

LEARNING SOCIETY

FOUNDING DOCUMENT

Toward a New Paradigm for Lifelong
Learning

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Convened by
Stanford University

In partnership with the
Stanford Center on Longevity

Summary

Learning Society is a field-building research and narrative project advocating a paradigm shift in how the United States invests in people: from school-centered models built around formal classroom instruction leading to academic credentials in the first quarter of life, to learning centered models recognizing that human talent grows everywhere and across the entire arc of the life course.

Learning Society supports applied science to better identify, measure, and enable human learning wherever it occurs; fosters experiments and innovations that blur the boundaries between educational and other life experiences; and encourages strategies for sharing investments in human learning among all who benefit from those investments.

Motivation & Project Origins

Our national human-capital system was built on a limiting idea that no longer serves us: that education happens primarily in the first 25 years of life within organizations called schools.

People learn in every domain of life: at work, at play, in community, and at worship as well as in school. People also are now living and working longer and can anticipate changing jobs and careers many times. At the same time, the needs and structure of workplaces are shifting rapidly. From artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies to demographic and geopolitical shifts, we are in the early phases of a new era with yet untold impacts on the nature of work and indeed all of life.

Learning Society seeks to build a future in which everyone can learn and grow throughout their lives; where all kinds of learning count, not just school credentials; and where all who benefit from a skilled and resilient workforce invest in sustaining it.

We call our effort Learning Society to distinguish it from the “schooled society” we inherited from the twentieth century. Generations of America’s business and civic leaders built schools, colleges and universities with the ambition of enabling human flourishing in a steadily industrializing world. Creating a nation of schools was a great and noble accomplishment, yet in our own time schools alone will not enable the continuous learning and adaptation that revolutionary technological change and lengthening lifespans require.

Moving from a schooled society to a learning society will enable us to recognize workplaces, homes, and civic organizations as vital sites of learning alongside schools; and to hone technologies and business models that convey learning more equitably, flexibly, and affordably than ever before.

Learning Society emerges from a series of national dialogues anchored at Stanford University and sponsored by the Stanford Center on Longevity in 2024-2025, purposed with developing a national vision for investing in people appropriate for our time. Beginning with a core group of 33 people, the dialogue expanded over the course of the year to include input from leaders in over 100 education, business, and civic organizations nationwide.

Mission & Strategic Goals

Learning Society connects practitioners and researchers across education institutions, businesses, nonprofits, philanthropies, and governments. It has three goals:

1) Advance a paradigm shift in America's human-capital strategy from schooling to learning.

The expansion of schools and school credentials was a signal accomplishment of the twentieth century. Yet today, inherited school models constrain innovation in learning and obscure recognition of many other ways of enabling it. While schools remain cherished civic assets, they must be seen as only partial components of a learning infrastructure suitable for the needs and possibilities of our own time. Seeding a shared vision for what to build next, and why, is Learning Society's first priority.

2) Cross-pollinate knowledge and wisdom across currently fragmented human-capital sectors.

Our predecessors in the twentieth century divided educational programs, policies, and research into separate sectors: early childhood, K12, higher education, and "lifelong learning" for adults; corporate learning; workforce development; education technology. While useful for enabling specialized expertise, these divisions are at odds with the deeply cumulative character of investments in people. They also artificially restrict innovation and cross-fertilization across work in different contexts. Through its own research, as well as synthetic integration of emerging science, practice, and wisdom worldwide, Learning Society develops an integrated, holistic, and expansive understanding of human learning in every domain of life and throughout the life course.

3) Seed a networked learning sector.

Experts in K12 education, higher education, corporate learning, workforce development, and edtech do not currently see themselves as members of the same professional community. Divides of terminology, conventional wisdom, career trajectories, and status substantially inhibit cooperation. Learning Society integrates and transcends these twentieth-century divisions by enabling relationships, joint ventures, and professional-development opportunities among a wide plurality of learning leaders.

Our Work

While our sectors do not lack for conferences and convenings, we see a market gap to be filled in efforts that connect individuals and organizations across sectors in service of research-based work. In service of this goal, our work will focus on three primary areas of activity as we begin, with an eventual fourth area:

Research. Learning Society is a catalyst for collaborative research. We publish and co-publish original, data-informed insights that receive ongoing review from a steadily growing web of experts in a range of fields.

Curation. We synthesize disparate efforts across currently divided learning sectors. We also provide expert peer review, helping to validate and refine emerging models of learning delivery, measurement, and investment before and while they scale. All content on learningsociety.io is subject to peer review and ongoing revision as knowledge grows.

Connections. We provide a substantive and porous network for “boundary spanners,” enabling collaborations between academic researchers, businesspeople, civic leaders, educational practitioners, and employers who are building the future of learning.

Policy. Learning Society synthesizes insights generated by the network into actionable concepts and data-driven frameworks specifically designed for policymakers at the local, state, and federal level.

We will focus our initial energy and efforts on three core focus areas related to learning across the life course:

Learning delivery

- What are promising new models for expanding sites of learning across workplaces, communities, and schools? How might legacy delivery models be renewed and transformed?
- How can we integrate and harmonize learning that happens in multiple contexts?
- How can we harness new technologies to enable all of the above?

Learning measurement

- How best to measure learning beyond credential attainment and spur cultural change toward honoring non-credentialed learning?
- How should we instrument for measuring learning accumulation across the life course?
- Recognizing that measurement is a collective-action problem, how do we create incentives for cooperation among the many organizations that deliver and seek to recognize learning?

Learning investment

- How best to distribute the cost of providing human learning among all who benefit? What are possible models for sharing learning investments among government, business, philanthropy, and individuals/households?
- How best to provide incentives for beneficiaries of learning to help shoulder costs?

The intended audiences of Learning Society's work are:

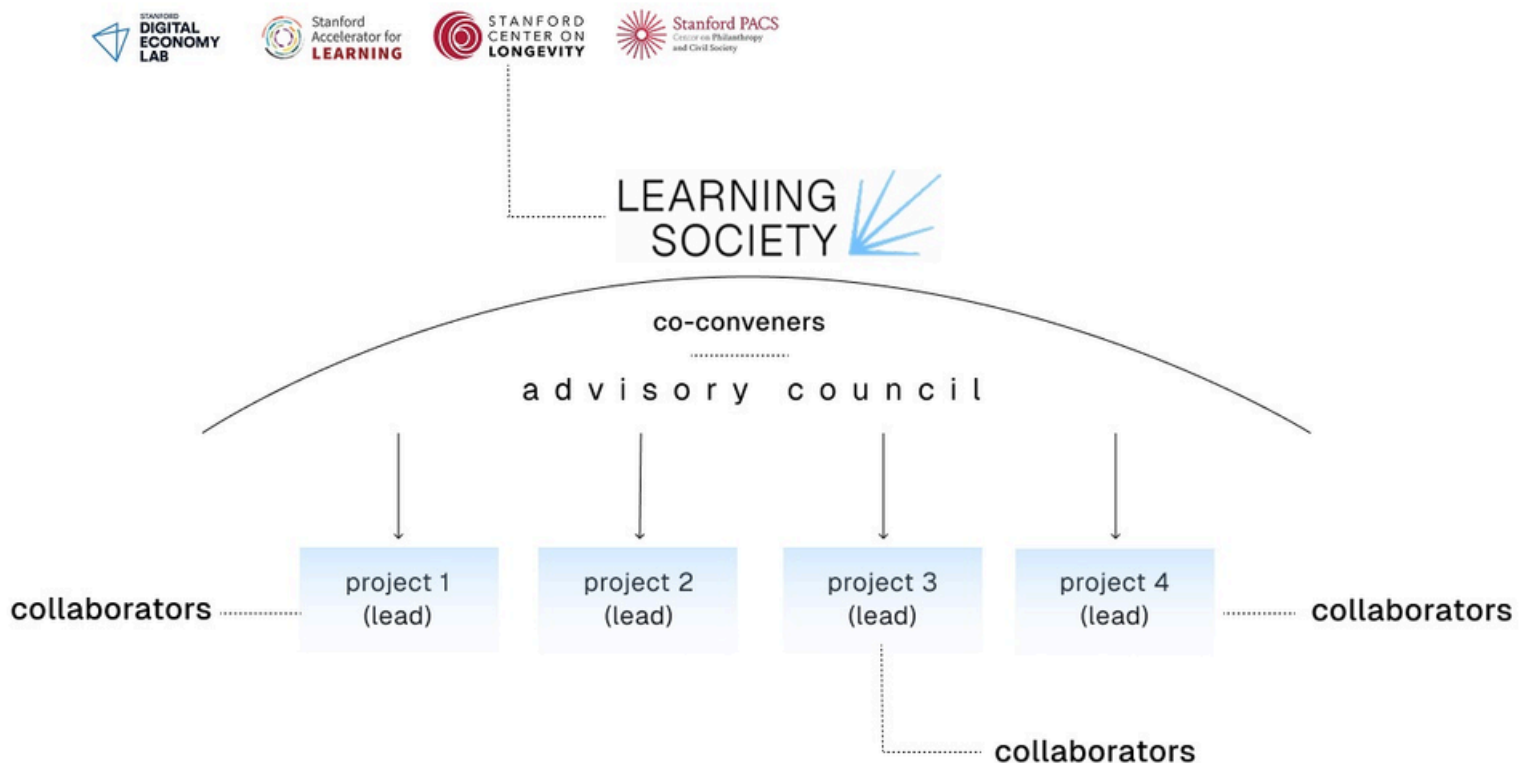
- Professionals in higher education, corporate learning, and workforce development seeking well-curated, cutting-edge knowledge and actionable strategies to guide change in their respective organizations
- Decision-makers in philanthropy and government seeking insight to inform investments and policy development
- Early-career professionals and graduate students in the emerging learning sector who must keep current with the state of knowledge and practice in a rapidly evolving domain
- The wider public of learners who are seeking to navigate their own futures

Organizational Structure

Learning Society (LS) is convened by Stanford University. Its fiduciary agent is the Stanford Center on Longevity, (SCL) which also provides academic oversight. Stanford / SCL also provide operational support for LS and retain third parties to provide capacity and targeted expertise where appropriate.

LS has a Lead Convener who is a tenured member of the Stanford faculty. LS may name additional Co-Conveners from within or beyond Stanford. LS also sustains an Advisory Council of people with expertise, experience, and wisdom in various domains of the emerging learning sector. Advisory Council members serve as contributors and peer reviewers to LS projects and other thought leadership produced, promoted, or otherwise advanced by the Learning Society.

LS is designed to be an umbrella organization, connecting a variety of endeavors within, beyond, and in collaboration with Stanford. To enable this, LS has a “Project” mechanism in which named “Project Conveners” or “Project Co-Conveners” take lead responsibility for specific lines of work and inquiry. LS welcomes named and anonymous sponsors to support its work as a project of civic enrichment.



Our Values: What We Believe

1. The schooled society Americans built to nurture human talent in the twentieth century is ill-suited for a world of rapid technological change and hundred-year lifespans. To flourish forward, we must transition to a learning society in which talent development happens everywhere and is continuous, accessible, and enjoyable at every age.
2. Learning is an essential civic good and a shared responsibility among government, employers, learning businesses, and civil-society organizations in tandem with legacy schools.
3. Learning happens everywhere: at work, at home, at play, and at worship as well as in school. We value and seek to capture evidence of learning wherever it occurs.
4. Learning delivers a dual return-on-investment: it drives economic prosperity by fueling workforce productivity, and it sustains healthy societies by fostering the resilience, purpose, and informed engagement in civic life.
5. We honor and utilize the capacity of our legacy schools and universities while also encouraging radically new models of learning designed specifically for our time.
6. For adults especially, learning must be incorporated into the rhythms of the rest of life, not the other way around. Learning can and should be designed to accommodate the realities of paid work and caregiving.
7. The enablement of human potential is well served by a cumulative science of learning. We are dedicated to identifying, measuring, and validating learning through rigorous research and evidence-based practice.
8. Equality of opportunity requires holistic measures of learning, competence, and potential. Educational credentials that are mere proxies of these values deepen social division and undermine the integrity of the learning enterprise.
9. Technology should augment human capacity, not replace it. While digital tools are powerful catalysts for scale and access, they must be designed to enhance human intelligence, agency, dignity, and social connection rather than undermining them.
10. In a time of rapidly evolving technological change, conceptions of essential human learning and skill must continually evolve.