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FUTURE OF WORK SYMPOSIUM
INNOVATION CONCEPTS REPORT

JANUARY 2024

University of Nebraska, Omaha
Future of Work Symposium

CONTEXT

On Monday, December 11th, 2023, leaders from UNO orchestrated a symposium on *The Future of Work,* held at the Scott Conference Center in Omaha. The audience consisted of roughly 300-attendees drawn from the University, local leaders, local philanthropists, and other special guests, all orchestrated by Chancellor Joanne Li. As an integral part of the conference, fifteen self-organized teams elected to use methods custom developed for the symposium to author innovation concepts.

This document analyzes and reports on those suggested initiatives.

OVERVIEW

The future of work is an important topic in a time of great change. The symposium was well designed in part because of its multi-axis focus. Consider these issues:

- For any university it matters since, for the first time ever measured, there is some growing *perception* (though not yet definitive evidence) that the economic lift of an undergraduate degree may not justify its cost[1].

- For employers it matters since there are still widespread disruptions post-COVID in where and how people will work; there are technologies on the horizon such as generative AI that may fundamentally reinvent work, and employers are frustrated by getting credentialed workers then still having to spend a great deal on their training.

- For philanthropies it matters since they need to find workable solutions for the most intractable, gnarly problems on the planet (*diseases, poverty, corruption, affordable housing, nutrition, global warming,* etc.) as most governments now throw up their hands and abandon such efforts. This means they need to find systemic advances to avoid having to throw infinite funds at those issues.

- And it matters in Omaha, since all great cities now increasingly benefit from *conscious planning* of their differentiation, rather than just hoping that their location, history, and engaged citizens will advance the region over time, as if by magic.

We also tackled the challenge in novel and noteworthy ways. Working with a remarkable team of UNO leaders and facilitators, the symposium was designed to use **high protocol innovation methods**, custom built for UNO, Omaha, and the explicit issues that impinge on the Future of Work in the region. These methods, detailed below, are the *opposite of brainstorming,* explicitly designed to help teams author **a smaller number of bigger ideas,** as opposed to a large number of little ideas. Moreover, such methods place a huge premium on authoring concepts that can reliably be built, with likely good outcomes.

The balance of this document assesses the concepts that emerged from the teams who participated in theUNO Future of Work symposium—first as patterns, then as initiatives, and finally as speculative breakthroughs.

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[1] A recent episode of the hugely popular podcast, *The Daily*, delineates this problem with its customary brevity and clarity. Listen to that episode here: Is College Worth It? Or find the transcript here: transcript. Of special note is the advent of a new metric, growing in popularity, called the *College Wealth Premium,* the first metric to assess the lift from an educational investment net of its cost. *It is important to note the UNO does reasonably well on this metric, and that alone suggests that it may be a comparative strength to innovate around.*

SECTION 1:
The methodology

To a disturbingly large extent people assume innovation is about *creativity.* This is profoundly misguided. Instead, it is about *discipline.* Research now shows that teams using the best available innovation methods, in the proper sequence, are fully *20 times more likely to achieve successful innovation outcomes* as compared to those that use creative methods.

For the UNO Symposium, we developed custom protocols to tackle the specific challenge that innovation teams should address first: ***clarifying an innovation intent.*** This term of art describes the team's *mission for innovation*—essentially what they intend to achieve.

On Innovation Intent

A great innovation intent passes three tests: It declares an *epic mission,* that people will fi nd inspiring and valuable. It creates some *unambiguous goal*, that you ultimately either hit or miss. Then third, it declares a *specific time frame* by which that goal will be achieved.

Crafting a final innovation intent in this specific form takes a committed team about two days of work. We had two hours. So, for fifteen separate teams we used an ***Innovation Intent construction worksheet*** to head in the right direction. It looked like this:

For this exercise, several specific design attributes deserve clarification.

1. Teams were expected to choose a ***domain of focus,*** from four options: *reinvent education; design new corporate partnerships; imagine new philanthropic partnerships; or center on Omaha.*

2. Then teams were given six ***constrained options*** that they could use in any combination or permutation to address the domain they chose. Of those six, five were pre-defined and the sixth was open, in the sense that the team could make up its own.

By using this methodology, especially in groups, we learn a lot by analyzing both the granular choices teams make and the specific ideas they then author. **That proved to be the case for the UNO symposium, too.**

SECTION 2:
The data patterns

We will address the *collective work of the group first,* in an attempt to learn from *the wisdom of crowds.*

In terms of **domains of focus,** here's how our fifteen self-forming teams chose to focus:

- Five focused on **Reinventing Education**
- Four on new **Corporate Partnerships**
- Three on new **Philanthropic Partnerships,** and
- Four on **Reinventing Omaha**

Constraining their **Innovation building blocks** often intuitively strikes people as an unwise way to foster innovation. In fact, it is the opposite: it significantly increases the probability that the resulting innovation concepts can be built in reliable, robust ways. These building blocks were identified by examining current innovations in education globally and finding statistically significant emerging exemplars worth building upon.[2] So, it is instructive to examine the five basic building blocks teams were asked to choose among:

- **Special Talent Pools**, *analogous to Special Forces*
- **Digital Team Tools**, *used with students, then licensed for lifelong use*
- **New Units of Achievement**, *beyond degrees, such as certifications*
- **Signature UNO methods**, *to deal with complex problems, useful anywhere*
- **Guaranteed outcomes**, *forcing teams to think through deep solutions*

Here is the statistical frequency with which each of these building blocks ended up being built into the team concepts in our group. *Shown here: **weighted total score** based on ordinal ranking and frequency of selections:*
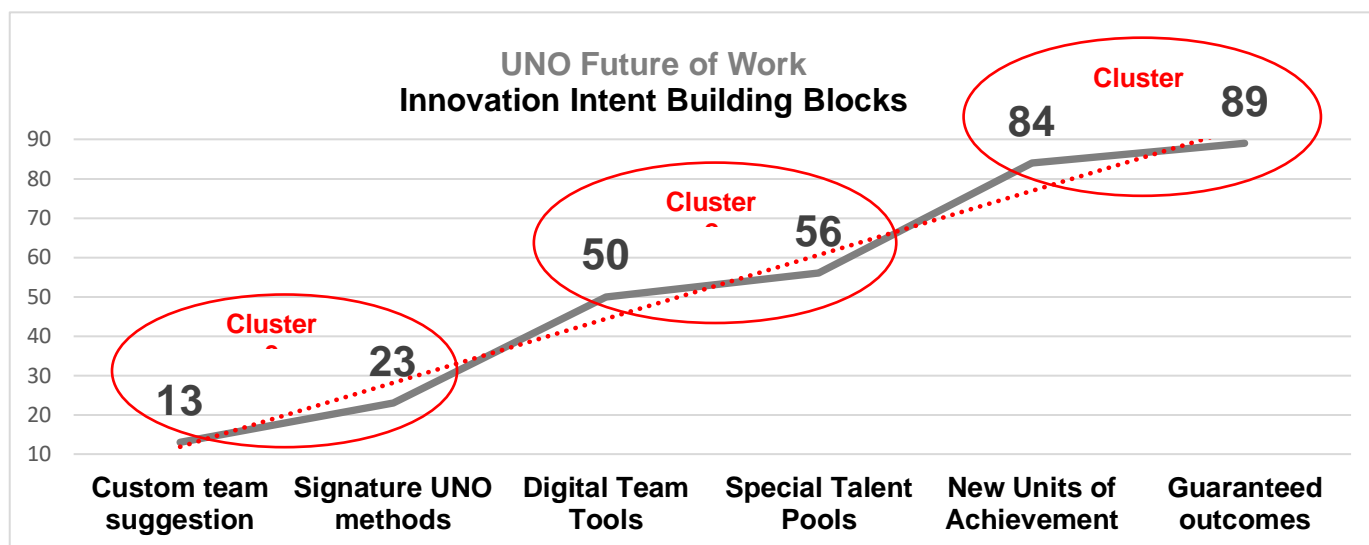
It is important to remember that the single biggest shift in the history of innovation has all occurred in the past quarter century. ***Today, the most valuable innovations are less about the primary invention of something new** (such as the first transistor) **and more about the elegant integration of many things that are already known.*** So these granular modular building blocks really matter. They are likely to be the most reliable way UNO can build real breakthroughs.

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[2] As an integral additional aspect of the work done for the UNO symposium, we also produced a concise ***Innovation Precursor Catalog*** focused on higher education. Find a digital copy of that useful innovation research here: Education Precursor Catalog

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The choices of our fifteen teams reveal ueful patterns. Simply put, they reinforce the sense that this is a time of great change. Indeed, across our collective group of innovators there is a strong conviction that bold, game changing innovations **should now help students get something other than degrees,** and that they should lead to **a variety of important, guaranteed outcomes**.[3] Beyond that, teams clearly feel that UNO should **attact and serve especially talented incoming students**, and provide them with **signature new digital tools that change how they work**, both in classes in their lives.[4]

Open innovation patterns

Bear in mind that each of the fifteen participating teams also could create critical innovation building blocks of their own, whatever they felt was essential. Four teams did so, and several others created important *central themes* for their innovation iniatives. Here's what we can glean from those choices:

- **Many teams,** including ones focused on each of our four areas of focus (Education, Corporate Partnerships, Philanthropy, and Omaha) imagined new kinds of **sponsored programs, certifications, internships, career pathways,** and **skills**. This is absolutely one of the most promising issues to explore more deeply.

- **Across Education teams** there was some clever support for seeing the needs of students and faculty members holistically. Teams saw issues like **transportation, childcare,** or **housing** as seamless, bundled needs that UNO could address systemically.

- **A handful of teams focused on just ONE tactic.** This is rare, and candidly, seldom actually works in the real world. Thirteen of our fifteen teams used multiple dimensions for, and tactics to build, their innovation initiatives. *This is highly correlated with the best innovations that end up changing industries, categories or the world.*

Limits to this

We should all bear in mind that the work done by these teams in under two hours is the very beginning of a robust innovation practice, not the end. Teams had time to author innovation directions, not comprehensive innovation goals or initiatives.

In practical terms, that means you should read the specific concepts that follow as important in direction, but not in detail. Good innovators would treat them like a *sketch of important possibilities.* It is best at this stage to take them seriously, but not literally. Any of the directions that UNO or Omaha leaders find intriguing should be pursued using additional robust innovation tools, specifically **platform authoring protocols.**

[3] This is what we can infer from **Cluster 1**, shown on page 3. These two building blocks were used much more frequently and very often as the first or second choice for nearly every team authoring innovation initiatives. Guaranteed outcomes should be *tangible and valuable.* Examples may include guaranteed internships; guaranteed field credentialing; even guaranteed economic lift, etc.

[4] This is the significance of **Cluster 2,** same graph. These two building blocks suggest that UNO, its corporate and philanthropic partners, and even Omaha itself, would do well to build distinctive talent pools. Note that this does not mean "elite" top-tier academic students, necessarily. Today, it is just as likely to mean people of color, those with special needs, and those with unusual skills, prior experiences, or unique points of view. Also covered in this cluster is the notion of giving anyone who attends UNO signature new tools and methods, such as digital skills, generative AI tools, etc., suited to today's complex, high velocity problems. These tools change the way you teach, collaborate, and produce results, and should almost certainly become important enough that you later license them for use by your partner and alumni—a significant benefit of association with UNO.

SECTION 3:
Team Initiatives

These concept summaries show how our fifteen teams used high protocol innovation methods to offer specific possible innovation initiatives.

In the interest of concision, each initiative is distilled to its essence and conveyed at a high level. Nuances are certain to be lost. *Table numbers were assigned arbitrarily and after the fact. Most teams had about six participants; typically, one name is cited for each—the first name listed on each worksheet. Please forgive spelling errors: penmanship was highly variable and often barely legible.*

Education concepts

Foster a seamless approach to skills development, removing friction points for students by providing integral transportation, drop-in childcare, etc. Interesting and novel kicker: ensure job placement using a variant of the medical school match system. *Table 1: Deanna Dymond, et. al.*

New ways of teaching matched with guaranteed employment or internships. Delivered in part to a different, more inclusive group of students through productive government programs. Strong emphasis on workforce development. *Table 2: Deb Wisnieski, et. al.*

Focus intensively on childcare, both as an educational frontier and by using UNO as a model for advancing the field. Provide integral childcare for students and faculty. Similar, in principle, to Hotel ICON in Hong Kong *(c.f. Education Precursor catalog, page 8,* link*).* *Table 3: Jessica Charlsen, et. al.*

Singular focus on educational pathways: individualized, customized, and built around the student's declared purpose. *Table 4: Greg Betts, et. al.*

Guarantee a set of core competencies for students, and help students build a skill toolset. Dramatize with a student thesis or capstone learning challenge, akin to practices at Reed College or Bard College. *Table 5: Alyssa Askeland, et. al.*

Corporate Partnership concepts

Work with partners to understand their talent goals, then custom build programs to suit. Significant new focus on internships, where students earn both appropriate compensation and credits for their work. Essentially education reinvented as a two-way street. *Table 6: Jamie Eckmann, et. al.*

Invent a new approach to sponsored learning. Combine non-traditional incoming students, plus careful co-construction of programs with employers, and guaranteed outcomes. *Table 7: Erin Pearson, et. al.*

Deep workplace and career preparedness, starting with special, diverse talent pools and working through needs like mock interviews, LinkedIn profile support, supported by a strong, modern digital curriculum. *Table 8: KC Belitz, et.al.*

Summary comments across Education and Corporate Partnership concepts: Some educational experts might criticize these initiatives as authored for being too mercenary, too built around employment as the highest, best purpose of education. Thus, too close to the mission of community colleges or vocational technical training. This is a long-running debate in higher ed circles. Classically, those that defend a liberal arts education argue that it gives people the time and skills to know how to live a considered life of purpose—ideas that go back to Plato and Aristotle, *inter alios.*

We are in a time of great change and uncertainty. The value of higher ed is being questioned and scrutinized like never before. It is almost certainly the case that *in this context,* pragmatic innovations that lead to guaranteed jobs will be resoundingly well received. And yet UNO leaders should see this as a swinging cultural pendulum. Take care not to let it swing too far—perhaps by always fostering **purpose driven jobs**.

Reinvent Omaha concepts

A significant new joint program between UNO and Omaha for advancing "Public Omaha". A special talent bank, taught in new ways with guaranteed outcomes, to address advances like community building, emergency response, etc. *Table 9: AT Miller, et.al.*

Author an "Epic Mission" for Omaha, then invent signature methods to make sure that it comes alive. Build Omaha as a "destination city" and show how it can become demonstrably best at its chosen goal, such as *best city to raise children* (illustratively). *Table 10: Keith, Lauren, et. al. (no last names provided).*

Attract special individuals, guarantee that they will work on important regional programs, teach them in new ways and grant them credentials as they succeed. A deeply pragmatic approach to directly driving progress in Omaha through a special UNO and Omaha partnership. *Table 11: Stan Odenthal, et. al.,*

Create new sponsored internships that provide guaranteed college to career pathways. Use Omaha employers as a proving ground and flywheel for these programs that attract global talent and provide new modular transferrable skills and micro-credentials. *Table 12: Abby Scott, et. al.*

New Philanthropic partner concepts

Proactive program to attract and build the greatest philanthropic talent program in the world. Akin to how world class athletes are trained in systemic ways. Engage Omaha businesses and philanthropists into this mission. Build Omaha as a "City of Greatness" using these sponsored projects, and actively use a platform like *JustServe* to engage volunteers around purpose-driven projects. *(c.f. Education Precursor catalog, page 35,* link*). Table 13: Jonathan Acosta, et.al.*

One-year intensive program that builds a deep peer-to-peer network. Talented individuals get an amazing one-year immersion experience, while the Omaha philanthropic community gets steadily better at collaborating and addressing strategic issues over time. *Slightly reminiscent of the highly regarded Loeb Fellowship program that has been a fixture at Harvard for decades. Table 14: Fidele Mienso, Hieke Langdon, et. al.*

Strategic focus on special talent pools, such as immigrants and incarcerated individuals, then building them into exceptionally effective philanthropic programs piloted in Omaha, such as Metro, Immigrant Legal Center, Refugee Empowerment Centers, and a wide array of health care advances. Engage new arrival or re-entry individuals in comprehensive, effective ways. UNO as the major orchestrator. *Table 15: Stefanie Torres Chan, et. al.*

Summary comments across all fifteen authored concepts: The work done by our teams at the UNO Future of Work Symposium was deeply impressive for the short period of time individuals were given. It was also the very first time any of them had a chance to use high protocol innovation methods. These are distinctly different from efforts to "enhance creativity" via low protocol methods such as brainstorming then voting with sticky dots.

Teams were given about 90-minutes of work time to author the ideas briefly summarized here. Afterwards, back in plenary, they were asked **two questions** by show of hands:

1. How many of you think the idea you authored—and those from others you heard—could work, if we took them seriously enough? ~***100% of hands were raised.***

2. How many of you would be proud of UNO and Omaha if these ideas were to be seriously pursued? ~***100% of hands were raised.***

No one gets "hit rates" anywhere close to this with brainstorming. So, this worked well as a pragmatic demonstration of the power of high protocol innovation.

SECTION 4:
Recommended
Initiatives

In this final section we offer ***integrated suggested initiatives*** for each of our four focus areas. These borrow aspects from all fifteen teams and add in a select supportive speculations, often drawn from the *Education Precursor catalog*. The idea here is not to reject the symposium teamwork in any way, but rather to integrate it, build upon it, and craft credible concepts that reflect their highest, best aspirations.

As you read these for speculative ideas, please bear in mind the paradox of modern innovation: ***it is FAR easier to succeed if you commit to being the BEST IN THE WORLD at something, than if you merely try to be pretty good at it.***

Recommended Initiative #1: **Reinventing Education**
Our five teams tackled this challenge with relish. Integrating across all their efforts and standing in the future, ***Imagine a UNO that attracts diverse, world class talent, from Nebraska and anywhere else. It gives them an amazing supportive campus. They enjoy world-class teaching tech, plus housing that epitomizes affordable, healthy living. There is support for childcare, plus impressive, convenient local transportation.***

*These students—many of them from diverse talent pools like immigrants, and the current or recently incarcerated—**are challenged to build the work systems of the future**. Local firms offer up signature challenge programs that UNO faculty use as proving grounds for these teaching advances. Students get clear career pathways, choose among a plethora of important, topical certifications, and get paid for their work applying their learnings. As they amass enough certifications, they earn degrees.*

Employers are actively encouraged to help design, then subsidize these career pathways. **UNO and Omaha get seen globally as a whole new kind of robust future talent engine.** Any student lucky enough to get in knows she will have meaningful guaranteed work options available to her, all as she builds her skills and her lifelong network. *Overall, this concept is analogous to the Navy Seals or other elite special forces. People compete to get in; they train differently once they get it; they are universally recognized as remarkable and respected once they get out.*

Recommended Initiative #2: **Reinventing Corporate Partnerships**
Three teams tackled this challenge. Taking the best of their speculations, and cross fertilizing it with the **Talent Engine** just described, let's imagine a world where: ***Firms bid for the right to become UNO Talent Engine partners.*** This is a two-way street. UNO selects the employers because they are purpose-driven, they represent meaningful sectors in times of great change (like finance, healthcare, housing, tech and entrepreneurship, etc.) and they will commit to multi-year relationships. Commitment entails more than mere financial underwriting. True partners also commit to helping to set priorities for credentialing modules (such as generative AI, coding, teamwork, data analytics, and other emergent needs), while also offering pilot programs that become the landing place for their UNO interns and student fellowships.

This is akin to the brilliant positioning of Harbour.Space University, with campuses in Barcelona and Thailand. *(Strongly encourage review of. Education Precursor catalog, page 5,* link*).* **This nets out as a Future Work Collaboratory,** one that is so important that employers should be willing to compete actively and aggressively to be accepted as partners. While this needs to be executed brilliantly in Omaha, over time it is in everyone's interest to make it so important that it transcends geography. Indeed, one reasonable test of long-term success is that there should be highly respected **UNO FUTURE WORK COLLABORATORIES in places like Silicon Valley, India, South Africa, Brazil, Singapore, etc.—wherever in the world the future happens first.**

Recommended Initiative #3: Reinventing Omaha

Three teams played with this challenge. Building upon their starting places: *Imagine an Omaha that articulates select strategic challenges on a rolling five-year horizon. Each of these is well-chosen to be both locally vital, and globally extensible.* So, the priorities for the next five years might be, illustratively: *affordable housing, sustainable energy generation and transmission, healthy living, family support* and *childhood development.*

Whatever the list of key challenges, city leaders ALL work to make their data, their goals, their programs, and their initiatives the basis for **joint efforts** engaging UNO, local businesses, local philanthropists, and focused student teams. Highly talented faculty would adapt their courses and methods to these strategic topics. UNO Partners of various kinds would orchestrate everything from challenge grants, volunteer programs, and their own donations around these rolling areas of focus. *All the work would be done with signature new tools and open, shared, data models, with a relentless focus on what works.* **Success is defined as Omaha becoming the LABORATORY CITY, the place one looks to whenever you want to see the city in the world that fosters progress fastest.** Students interested in urban development should see this as the hot place to learn and try new advances. And the lucky residents of and visitors to Omaha can enjoy something that is shockingly rare today: competent government, simply trying to make life relentlessly, demonstrably, better for its citizens.

Recommended Initiative #4: Reinventing Philanthropy

Three teams focused on reimagining philanthropy, a field that is often stuck addressing the world's most intractable, expensive, and daunting problems, as noted on page 1. Yet our teams rose to the challenge. They urged us to imagine a future where Omaha is known for its amazing philanthropists, and they collectively agree to build the **World's leading philanthropic solutions center.** *This consists of an incredible UNO Talent Engine, plus a deep commitment to data and randomized controlled trials (see the Nobel Prize winning work of Ester Duflo: [link]), all focused on real world applications in Omaha. Later, the work will be extended to other laboratory cities that agree to use the talent, methods, and data models you pioneer, then applied in places of great need anywhere in the world.* Over time, strategic partnerships would be added with organizations willing to license, apply and use your advances, such as United Way, Red Cross, YMCA, Rotary International, Salvation Army, etc. As more and more billionaires participate in the Giving Pledge, UNO and Omaha philanthropies should become the *trusted partner for authoring, piloting, evaluating, or scaling the programs that provably deliver results.*

Final comments

These four speculations are clearly interconnected and self-reinforcing. To a certain degree picking any one of them heads you into the other three over time. That is actually cool; a feature not a bug. UNO and Omaha leaders could pick any of these as a starting place and make them real, very fast. The ideas may *feel daunting.* They may feel *too big for little Omaha.* They may feel grandiose or Panglossian.

They aren't. These are pragmatic concepts, entirely buildable with known methods and with many remarkable precursors. So, as you reflect on the outcomes of the UNO Future of Work symposium, remember the famous insight from Margaret Mead, the person who invented the field of cultural anthropology:

"Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world.... Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

SECTION 5:
Resources

Here are digital links for resources created in support of the UNO Future of Work Symposium:

The PRE-WORK, an Educational Innovation Precursor Catalog: Precursors

The LECTURE by Larry Keeley: Lecture

The Innovation Intent protocol used during the symposium: Protocol

The annotated Innovation Initiatives created by 15-teams: Raw Initiatives

The data analysis for the initiatives authored by the teams: Analysis

Acknowledgements

UNO Chancellor, **Dr. Joanne Li** was the driving force behind the Symposium. It was her concept from the beginning, and she shepherded it through with vision and care.

Dr. Jaci Lindburg, Associate Vice Chancellor, Innovative & Learning-Centric Initiatives, was instrumental in designing and leading the symposium. She got the details right. She was also a remarkable program leader during the event.

Myah Lanoux-Nguyen, Director of Strategy & Operations, Innovative & Learning Centric Initiatives, was a tireless program organizer and made it easy to do hard things. She is also a pleasure to collaborate with.

It was a privilege to help design, lead and participate in UNO's symposium.
Larry Keeley