an average salary of $60,000 a year when they finish.

MONTOYA: Fear is certainly a factor, and part of that is driven by cost. When a student enrolls in college, the family is investing, or the individual is investing or maybe they're borrowing and they are worried about making the right choices.

It's a fair concern. And it's why states need to support its public universities. Our companies need educated workers and we want them to be able to hire qualified Oregonians rather than have to import talent from elsewhere.

HEARTQUIST: Student loan debt has reached an all-time high of $1.4 trillion. The average student loan balance now exceeds $34,000. What actions can institutions take to help address student debt?

MONTOYA: Oregon State University's average debt is lower than the national average. It's $25,000. I think we all need to do our part to support financial literacy education and financial planning. In my opinion, that education should start in K-12, getting parents and students involved early. We need to educate people about the importance of education to their personal earning potential and the need to save for college. People don't need to go to elite private schools to get a good job. The research clearly shows that it doesn't matter where you go. Students should go where they can afford and make decisions based on the ability of the school to prepare them for a career. And obviously higher ed has to continue to do the best we can to manage

costs. But we also need our state to reinvest. When we reduce public funding for higher ed, we disproportionately affect lower income families. When you go all the way back to the beginning of the formation and foundation of land grant institutions, like OSU, the intent was to create access to people who previously had not had access to education. And that's still what it should be. But, as we disinvest in public higher ed, we are saying only those who can afford it get to go to college.

GROSS: This is near and dear to my heart and obviously – we're a for-profit institution and a technical trade school. But at the end of the day, I'm human and I care about people a lot. This is a scenario of great frustration for us. And this is an issue we think about as well. How do you get the word out and how do you make it financially accessible? - obviously, you have to be able to keep the place there. So we are partnering with several anti-gang task force groups and religious institutions that are trying to serve our underrepresented populations to provide scholarships and get people in, but at the end of the day that might help a handful of people. We're trying also to figure out how to get education technology out to the masses. I don't even know that I have a perfect solution for this, but I do care about it and we're trying to figure out - "What can we do to still keep the business alive, but still open those doors to a lot more people?" We aren't that expensive, but it's an impossible amount of money for some people. So we are looking for solutions.

HASLITT: Student debt and the financial stress that goes with that presents can show up in legal challenges — at times driven by the student as a consumer. And financial stress is often in the background of many of the student issues on which we advise. Early identification of a career path following a path with intentionality may alleviate some of the stress but there is fear and uncertainty when life events — planned or unplanned — cause a student to deviate from their expectations.

Early interventions and communication of information and available resources for students when they're navigating those challenges, whether that be financial aid or academic progress assistance, seems to be the most effective in avoiding an adversarial situation (and particularly, legal ones) down the road.

MONTOYA: We do know though, with financial

literacy, you can plan a pathway through college and graduate with a reasonable amount of debt and a job that shows a great return on the investment in a degree.

This is important because higher student debt tends to lead to delays in major purchases - whether that's a home or a car. Research also shows that as student debt has gone up, fewer young people are starting companies, which is bad, because new business starts are the driver of our economy. Also, as students feel financial pressure it leads to mental health challenges. Students self-report anxiety and stress about finances which interferes with their ability to be successful.

GROSS: I really appreciate that you circled back around to the idea of the education piece, even early K through 12. You're right. It's this whole process of getting someone to be able to stand on their own two feet as an adult navigating the world with finance education early on. These things are important and are high stakes. So I think it's something really worth discussing and actually making changes on.

HEARTQUIST: How do you promote civility and respectful political discourse on school campuses and how can organizations advance equity and inclusion successfully?

HASLITT: It seems that in the time that we exist in right now, on both online and traditional physical campuses, there's a challenge of finding a place where academic institutions can bring people together to have discussions about topics about which they have very different, and possibly conflicting, viewpoints. Providing opportunities for authentic engagement between students and the community through structured forums for dialogue can really advance and promote that important role that higher education institutions have always occupied – a place for discourse and learning from our professors and peers.

GROSS: Obviously, I'm a middle-aged white guy. I'm Mr. Average in terms of what the technology industry is. I was never really aware of that. I don't care if you're black, yellow, green; male or female. I don't care. If you're a nice person, you're a nice person.

But there is a legitimate problem in tech and I gradually became more and more aware of that as we built this school. And there are some really brave, awesome, wonderful people trying these very cool things in this

area. PDX Women in Tech for example; they're fantastic. I can tell you even for somebody that, I was decently self-aware of being pretty open about considering other people's viewpoints, I went to a Women in Tech conference where I was one of maybe 10 guys in a room of 700 women. It was actually an intensely emotional experience to go through. It was painful. It hurt to see what can happen in some of these environments that people are in when all they're really trying to do is show up, do a job and be part of a team. So, my intention and passion along the equity line grew quite a bit from that experience. I think that one of the beautiful things about technology, is when it's still a meritocracy. "Can you do the job well? Great. If you can't, sorry, study up and do a better job." And that should be the only thing that matters and when it isn't – that's not okay. So how do you approach it? How do you change it? We can reach out to these communities and let them know, "Listen, you're welcome. Come in," but we also need to make sure that once they're in the educational process that we're doing something about it.

We have these weekly Tech Talks every Friday afternoon. We bring in someone from some industry, and they speak to all our students in the world – we broadcast it all over - and we just want people to be exposed to different viewpoints of technology. We started having a lot more focus on inclusion and representation and not just looking at the state of what this industry is but doing something about it. Prejudice is real. It's there. So at the most basic form we try to let people know, "Listen, you are going into an area and industry where this is a concern. And it's a legitimate concern. Don't be part of the problem. Be welcoming, open and nice."

It's easy to say and hard to do. You have to have these kinds of conversations about it.

MONTOYA: The very purpose of a university is to facilitate free and open exchange of ideas that lead to the creation of new knowledge. A great advantage that universities have is that we are in a questioning environment. We are expected to think critically about our world.

The truth is, people and institutions have bias. So, we need to start by recognizing the existence of bias. Oregon is not very diverse, relative to other parts of the US. And so it is therefore understandable that plenty of folks have limited interaction with people who are different from themselves. The idea of unconscious bias is that you may be unaware or unintentionally doing or saying things that negatively affect others. That means you have to work harder - you have to talk about diversity and inclusion, and you have to intentionally expose yourself to diversity. In the College of Business, we integrate this into our curriculum. We also talk about the ways diverse teams makes for better products, better solutions, better run companies, better communities and stronger economies.

At OSU, we have amazing cultural centers that celebrate different cultures and welcome all people. And we openly address issues and challenges.

Part of our educational responsibility is educate our students on how to have civil discourse in a way that allows people to make mistakes. It is a long process – one that's never complete – to become aware of our biases, to recognize privilege and power differentials, and to advance our cultural competency. Along the way, we are bound to make mistakes. We need to be able to learn from those mistakes – to recognize them, reflect on them and change our behavior.

In higher education, we must be able to take a hard look at our own work and be honest with ourselves about where we're failing – and then commit to take action. That includes everything from hiring so our faculty looks like our student body to taking a culturally responsive approach to curriculum,

to thinking about the fact that you have to be willing to own your own bias and hold yourself accountable to addressing it.

HASLITT: It seems that you are really talking about system change — an examination of whether the actual systems in place are inclusive and not perpetuating an implicit or unconscious bias, and ultimately designing systems that can promote equity among students.

MONTOYA: Actually, a lot of times, this topic comes up and people are worried – worried that they'll say the wrong thing and be labeled as a racist or misogynist or something similar. I think that's actually really important that people be allowed to ask questions on both sides of an issue, and then engage in facilitated, respectful dialogue. This sort of dialogue is more common on university campuses than in the general public because at universities, there's an understanding that the purpose of education is to learn, so there's more open discussion.

HASLITT: It interesting because often at higher education institutions, students are in a space where provocative issues and conversations may occur, whereas often outside of the educational environment, people self-segregate and avoid conversations and topics that may not always be comfortable for the participants.

HEARTQUIST: How do educational institutions reinforce the communities trusted academic and institutional integrity, for example, after the recent college admissions scandal?

MONTOYA: If you look at the schools involved, you will see that it was the elite universities, as opposed to the public land grant universities. It is a great reminder of the unintended consequences of decisions. For example, some people don't realize that the reasons many of the popular university rankings and college rankings were created was to sell newspapers. That led to an unintended behavior of some people trying to impress each other based on where they or their kids went to college. As a reminder, the reason land grant universities were originally founded was to create access to higher education, and ideally affordable and excellent education. We all have to remember that what we're trying to do is create opportunity for people to better themselves through new knowledge, and through contribution to our communities, which means our local economy. That is what great state institutions do, and it's what all education should do. So, this idea of impressing each other with credentials is consumerism run amuck. If anything, I think this terrible scandal should increase our trust in universities like OSU.

HASLITT: When there is a "scandal" that reaches that level of media attention and public interest that we have seen relating to recent college admissions, it is an issue that all institutions have to work through regardless of whether they have any involvement or institutional concerns in the given area. When issues like this happen, and we've seen it now, legislatures step in and that usually creates additional compliance requirements for the institution — and we've seen that in response to this current situation in other states. And this often can necessitate reallocation of resources to administrative functions for institutions, at least in the short term.

GROSS: Watching this happen, it didn't at all change my trust or point of view about higher education. I'm going to be very precise about how I say this. This has always happened; the elite have always found a way to do things like this. And they do it precisely for the reason that was mentioned. It's for the diploma and that label rather than being justifiably proud of having gone through a rigorous course of education. Instead of, "That's the work I did and I'm proud of it and proud to put that on the wall," it's about pedigree.

MONTOYA: Part of the problem is that many schools measure themselves more by who they exclude than who they include, and that exclusivity is what drives that behavior. So, anytime you have an exclusive or scarce good, it creates incentives to game the system in order to gain access to that exclusive good. Everybody is to blame for this.

HASLITT: This is reinforcing the academic and institutional integrity of our schools should really be more broadly focused to our community and society instead of just focusing solely on, "Okay, what legislation are we going to pass now?" and "How is this institution going to address this issue?" Really, it goes to a larger and broader discussion and recognition that we all are responsible for creating a system that we want to both have our community benefit from, and then ultimately, that we want to benefit from by having the best and brightest come out of it.

MONTOYA: Agreed. The integrity of our universities matters. We have a responsibility to serve the state of Oregon and create access to opportunity.

HASLITT: But, it's clear that you do that with the intentionality of creating a quality product for both the students that are coming in to the institutions and the workforce that is receiving your graduates.

GROSS: The first bootcamp came out in the summer of 2012 in San Francisco. This year, we're going to be up to about 40,000 graduates a year from coding boot camps. What's really cool is that during the same time period, the universities and colleges went up to 60,000 graduates a year from 40,000. And this is an indication of the fact that they see the demand. The single biggest driver is technology.

MONTOYA: And I would say it's not unique to coding. Coding is the most recent example of a skill where there's a gap. In many ways, it's not unlike what we saw in other trades – there was a gap and it was not being filled by higher ed. Some would say that universities should train on all sorts of skills. I would say, no, that's not our role. That's why technical and trade schools play important roles in the education system.

HASLITT: It is invigorating to practice law and help our higher education institutions navigate the multi-faceted challenges and issues that you are all dealing with on a day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year basis. The issues are often so connected – promoting access relates directly to equity and inclusion which relates to the educational product that is being provided to students.

GROSS: There is a synergistic system here. Everything we all brought up has ramifications on or is influenced by almost all the other things brought up. And so, to have the opportunity to look at things as a whole is really, really valuable. I think it's incredibly valuable for the readers as well.

MONTOYA: When you think about who's here and talking about very different types of educational models, I think one of the things that we need to make sure that we create is the ability to be flexible and responsive to a changing reality. That's necessary inside of the university, but, some of our inability to be responsive to the market is due to policy constraint. We lack a clear connection between economic development and education policy. That is unfortunate. We know companies need educated workers. We know they will hire them elsewhere if we don't produce them. And education is a product that we can export which generates income for the state and is a good thing for all of us.

The essence of this conversation is around the need to be responsible, flexible and adaptive for students. Higher ed needs to do the same.