

42 What's Next for the Skills-First Movement



Two incredible champions in the field of competency-based education and the skills-first movement: Julian Alssid and Kaitlin Lemoine, join the conversation on Episode 42 of Ready for Work. Through their pioneering work at College for America, the duo emphasizes the importance of transparently naming and communicating skills to learners, bridging the gap between academic and workplace skills. Learn more about the challenges posed by legacy systems and the importance of breaking down silos. They also share insights from their new consultancy work, giving us a preview of What's Next for the Skills-First Movement.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 42



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Transcript of Episode 42

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Julian Alssid: My first wish is that my first wish is that parents begin from day one talking to their kids about skills and that we all learn to integrate in our daily lives. That should be driving decisions we make going forward. That for me would make for a skill centered nirvana.

Kaitlin Lemoine: Really focused on competency-based education and making curriculum that really, genuinely, authentically reflects what's needed.

Jasen Jones: Julian Alssid and Kaitlin Lemoine join us on Episode 42 of Ready for Work on What's Next for the Skills-First Movement.

Podcast Open: Ready for Work is a podcast from ACT spotlighting excellence and innovation throughout the workforce ecosystem. Jasen Jones hosts this journey with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential. Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: We are thrilled to showcase the competency-based education and skills-first progress from two champions in the field, Julian Alssid and Kaitlin Lemoine. Pioneering their work at the College for America out of Southern NH University, their new partnership tackles current challenges and their emerging work paints a picture of what's ahead in the skills-first movement.

Welcome to both of you and thanks for joining us on Ready for Work. Let's set the stage with a quick recap of what brought both of you to this point in your careers and the skills-first mission.

Julian: Well, I first became involved with the Skills First movement back in the early nineties when it became clear that a high school diploma wasn't cutting it for many career track jobs. And the skills gaps were really clear and evident and we could no longer follow this sort of very hard divide between vocational and academic programming. but our systems were not built to around skills. And so flash forward saw several of us, Kaitlin included, began to think that the one thing that kind of runs through trainings, whether it's for vocational and technical work or more academic work, are skills and in a sense, each job is just sort of a different configuration of skills. And so that if we could begin to understand those skills, we could then begin to parse out what do people need to know to go into one field or another? What kind of training do they need? How do we divvy up and understand the different ways in which people can learn, whether it's on the job through work, experience, internships, world of experiences, courses, degrees, certificates, you name it.

Kaitlin: What brought me to what brought me here to this point is I have spent my whole career really thinking about the intersection of actually academic skills and what is needed after your academic experience or your training experience, whether that's the workplace or a college or another training program or really that intersection. And what does that what does that look like and how do you reach learners with experiences that are authentic and allow them to engage with content or curriculum or courses that feel like they tie to whatever is next for them out in the world? And so working with high school students, I spent a lot of time thinking about that and then working, as Julian said a lot in our College for America programs through the Southern New Hampshire University really focused on competency based education and how to explicitly call

out the skills that are needed to tie to both academic skills, but also skills needed in the workplace or on the job, and making curriculum that really, genuinely, authentically reflects what's needed.

Jasen: I've been such a big fan of Julian's work over the years and happy to get acquainted now with Kaitlin. It's truly been a remarkable journey for competency-based education. Could you share with us some of the unique insights you acquired along this journey?

Kaitlin: One thing that sticks out to me is really transparently naming the skills, naming the competencies for people. I think that it's often you can say, Oh yeah, we're going to you're going to enroll in X course and the course you can talk about the course topic and what the types of materials you're going to engage with over your time in the course. But to call out really explicitly what are the skills you're going to be learning and what's common language that people use to talk about those skills. Right? So not just from an academic standpoint, but from an employer standpoint, What are what are the communication skills you might be using? What are the public you know, maybe you're talking about public speaking. Are we talking about critical reading? Are we talking about analytical writing? Right. There's so many different ways to call out the explicit skills that people are learning and making those skills clear to the learner, I think is a huge step in the direction of moving this movement forward.

Another piece of the puzzle is being able to integrate skills effectively across different content areas and making it clear that for and for people in jobs, there isn't a hard and fast line between content use and skills used. It's all intermingled and giving people opportunities to connect skills across content areas and across contexts and show how they're developing, perhaps across various disciplines, I think can build people's confidence and also allows that metacognitive piece really around the self-reflection and the ability to see, Oh, here's where I'm growing, oh, here's where I need to grow, because those are the lifelong skills we all hit anyway, right? I mean, those are the skills we hope to carry with us beyond any kind of educational or training experience into the workplace, and especially in the reskilling movement where we're all needing to think about how do we continue to reskill and upskill, Those are skills that you take with you. No matter where you are.

Jasen: Thank you, Caitlin. Indeed, the modern career landscape demands higher critical thinking due to its increasingly non-linear nature. Preparing individuals for the complexities of navigating these career and education choices is a substantial undertaking. Julian, what insights have you acquired during your journey?

Julian: Well, it's interesting and I think part of what I so enjoyed my partnership with Kaitlin is that she really comes out this from the kind of how do you build program, how do you build curriculum in a way that makes sense? I tend to come at it more from the kind of partnership development. And because workforce development is such an interdisciplinary undertaking, how do you get the various actors involved, the employers and the educators and the trainers to work together? And I think the big insight that I've taken away and see again and again and again is our systems were not built to accommodate a skill centric approach. It's not what college professors have learned. It's not what HR people do. And so it's requiring a whole orientation for all those involved in workforce development and the institutions they represent.

Jasen: Initiatives like the Open Skills Network and T3 at the U.S. Chamber are actively grappling with those challenges and legacy systems you highlighted. Over the past nine decades, workforce programs have accumulated layers of complexity. If we had a "workforce genie" to grant our wishes to remove financial or programmatic barriers, what would that look like for each of you?

Julian: My first wish is that my first wish is that parents begin from day one talking to their kids about skills and that we all learn to think of and kind of just fully integrate in our daily lives. This notion that everything we're doing is kind of about skills building and practice, and I think that should be driving decisions we make going forward. What do we like to do? You know, what do we love to do that we do best? Kind of the what color's your parachute approach? And that should be driving the decisions we make about where do we go to school and what kind of jobs we get. I love that all the companies we work with, and can work for, think in these terms. And then then I'd love that all the people who are charged with educating and training us, come to this with the same orientation. That for me would make for a skill centered nirvana.

Kaitlin: I think that Julian, you kind of covered everything with that one wish. I think what I would add to that or expand upon a little bit is just I think wherever there are, I think there are so many opportunities to bridge these worlds between school higher, like K-12 education, higher education, the workplace, and all of the training opportunities in and along the way. And I think if we can begin to speak to communicate more across those different organizations and those different sectors, so to speak, even though they're all education, right? I think they sometimes exist in their own silos or buckets. And there's so much opportunity to speak across. And I think while that work is happening, I think if that work can be expanded, that would be huge. So I think it builds upon what Julian said with respect to starting really early, right, with learners and being able to talk more to earlier on and in in an individual's development and their sense of self and

their sense of how they learn to begin to call out skills, to begin to call out what their interests are, what their passions are, and what skills tied to different roles. And, you know, what does it look like to have different jobs? I mean, all of that can start to happen earlier. But I think to have the link to the to industry, to academic experiences later, later on, I think bringing that those worlds together would be quite powerful.

Jasen: I think our listeners would enjoy about some of the day-to-day activities of your new work and what you see on the horizon on what's next in the skills-first movement?

Julian: Our consultancy is really focused on working with executives that want to optimize their organizations as workforce development entities and realize what a challenging job this is. You know, we like to think of this as sort of the coalition of the willing, the people who are willing to take this on. And what they they'll do is they'll invite us in to take a look at their organizations, kind of see where they are currently and what they can do to kind of build from what they've got. And that's really our belief is that there's something there to start with. You know, for a university, for example, you know, there is there's a there's a place where the economy and the demographic and the faculty and the offerings and the facilities kind of there's a place in the Venn diagram where they can begin and and grow from there and that this is not something we do by fiat.

Kaitlin: So a couple of things I would add. I think in our in our day to day work through, as Julian said, through the conversations we have and the work that we do, I think there are two things that come to mind. One is the identification of themes that emerge across projects. So, you know, it's like you're working on one thing, but then actually wait a minute, that that's a theme we're seeing in these five other places. And what does that mean? Is that something we're picking up on, something that's it's critical? Or do we need to be paying attention to the signals here or there? I think there's a lot there's a lot of exciting excitement that comes from that end of our work. And then I think the other pieces as we're as we're engaging with different projects and different clients thinking about, you know, how do we how do we have a, a how do we take projects, break them down in ways that, as Julian said, this is a these are complicated problems to solve. But how do we break them down in such a way that they become manageable and impactful? And then with the goal toward scaling, with the goal toward bigger and bigger impact. And so the opportunity to do that is also super exciting.

Jasen: Thanks for helping us amplify what's ahead for the skills-first mission. Exploring common themes in Skills First is crucial and we need to amplify these voices. We're thankful to both of you for this opportunity on Ready for Work.

Julian: Thanks so much. Jason, if there's anything we can do for you along the way, people you want to connect with, you know, again, mine are LinkedIn profiles. And if there's any potential collaboration on this work, we're always open to the possibilities. So it's really great. And, really appreciate your, you know, inviting us to the show.

Kaitlin: Thank you so much. This is a great opportunity. Thank you.

Jasen: In our show notes for Episode 42 we provided the link to connect with the team at J Alssid Associates. They recently launched a podcast titled, Work Forces, with conversations of innovators shaping the future of workforce and career prep.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!