

Life-Integrated Learning:

Reimagining Higher Education from the Unit Level Toward a New American Polytechnic

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[Executive Summary](#)

[The Case for Change: Misalignment and the Implementation Gap
From Transactional Education to Life-Integrated Learning](#)

[Defining the Shift](#)

[Core Principles: Life-Integrated Learning](#)

[Design Drivers](#)

[System Outcomes](#)

[From Model to Practice: A Unit-Level Implementation Framework](#)

[Design Area 1: Understand the Learner and Industry Context](#)

[Design Area 2: Align Academic Identity](#)

[Design Area 3: Design for Structured Flexibility](#)

[Design Area 4: Align Modality with Purpose](#)

[Design Area 5: Embed Industry into the Learning Environment](#)

[From Design to System Outcomes](#)

[Case Study: Implementing Life-Integrated Learning in TPS/GIT](#)

[Design Area 1: Understanding the Learner and Industry Context](#)

[Design Area 2: Aligning Academic Identity](#)

[Design Area 3: Structured Flexibility](#)

[Design Area 4: Modality by Design](#)

[Design Area 5: Embedded Industry Engagement](#)

[Key Takeaways](#)

[The Vision: The Polytechnic Innovation Zone \(PIAZ\)](#)

[From Unit-Level Design to System-Level Integration](#)

[Embedded Industry at Scale](#)

[A Continuous Learning Ecosystem](#)

[A Walkable, Integrated Community](#)

[Entrepreneurship and Applied Learning](#)

[The Lifelong Learning Loop](#)

[What PIAZ Represents](#)

[Conclusion: Leadership Through Implementation](#)

[References](#)

Executive Summary

Higher education is increasingly misaligned with the realities of modern student life. Rising concerns about affordability, career outcomes, and mental well-being are prompting students and families to question the value of a college degree (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2024; Bryant, 2024). At the same time, institutional systems remain structured around a traditional student model that no longer reflects the needs of the majority of learners (AP-NORC, 2023).

While many innovations—such as online learning, hybrid delivery, and experiential education—already exist, they are often implemented inconsistently and without systemic integration (HEQCO, 2020). As a result, students must navigate fragmented systems that do not align with their academic, professional, and personal responsibilities.

This paper argues that the central challenge facing higher education is not a lack of innovation, but a failure of implementation—an issue that aligns with broader calls for systemic redesign within the New American University framework (Crow & Dabars, 2015).

Using The Polytechnic School (TPS) at Arizona State University as a context—and the Graphic Information Technology (GIT)¹ program as a pilot case—this paper proposes a **Life-Integrated Learning model**. This model begins at the academic unit level, where curriculum, structure, and student experience are directly shaped.

The paper outlines a unit-level implementation strategy, beginning with aligning program identity to learner and industry expectations, followed by redesigning delivery systems. It also presents a future-state vision—the **Polytechnic Innovation Zone (PIZAZ)**²—as an integrated ecosystem where learning, work, and life coexist across a learner's lifetime.

The Case for Change: Misalignment and the Implementation Gap

Higher education is at a critical moment of transformation. Students and families are increasingly evaluating the value of a college degree, weighing rising costs against uncertain career outcomes. Recent data shows that only one-third of students believe college is worth the cost, while 62% of Americans report that financial barriers limit access (Bryant, 2024). At the same time, concerns about employment persist, with approximately 40–45% of recent graduates underemployed early in their careers (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2024).

A growing mental health crisis compounds these concerns. 90% of students report experiencing frequent stress, with financial pressure identified as a major contributing factor (Ipsos, 2024;

¹ The Graphic Information Technology (GIT) program in The Polytechnic School of the Fulton Schools of Engineering is in the process of transforming to the Visual and Interactive Media (VIM) program.

² The [ASU Polytechnic Innovation Zone](#) is in development. I have expanded its vision here and added the AZ to the acronym so it could be branded as PIZAZ (read "pizzazz").

TimelyMD, 2022). Together, these trends reflect a broader erosion of confidence in higher education's ability to deliver value.

At the same time, the profile of today's student has shifted significantly. Many learners are balancing coursework with employment, caregiving, and other responsibilities, yet institutional systems continue to reflect assumptions of full-time availability and flexibility (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2023).

This disconnect reveals a deeper structural issue: higher education is not designed for the realities of modern student life.

The traditional model remains constrained by:

- **Time-bound structures**, including fixed semesters and rigid pacing
- **Place-bound delivery**, centered on physical campus attendance
- **Degree-bound pathways**, emphasizing linear progression

While these structures historically supported scale, they now limit flexibility, access, and responsiveness.

More fundamentally, the traditional model operates as a transactional system. Students enter, complete a prescribed sequence of courses, earn a degree, and exit. The relationship between the learner and the institution is largely time-bound and outcome-specific, with value concentrated at the point of graduation.

This transactional structure is increasingly misaligned with the realities of modern careers, which require continuous learning, reskilling, and adaptation over time. As industries evolve and professional pathways become less linear, the expectation that education occurs within a fixed, four-year window no longer reflects how learning is needed or experienced.

Importantly, higher education is not lacking in innovation. Over the past two decades, institutions have introduced asynchronous learning, hybrid and HyFlex delivery, experiential education, and competency-based pathways.

However, their impact has been limited by how they are implemented.

Rather than being integrated into cohesive systems, these innovations are typically applied in isolation—confined to specific modality-driven pathways, such as immersion or online. As a result, students are forced to choose a modality before they can choose a program.

Examples such as competency-based education models demonstrate that flexibility can scale but also reveal tradeoffs in student support and engagement when systems are not intentionally designed (Western Governors University, 2023).

The central challenge facing higher education is not a lack of innovation but a failure of implementation.

This shift reframes higher education from a system students attend to one that **integrates into the flow of their lives**.

From Transactional Education to Life-Integrated Learning

Life-Integrated Learning is a system design approach that aligns academic structures with the realities of learners' lives across time.

Rather than treating education as a discrete phase with a defined beginning and end, this model positions the university as a lifelong partner, supporting learners from initial enrollment through career progression, transitions, and leadership development.

The traditional model assumes learning is finite. Modern life demands that it be continuous.

In the traditional system, students enter, complete a prescribed sequence of courses, earn a degree, and exit. The value of the institution is concentrated at the point of graduation. In contrast, Life-Integrated Learning extends the relationship between learner and institution across decades, aligning with the concept of a "60-year curriculum," in which learning evolves in response to changing workforce and life demands (Crow & Dabars, 2015).

Defining the Shift

The distinction between these models is not simply one of delivery but of design.

Dimension	Traditional Model	Life-Integrated Learning Model
Structure	Fixed semesters, rigid pacing	Flexible pathways with structured consistency
Scheduling	Fragmented, time-inefficient	Block-based, aligned with life responsibilities
Modality	One-size-fits-all or siloed	Intentionally designed (async + high-value in-person)

Student Role	Full-time, institution-centered	Integrated learner balancing work, life, and study
Faculty Role	Content delivery and evaluation	Learning designer, mentor, and facilitator
Industry Relationship	External, episodic (internships)	Embedded, continuous collaboration
Credentialing	Degree-bound, linear	Stackable, flexible, lifelong pathways
Alumni Relationship	Transactional, post-graduation	Continuous engagement across career milestones
Value Proposition	Degree as endpoint	Learning as ongoing, career-integrated process

At its core, Life-Integrated Learning is not defined by a single innovation but by the intentional alignment of systems.

Core Principles: Life-Integrated Learning

Life-Integrated Learning is defined by seven interconnected principles. These principles operate at two levels:

- **Design Drivers**—principles that directly shape how academic units design programs and experiences
- **System Outcomes**—principles that emerge over time as a result of aligned systems

Design Drivers

These principles guide implementation at the academic unit level:

1. **Inclusive, Student-Centered Design**
Systems are designed around the lived experiences, goals, and constraints of learners.
2. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration**
Learning reflects the complexity of modern problems, extending across traditional disciplinary boundaries.
3. **Experiential Learning**
Students engage in applied, project-based work connected to real-world contexts.
4. **Embedded Industry Engagement**
Industry partners participate directly in curriculum, mentorship, and applied learning.
5. **Life-Aligned Scheduling**
Academic structures are intentionally designed to align with work, family, and personal responsibilities.

System Outcomes

These principles are not implemented directly but emerge from coordinated design decisions:

6. **Flexible, Competency-Based Pathways**
Students progress through adaptable pathways that support different timelines and goals. This flexibility emerges through aligned scheduling, modality, and program structure.
7. **Lifelong Learning and Re-engagement**
Learners return throughout their careers to upskill, pivot, and advance. This continuity is enabled through stackable credentials, industry integration, and sustained institutional relationships.

Together, these principles shift higher education from a **transactional system** to a **continuous, relational model of learning**.

Life-Integrated Learning is the result of aligning design decisions that enable learning to extend across the full arc of a learner's life.

From Model to Practice: A Unit-Level Implementation Framework

Life-Integrated Learning is implemented through a set of coordinated design decisions at the academic unit level.

While the principles of the model remain consistent, their application will—and should—look different across programs. Each unit operates within a unique context shaped by its discipline, student population, faculty expertise, and industry relationships.

As a result, this framework is not a prescriptive checklist but a set of **design areas** through which units can align their programs with the realities of student life.

The following design areas translate the principles of Life-Integrated Learning into actionable points of intervention³.

Design Area 1: Understand the Learner and Industry Context

(Activates: Inclusive Design, Lifelong Learning)

Effective system design begins with understanding the learners the system is intended to serve.

This includes examining the following:

- How prospective students discover and interpret the program
- How current students experience its structure
- How alumni describe their career pathways
- How industry defines relevant skills and roles

This step reveals gaps between institutional assumptions and student reality, as well as misalignment between program identity and external understanding.

Transformation begins with understanding—not redesign.

Design Area 2: Align Academic Identity

(Activates: Access, Interdisciplinary Collaboration)

Academic programs communicate their value through how they are named, structured, and presented.

Misalignment in degree names, pathways, and course titles can create barriers to access, even when curriculum quality is strong.

Key actions include:

- replacing ambiguous structures with clearly defined pathways
- using industry-aligned terminology
- simplifying curriculum to improve clarity and advising

Access is not only about availability—it is about clarity, relevance, and alignment.

Design Area 3: Design for Structured Flexibility

³ There is also a [downloadable toolkit](#) for academic units to get started.

(Activates: Life-Aligned Scheduling, Equity)

Flexibility must be intentionally structured.

Programs should design predictable, consistent schedules that align with student responsibilities, including:

- consolidated course scheduling
- consistent time blocks across semesters
- dedicated time for work, projects, and support

This approach supports a broader range of learners by balancing flexibility with necessary structure.

Flexibility is most effective when it is designed, not assumed.

Design Area 4: Align Modality with Purpose

(Activates: Experiential Learning)

Modality should be a design decision, not a default.

- **Asynchronous delivery** supports foundational knowledge and flexible access
- **In-person learning** supports high-impact, applied experiences

This ensures that time spent on campus provides clear value and supports meaningful engagement.

Modality is not a constraint—it is a design tool.

Design Area 5: Embed Industry into the Learning Environment

(Activates: Industry Engagement, Lifelong Learning)

Industry engagement must move from peripheral to integrated.

- incorporating real-world projects into coursework
- embedding mentorship and feedback into classes
- aligning work experiences with academic learning

This creates continuity between education and professional practice.

The boundary between education and industry should be continuous and mutually reinforcing.

From Design to System Outcomes

These design areas do not operate in isolation. When aligned, they produce system-level outcomes, including:

- flexible, adaptable learning pathways
- stronger alignment between education and workforce needs
- sustained engagement between learners and institutions over time

Most importantly, they enable a shift from education as a fixed, time-bound experience to learning as a continuous, integrated process.

The following case study illustrates how this framework can be applied in practice.

Case Study: Implementing Life-Integrated Learning in TPS/GIT

The implementation of Life-Integrated Learning within The Polytechnic School's Graphic Information Technology (GIT) program provides an example of how this framework can be applied at the academic unit level.

This work is ongoing. Some elements have been implemented, others are in progress, and several remain future opportunities. Rather than presenting a completed model, this case study illustrates how the design framework can guide iterative change.

Design Area 1: Understanding the Learner and Industry Context

Status: Completed

The process began by examining how the program was understood by students, alumni, and industry.

This revealed a critical misalignment:

- The curriculum was strong and industry-aligned
- The program's identity was not

The term *Graphic Information Technology* lacked industry recognition and did not clearly communicate career pathways. As a result, many students struggled to find the program, with a significant number entering as transfer students despite high retention and graduation rates once enrolled.

This insight reframed the problem—not as one of curriculum quality, but of **alignment between program identity and audience understanding**.

Design Area 2: Aligning Academic Identity

Status: Initiated

Rather than redesigning content, faculty focused on aligning the program's identity with industry and student expectations.

This included:

- renaming courses using industry-relevant terminology
- replacing “focus areas” with clearly defined concentrations
- aligning degree names with recognizable career pathways
- simplifying curriculum structure for clarity and advising

These changes resulted in the development of the **Visual & Interactive Media (VIM)** degree framework, which more accurately reflects the interdisciplinary and applied nature of the program.

A similar shift occurred in the graduate program, where the primary audience—working professionals—was centered in the design of flexible, course-based pathways and stackable credentials.

This phase aims to demonstrate that alignment, not reinvention, can significantly improve access and clarity.

Design Area 3: Structured Flexibility

Status: Emerging

With identity aligned, the next phase focuses on redesigning how learning is structured.

A proposed block-based schedule includes:

- courses held between 9:00 AM and 1:15 PM, Monday through Thursday
- afternoons reserved for internships, project work, advising, and personal responsibilities
- consistent scheduling patterns across semesters

This model aims to reduce fragmentation and better align academic schedules with student life. Implementation is ongoing, with continued evaluation of feasibility, faculty workload, and student outcomes.

Design Area 4: Modality by Design

Status: Emerging

Efforts are underway to more intentionally align modality with learning objectives.

This includes:

- shifting foundational content to asynchronous delivery
- reserving in-person time for labs, critique, and collaborative work

While elements of this approach are already present, full alignment across courses remains in development.

Design Area 5: Embedded Industry Engagement

Status: Emerging

The program has a strong history of industry engagement through advisory boards and applied coursework. Current efforts are focused on deepening this relationship by:

- increasing industry participation in course design and critique
- aligning internships more directly with academic pathways
- exploring more consistent, embedded forms of industry engagement

These efforts represent a shift from **episodic interaction** to **continuous integration**, with future potential for expanded partnership models.

Key Takeaways

Several insights have emerged from this process:

- The most immediate barriers to access are often **structural and communicative**, not curricular
- Aligning program identity with audience understanding can significantly improve discoverability and entry
- Structural changes, such as scheduling and modality, require iterative implementation and institutional alignment
- Full realization of the model depends on coordination across multiple design areas—not isolated interventions

Most importantly, this case study reinforces a central principle of Life-Integrated Learning:

Transformation does not begin with new systems—it begins with aligning existing ones.

The Vision: The Polytechnic Innovation Zone (PIZAZ)

The Polytechnic Innovation Zone (PIAZZ) represents the full realization of Life-Integrated Learning when its principles are applied at scale.

If Life-Integrated Learning redesigns programs, PIAZZ redesigns the institution.

Where the unit-level model aligns identity, structure, modality, and industry within a program, PIAZZ extends that alignment across the broader university environment—integrating learning, work, and life into a single, connected system.

In this model, the university is no longer a place students attend for a fixed period of time. It becomes an ecosystem that evolves with learners across decades.

From Unit-Level Design to System-Level Integration

The design areas introduced at the academic unit level—understanding learners, aligning identity, structuring flexibility, designing modality, and embedding industry—do not disappear at scale. They expand.

- **Understanding learners** becomes continuous engagement across the learner lifecycle
- **Academic identity** becomes transparent, stackable, and navigable across programs
- **Structured flexibility** extends across institutional scheduling and access points
- **Modality by design** becomes an integrated hybrid ecosystem
- **Embedded industry** evolves from partnership to co-location

PIAZZ does not introduce new ideas—it integrates existing ones into a cohesive system.

Embedded Industry at Scale

At PIAZZ, industry is not only integrated into coursework but physically present within the university environment.

- Companies operate on or near campus⁴
- Students transition seamlessly between learning and work
- Industry professionals contribute to teaching, mentorship, and project development

This creates a continuous feedback loop between education and practice, ensuring that learning remains aligned with evolving workforce needs.

A Continuous Learning Ecosystem

PIAZZ expands the role of the university beyond traditional degree programs.

- Learning becomes bidirectional and continuous

⁴ [Move in to The Polytechnic Innovation Zone.](#)

- Students engage with industry throughout their education
- Professionals re-engage with the university throughout their careers

This is achieved, though:

- graduate microcertificates
- short-term workshops and bootcamps
- advanced degree pathways

Rather than a one-time experience, education becomes an ongoing relationship.

A Walkable, Integrated Community

PIZAZ is designed as a mixed-use, walkable environment that supports the full range of learner needs.

This includes:

- housing for students and their families
- childcare and healthcare services
- food, retail, and shared community spaces
- green space and recreation

This design reflects a key premise of Life-Integrated Learning: students do not separate life from learning—institutions should not either.

Entrepreneurship and Applied Learning

Within this ecosystem, learning is directly connected to creation and innovation.

- Student-led startups operate within the environment
- Commercial and creative spaces are shared by students, alumni, and partners
- Coursework connects to real products, services, and organizations

This reinforces the polytechnic emphasis on applied, experience-based learning.

The Lifelong Learning Loop

At scale, lifelong learning is no longer an outcome—it becomes structural.

Learners move in and out of the university across their careers, re-engaging at key moments:

- career transitions
- industry disruption or technological change
- advancement into leadership roles

Educational offerings are designed to support this cycle through:

- flexible, stackable credentials
- targeted skill development
- pathways into advanced degrees

This reflects the concept of a “60-year curriculum,” in which the university serves as a long-term partner across a learner’s life (Crow & Dabars, 2015).

What PIZAZ Represents

PIZAZ is not a prerequisite for implementing Life-Integrated Learning. It is the natural extension of its principles when systems are aligned over time.

It represents a shift.

The university is not a place students attend—it is a system that integrates with their lives, evolves with their careers, and remains present across decades.⁵

Conclusion: Leadership Through Implementation

The need for change in higher education is no longer the question—it has been well established for over a decade. The question now is who will take responsibility for leading that change, and how it will be implemented.

Higher education is not lacking in innovation. The tools exist. The models exist. What is missing is alignment.

This paper has argued that meaningful change begins at the academic unit level—where programs define their identity, structure learning, and shape the student experience. The Life-Integrated Learning model demonstrates how existing strengths—curriculum, modality, and industry engagement—can be intentionally aligned with how students live, work, and learn.

This does not require a complete reinvention of higher education. It requires a shift in how we design it.

- From transactional to relational.
- From time-bound to life-integrated.
- From isolated innovation to cohesive systems.

The vision of the Polytechnic Innovation Zone (PIZAZ) illustrates what becomes possible when this alignment is scaled. But transformation does not begin at the system level—it begins within programs willing to examine their structure, understand their students, and act.

⁵ [See what this might look like.](#)

The future of higher education will not be defined by those who recognize the need for change, but by those who implement it.

Leadership in this moment is not about generating new ideas. It is about taking responsibility for turning existing ideas into systems that work.

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