



ELISE AWWAD

CEO > DeVry University

Client Overview

- > DeVry University, a private institution, offers pre-professional undergraduate and graduate programs, serving 30,000 students annually with nearly \$1B in revenues.
- > DeVry offers flexible learning options, including online and oncampus courses, in fields such as technology, business, healthcare, and liberal arts.
- > The university emphasizes tech-forward and pre-professional skills to ensure graduates excel in their careers and contribute to organizational success.
- > The former COO, now CEO, of DeVry has been a GENERATE member since September 2021.
- > DeVry has long been at the forefront of online higher education. At DeVry, virtual learning helps students fit education into their lives. Since offering its first internet-based courses more than 20 years ago, DeVry has continuously evolved its digital tools and resources to ensure all students have everything they need for a customized learning experience.

Case Study

Galvanizing Innovation in response to a competitive threat.

PROBLEM

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed lockdowns, reduced enrollments, and accelerated the adoption of online learning for higher education worldwide. Since early 2021, at least 113 colleges and universities in the United States have closed, merged, or announced plans to do so. Higher education institutions have faced the challenge of adapting their business models to remain competitive and financially stable.

CHALLENGE

INNOVATION: Identify opportunities for DeVry to maintain its leadership in online higher education through innovation.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE/CULTURE: Inspire and implement product and organizational changes quickly despite industry and institutional resistance.

College Closure Sources:

Giving Compass,
The Hechinger Report

Despite the rapid pace of external change, people are rooted in their beliefs. It leaves higher education institutions like DeVry vulnerable to external disruption if they do not change, according to Elisa Awwad, CEO of DeVry.

SOLUTION



BROADENED PERSPECTIVES/ NETWORK OF PEERS

As COO at the time, Elise Awwad had few people to turn to other than her own CEO to help guide her through the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. She joined the CNEXT Generate program to gain access to a group of fellow senior executives and former CEOs. This allowed her to discuss her challenges in an open and confidential environment, gaining the needed insight, expertise, and guidance.

IMPLEMENTATION



INNOVATION/STRATEGY

The first change Elise implemented based on learnings from CNEXT sessions was adopting a more outside-in approach to innovation. She helped shift the leadership team's focus from internal curriculum design to considering how technologies and external trends impacted the disruptions brought on by COVID-19. The team ensured that all decisions were backed by external market research and key stakeholder insights. This approach proved especially effective when presenting strategy proposals to the board, enabling them to secure the funding and resources needed to drive their transformation programs.

PRACTICAL TOOLS AND TACTICS

As she was onboarded to the program, the member services team helped Elise collect successful examples of new approaches to innovation, transformation, and team alignment by connecting her with the right CEO mentors and peer members. She was able to share insights and new frameworks with her leadership team and her CEO, and together they figured out how to apply these to the unique environment at DeVry University.

RESULTS



ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY

DeVry's strategy execution accelerated, saving time and money while driving more robust decision making and better alignment across all stakeholders. Functional leaders began sacrificing their budget allocations for internal 'nice-to-haves' in favor of investments in the broader company strategy. This resulted in over \$500K in reallocated investments.



PERSONAL GROWTH

In 2023, Elise was appointed CEO of DeVry University. She partly attributes the promotion to the success of her projects as COO and the increased confidence she gained from her exposure to CEO mentors and peer members. Discussions with female CEOs in the Generate sessions were particularly influential in helping her to understand her potential as a CEO.



CULTURE/TALENT WINS

Teams showed greater motivation to tackle problems and overcome challenges, and Elise noted higher employee engagement and better Glassdoor ratings, saving over \$250K in recruiting costs.



Elise remains a member of the Generate program and continues to benefit from the shared knowledge and support of her peers and our CEO and SME networks, while also offering her own knowledge and support to other members of the program.