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COMMENTARY

# Person-centered learning: The future is here and it's not pretty, but it can be

Keaton A. Fletcher[1] and Alexis R. Kennedy[2]

[1]Psychology Department, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, USA and [2]Master of Public Policy and Administration Program, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, USA
**Corresponding author:** Keaton A. Fletcher; Email: keaton.fletcher@colostate.edu

Although Beier et al. (2025) make a great effort to highlight the unique position of vulnerable workers, and some of the potential implications of facilitating "a more general pattern of organizations shifting the onus of their otherwise traditional 'duty of care' responsibilities . . . onto employees themselves" (p. 24) we argue that the implications of "a person-centered perspective on workplace learning" in the current sociopolitical landscape will likely come at a financial cost to both individuals and communities. In fact, discourse around secondary and postsecondary education in the United States already centers these issues. We propose principles of systemic change that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists can advocate for and can help shape and exemplify these with one possible intervention, modeled after a Colorado regional effort that supports workforce development. Our principles integrate I-O psychology, public policy, and education scholarship to address issues of inequity in the access to, and rewards of, a person-centered learning approach.

## The costs of learning

As Beier et al., highlight, historically organizations shouldered the burden of training their employees, despite the risk that better trained employees may be more competitive for jobs outside the organization. However, as the focal article suggests, economic trends and lean operating styles for organizations have shifted much of the burden of learning onto individuals. This is despite the trend toward heightened use of noncompete agreements even for entry-level workers, and other anticompetitive practices that minimize the risk of turnover (Colvin & Shierholz, 2019). One report found that in the United States in 1973, 72% of jobs required no more than a high school diploma, but that dropped to 44% by 1992 and 41% by 2010 (Carnevale et al., 2013). A separate report estimates that by 2030 this percentage will drop to 28% (Carnevale et al., 2023). At the same time, the proportion of state-subsidized higher education has been decreasing. In the 1970s, state governments covered nearly 75% of the funding for higher education, which dropped to 32% by 2003 and 23% by 2012, forcing students to shoulder the burden of the remaining tuition costs. Together these trends suggest that organizations are expecting an increasing percentage of their employees to pursue their own development to some degree prior to joining, and that the cost of sponsoring that development has increasingly fallen on the individual rather than the employer or the state.

We see a similar movement toward the privatization of K–12 public education in the United States (Baltodano, 2023), again increasing the proportion of costs to access even the most basic levels of education in the United States away from the collective community and toward individual

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families. At the same time, corporations have been increasingly involved in education reform discussions (Fontdevila et al., 2019) largely arguing "that the public sector should subsidize job training and job preparation for the corporate sector, but that the corporate sector should not have to pay for it through taxes" (Saltman, 2014, pp. 255–256). This places the burden of job training on the community, likely at the expense of other education goals (e.g., citizenry, self-actualization, social mobility; Labaree, 1997).

With these trends in mind, there is no reason to suspect that a person-centered approach to learning would result in equitable access or outcomes in the current sociopolitical landscape. It is clear that given current trends, individuals already are more financially responsible for their learning than they were 50 years ago, and that a further change toward person-centered learning will accelerate this shift. Moreover, this shift, as Beier et al., highlight, means that greater proportions of the population will be unable to access necessary educational opportunities to advance their careers and lives, especially from a global perspective. This is exacerbated by policy decisions that further burden disadvantaged communities (e.g., primarily funding public education through local property taxes, which tend to be regressive, meaning lower income areas pay higher effective property tax rates for access to public education; Berry, 2021).

## The rewards of learning

One of the fundamental, albeit implicit, arguments presented by Beier et al., is that a person-centered approach to learning should inherently benefit individuals, focusing on their needs and goals. However, we argue that without a significant change in the sociopolitical landscape, the benefits of a person-centered approach to learning will largely be reaped by organizations, with few tangible benefits trickling down to the learners or their communities.

Evidence suggests that there is a growing gap between worker productivity and wages. Specifically, since 1979, worker productivity has grown by 81%, whereas hourly pay has only grown by 29.4% (Economic Policy Institute, 2024). Similarly, the top corporate tax rate in the United States has fallen from a high of 52% in the early 1950s to 21% today (Tax Foundation, 2021) with the largest corporations benefiting the most from decreasing taxes. Together, this suggests that corporations are not passing on increased profits to workers through wage increases nor to government entities (and thus communities) through taxes.

In addition, there are barriers that differentially limit the return on investment (ROI) for individuals paying for their learning. For example, men in the United States see a greater financial ROI from college degrees than women, and this effect is pronounced for White men compared to men from racial minorities (Hout, 2012). This could be because women and people of color are still paid less than White men (e.g., Budig et al., 2021), are less likely to be hired to leadership positions (e.g., Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023) than their White male counterparts, and experience discrimination, overtly or through micro-aggressions, at higher rates than White men (Schaeffer, 2023).

Although Beier and colleagues highlight the intrinsic value of person-centered learning, these intangible benefits alone cannot be used to justify the personal expense of (high-quality) learning experiences. We argue that this is akin to the notion of "psychic wages" and "hedonic price functions" (e.g., Lucas, 1977) in which the intrinsic and extrinsic values of a job are summed to create an overall value of the job to the employee. The idea that jobs that are high in intrinsic value (e.g., prosocial orientations) can be compensated with lower salaries because they meet other psychological needs (or in the instance of people-centered learning, education can be individually funded because it is intrinsically motivating) has negative effects, particularly for vulnerable populations. We see this commonly in prosocial professions, like nursing, teaching, or nonprofit service work, where women, racial minorities, and people from lower economic class backgrounds

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are disproportionately represented (e.g., Fang & Tilksic, 2022) and are underpaid compared to other sectors.

Applying this concept to person-centered learning, viewing learning exclusively as intrinsically valuable to the workers themselves justifies greater monetary expenditure with a disregard for the unequal financial return on investments for individuals from historically disadvantaged populations. We argue that this is an untenable solution. As such, we next outline principles that ought to guide any further shift toward person-centered learning and the role that I-O psychologists can play that does not place a greater financial burden on individuals and communities while directing financial gain exclusively toward corporations and shareholders.

## Principles to guide implementation of person-centered learning

The fundamental concern with a person-centered learning approach is that although the responsibilities for finding and paying for learning lie with the individual, and so too does some flexibility in what knowledge and skills to pursue, the decisions about what learning opportunities are available and which knowledge and skills are financially compensated are still dictated by corporations that stand to financially gain from this increased human capital. In other words, person-centered learning without structural reform is simply worker-subsidized corporate training and development. Meaningful person-centered learning must be guided, and organized, not by corporations but by communities. To benefit from the range of interests and skills, not all of which can or should be profitable for an organization, it must be communities that direct financial investment in human capital and communities that benefit from these investments.

Our first key principle is that any further shift toward person-centered learning must be largely funded by the corporations that benefit from an improved pool of human capital, not by the individuals or communities themselves. This necessitates international agreement upon a minimum additional corporate tax to avoid any efforts to tax-rate shop, which would cause a race to the bottom (Heimberger, 2021). I-O psychologists can work in interdisciplinary teams to help facilitate this goal, arguing for the utility of this tax and proposing best practices for any training or development initiatives that would benefit from the proceeds of this increased tax revenue.

Our second key principle is that decision making about learning and development needs, although person centered, should be planned by communities akin to industrial planning and policy (Tucker, 2019). The degree to which this human-development planning occurs at local/regional/national/international levels likely will vary depending on the needs. However, it is critical that although these needs may be informed by corporate interests, they are not exclusively driven by corporate interests. Many skills that are necessary for communities to thrive are simply not profitable in the modern economy. I-O psychologists can work to inform training needs at all levels of decision making from individuals to international workforce planning. Here we suggest that I-O psychologists broaden their scope of practice from facilitating the needs of organizations to facilitating the needs of communities.

Our third key principle is that opportunities for learning and development should be equitable. Unlike public schooling in the United States, which relies on property taxes that are entrenched in historically official racial discrimination (e.g., Cyna, 2023), any efforts to make person-centered learning accessible must be equitably driven. We suggest that any future shifts toward person-centered learning must be accompanied by efforts at an international level to direct necessary tangible resources to communities that do not have them. These resources may include high-speed internet or other traditional forms of infrastructure support, but also human capital (e.g., teachers, subject matter experts). These efforts cannot rely exclusively on local policy or taxes given historic and modern flows of capital extracted from communities toward global financial centers (e.g., Wise & Shtylla, 2007). We argue that I-O psychologists must advocate for the importance of

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systemic changes that impact equitable access to learning resources, and that I-O psychologists can themselves act as human capital when possible.

## A possible future

Ultimately, our critique of Beier et al.'s vision of the future is that much of the future they describe is already here, but much of the future they promote is unattainable given the status quo. Without a meaningful system-level shift, a further change toward person-centered approach to learning will only harm workers and communities, which, ultimately, will harm corporations. Below we give an example of the type of radical change that is already happening in communities that may be necessary to implement in a way that benefits people and communities as well as corporations. We do this by describing a new regional initiative in Northern Colorado, called "NoCo Works."

NoCo Works was formed as a way to re-energize community-informed work in support of regional workforce and economic development. In September 2022, the Larimer County and Weld County Commissioners signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to align initiatives, share data, and support regional efforts across Northern Colorado (Baun, 2023). The initiative crosses county, sector, and political lines, and is legitimized through the MOU. NoCo Works' mission is "To create an effective, efficient, and aligned talent and workforce ecosystem for NoCo that can show measurable results" (p. 4). Their vision is, "A regional coalition to foster an inclusive and economically healthy community." Their guiding pillars include, "Support NoCo employers in attracting, retaining and growing their workforce," "Support workforce (future and current) in obtaining and retaining Quality Jobs in NoCo," and "Support NoCo ecosystem to improve the prosperity of our talent and workforce systems" (Baun, 2023, p. 4).

Once launched, NoCo Works developed a steering committee made up of members from public agencies, private companies, educational institutions, foundations, and the nonprofit sector, and launched six subcommittees (Business Resources, Economic Inclusion, External Barriers, Talent Pipeline, Training & Development, and Work-Based Learning) tasked with organizing, facilitating, and creating content and products to support employers and talent. Of these six subcommittees, the most relevant to the topic of this paper is Training & Development. Launched in August 2023, the Training & Development subcommittee includes 43 members across Northern Colorado organizations working together to "Create regional access for businesses to provide training and development opportunities to Northern Colorado's labor force, including both incumbent employees and job seekers. This includes upskilling and reskilling through access to certifications and credentials, as well as customized soft skills and technical skills training" (p. 8). In the first year of their work, this subcommittee has focused on understanding the spectrum of needs across mainly private sector businesses and creating guides to training and professional development resources for companies and their employees to leverage.

Although in its early stages, through community-engaged and facilitated discussions and work, NoCo Works offers an exciting and community-led approach to dealing with the professional development and training gap corporations and individuals are seeking to fill. What is promising here is that NoCo Works is attacking this issue together, without expecting or requiring individuals or businesses to do it alone. On the contrary, NoCo Works has been successful because of the sweat equity and commitment provided by individuals and organizations across sectors who together are working to support workforce development regionally and strengthen the Northern Colorado ecosystem.

We argue that NoCo Works provides an initial example of what communities can pursue to facilitate an intentional further shift toward person-centered learning. By housing these conversations in the community, and ensuring the presence of multiple stakeholders (not just private companies), initiatives like NoCo Works can help communities gain the human capital they need while also furthering personal development for community members, all with a wider range of criteria of concern than if these initiatives were led solely by private companies. Certainly,

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other initiatives like this will need to grapple with the degree to which business needs are considered, funding sources, democratic governance, international economic patterns, and many other unforeseen challenges; but at least as a first step we believe that this community-led initiative works to shift some power in person-centered learning from private companies to communities and individuals.

## Conclusion

Overall, we appreciate the attention Beier and colleagues paid toward vulnerable populations and possible consequences of person-centered learning, but we argue that we must think bigger and go further. We show that the current sociopolitical landscape has already enacted person-centered learning in ways that extract financial resources from individuals and communities for the gain of corporate interests. We propose three guiding principles for system-level changes that would be necessary to implement further person-centered learning in a way that benefits individuals and communities instead. And we provide a possible example of an intervention that could embody these principles. We hope that I-O psychologists keep in mind who pays the costs of person-centered learning and who receives the financial benefits.

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