

# Prospectus for the Global Education Leadership Commons

## Redesigning Education through a Collaboration of the Willing

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### Introduction

This document evangelizes the “**Education Leadership Commons**” in which leaders with a vision for redesigning education may soon be able to collaborate and act together. Initially taking the form of TED-like “summit” events and leadership “think-tank” events, the ELC’s ultimate purpose is to catalyze and sustain a scale-up of accredited postsecondary degrees and certificates on a cost basis mutually affordable to education providers and education’s external investors – students/families, governments, donors, employers, and suppliers. **Completions** (accredited postsecondary degrees and certificates and other accredited credentials that underpin them) are a common good of significant economic value to all vested parties. Indeed, the phrase “mutually affordable to education providers and education’s external investors” reflects the affordability anxieties of students/families and governments in the current marketplace in which accredited completions are earned, granted, and rewarded. If a greater proportion of the population is to be educated to higher levels, then the “completions marketplace” must become more responsive not only to the affordability challenges facing students and governments as buyers, but also to the affordability (budget) challenges facing education providers.

Participants in an ELC would have to call upon their leadership experiences with, and commitments to, the common good of accredited completions, while suspending, for purposes of collaboration, the human tendency to act parochially. If we think globally together while acting only locally, then the results of our local actions are not likely to aggregate into completions at the scale and mutual affordability needed to save the world. At the most recent triennial meeting of the International Association of University Presidents, Association President Michael Adams put this idea in the timely but historical words of H.G. Wells from 1920: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” Justifications for such urgency are included here. They point to the need for an economic governance mechanism – the eventual role of the ELC – to integrate and amplify local actions among peers in order to increase and sustain completions at every level of geopolitical educational attainment. Initial ELC programming will accordingly bring together leaders from all the groups vested in completions to:

1. Build a consensus understanding of the structural barriers to scaling up the proportion of completions in the adult population while simultaneously assuring their affordability to all involved parties, especially to the needy, underprepared students whose ranks will have to increase as a proportion of the life-long learning pipeline and to the education providers and governments that support them.

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\* This prospectus draws heavily on the author’s two most recent EDUCAUSE publications: 1) Facing Education’s Mounting Challenges with Collaboration and IT, *ECAR Research Bulletin 5, 2011*, and 2) Waste Not the Learning Productivity Crisis: Transforming Educational Opportunity into Educational Assurance, *EDUCAUSE Review 45, no. 1 (January/February 2010)*, *Web Bonus*. (The author’s brief bio is available to the end of this document.)

2. Design a nonprofit, non-governmental economic governance organization for virally expanding the completions marketplace by doing for completions as a common good what the *Internet Society* has done and continues to do for the “global network of networks” as a common good and an engine of new social and economic wealth.
3. Transition the ELC, as appropriate, into an Internet Society-like economic governance organization, fleshing out its start-up strategy, working groups, educational peer groupings, geopolitical peer groupings, and related media and outreach events.

SunGard Higher Education, the author’s employer, is contributing leadership and planning support for the ELC as part of the company’s “belief in the power of the community” – in the words of CEO Ron Lang. If the ELC achieves lift off and ultimately succeeds, then it will have become a nonprofit, non-governmental economic governance organization for a more nimble, scalable, and affordable completions marketplace. Of necessity and by intent, the ELC is now an embryonic “movement” which is being designed to evolve into an “ecumenical” non-commercial, 501(C)(3) organization to serve not only the shared interests of SGHE and its clients, partners, and investors, but the common interests of all economic beneficiaries of postsecondary completions as a common good.

### **Adapting the Model of the Internet Society**

The nonprofit, non-governmental Internet Society does not own or control the Internet. Indeed, as a common good the Internet is not wholly owned or controlled, but instead is openly accessible to all network traffic under “rules of the road” – the principle that all people and organizations are free to create Internet traffic and can trust the common-good Internet to treat all traffic equally. These rules are technical interoperability standards and protocols referred to as TCP/IP and are openly governed by the Society and its working groups and other subgroups and affiliates. Standing working groups, for example, include the Internet Engineering Task Force and the Internet Architecture Board. The Internet Society thus engenders a level of trust and openness that virally attracts investments in digital infrastructure, applications, and innovations to create new economic and social wealth for the global knowledge economy.

By adapting the model of the Internet Society, the ELC could openly govern the interoperability of common educational processes and related standards and accountability metrics at a minimally intrusive level as a means to scale up completions within a culture of trusted processes and accountabilities. Like the IS, the ELC could do its work through loosely coupled standing working groups, their advisory or governance committees, and an array of other efforts designed to advance and sustain educational attainment within and across micro and macro educational and geopolitical boundaries.

### **The Centrality and Complexity of Completions**

Humanity’s global environmental, economic, and societal sustainability are codependent and threatened by catalysts of disintegration – such as oil spills, nuclear meltdowns, great recessions, poverty, mass pestilence, war, and other forms of social injustice. We need to educate more and more people to higher and higher levels in order to mitigate these catalysts of disintegration. Yet education, long a respected but cloistered “cottage industry,” is in a state of “dis-integration” (a persistent lack of integration across geopolitical boundaries and key linkages in the education pipeline). This dis-

integration threatens the interoperability of the educational services, processes, and records needed to scale up postsecondary completions at costs mutually affordable to education and its external investors. Education has become a sustainability challenge in its own right and, from a policy perspective, has arguably become too important to leave solely to educators and/or government regulators.

Postsecondary completions are clearly a “private good,” not only to educational institutions and their employees, but also to postsecondary “completers” whose earnings and employment rates typically elude those on lower rungs of the educational attainment ladder. Postsecondary completions are also a “public good” to the governments that subsidize secondary and postsecondary enrollments in the hope of increasing postsecondary-credentialed intellectual capital, not only for competitive economic reasons, but also to stay on top of environmental, economic, and societal sustainability issues. The core goals of this “brains race” are, or should be, not only competitive economic advantage, but also our co-dependent future, which is contingent on the interconnections within each and among all three sustainability challenges. These interconnections lead to unfathomable complexities outside the sole control of any single private or governmental entity.

Thinking at the global level while acting at the local level will be necessary, but not sufficient, to scale up and afford postsecondary completions. There’s no evidence that micro solutions will scale up to a macro solution, let alone a commonly affordable one. Not only does scale matter, but so do costs and, thus, economies of scale through collaboration and integration.

In the U.S., the Gates Foundation is working to “double the number of low-income adults who earn a college degree or credential with genuine marketplace value by age 26.” In the same spirit, President Obama, in a 2009 address to Congress, set a major goal: “By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” His goal was later described more specifically as an increase in the higher-educated proportion of U.S. adults over a 10-year period from 38% to 60%. To understand that his challenge is unprecedented in its scale, assume for simplicity of calculation that the current proportion of the U.S. population of age 25 and older remains constant through 2021. Then the current proportion of postsecondary-credentialed adults of age 25 or older would have to compound over the next 10 years at a rate approaching 5% annually, yet has been relatively stagnant for several decades. Take into account that the same adult population is increasing in absolute terms, and the back-of-the-envelope numbers appear even more elusive. Indeed, a recent survey of college presidents in the U.S. reported that most believe the goal to be elusive. In any case, the calls from President Obama, the Gates Foundation, and many others for postsecondary completions at unprecedented scale can be described in goal-oriented language as follows:

**Completions Priority:** Scale up the proportion of adults holding postsecondary degrees or advanced workforce credentials as a lever for improving environmental, economic, and societal sustainability.

The completions priority shares interdependencies with many other broadly cited priorities – such as various student-success ratios and improvements in accessibility, affordability, accountability, and productivity. The completions priority also faces a number of barriers inherent in current education

practices. Many of these barriers and co-dependencies can be inferred from the outline below, which has multiple connections to the preceding discussions of postsecondary completions as a common good.

- *The [secondary](#) and [postsecondary](#) education pipelines are profusely leaky.*
- *The percentage of underprepared, needy students in the pipeline and completions pool will have to increase.*
- *[Per-student government funding is on the wane](#) for the foreseeable future.*
- *[Education is not economically sustainable because it is not commonly affordable](#) to education providers and their external investors.*
- *Education's financial model is based on credits attempted, not credits or credentials earned.*
- *Required [accountability reporting does not reflect the completions priority](#).*
- *[Lack of interoperability of data and educational processes](#) stymie the completions priority.*
- *Education has yet to recognize the completions priority at scale as a [completions productivity crisis](#).*
- *Current cultural and governance practices render [IT-enabled completions productivity an oxymoron](#).*
- *Education is failing "Globalization 101" by largely [ignoring the game-changing leverage of education-specific, proven IT-enabled organizational innovation and service redesign strategies](#).*
- *Failure to benchmark critical thinking skills using learning assessments that are independent of education providers and governments (and other omissions) [leave accreditation open to charges of collusion and encourage invasive governmental regulation](#) that works against an open, trusted, competitive education marketplace.*

## **Restating the Need for Collaborative Thinking and Action**

1. The "completions pool" of people holding a trusted (accredited) postsecondary degree or certificate is a common-good resource for humanity's sustainability.
2. The primary economic beneficiaries of completions are accredited education providers and external investors in accredited education at every level – students/families, governments, donors, employers, and suppliers.
3. Rights and responsibilities among the economic beneficiaries of completions are out of balance. Consider these points of dissonance that prevail, for example, in postsecondary education in the U.S., as follows:
  - a. Too many students and families find higher education unaffordable, inflexible, opaque, slow, and unconnected to the digital cloud in which people increasingly learn and communicate.
  - b. Too many governments judge education to be unaccountable, underperforming, and reliant on a "business model" that is overly costly to public coffers and to too many students.
  - c. Too many education providers grumble about weak parental and societal support, underprepared students, and inadequate, unreliable, and intrusively regulated government funding.

4. These and many other imbalances, along with structural barriers to rebalancing them, are inhibiting urgent attempts around the world to scale up and sustain the completions pool to meet the market demands of the brains race.

## Economic Governance of a Common Good

At the heart of the need for an ELC is the concept of *economic governance*, which can be most readily understood as a governance mechanism designed to decrease the risk of a “tragedy of the commons,” a phrase connoting the abuse of a shared resource by a participating individual or group to the detriment of the resource and *all* of its economic beneficiaries. Consider, for example, a grazing land shared by multiple cattle ranchers, each having unconstrained grazing rights to the land. In the absence of some form of voluntary governance protocols – “rules of the road” – the shared grazing land might be depleted by those who expand their herds of cattle to their own economic benefit.

The health of the U.S. population might experience a tragedy of the commons were health care to be dominated by health-care insurance providers through enrollment and reimbursement rates that are unaffordable to many in need of health care, to national and regional governments, to health-care provider organizations, and to health-care professionals.

The Gulf of Mexico might experience a tragedy of the commons when multiple, collaborating companies benefit from drilling an offshore oil well that could explode and leak raw crude oil into the Gulf to the detriment of bordering governments (such as Louisiana, Florida, the U.S., and Mexico), the natural resources within their governmental jurisdictions, and their fishing industries and work forces.

Should any of these potential tragedies of a commons concern us? They concerned Elinor Ostrom, who became a 2009 Nobel Laureate in Economics for her research on the “economic governance of the commons.” Her results argued for an economic governance model having representation from each economic beneficiary group in the development and maintenance of the “rules of the road” for sharing natural resources as a common good. Her result runs contrary to the popular belief that economic governance should be left to either government (regulation and legislation) or private ownership.

In addition to the Internet, two other common goods are economically governed in an Ostrom-like model. The World Wide Web is economically governed by the World Wide Web Consortium and its board to standardize and evolve the original HTML protocols for the interoperable exchange of information and other resources across the Internet. The nonprofit IMS Global Learning Consortium and its board work through member organizations, working groups, and, advisory councils to advance the interoperability of the digital technologies, content, and records used in education by developing, maintaining, and compliance-testing technical interoperability standards. As with the Internet, neither example is a natural resource, but each is economically governed to scale and protect a common-good resource from the selfish, predatory, or otherwise resource-devaluing behavior of its inclusive, participating economic beneficiary groups.

There are other, more restricted examples of Ostrom-like common-good collaborations. Consider the community sourcing collaborations that have exponentially advanced Wikipedia, Moodle, and Linux for the common good. Consider also the SunGard Higher Education Community Source Initiative that is

economically governed by the SGHE Community Source Steering Committee led by client Bill Thirsk from Marist College to the common benefit of both clients and company.

A key point, however, is the need for vigilance in sustaining even the most successful attempts to economically govern a common good. Consider, for example, that the Internet is increasingly threatened by tragedies of the commons. Karen Kornbluh and Daniel J. Weitzner describe some of these threats in “Preserving a worldwide Internet” published by the Washington Post on July 15, 2011.

## Getting Started on an Ostrom-Like Education Leadership Commons

This prospectus is a call to design and found the ELC to evolve into an Ostrom-like economic governance collaboration for the completions marketplace. The completions priority, however, is not just a local access and student-success priority, but also a global priority to scale up outcomes, while simultaneously making them commonly affordable to all the parties involved. Economically sustainable, exponentially scalable outcomes are unlikely from a cottage industry that is highly dependent on capital brick-and-mortar investments, revenues from enrollments rather than outcomes, and a belief that increasing student-to-faculty ratios necessarily decreases quality. A possible first step, therefore, is to create a standing high level working structure that could spawn differentiated working groups at nested levels of government and education. These nested working groups could be structured to “roll up” their progress into global progress via a matrix of local to national to inter-nation governmental groupings and peer-groupings of education providers from primary to postsecondary education sectors. Following the Internet Society model, two key ELC functional working groups could provide core starting points for addressing the three rights-and-responsibilities points of dissonance cited above in “Restating the Need for Collaborative Thinking and Action” and the need to cohere the disparate, but interdependent challenges outlined in “The Centrality and Complexity of Completions.”

1. Establish a standing “**Completions Productivity Task Force**” under the ELC to develop and maintain accountability processes and metrics for monitoring productivity in the completions market in ways that can be trusted by all of its economic beneficiaries. A starting point could be an agenda to:
  - a. Agree on some subgroups of the adult population for which the proportion of accredited postsecondary completions should and could be tracked in the aggregate and within most geopolitical boundaries. (The OECD and the NCES already report such metrics.)
  - b. Develop guidelines for mapping completions production to professional and workforce needs.
  - c. Publish summary-level education-provider productivity metrics formulated both to be universally transparent and to be meaningful benchmarks – but the latter only when compared within peer groupings. Such metrics, for example, might be as simple as the annualized ratios of:
    - Completions granted to unduplicated student headcount
    - Operating expenses to completions granted  
(Operating expenses might be refined, for example, to be “Education and Related” expenses as defined from IPEDS data by the Delta Cost Project in the U.S.)
  - d. Assess learning readiness independent of learning providers and governments and in the longitudinal aggregate to profile various population demographics and student bodies of peer-

grouped education providers. This could be accomplished, for example, via the data from periodic, age-based, independent, constructivist assessments of students' critical thinking and basic communication skills. (Such assessments are already available from various sources.)

The simple metrics in 1.c are meant to be applicable in a macro context. Within micro peer groupings defined in consideration of various geopolitical and education-sector boundaries, however, ever more detailed metrics and cohort-based approaches could be formulated to drill down into those in 1.c.

Similarly, the learning readiness assessments referenced in 1.d are meant to be, not one centralized series of assessments, but to be drawn from a pool of learning readiness assessments that are independent of governments and education providers while admitting to age-based concordance among instruments of common purpose that address the common good of preparing for a lifetime of learning. Any number of other assessments could be utilized by governments and education providers to track learning outcomes at various levels of content and geopolitical and education-sector peer groupings. The intent is not to stifle these micro activities, but to encourage them to roll up into a macro population that is as "ready" as possible for lifelong learning.

2. Establish a standing "**Completions Governance Council**" to start transitioning the completions marketplace to be mutually affordable to education providers and education's external investors based on the accountability processes and metrics developed and maintained by the Completions Productivity Task Force. There may be multiple ways to approach common affordability. One possibility, for example, would have government funding flow directly to the student on the basis of means-tested financial need or on eligibility for a tax break. A "governance matrix of rights and responsibilities in the completions market" might then be derived from the responsibilities incurred by the financially supported student, the responsibilities incurred by an education provider by accepting revenues from that student, and the rights earned by government for financially supporting that student.

The next section provides one such matrix of completions rights and responsibilities. Notice that the student is asked to submit periodically to the independent learning readiness assessment process described above (1.d) in order to be eligible for a needs-tested promissory government grant or a tax break, the value of which is estimated at birth from tax data and then updated annually.

Government inaction being too often today's norm, readers are encouraged to think about other leverage points for creating a vigorous ELC at this moment when H.G. Wells' race between education and catastrophe is at full pace.

## Governance Matrix of Rights and Responsibilities in the Completions Market

Economic Beneficiary	Responsibilities	Rights
Student	Submit to periodic, age-based, independent, constructivist assessments of learning readiness starting no later than, say, age 15 and persisting for as long as the student wishes to qualify for and earn a means-tested grant or a tax break.	Defray the costs of services provided by participating assessment and postsecondary education providers from a promissory individual grant account having needs-tested value estimated annually from tax data, starting at birth – or from a tax break.
Assessment Provider	Remain independent from government and education providers while securing and maintaining assessment data and concordance tables for age-based learning-readiness assessments of like purpose.	Bill a participating student or the student’s grant account to help defray assessment fees incurred by the student.
Education Provider	Track and openly report the minimally intrusive, shared accountability metrics maintained by the Completions Productivity Task Force for peer-group analysis. Maintain student, instructor, and other privacy-secured identifiers for data extraction in support of longitudinal research.	Bill a participating student or the student’s grant account to help defray the cost of learning services provided to the student.
Government	Commit to promissory need-based grant accounts and tax breaks to help students pay the costs of completing learning-readiness assessments and academic programs (from participating assessment and postsecondary education providers).	Extract privacy-secured data (from participating assessment and postsecondary education providers) for longitudinal research into learning readiness, completions, and their costs to the economic beneficiaries of completions.

The above matrix is based on the leverage of earned, needs-tested promissory grants. There are other possible leverage points for establishing trusted relationships among education providers and their external investors by rebalancing the economic benefits of completions among the parties involved. To be sure, there will be devils lurking in the details of how to integrate governance across various geopolitical and educational boundaries. The potential outcomes of the above approach, however, may clarify the intent of such rebalancing efforts.

### Possible Long-Term Outcomes from a Nonprofit, Non-Governmental ELC

Outlined below are some long-term outcomes that could result from an ELC created around the leverage of needs-tested, government-funded promissory grants or tax breaks, either of which would have to be earned by students as outlined in the rights-and-responsibilities matrix above.

1. Unbundle and virally expand the education marketplace through open, voluntary compliance with technical (IMS) and non-technical (ELC) interoperability standards and protocols for extracting and

transferring (by mutual consent) core data (about the outcomes and costs of teaching and learning) into a distributed longitudinal data system in which:

- a. Each participating education provider and independent assessment provider has the right to capture selective privacy-secured data about its participating students and instructors as part of the contract among the parties involved.
  - b. Each individual (for example, student and instructor) controls a privacy-secured record and portfolio of personal educational accomplishments to share selectively with sources of funding, education, and employment – again as part of a trusted relationship of potential mutual benefit to the parties involved.
2. Encourage parents and, eventually, each of their children, to make postsecondary completion a shared life goal. This encouragement is a corollary of using annual tax data, starting at a child's birth, to estimate and annually update the value of a needs-tested promissory grant or a tax break that can be earned by the child submitting periodically to the learning readiness assessment process overseen by the Completions Productivity Task Force.
  3. Focus and stabilize government funding for postsecondary education on need-tested aid and tax breaks that have to be earned by individual commitments to learning-readiness assessments on behalf of the completions priority and its attendant principle of equal opportunity.
  4. Meet market needs for professional and workforce expertise by encouraging employers to offer completions incentives to supplement the value of grants and tax breaks (according to projected employment needs).
  5. Remove the already blurred distinctions between nonprofit public, nonprofit private, and for-profit private education providers that benefit from the needs-tested promissory grant program and tax breaks by encouraging ELC participation at all levels of government and market needs (demand)
  6. Support an open, digital *learning-cloud* to provide gratis access to comparative information about education (and all its implications for personal and collective success) and also to informal, online, asynchronous learning opportunities and resources, such as free content and learning portfolios for students and instructors.
  7. Encourage education providers to compete in learning-centric accountability terms that are also learner-centric by providing options for an affordable and flexible learning experience.
  8. Preserve accreditation's formative peer-review process for education provider improvement by *a priori* requiring adherence to the above minimally invasive ELC external accountability protocols.

The above possibilities are incentives for creating the Education Leadership Commons from an economic governance model – the Internet Society's – to make the current completions marketplace more transparent, productive, and beneficial mutually to education providers and their external investors.

## Participation

The ecumenical intent of the ELC is to ensure equal representation at all geopolitical and education levels by organizations such as:

- Postsecondary education providers
- Primary and secondary education providers
- Governments
- Other nonprofit organizations, associations, foundations, and policy centers
- Commercial organizations

## About the Author

Dr. William H. Graves earned a mathematics Ph.D. from Indiana University and then served the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) for over 30 years – as a professor, dean for general education, interim vice chancellor for academic affairs, senior information technology officer, and founder of the Institute for Academic Technology (a UNC/IBM alliance). Now an emeritus professor at UNC, Graves is senior vice president for academic strategy on the executive leadership team at SunGard Higher Education. He is a member of the board of governors of Antioch University, the board of visitors of the School of Information and Library Science at UNC, the National Board for the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and is also a co-founding board member of both the National Center for Academic Transformation and the IMS Global Learning Consortium.

While on leave from UNC in 1998-2000, Graves founded the nonprofit Collegis Research Institute. He then retired from UNC in 2000 to found (and chair the board of) Eduprise, an academic technology services firm. After Eduprise merged with Collegis, the resulting privately held company was acquired in 2004 by SunGard Data Systems and later became part of privately held SunGard Higher Education, the world's largest, most comprehensive IT-related business focused solely on education.

Graves has helped to pioneer technology-enabled strategies in tertiary education for measurably improving upon and accounting for institutional productivity – learning productivity. Along the way, he has consulted with hundreds of institutions; published 80+ articles and books; delivered hundreds of invited presentations; served on the boards of CAUSE, EDUCAUSE, and the Coalition for Networked Information, served on the Tenth Anniversary Commission of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and helped launch both Internet2 and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (chairing the latter's planning committee from 1994-2004).