Abstract

Brighter Edge connects underserved students and institutions with professional skills nano-modules and experienced professionals to facilitate and deepen the learning of competencies necessary to be successful in the global economy. Countless studies have confirmed the gap between the professional skills and abilities needed by employers and those taught in the classroom. Brighter Edge helps colleges and universities ensure that their graduates are ready for the workforce and career ready by providing an online program focused on developing 21st century professional skills and abilities. Because the program is competency-based and is modeled in a nano-module framework, it is flexible enough to fit seamlessly with existing curriculum or to be accessed individually on the fly. Furthermore, institutions can access a network of experienced professionals who can be invited to campus to share their experience and insight within the context of a particular competency to provide a complement to the lessons, as well as an opportunity for underserved students to connect directly with a local employer.

The minimum viable product can be found at brighteredge.org

Need

Problem #1: College graduates don’t have the professional skills and abilities they need for the workforce.

Beth graduated from college with a Bachelor of Arts and $35,000 in debt. While she was an extraordinary student, Beth still hasn’t found a job after a six month search. A
number of factors are making things especially difficult. While her classmates received guidance from their parents on how to network, draft a resume, and interview, Beth’s parents didn’t have the professional backgrounds and experiences to provide the same level of support. Additionally, Beth is having trouble connecting her experience in the classroom with the professional skills and abilities required in job openings. With nothing on the horizon, Beth starts applying to jobs that only require a high school education to make sure that she doesn’t miss a rent or loan payment. Beth is not alone. According to a May 2013 report by McKinsey & Company, half of recent graduates settle for jobs despite being overqualified.

Problem #2: Institutions don’t have the resources to change their curriculums to incorporate professional skills development resources.

Dr. Eaton is Dean of Undergraduate Education. Since his institution started tracking employment outcomes for recent graduates four years ago, things have been steadily downhill. Through interviews with local businesses and other organizations, Dr. Eaton learned that it is increasingly difficult for them to find recent graduates with the professional skills and abilities they need in entry-level employees. According to a recent poll by Gallup, few business leaders agree that colleges and universities are preparing students for the workforce, especially underserved students. Unfortunately, his attempts to change things on campus have been unsuccessful. The Provost cannot find the resources necessary for the curriculum reform effort to address the issue, and several faculty leaders have questioned whether the classroom is the right place for the subject matter.

Problem #3: Businesses and other organizations can’t find employees with the professional skills that they need to be successful in entry level positions and contribute to the company over the long-term.

Rick is the Vice President of Human Resources for a growing company. Each year, it becomes harder to fill entry-level job openings. Rick needs employees who can adapt a communication to different audiences, identify alternative solutions to problems, and think critically. While the recent graduates that interview with his company display tremendous potential, the company doesn’t have the resources to provide them with additional training. His experience is in line with a poll by Northeastern University indicating a troubling disconnect between the college campus and the workplace.

Description
Brighter Edge provides high quality, engaging professional skills curriculum that is easy for underserved students to access and develop their professional skills, for faculty to incorporate in their classes, or for institutions to offer as out-of-class learning experiences. Built in a nano-learning module structure, underserved students can have access to skill development content that is grounded in 21st century professional competencies. In order to deepen this learning experience, institutions and faculty can access a database of experienced professional as mentors or guest speakers who can provide greater real-world context on the application of these skills. The outcome is that underserved students learn skills and develop networks that will make them more successful employees or entrepreneurs.

The catalyzing idea consisted of the following components:

- A competency based educational program characterized by:
  - Nano-based learning modules
  - Non-traditional delivery (via web, app, etc.)
  - Market-relevant content
  - Corporate/employer partnerships
  - Easily integrated with existing institutional programs
  - Subscription-based distribution

- A mentor/speaker program characterized by:
  - Corporate/employer and institutional partnerships
  - Certification of speakers/mentors via proprietary training and certification program
  - Face-to-face delivery of presentations
  - Synchronous and asynchronous web-based delivery of presentations

The below table demonstrates our customers, and the products and services we offer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Students</th>
<th>Career-Changers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(End users)</td>
<td>This group of customers is looking to gain the skills and develop the networks they need to find jobs, start businesses and generally convert their education and experience into opportunity. We provide three services to these customers:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1. We provide direct training via flexible delivery methods for skill development. Training is typically delivered via web-based CBE courses, but we will pursue any avenue or technology that allows us to deliver skill training to customers.</td>
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<td>2. We facilitate networking and mentoring relationships between customers and those professionals that</td>
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<td><strong>participate as mentors/speakers in our program. These professionals interact directly with our customers, providing access to professional relationships that these customers might never otherwise have access to.</strong></td>
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<td>Higher Ed Institutions Secondary Ed Institutions  Non-Profits  <em>(Intermediary customers)</em></td>
<td>This group of customers facilitate the delivery of our services to end users that might have difficulty accessing the services on their own. The method by which we serve these customers is to make the services we provide to end users accessible to their customers, and where appropriate to integrate our end user services with programs that our intermediary customers already have in place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionals Mid-Level Org Leaders Executives Business Owners Academics/Faculty <em>(Mentors/Speakers)</em></td>
<td>This group of customers could conceivably include almost anyone with insight to offer. These are people who desire to participate in our mentors/speakers programs as speakers and mentors. We have three services that we offer to these customers which they pursue according to their goals and purposes for participating in our programs. 1. We offer opportunities to “give back” by participating as speakers and mentors in programs designed to assist underserved or underprivileged students and career-changers in developing skills that will help them pursue career and personal goals and opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers <em>(Corporate customers)</em></td>
<td>Our corporate customers are organizations, and the leaders of those organizations who may participate directly in our programs, or whose employees may participate. We offer three services to corporate customers. 1. Networking and mentoring relationships with potential employees. Participation in our programs gives representatives from our corporate customers (employers) access to potential recruits for positions in their organizations. The network or mentor relationship gives the employer much greater insight into potential employees than a traditional interview process, and corporate customers will have an opportunity to identify potential recruits through these programs.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Finance and Business Model

In this model, we plan to sell access to learning modules in a monthly and annual subscription. To start, the nano-modules will be a freemium for the first module to individual users to try and build a user base. Users who want access to additional content will pay $9.99 per month or $100 annually. Faculty and institutional subscriptions will be negotiated based on user population.

According to the BLS, there are approximately 1,267,000 postsecondary working teachers and over 21 million students based on Department of Education data, we feel that there is a significant market opportunity even if we serve only 1% of these populations.

Resources Needed

- Capital
- Website
- Learning Management System
- Curriculum
- Management (Curriculum, Employee Partnerships, Institutional Partnerships), Sales (Institutional Partnerships, Other), Marketing, Administrative Personnel (Accounting/HR, etc.), Information Technology
- Subject Matter Experts
- Production and Film
- Marketing

Differentiators

There are a plethora of options for professional skills and career development training in the market. First, we are different because we are pragmatically grounded in applicable skills. For example, we have found no training materials on how to be a participant in a conference call. It might be an overwhelming experience for a new hire to understand the basic etiquette of being an active participant in a conference call. Second, we are exceptionally affordable in the market compared to existing players. Third, we are accessible across distance and audience. Finally, we are the only provider in this space that connects practicing professionals to help deepen the learning experience.

Success Measures
Brighter Edge will measure success in several ways. First, revenue generation will be a key indicator of success. We will track the number of partner institutions and the number of students enrolled across all institutions. Additionally, we will interview employers to determine whether they are satisfied with the graduates of the program, as well as the professional skills and abilities taught by Brighter Edge. We will also send satisfaction surveys to our graduates. As we enroll more students in the program, we also will track the employment rates and time to employment of our graduates.

Assumptions/Making the Case

In recent months and years, there has been a significant focus on whether graduates are prepared for the workforce. According to a recent poll by Gallup, only 33% of business leaders agree that colleges and universities are graduating students with the skills and abilities that their business needs. A February 2014 poll by Northeastern University found that 85% of business leaders nationally believed that only some or very few recent graduates had the skills or capabilities they identified as most important. Numerous organizations, including the Society for Human Resource Management, have confirmed that many job applicants lack the skills necessary for success.

Several existing programs (Fullbridge, Koru) have confirmed that students and employers are looking for programs that teach recent graduates professional skills and abilities. However, these programs are on-the-ground, very expensive and take place post-graduation or at the end of a program, which is too late. Nor do they serve underprivileged populations. By lowering the cost of this type of program and making it accessible anytime and anywhere, Brighter Edge can make all students, regardless of their background, have the resources they need to be successful and build skills the day they enroll in college or start developing in high school.

Value

The plan is valuable to underserved students, colleges/universities and employers. It provides a means to connect the three stakeholders through the goal of developing highly useful and desirable professional skillsets in graduates and future employees.

The plan also:

- provides underserved students with highly sought-after professional skills that will assist them in transferring from college to professional life
- presents underserved students with professional role models
• offers employers the opportunity to shape curriculum and benefit from new graduates prepared with the professional and interpersonal skills they demand
• gives professionals the opportunity to “give back” to their professions as presenters, mentors and speakers
• enables universities to expand their curriculum offerings without significant major investment and development time.

Student performance is enhanced through their interaction with a competency-based curriculum that provides them with clear learning goals and real-world contexts in which to apply their learning. The flexibility of online or face-to-face delivery allows students to choose when and where they engage in learning. The nano-modules facilitate learning in short sessions or extended periods of interaction. The use of introductory videos that feature industry leaders and professionals, sharing their experiences with mastering the skills being presented, provide inspiration and motivational support for learners.

Student satisfaction is of primary interest and concern. Our goal is that students consider the content to be of quality and worthwhile to their endeavors. We also are committed to reliable delivery. We will monitor student satisfaction through course evaluations and surveys. As we update and improve, we will request feedback from all stakeholders groups.

Additional value to underserved students is delivered through Interviews with employer partners. As we grow Brighter Edge communities, students and employers will have opportunities to interact and network. This interaction may be synchronous or asynchronous and take the form of taped interviews with employers, discussions in classes, online social media interaction, and other networking activities. Through this interaction, students learn more about what employers expect of new employees, gain professional mentorship, and develop employment prospects. Employers mutually benefit in having more direct access to qualified candidates.

The plan offers a unique value proposition in that it offers a means for employers to play a more active and participatory role in curriculum review and development, beyond their current occasional capacity as consultants. In this model, employers are regularly relied upon to inform, maintain and deliver the curriculum. This gives them a vested interest in its success. Additionally, the curriculum will be routinely reviewed by other experts, including participating institutions.

This program has the potential to make a contribution to economic activity in the area of employment by preparing better qualified graduates who are ready to step into the
workforce with reduced upskilling. Such graduates will come to employers with intrapersonal and interpersonal skills required to successfully communicate, organize, adapt, problem-solve, lead and think creatively in their organizations. Such advance preparation reduces the time to employment, improves productivity and may create a competitive edge, which over time will potentially increase salaries for those with such skills, and reduce employment rates.

**Benefits**

*Students* are able to develop the professional skills and abilities necessary for success in the workforce, easing the transition into their first job after graduation and setting themselves up for long-term career success.

*Institutions* are able to improve employment outcomes for graduates with a minimal investment to integrate these lessons into their existing programs.

*Employers* can be confident that graduates of the program have the skills that they need to be successful in entry level positions and contribute to the company over the long-term.

**Impact**

Brighter Edge enables learners from underserved groups to gain mastery of the 21st century professional competencies that aren't taught in traditional higher education curricula but that are necessary for success in today's workforce. Each of these well-prepared learners represents a potential impact within her/his institution/workplace and, in the aggregate, such learners have the potential to transform entire communities. Thus, each such learner can cause a ripple, but, at scale, a great wave of change will result.

In order to determine the impact of each well-prepared learner, it is important to track the individual's progress through the entire value chain, collecting multifaceted data at each point.

For instance, within a cohort of underserved learners from a subscribing institution, we will monitor the following metrics using system analytics relative to the total number in the cohort:

- # of learners who have begun the program (logged in)
- # of learners who have demonstrated mastery of each competency
- # of learner who have completed the program
Within the institutional context, we will work with key stakeholders at the subscribing institution to compare (group to group) the program participants with current/historical underserved students on such metrics as:

- graduation rate
- GPA
- job placement within one year of graduation
- starting salary

Working with each subscribing institution we will survey past program participants and their employers (i.e., direct supervisors) during their first year of post-program employment to determine the following:

- rated relevance of each program competency to the job (self & supervisor)
- rated performance level of the past participant on each competency (self & supervisor)
- any remediation needed in any of the competency areas (self & supervisor)
- overall evaluation of employee performance (self & supervisor)
- rated likelihood of employee advancing with this employer within two years (self & supervisor)

Beyond the immediate institutional context, we will monitor:

- # of subscribing institutions (or other organizations)
- # of participating learners without a cohort
- # of individual employers in which program completers are employed

We believe that cohorts of learners from underserved populations, especially those determined by subscribing institutions as being at risk, will be best situated to take full advantage of the program’s benefits and to demonstrate maximum impact. However, the program will undoubtedly benefit everyone who participates.

At least two initial institutional pilots of 25-100 underserved students each is anticipated as a starting point. Given the institutional support structures and relationships associated with these cohorts, a completion rate of at least 50% is not unreasonable. At a small scale implementation (e.g., 10 subscribing institutions with cohorts of 100 students each) similar rates will produce at least 500 individuals well-prepared with 21st century professional skills and employed successfully in jobs with promising career paths.
Summary

Brighter Edge is affordable, accessible and relevant to underserved learner needs, and there really are no options in the marketplace that meet all of these criteria. With a focus on student centered design, the nano-module approach will enable users to access learning in a variety of modalities and experience to best fit their needs. The literature, as well as the success of start-ups in this space, is evidence that there is a need for this type of business. Leveraging technology to scale and drive costs down, and engaging employers and experts to share their experiences ensures a high quality, relevant learner experience. This model levels the playing field for underserved populations who need to build professional skills to be competitive, and supports institutions and employers by producing graduates who are truly career ready.

References


Bernanke, Ben S. (Feb. 6, 2007). “The Level and Distribution of Economic Well-Being.” Speech given to the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Omaha, NE.


