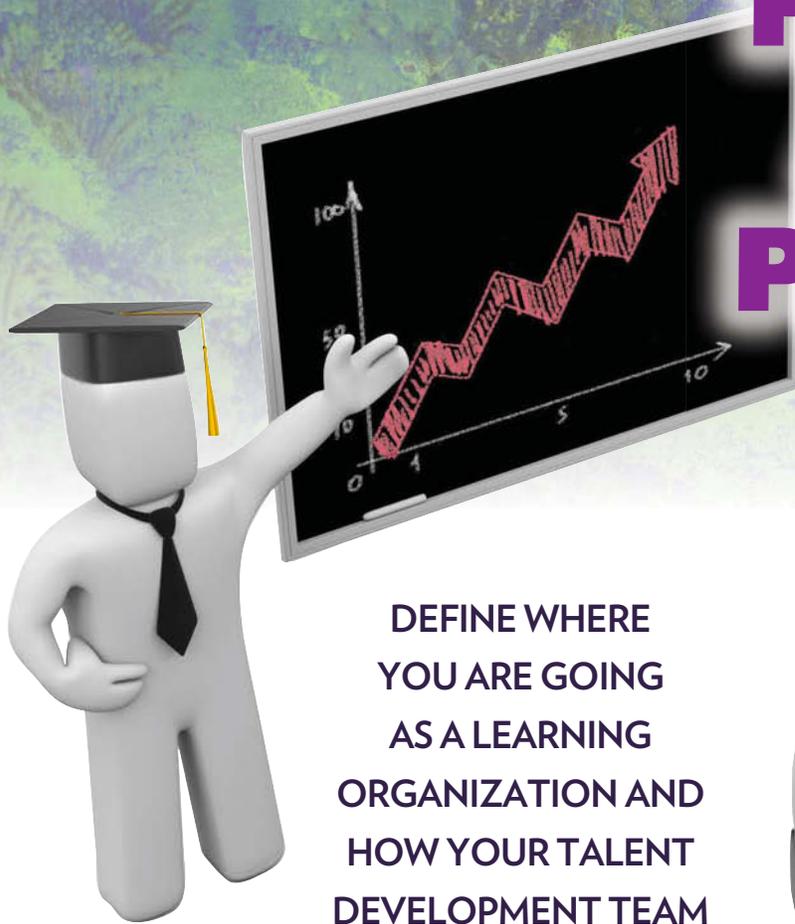


# Developing High Impact Academia Partnerships



DEFINE WHERE YOU ARE GOING AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION AND HOW YOUR TALENT DEVELOPMENT TEAM WILL SUPPORT THIS DIRECTION.



BY LARRY LOOKER, GRETCHEN PAYNE & KEE MENG YEO

**B**ring up the subject of partnerships between corporations and academic institutions in a learning community discussion and there is a good chance the discussion will quickly move to tuition reimbursement programs or some form of specially designed academic degree-granting programs. While these are not unimportant, they miss out on the potential strategic benefits a well-structured corporate-academia partnership can provide both the organization and the institution. The focus on tuition reimbursement and degree granting

programs is also somewhat academia-centric, not that there is anything specifically “wrong” with that (in the spirit of full disclosure, one of the co-authors of this article is on the Advisory Boards of two academic institutions). In addition, some “traditional” universities have tended to shun discussions with corporations outside of their degree programs for fear of tarnishing their academic reputations, and as a result both the organization and the institution miss out on the benefits a well-designed corporate-academia partnership can provide.

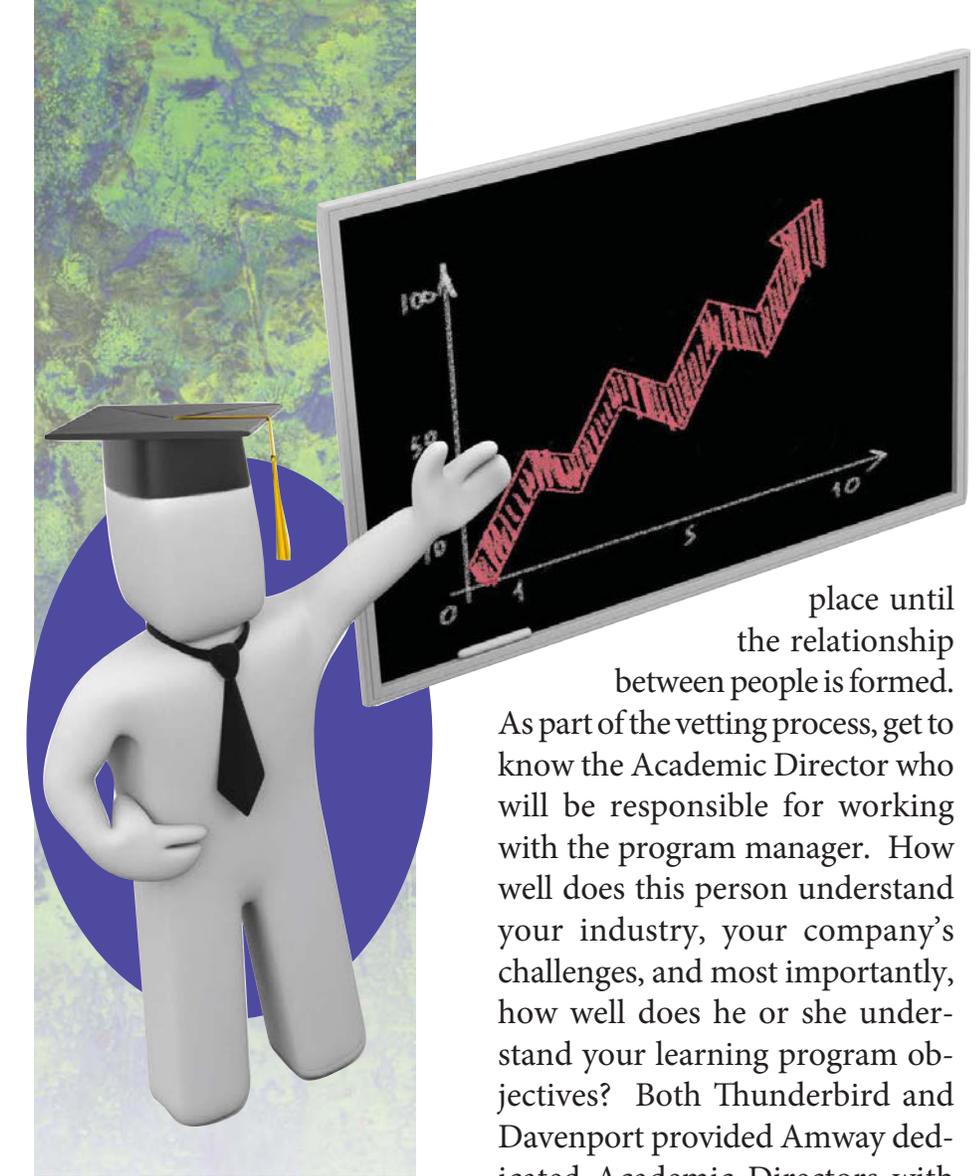
In this article, using two award-winning leadership development programs as a basis, we will share lessons and insights we have gained at Amway through building a strategic partnership with Davenport University and the Thunderbird School of Global Management to move past traditional tuition reimbursement and degree granting programs.

### **1. Know Who You Are and Where You Want to Go**

Before you begin your search for a strategic academic partner it is important to establish your own internal learning framework. A truly strategic partnership between a corporation and academic institution requires first defining where you are going as a learning organization and how your talent development team will support this direction. The expertise and influence a university brings is a clear benefit of corporate/academic partnerships, but if you have not carefully constructed your own internal learning framework and partnership goals, you can easily be misdirected into an academic solution instead of a strategic business solution.

### **2. Select For Fit**

An important prerequisite to any successful corporate-academic partnership is to match your learning framework and success criteria to your partner's strengths. Doing so requires careful research and a structured evaluation process. After evaluating a number of potential partners, Amway selected Thunderbird School of Global



Management because Thunderbird already had the strategic and global mindset the program was designed to develop. Likewise, Amway partnered with Davenport University largely because of their experience with adult learning in a virtual environment. Having an academic partner that is not only able to accomplish your objectives but already excels at them is critical to true success.

### **3. Partnerships Are About People**

Finding the academic institution that fits learning needs is where many organizations stop. However, a true partnership is not in

place until the relationship between people is formed. As part of the vetting process, get to know the Academic Director who will be responsible for working with the program manager. How well does this person understand your industry, your company's challenges, and most importantly, how well does he or she understand your learning program objectives? Both Thunderbird and Davenport provided Amway dedicated Academic Directors with the capacity and vision to support the corporate partnership. These directors were consistent from design through implementation and worked closely with internal program managers to ensure a seamless alignment and execution. Many institutions do not put enough weight into corporate partnerships to enable this type of dedicated staffing. Finding an academic power with the knowledge and ability to support your learning goals makes the difference between a mediocre educational activity and a successful award-winning development program.

## **MATCH YOUR LEARNING FRAMEWORK AND SUCCESS CRITERIA TO YOUR ACADEMIC PARTNER'S STRENGTHS.**

### **4. Customize but Don't Discredit**

As you begin the process of identifying appropriate academic partners, it is critical to find an academic partner with the flexibility to fit your needs while maintaining their own academic integrity. The selected academic partner

must be willing to customize their content and delivery in a way that fits your framework and learning needs. What works for another organization via a different delivery method may not work for you. While you want an academic partner with practical corporate experience, this past success should not

limit what they are willing to do for you. Purchasing out-of-the-box solutions and retooling existing content may fill specific organizational gaps, but for the partnership to have long-term strategic impact, it needs to be aligned with your organization's specific requirements. If the academic partner is unwill-

### **The Programs**

#### **Leadership Acceleration Process (LeAP)**

The Leadership Acceleration Process (LeAP) program is a seven month, global executive development program designed to provide the next generation of Amway executives with the capabilities to lead within a global organization. Program content was determined in partnership with Thunderbird School of Global Management and Amway Global Talent Development.

LeAP is divided into three phases. Phase 1 consisted of the pre-work, assessments, and eight days on the Thunderbird campus in Glendale, Ariz. Phase 2 requires the participants to work in global virtual teams to solve a real-life business challenge. Phase 3 concludes the program at Amway Corporation World Headquarters in Ada, Mich.

Thunderbird is directly involved in all three phases. Thunderbird provides academic instruction in Phase 1 and 3. In Phase 2, the academic director partners with Amway's director of Global Talent Development to provide consultative support and guidance to the global virtual teams on solving the business challenge.

LeAP was recognized by Bersin & Associates as a 2010 Learning Leader in Leadership Development Excellence.

#### **Global Leadership Development Program (GLCP)**

The Global Leadership Development Program (GLCP) is a global eight month, blended virtual leadership development program. Designed in partnership with Davenport University and using Harvard Business Publishing's Harvard ManageMentor product, the GLCP provides first-line managers with the core, common and critical skills needed to be effective people leaders.

Davenport's partnership with Amway included designing a customized four-week learning cycle that repeated five times throughout the program. Learning takes place using an Amway-specific Blackboard site where participants use discussion boards, live classroom technology, group sites and chat functions to interact virtually. Davenport also provides two dedicated instructors to teach the live web classes and provide coaching and discussion-board feedback during the program.

GLCP was recognized by Corp U as a winner of the Corporate University Xchange Award for Excellence and Innovation.



## CORPORATE-ACADEMIA PARTNERSHIPS OFFER REAL BENEFITS TO A LEARNING ORGANIZATION.

ing or unable to customize to fit your unique requirements, keep looking. While customization is important for the partnership's success to be sustainable, it must benefit both partners. Therefore, a strong corporate academic partnership is careful not to customize to the point where it harms the academic integrity of the institution. Instead, it uses the academic institutions' integrity as a point of differentiation and success.

### 5. Empower the Partnership

Once you have identified the right partner, it is critical you trust the partnership and allow your partner to do what they do best. Academic partnerships allow organizations to leverage new resources, add capacity to your learning organization and generate external credibility. So once you have established the strong partnership, allow the institution to use its expertise to develop your employees. While an element of corporate involvement throughout the process is important, it is just as important to not micromanage the process. Amway remains closely involved in both academic programs but allows the institutions the freedom to continually evolve and improve the process. The program managers and academic directors meet

annually to evaluate their programs and discuss lessons learned and opportunities for continuous improvement. It is only through this collaborative approach, not a prescriptive relationship, that the power of a corporate-academic partnership can be fully realized.

### Conclusion

It is clear that corporate-academia partnerships offer real benefits to a learning organization. Along with the traditional tuition-reimbursement and degree-granting programs, these partnerships can help you achieve your strate-

### Takeaways

If your organization is considering forming a partnership with an academic institution beyond the traditional tuition reimbursement programs or a specially designed academic degree-granting program, consider the advice from Amway Corporation. Amway recognized there are five keys to forming a successful partnership.

1. Start by establishing your own internal learning framework linked to your organization's strategy. Know the role of the learning staff and how they will support the partnership.
2. Select the academic institution based on how well their strengths fit your learning needs.
3. Consider the academic director in the partnership. This person translates your objectives into actions and ensures the academic institution provides you the best resources to meet your needs.
4. Consider customization but make sure it works for both you and the academic partner.
5. And finally, allow the partnership to flourish; work together and allow both parties to help each other provide the students the best possible learning experience.

gic learning goals and fulfill your learning framework. But doing so requires intentional planning and forethought.

*The authors are from Amway Corporation. Kee Meng Yeo is director, Global Talent Development; Larry Looker is manager, Global Leadership Development and LeAP program manager; and Gretchen Payne is senior leadership development specialist and GLCP program manager. E-mail the [authors](#).*



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