

Doing Good: Collaborating for Positive Change and Meaningful Work

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from UNICON's Team Development Conference 2025 hosted by the Office of Executive Education at the Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School

A Report by IEDP for the Executive Education Sector

Executive Summary: Insights, Practices & Strategies for the Future of Executive Education

Key Takeaways from the 2025 UNICON Team Development Conference

I. Insights for Meaningful Work

(Drawn from Day One: Making Meaning)

#1 Human connection is not a ‘soft’ element — it can be the infrastructure

From Carl DuPont’s “ROI of connection” to the rapid bonding exercises that opened the conference, participants experienced first hand that psychological safety and presence are the foundations of meaningful work. Leaders repeatedly stressed that trust accelerates learning, creativity, and collaboration, and can be intentionally cultivated.

#2 Meaning arises when personal values, identity, and work are in alignment

The Day One panel spoke candidly about navigating shifting missions, social fragmentation, and personal crossroads. Whether through Susan Magsamen’s call to “find, share, and celebrate who you are,” or Beth Blauer’s reminder to “sync up with ourselves” instead of chasing external pressures, speakers reinforced that meaningful leadership begins with honest internal work.

#3 Creativity and the arts deepen understanding, healing, and connection

The arts surfaced repeatedly as a tool for navigating complexity — from neuro-arts research to Denyce Graves’ reflections on voice, history, and imagination. Creativity was framed not just as enrichment, but as a core mechanism for introspection, resilience, and collective insight.



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II. Practices for Doing the Work Well

(Drawn from Day Two: Doing the Work)

#4 Move from purpose to action through experimentation, empathy, and iteration

Speakers emphasised that purpose is realised through deliberate practice. From design-thinking methods to prototyping, storytelling, and user research, Day Two highlighted a consistent principle: action emerges through curiosity, engagement, and small tests of change, not grand declarations.

#5 Break silos to build cross-functional, cross-disciplinary capability.

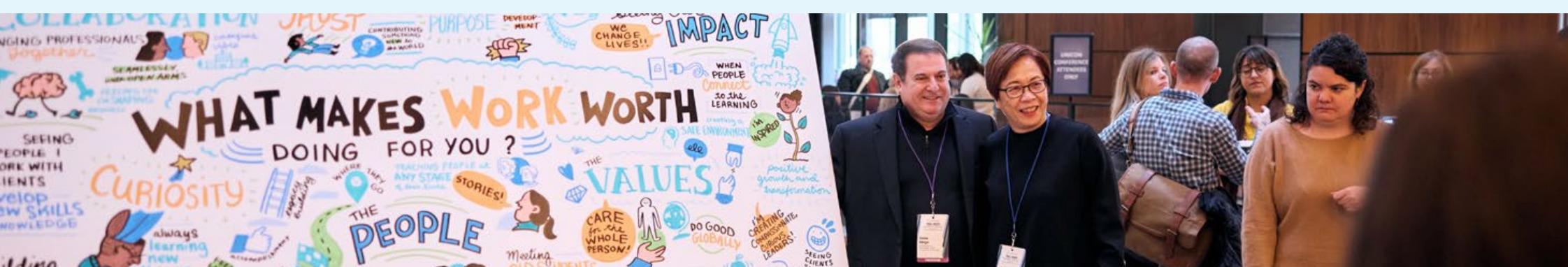
Multiple sessions pointed to a common friction point: while client challenges are cross-cutting, many institutions still organise work in isolated functions. High-performing teams — whether in hospitals, business schools, or public agencies — shared the same underlying pattern: alignment, communication, and distributed ownership.

#6 Clarity, shared language, and operational backbone matter as much as creativity

Day Two underscored that innovation cannot flourish without structure. Themes such as operational durability, team rituals, feedback loops, and clear responsibilities were highlighted as critical for sustaining momentum and enabling teams to do their best work.

#7 Community is both a resource and an outcome

Executives, educators, and practitioners all described the centrality of community in learning and leading. Peer dialogue, shared challenge, collective sense-making, and mutual accountability were repeatedly named as sources of truth, courage, and renewal.



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III. Strategies for Stronger Learning Partnerships

(Drawn from Day Three: Building a Legacy)

#8 Align with business priorities — and remain flexible as they shift

Research from UNICON and Naxed Insight showed that the two qualities clients value most in a partner are:

1. The ability to align with business goals, and
2. Adaptability and flexibility – to achieve those goals.

For these to flourish, providers may look to design discovery, framing, and delivery processes that respond to a fast-changing landscape.

#9 Treat discovery with care and curiosity, not a templated pre-sales process

Panellists echoed it in different ways: *“Discovery is the new program management.”* The greatest differentiator today is curiosity — the ability to co-define the problem, surface hidden dynamics, and understand context before designing solutions. Schools that invest in meaningful early-stage engagement will build deeper, longer-lasting relationships.

#10 Build continuity through follow-through

Clients notice who checks in between programs, who carries context over time, and who demonstrates care without immediate expectation.

“Even if you lose it this time, they may remember you spent the extra time to understand them,” one panellist noted. Continuity builds trust — and trust builds partnership.

#11 Strengthen the bridge between research and practice

AACSB’s data showed that business research often fails to reach business audiences. Executive education is uniquely positioned to close this gap by helping faculty articulate insights in accessible ways, engaging practitioners earlier in the research process, and framing knowledge around real organisational problems.

#12 Address the human anxieties beneath technical problems

From AI disruption to geopolitical shifts, leaders spoke of uncertainty, identity, and a desire for better lives — not just better skills. Providers who engage with these deeper layers create environments where learning becomes transformative rather than transactional.

#13 Build legacy consciously: whose voices are elevated, and whose stories are told?

Denyce Graves’ reflections on erased histories and ‘widening the circle’ invite a strategic question for every institution: What legacy are we shaping through the leaders we develop, and which narratives should we choose to amplify? Expanding representation, honouring overlooked stories, and investing in emerging talent are all part of that legacy.

Day One — Making Meaning

Hopkins Bloomberg Center, Washington, D.C.
November 2025

Introduction

Day One of the 2025 UNICON Team Development Conference opened with an invitation to the executive education professionals attending from around the world: to pause, reflect, and reconnect with the deeper purpose behind the work they do.

The next three days were framed as a rare moment to step out of routine and into a community or industry peers — to surface the values that guide us, the uncertainties that challenge us, and the field-strengthening shared learning that UNICON represents and facilitates.

Connection as the Foundation of Meaning

Master of Ceremonies Carl DuPont, a Johns Hopkins Peabody professor and internationally performed opera artist, set the tone from the off. Warm, charismatic, and unmistakably theatrical, he invited participants not simply to “attend a conference,” but to engage in what he called “the ROI of connection.” Drawing on Google’s Project Aristotle and its findings on high-performing teams, he reminded the room that psychological safety, trust, and

human connection are the invisible infrastructure of meaningful work.

Through a series of rapid-bonding exercises — rating one’s sense of connection and comfort, silent observation of hands, faces, and eyes, and a simple but disarmingly honest “How are you doing?” — participants watched their own connection scores rise. DuPont linked this to their work in executive education: *“It is possible to create rapid moments of bonding that give us the psychological safety we need to do the kind of work we ask of our clients. And in this conference, we get to be the clients. We get to pour into ourselves in the same way we pour into them.”*

He encouraged participants to check in with their new connections over the coming days, at subsequent conferences — and, ideally, between conferences too. The theme of meaning, he suggested, begins with presence.



Setting the Institutional Context

Following DuPont's opening, Lasse Mertins, Vice Dean for Education and Partnerships at Carey, provided an overview of the school's evolution. At less than 20 years old, the business school has grown rapidly to 2,500 students, with executive education expanding significantly in the past two years. He highlighted the school's commitment to developing innovative leaders, its interdisciplinary model, and its two distinctive locations, both at the heart of Baltimore, and at the center of diplomacy and policymaking in Washington D.C., "between the Capitol and the White House," where research, collaboration, and practical application intersect every day.

He also noted that 2025 marks Johns Hopkins University's 150th anniversary, as well as the Executive Education unit's 10-year milestone. Executive Education's rise, he emphasized, owes much to Pam Williams, who in 2015 took on the task of building a new executive education function from scratch. Williams own opening remarks focused on resilience: From visa issues to travel complications to a government

shutdown, organizing this global gathering required numerous pivots and constant agility. But, she noted, this is precisely where executive education excels: *"Plan B is what we do best. We pivot, we adapt."*

Williams set the conference's theme within a wider context of uncertainty and technological acceleration. In a world where AI is reshaping work and where volatility feels constant, she argued, meaning matters more than ever:

"While technology can simulate intelligence, it can't replicate human connection — the laughter, the curiosity, the spark of creativity that only happens when people come together in spaces like this."

Across three days, she said, participants would explore how values align with action; how reflection becomes action; and how, ultimately, the stories of their institutions become their legacy.





UNICON's Charge to the Community

To close the opening remarks, Melanie Weaver Barnett, Executive Director of UNICON, offered a direct call to make the most of the days ahead:

"There is an opportunity here to gain a huge amount of new knowledge, new experiences, new ideas. Now it's up to you. Connect and learn as much as you can, and help others do the same."

Acknowledging the pressures facing executive education — “one of the most difficult periods in our field” — she stressed:

“We need each other more than ever, and our schools need us to come back with great new ideas.”

Melanie Weaver Barnett, Executive Director of UNICON

Session 1

Panel Session: How We Make Meaning in Our Work

Moderated by Carl DuPont the conference's first major conversation gathered four leaders whose work spans public impact, neuro-arts, music, and social innovation:

- Beth Blauer, Vice Provost for Public Sector Innovation at Johns Hopkins
- Susan Magsamen, Executive Director, International Arts + Mind Lab
- Wendel Patrick, Associate Professor of Music and host of PBS's Artworks
- Anthony Watters, Director, JHU Social Innovation Lab

Framed as a look at how individuals — not just institutions — create meaning, the panel explored values, challenges, and the inner work behind leadership.

The Challenges Leaders Face: Values Under Pressure

DuPont opened by asking what leaders are grappling with today.

For Blauer, the key challenge today is one of constant shifts in both mission and values.

“We’re in an unprecedented time of shifting missions and values. We all struggle with this — in any leadership paradigm.”

Institutions, she noted, must frequently realign around funding changes, leadership turnover, and the political and social priorities of the moment. Preserving core values in this turbulence has become “critically hard.” Watters sees the strain through the lens of Baltimore’s social-impact entrepreneurs. Many serve customers that cannot pay market rates, and the challenge is around creating value for, and aligning the incentives of, other stakeholders in the ecosystem — just as many organizations are pulling back from the language of equity and diversity.



“It creates a very challenging space [for these entrepreneurs] ... trying to sustain strong revenue models while staying connected to their communities.”

For Magsamen, the overriding challenge is mental health: *“Climate, economy, politics [and their impact on mental health] ... there’s a public health crisis. How do you create a culture where leaders can hold that space while meeting deliverables and KPIs?”*

And yet, she added, the future-oriented skills demanded by employers — creativity, agility, innovation — are nurtured through arts-based experiences that support introspection and community building.

Patrick cautioned that even the idea of “social” is shifting: *“For some it means gathering for a meal or at a conference like this one. For others it just means ‘online’. People can have conversations that feel social, but they’re not open to engagement.”*

Across the panel, there was a common theme: leaders are navigating fragmentation while trying to build authentic, values-aligned communities of work.

Finding Meaning: The Inner Work Behind Leadership

DuPont invited the panel to share how they make meaning from their work.

For Blauer, meaning has stemmed from a personal transition. After years focused on large-scale national work, she chose to remain rooted in Baltimore.

“We don’t spend enough time having these conversations with ourselves. Professional decisions often follow the money. Syncing up with ourselves can tie us much more to our mission.”

Magsamen emphasized slowing down to reconnect with one’s own distinctive voice: *“We move so fast we don’t stop to reflect on our unique purpose. There will never be anyone like you. If we’re brave enough to embrace and share that — that’s where meaning happens. Find, share and celebrate who you are.”*

Her work in neuro-arts, she explained, is grounded in helping people find that authentic expression.

Beyond taking meaning from ‘making and creating’, which is something he’s always done, Patrick shared how he ‘fell into’

teaching and unexpectedly found deep meaning there, emphasizing how we should all remain open to finding meaning in unexpected places.

“I had no plans to teach. I actually thought I’d be terrible at it. But it’s given me tremendous meaning.”

He also noted that creators must articulate their own meaning before others assign it for them, referencing his pioneering hip-hop degree: *“It’s important to get out in front and explain what the meaning is, so people don’t decide it for you.”*

Watters rooted his meaning in community: *“I’m a product of my community. I’ve always tried to pair my talents and gifts with opportunities to help the community.”*

Now working at a systems level, he described the expanded possibilities that come with resources, networks, and institutional support — and the responsibility and motivation to use them well.

“My ambitions have grown now... about what is possible and what I could do with my work.”

Creativity, Art, and Executive Education

A question from the audience invited reflections on how the panellists' artistic backgrounds influence their professional work.

Blauer described her work in data visualization as an essentially creative endeavour: *"I've seen horrible data visualizations that obscure reality and create distrust. Pairing data with storytelling is critically important — it's a pursuit of creativity."*

DuPont shared his own artistic pivot: losing his voice entirely in 2018 and rebuilding from silence. That experience, he explained, now informs how he teaches public speaking and presence.

Reasons for Optimism

The panel closed on the question of optimism.

Patrick warned against accessing "personalized pessimism" — the negativity served algorithmically through our devices — and highlighted the grounding force of his one-on-one relationships on campus.

Watters expressed optimism in Baltimore's entrepreneurial ecosystem and the potential for universities and communities to drive change together.

Magsamen pointed to the choice toward kindness: *"Stress is a pheromone — and so is kindness and hope."*

Blauer celebrated Baltimore's steep decline in crime, improvements in housing, and — on a personal note — her children "going to parties again" after coming of age during COVID where socializing was all but outlawed.

Across these reflections, the message was clear: meaning is made through community, creativity, intention, and the courage to define one's own narrative.



Session 2

UNICON Benchmarking Survey: Trends, Data, and Emerging Questions

A cornerstone of the annual Team Development Conference, the UNICON Benchmarking Survey offers the sector's most comprehensive dataset on non-degree executive education. Presented by Nicholas Hamilton-Archer, University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, Cuneyt Evigren, Georgia State University J. Mack Robinson College of Business, and Brian Mahoney co-founder of Percept Research, this year's report emphasized both continuity and change. Evigren noted that the survey plays multiple roles: informing internal decision-making, supporting communication with deans, and providing a shared reference point across the industry.

"We act on feedback... that's what the survey is about: making meaning, doing the work."

Demonstrating that approach, this year's survey included several updates: new learning themes; open-enrolment alumni privileges; expanded partner-organization data; and updated AI utilization and planning metrics.



Headline Insights from this year's survey:

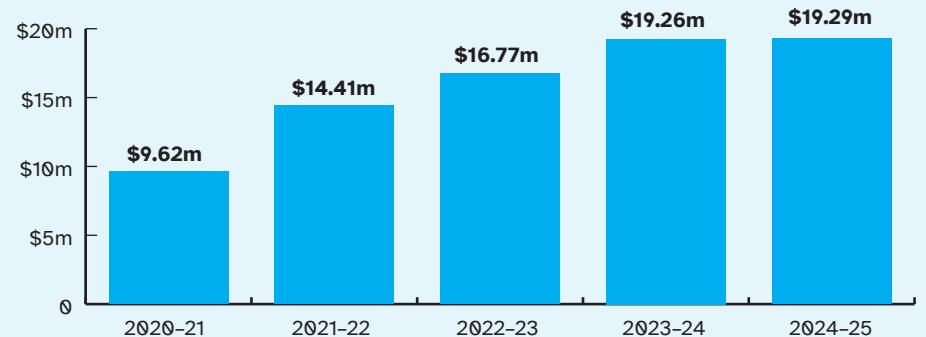
Participation

- 101 completed surveys
- 86% response rate
- 71 schools included in a five-year uniform group analysis

Key Findings

Gross annual revenue for university-based executive education units (2024-25): **\$19.3M average per business school**

Five-year revenue trend (uniform group)



As Mahoney observed: *"There was a big recovery from the pandemic, and it looks like it's levelling off or stabilizing. Gross annual revenue is now double five years ago — but still not quite back to pre-pandemic levels."*

Regional growth patterns showed:

- Flat growth in the U.S. and Latin America
- Slight decline in the Middle East, Africa, and Oceania
- Strongest growth in European schools
- Larger schools outperforming smaller ones





Sentiment & Modality Trends

Using Mentimeter, attendees predicted — accurately — that custom programs showed the most growth. Expectations for next year were split almost evenly between growth and stabilization.

Survey data showed that face-to-face learning is back to its pre-pandemic position as the predominant learning modality at around ~two-thirds of total delivery, representing a five-year high in both open and custom programs. In addition, blended learning continues its strong upward trend and may yet be the lasting legacy of the pandemic pivot to online.

Tracking Privileges, Partnerships, and AI Practice

For the first time this year's benchmarking survey captured the privileges, or benefits, business schools are offering attendees of their open enrolment programs. The top two most commonly occurring privileges were: 'Discounts on future programs for the individual and/or their team', and 'Invitations to alumni events (in person or online)'.

The survey also measures the types of delivery partnerships that are currently in place, in an attempt to illuminate via data a prominent theme at recent UNICON conferences i.e. the appetite and necessity for schools to forge new partnerships. The top two types of

partnerships this year are with, 'Another business school', and with 'Corporations' – both at around 70% - while partnering with 'Consultancies' is also on the rise.

Finally, the survey is also monitoring GenAI adoption, measuring levels of comfort and understanding, as well as implementation. On the latter: 55% of schools have now either invested in or deployed GenAI; while 48% reported that the major barrier to implementation is a lack of a clear strategy; and 5-7% of Open and Custom Program titles are now dedicated to AI-related topics.

Unpacking the Benchmarking Report

In the final session of the day, participants broke into two facilitated discussions:

- "In Pursuit of Business Growth"
- "AI in L&D"

Designed to stimulate peer learning, the breakouts offered space for schools to compare their experiences against the benchmarking trends and explore how the data reflected — or challenged — what they were seeing on the ground.

Day Two – Doing the Work

Session 1

Keynote: Turning Purpose Into Action

Day Two opened with a powerful keynote from Dr. Joseph V. Sakran, Executive Vice Chair of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Medicine and a nationally recognized leader in trauma care, public health, and gun-violence prevention.

Introducing him, Vice Dean Lasse Mertins framed Sakran's work as an inspiring model of doing the work: taking personal experience, professional responsibility, and moral purpose and translating them into policy change, coalition building, and national impact.

"I can't begin talking about this issue without telling you my own story."

Sakran began by sharing with the room an experience that shaped his entire life story.

At 17, he was shot in the throat with a .38-caliber bullet—an injury that nearly killed him. He survived because two surgeons, *"along with their incredible teams,"* gave him a second chance.

Years later, he returned to Inova Fairfax Hospital—the same hospital where he was born and nearly died—as a surgical resident.

This experience forced him to confront a truth he carries every day as a trauma surgeon: *"If someone comes in that's shot in the head, there's very little that I can do to bring them back to baseline."*

That realization pushed him *"beyond the four walls of the hospital,"* toward public health, systems thinking, and public policy. At Penn, he embraced the population-level responsibility captured in the motto *"protecting health, saving lives, millions at a time."* At the Kennedy School and later in the U.S. Senate, he deepened his understanding of strategy—*"not just having the right idea, but the right approach to be effective."*

Sakran's central message was crystal clear: purpose becomes action when we are willing to step outside our lanes—and sometimes claim them.



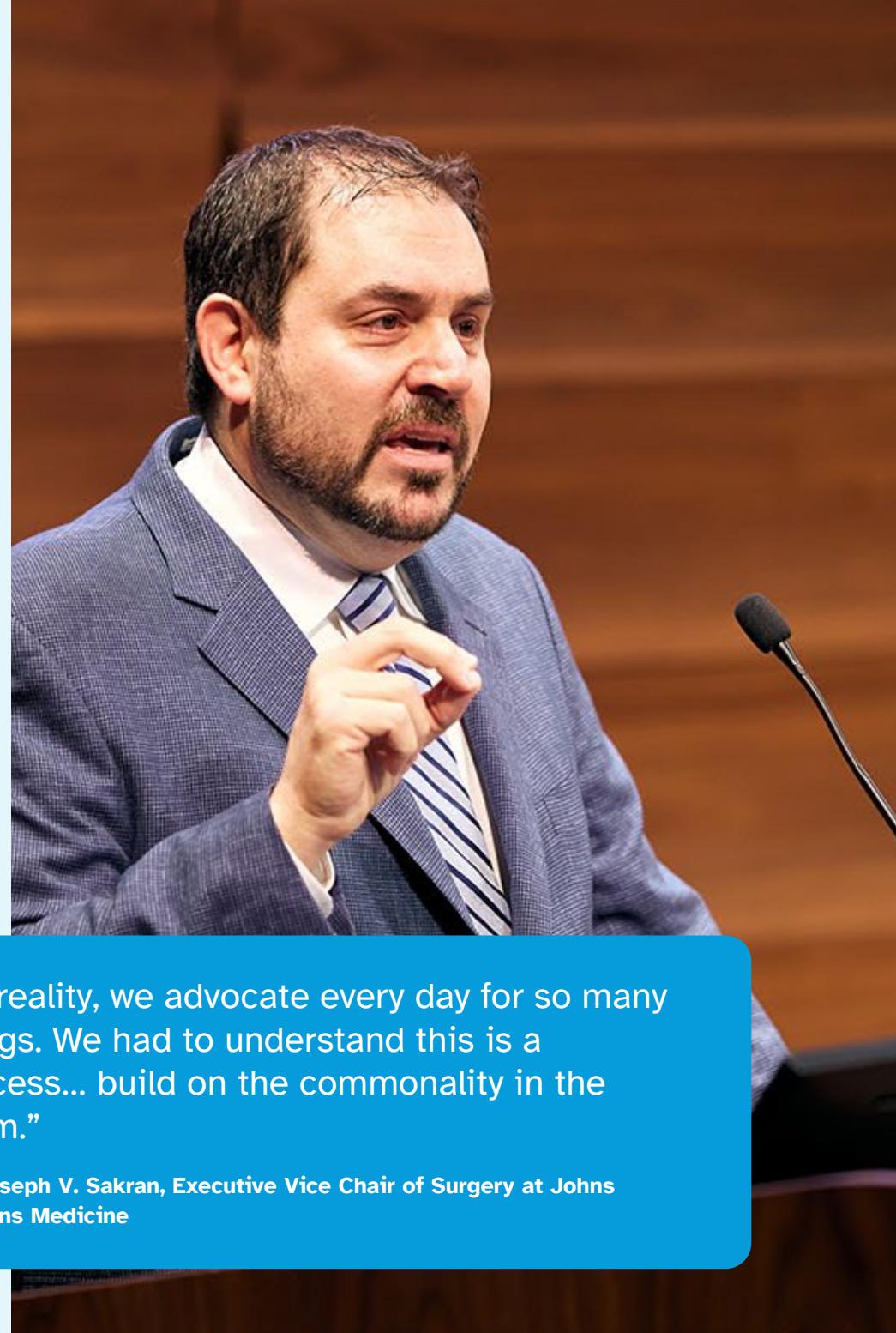
“This is our lane.”

In 2018, when the NRA told doctors to “*stay in their lane*,” Sakran helped spark a national movement by responding: “*This is our lane*.” His bold statement ignited a wave of collective action, with the public beginning to hear stories physicians had long witnessed—“*empty waiting rooms, operating rooms covered in blood*,” and the conversations no parent should ever have to endure.

From that point, coalition-building became essential. Through the American College of Surgeons, 44 medical organizations were brought together—surgeons, paediatricians, primary care physicians, gun owners, rural and urban communities, survivors—anyone with lived experience. The first summit, in 2019, revealed widespread fear around “advocacy” as something deemed too political for health care engage in. By the second summit, in 2022, appetite for it was growing.

“In reality, we advocate every day for so many things. We had to understand this is a process... build on the commonality in the room.”

This value-to-action arc has since produced tangible national outcomes: bipartisan federal legislation, a comprehensive public-safety strategy in Baltimore backed by \$50M, the creation of the first White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention (later discontinued with administration change), and a new state-level Office of Violence Prevention in Maryland.



“In reality, we advocate every day for so many things. We had to understand this is a process... build on the commonality in the room.”

Dr. Joseph V. Sakran, Executive Vice Chair of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Medicine

Breaking Silos, Building Systems

Throughout the talk, Sakran emphasized that no single person, institution, or sector can solve complex public-health challenges: *“You have to break down the silos... cut across sectors... it’s a multi-faceted approach that’s required.”*

He described the need for bi-directional communication between federal, state, and local systems, and why national coordination must sit where it has true convening power—“in the White House,” not buried within a single agency.

He also highlighted his work supporting the U.S. Surgeon General’s report on firearm injury—a document now removed from government websites but “written in pen, not pencil.” Its significance, he reminded the room, lay not only in its conclusions but in the visibility it created: Firearms are now the leading cause of death for children and adolescents in the United States.

Communicating Science Through Stories

A major thread in the keynote—echoing Day One’s exploration of meaning—was the critical role of storytelling. Sakran, once reluctant to share his own experience, now sees narrative as essential to moving people from values to action: *“If you want to go from value to action, it’s done through emotion.”*

He showed how physicians translate science into public understanding—through op-eds, through collaborations with journalists (including the Pulitzer-winning Washington Post project The Blast Effect), and even through partnerships with the entertainment industry, where something as simple as depicting safe firearm storage on screen can shift behaviour over time.



“You have to break down the silos... cut across sectors... it’s a multi-faceted approach that’s required.”

Dr. Joseph V. Sakran, Executive Vice Chair of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Medicine

Interactive Exercise: The Why Behind the Work

Sakran closed by shifting from his story to the room's own motivations. He invited participants into a short "Why" exercise—adapted from the longer "nine whys" he uses with medical students:

- 1. Reflect alone:** What is one thing you do in your role that really matters—and why is that important to you?
- 2. Pair up:** share your "why," then ask your partner to dig deeper into theirs.

This reflection tied the keynote directly to the day's theme: 'Doing the Work' is inseparable from knowing why the work matters. Many participants, as Danielle Piccinini Black later reflected, "didn't even mention job titles"—they went straight to purpose.

Four Lessons to Lead By

Sakran ended with four principles that guide his own work:

- 1. Purpose over position** — "Are you driven by ego or by purpose?"
- 2. Passion with patience** — passion fuels action, but patience sustains it through adversity.
- 3. Tell your story** — because storytelling is a leadership tool.
- 4. Community and collective action** — "Think about the people in your ecosystem... how you can make this world a little bit better."

The keynote closed with a deeply human story: a mother who had just lost her son placing her hand on Sakran's shoulder and asking, "Are you okay?"

"It's moments like that that restore my faith in humanity—and get me to wake up every day to do the work that we do."



Session 2

How I Built It: Snapshots From the Field

A series of How I Built It presentations by some of the executive education teams in attendance moved the conference from meaning to action, showcasing how UNICON schools are designing, scaling, and sustaining programs that create real impact. These rapid-fire case studies not only highlighted the ingenuity on show across the consortium but also primed participants for the afternoon Hackathon — offering fresh examples, approaches, and provocations to spark creative problem-solving in their own collaborative challenge.

Harvard Business School — Designing for Durability

In response to rapid growth, turnover pressure, and inconsistent processes, Harvard Business School built a durable onboarding and process-learning infrastructure designed to scale with organizational complexity. Senior Associate Director Josh Williamson described a shift from ad hoc problem-solving to system design, anchored by three elements: a dedicated process-specialist role, a single source of truth for documentation, and a repeatable onboarding model that evolves as the work evolves.

Their Learning Lab provides structured ramp-up for the first 90 days, while Training Innovation Specialists design and deliver both orientation and skill-building programs — from administrative fundamentals to public speaking workshops. Asynchronous learning tools and continually updated documentation reinforce consistency. Williamson emphasized that “durability” is built through behaviors: listening first, building partnerships, hiring for curiosity, growing iteratively, and sharing expertise. The result is increased confidence for new hires, reduced strain on managers, and a more resilient organization positioned to deepen, expand, and innovate — including through AI-supported simulations and responsible documentation practices.



ESSCA School of Management — Scaling a New Campus Through Agile Structure

ESSCA's presentation, delivered by Joan Vicens Sard, traced how a newly formed international unit helped the school rapidly establish a new branch campus in Málaga, Spain. What began as a seemingly straightforward internationalization project quickly required an agile, empowered structure — a task-force model able to move faster than traditional governance. As Vicens noted, "We made decisions in hours that would've taken months at HQ — because we had to."

The task force approach enabled speed, cross-functional collaboration, and on-the-ground problem solving, but it was also inherently temporary — a scaling tool, not a sustainable long-term structure. ESSCA used the model to navigate site selection, local ecosystem fit, program architecture, and operational readiness, ultimately launching executive education, learning expeditions, and student mobility initiatives ahead of the new campus opening in 2025. Vicens highlighted both the momentum and the limits of this approach: agile teams rely on borrowed people and budgets, and eventually meet the constraints of policy, hierarchy, and legacy processes. Still, the project demonstrated that structure streamlines strategy — and, when done well, can "give life to a small ecosystem" and not 'just' open a campus.

INSEAD — Scaling Immersive Learning Through VR and AI

INSEAD's Immersive Learning Initiative, presented by Katy Falcao, showcased how the school is transforming passive learning into deeply experiential, behavior-shifting development. Building on the insight that "we remember 90% of what we do," INSEAD created the world's largest VR library for management education, with 30+ cases, 60+ faculty users, and 7,000+ learners in 24-25. The ecosystem includes case writers, designers, recording teams, hardware support, faculty onboarding, and a teaching hub — all designed for scale.

The VR environment addresses core pain points in executive learning by boosting engagement, eliminating pre-reads, and enabling faculty to teach with greater efficiency and impact. It also opens new behavioral insights: heat-map decision tracking, perspective-taking, bias elicitation, and A/B testing inside a controlled "behavioral lab." Since 2024, INSEAD has expanded the portfolio with Immersive AI cases and premium online programs with AI bots, strengthening personalization and learner ownership.

The result is an end-to-end immersive strategy that moves from engagement to analytics — and now toward adaptive learning powered by XR and AI.

ASU W. P. Carey School of Business — Building a Universal Learning Ecosystem

Presented by Raghu Santanam, ASU's W. P. Carey School outlined its effort to build a universal learning ecosystem that expands career mobility and access for diverse learners. With 23,000+ students and multiple top-ranked programs, the school is investing deeply in stackable, flexible pathways that connect skills, academic credit, certificates, and degrees within a unified credentialing framework.

Pathways span micro-credentials, professional certificates, academic courses, foundational/advanced certificates, and undergraduate/graduate certificates. These can stack into degree programs, allowing working learners to navigate from short, targeted offerings to comprehensive academic study. Courses in supply chain, procurement, leadership, and AI illustrate how applied learning and academic rigor intersect — supported by strong learner feedback praising clarity, relevance, and instructor engagement. The model positions ASU to serve learners at every stage, embedding accessibility and mobility into the school's identity as a leader in lifelong learning.

University of Georgia Terry College — Designing a Sustainability Leadership Journey

UGA Executive Education's Sustainable Development Excellence (SDX) program, presented by Jason Parrish, demonstrated how a values-aligned corporate partnership can build a meaningful leadership pipeline. Co-created with a global health and animal-science company committed to "More Health, More Potential, More Green," the SDX certificate program equips leaders to align profitability with purpose by integrating sustainability into everyday decisions.

Delivered through a blended model — in-person immersion, virtual sessions, applied strategic projects, and co-delivery by faculty and corporate leaders — SDX develops mindsets and behaviors for long-term impact. Participants explore critical topics such as climate change, water stewardship, community health, inclusive leadership, and sustainable food systems. The results are significant: a 4.7/5 evaluation score, \$2.1M in savings identified in the first cohort, 20% of graduates promoted, and a reach of 4,255 colleagues through advocacy activities. The model is now scaling globally, supported by SDX alumni who commit 80 hours of sustainability advocacy post-program — a true "peaceful army" of sustainability ambassadors.

IMD — We@IMD: An Internal Development Program for a More Collaborative Culture

IMD's We@IMD initiative, presented by Christopher Hobrecker, offered a distinctive internal perspective: a development program designed by IMD for IMD staff. Grounded in the school's mission to create a more prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive world, the program gives every staff member access to IMD's signature learning environment while strengthening collaboration, leadership capacity, and organizational awareness.

The journey includes four modules, 3.5 days of in-person learning, virtual faculty-led sessions, weekly peer discussions, mentoring, and an innovation challenge. Participants explore self-awareness, business awareness, IMD's culture and strategy, team dynamics, and communication impact — often using IMD's newest pedagogical enablers, including VR, AR, and global-signal tools. The program has produced strong results: NPS 89, 90% reporting practical and applicable learning, and recognition with a Gold Brandon Hall Excellence in Technology Award. Participant testimonials highlight deep personal insight, cross-department connection, and a renewed sense of belonging — evidence that investing internally can be as transformative as any client-facing program.

FDC — A Strategic Approach to Market Expansion in Executive Education

FDC's case, presented by Paula Warick, highlighted how the school is reshaping its growth strategy amid intensified competition and rising demand for highly customized executive education. Following a major rebranding and the launch of its São Paulo campus, FDC has been evolving from a reactive, demand-driven posture to a proactive, data-informed approach — while maintaining the personalized DNA that characterizes one of Latin America's leading business schools.

A central element of this transformation is the Innovation & Internationalization Squad led by Warick, which operates within Market Development but serves as a strategic bridge between Marketing, market-facing teams, and program directors. This integration has allowed FDC to accelerate opportunity creation, expand its presence, and strengthen alignment across the client journey.

The strategy is anchored in four coordinated initiatives:

- Segmentation and relationship intelligence, deepening client understanding, informing engagement models, and identifying growth potential.
- Targeted go-to-market campaigns, mapping client challenges and tailoring content to open new segments.
- Thought-leadership and positioning, using executive forums, webinars, workshops, and strategic communications to reinforce FDC as a partner for organizational transformation.
- Internationalization, expanding global partnerships and designing customized corporate learning journeys abroad.

Together, these initiatives create a scalable, ecosystem-driven growth model. As Warick emphasized, FDC is "living the transformation we teach" — modernizing, globalizing, and creating new value while remaining true to its human-centered institutional identity.

UVA Darden - Expanding Executive Education Reach within Organizations and Society

In today's rapidly changing environment, UNICON member schools are increasingly looking for ways to "grow the pie" of offerings and strengthen their connections to the market. This session, facilitated by UVA Darden Executive Education and Lifelong Learning's Devin Bigoness, included a panel discussion with Rony Shir (University of Miami), Gene Mage (University of Michigan), and Mark Dembo (Cornell University). The panel shared ideas on how to expand reach through several core approaches, including:

1. Identifying new levels within the organization to serve — such as new manager and frontline development for greater scale;
2. Branching out to new audiences not traditionally engaged in executive education, leveraging the strengths and brand of the school (e.g., professional athletes); and
3. Utilizing the full university for expanded topic-based outreach, methodologies, and research, either through formal integration or shared focus and alignment.

A key point of discussion centred on the question of whether it is more challenging to sell these ideas externally or to mobilize them internally, given stakeholder management. The panellists shared examples of how they have approached external markets and clients with these concepts, as well as how they have mobilized faculty and university administrators toward a common goal. This conversation took place within the context of a growing competitive landscape, heightened client expectations around ROI, and shifting dynamics within universities — all of which shape how schools can align, formally or informally, to serve and expand the market.



Session 3

How I Built It Hackathon — From Opportunity to Solution

Day Two's afternoon session shifted the 'Doing the Work' emphasis over to the attendees—inviting participants to move from inspiration and ideas to experimentation, and from individual reflection to collective problem-solving.

After the morning's case-sharing, the UNICON Hackathon gave participants a structured space to apply design-thinking methods to their own executive education challenges. Over two and a half hours, functional teams—grouped broadly by job role—worked in pods of six across two floors to tackle themes drawn from the conference: growth, AI, operations, marketing, program design, and more.

The process followed a tightly timed design thinking flow:

- **Theme selection:** teams chose a focus area aligned to their real-world work.
- **Empathy work:** they mapped key stakeholders and then role-played interviews, surfacing tensions, needs, and hidden assumptions.
- **Problem definition:** groups clustered insights and converted them into focused "How might we...?" questions.
- **Ideation:** using a "bad idea brainstorm," teams flipped their questions to the negative, generated deliberately terrible ideas, then mined those for the seeds of strong solutions.
- **Prototyping:** each group created a one-minute "commercial" for its chosen solution—complete with props, jingles, and live performance.

Teams first shared commercials in pairs; from these, a shortlist was selected to present in a plenary "Commercial Jamboree", where applause decided the winning spots. The structure was playful and creative, but the intent was meaningful and substantial: to practice the mindsets of empathetic, iterative, collaborative design that many participants teach their clients, and to experience them together as a UNICON community, in practice.



Session 4

Doing the Work Takeaways — Commercials, Truths, and Surprises

Back in the main auditorium, Carl DuPont praised the energy in the hackathon rooms—noting how fully people had leaned into “the power of empathetic, iterative, creative design.” The session opened with four winning commercials: short, theatrical pitches that distilled common pain points and bold solutions.

One commercial followed ‘Anna,’ a program manager overwhelmed by endless, conflicting demands from deans, faculty, clients, and operations—until a friendly AI assistant appears: *“My name is AI Gemini, and I am here to show you the way... This isn’t just the future. It’s the power to build it today.”*

Another imagined ‘Lumina,’ a team that steps into departments to cut through noise and misalignment: *“We turn confusion into structure, complexity into focus, and vision into measurable action... Lumina: see clearly, move forward.”*

A third used a nautical, almost musical metaphor—inviting program managers, faculty, clients, and learners to “co-create executive education” and move from stormy seas to calmer waters. The final spot diagnosed “strategic misalignment syndrome” and pitched executive education partnerships as the remedy: *“Executive education—because a healthy company starts with smarter leadership.”*

The tone across all four was light-hearted, but the underlying issues—workload, clarity, alignment, and the promise and limits of AI—were both real and heartfelt.



One Truth, One Surprise

The crux of the session came next. Each hackathon team had been asked to distil its work into “One Truth” (a widely recognized pain point or opportunity) and “One Surprise” (something unexpected or counter-intuitive). Representatives from across the room stepped to microphones to share.

Several truths recurred a number of times:

- Shared pain points across contexts. Teams noted that institutions of different sizes and geographies were wrestling with remarkably similar issues—from growth and new markets to operations and faculty design. One participant put it simply: *“We have the same problems from Boston to Philadelphia to South Carolina to Stockholm.”*
- Constraints and capacity. Many groups highlighted tight time, budget, faculty, and operational constraints that “stifle creativity and innovation” in program design and delivery—and the risk that administrative burdens pull people away from their unique skills.
- Purpose as a growth driver. In conversations about new markets and revenue, one group concluded that the growth story has shifted: *“Revenue doesn’t drive revenue... mission and purpose and impact drive revenue.”*
- The centrality of faculty and follow-through. Others stressed that program design is meaningless without implementation and partnership—and that capturing faculty needs and preferences is critical to avoiding frustration and lost institutional knowledge.
- Organizational awareness and alignment. Teams emphasized the need for more intentional internal awareness—understanding stakeholders across roles so that the whole system can “move forward together,” and recognizing that true ROI depends as much on alignment as on analytics.

Surprises tended to be more personal—and often joyful:

- Many were struck by how powerful the “bad ideas” exercise was. Operationally minded participants admitted that the lack of guard rails “stressed us out,” yet inverting the problem and generating absurd ideas helped them think more creatively and “come up with some great solutions” they wouldn’t have otherwise considered.
- Several groups were surprised by how much fun they had tackling serious problems: *“In the day to day, these challenges aren’t always fun... but actually, we had a bit of fun—and maybe taking the fun back will make us more innovative.”*
- Participants repeatedly mentioned the value of multidisciplinary, cross-functional teams, and how easily their commercials could have come from any department. One facilitator reflected that it would be hard to guess which functional areas had produced which solutions—evidence, he suggested, of the inter-dependence between business development, marketing, programs, and strategy.
- AI emerged as both a theme and a lens: one group described being in a “pea soup of ambiguity”, where it’s no longer possible to predict three to five years ahead—barely even five months. Yet they were also struck by how quickly they could now prototype ideas with AI tools and by the realization that “AI is nothing without human curiosity.”
- Finally, many speakers named community itself as both truth and surprise: the comfort of discovering common challenges, the sense that “we have the solutions within our grasp,” and the image of being “each other’s puzzle pieces.”

Day Three – Building a Legacy

Session 1

Keynote Conversation with Denyce Graves: “The Power of Voice, History, and Humanity”

Day Three opened with Master of Ceremonies Carl DuPont leading the room through a vocal warm-up — a reminder that voice, breath, and presence are deeply human tools, and that “our voices are such an important part of our legacy.” With the room awake and energized, he welcomed a lifelong inspiration of his: Professor Denyce Graves, Distinguished Faculty Artist at the Peabody Institute and one of the world’s most acclaimed opera performers.

What followed was a wide-ranging, intimate fireside chat: part memoir, part masterclass, part call to action — bringing the conference themes into sharp focus. Graves spoke candidly about career, community, history, and responsibility, returning repeatedly to a single idea, that legacy is something you build through service to others.

“You fall in love with them. They become your family.”

Graves began with the unexpected development that brought her into teaching. For years, she had resisted joining Peabody’s faculty, fearing she didn’t have time. But once

she took on a few students, everything changed: *“They became part of my life. They got into my heart. They invaded my dream life. I worried about them all the time.”*

That sense of responsibility deepened during the pandemic, when stages closed and her students — especially young singers on the cusp of careers — faced sudden uncertainty. One former student told her bluntly: *“You talked me into this profession... and now there isn’t anything you can say.”*

Graves described the moment hitting her “right in my center,” and how it galvanized her toward action: *“I’ve got to do something.”* During lockdown she created Cooking with Denyce, an online cooking-and-conversation show that checked in on students and industry colleagues. What began as a stop-gap turned into a lifeline — eventually broadcast by major opera houses and drawing an audience of more than 250,000. It also opened a door to a deeper discovery. Recovering erased histories: *“I never learned about her.”*

Graves recounted learning — almost by accident — about Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of what had formerly been known as the National Negro Opera Company. Dawson,

a conservatory-trained musician barred from performing in segregated America, responded by creating her own opera house, touring nationally, and refusing to perform for segregated audiences. Graves was stunned: *“I did my undergraduate and graduate work, and I don’t know anything about this woman.”*

Sharing Dawson’s story on her cooking show sparked immediate public interest. Francesca Zambello, then Artistic Director at Washington National Opera, contacted Graves and together they commissioned and premiered The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson, an opera now touring widely.

This became the genesis of the Denyce Graves Foundation, dedicated to: *“...bringing into rightful prominence those great individuals who helped build the industry... many of whom we don’t know about, who have been erased from history — while investing in the young people who will shape the future.”*

The Foundation’s pillars — American history, social justice, and the classical vocal arts — sit at the heart of Graves’ legacy-building work.

Widening the circle: “Talking back to history.”

Graves described her newest project: reimagining the globally beloved “24 Italian Songs and Arias” by pairing them with contemporary composers across genres — classical, folk, R&B, musical theatre, gospel — to “widen the circle” of who is included in the canon.

“We’re taking history and talking back to it... shining a spotlight on artists we don’t know anything about.”

At the heart of the conversation was Graves’s conviction that music, and the arts more broadly, have a unique capacity to unite people across division: “The one thing that unites us and puts us in touch with our shared humanity is the gift of music [...] What is that transformative power that reminds us we are more alike than unlike?”

Teaching, energy, and optimism: “The work is restorative.” When asked where she finds energy to teach, perform, direct, and lead her foundation, Graves answered: *“The work is restorative. The work feeds you. It keeps you young [...] I will leave the studio with far more energy than I arrived with.”*

Her optimism, she added, comes from people: Working with students, seeing the “dawning of understanding,” renews her. *“I believe in the human spirit... There is more good in us than not good.”*

And ultimately, that belief shapes her legacy: *“The mission is to create a more compassionate world through the arts.”*

Becoming who we are meant to be

The conversation closed on identity and becoming, with Graves reflecting on how performing Carmen helped her grow from a painfully shy child into the woman she is today: *“It was the character Carmen who taught me how to become a woman.”*

This, too, resonated with the audience’s own work: the ways in which executive educators grow through service, stretch into roles they never expected, and discover themselves in the process.



Session 2

Panel Session: Unpacking UNICON & Naxed Insight Research — The Human Edge in Learning Partnerships

The final session brought the conference's themes together around another key element of UNICON's work, which is its research: this time on the human qualities, relational intelligence, and partnership mindset that may well define the future of executive education. Moderating the discussion, UNICON Board Chair Shalini Bhatia framed the session as a culmination of UNICON's longstanding commitment to research and community learning, *"Today's panel is around one of the key value adds that UNICON brings. It's about our research... the human edge, what demand-side research reveals about the future of learning partnerships."*

This study — UNICON's first research collaboration with Naxed Insight — examines what talent leaders value most in their learning partners, and what that means for the wider competitive landscape of business education providers. The panel brought together voices from AACSB, Emeritus, XED, and Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC), offering a rare multi-perspective view into client expectations and partnering practices.

Bhatia invited each panellist to introduce themselves, beginning with Aldemir Drummond, Professor of Strategy at FDC and Vice Chair of the UNICON Board. He was followed by Hanna McLeod, Director of Thought Leadership at AACSB; John Kallelil, Founder and CEO of XED Institute; and Mike Malefakis, a leader at five separate UNICON member schools over the course of his career, and now senior executive at Emeritus. Malefakis set the tone with a reflection that echoed the conference's emotional center: *"For those of you who are newcomers... you are in a tribe of people who are mission-driven, doing amazing work. And it is tough work. And... it is about the people."*

What Clients Value Most: Alignment, Flexibility, Curiosity

Drummond introduced key findings of the report, *Choosing the Right Learning Partner for the Right Job*, developed in partnership by UNICON with Naxed Insight. For years, UNICON had conducted demand-side research by asking member schools to connect researchers with their clients — sometimes overburdening those same clients. Naxed Insight, created by IEDP to study the space *"between the client and the executive education provider,"* allowed UNICON to pursue a more robust and sustainable research model.

The study, conducted across 200+ HR and L&D leaders with an additional 13 in-depth interviews, sought to understand how organizations choose learning partners, which provider types they prefer for certain scenarios, and what criteria matter most. Some findings reinforced what practitioners have long intuited; others pointed to deeper shifts.

Two qualities stood out strongly:

1. Alignment with business goals
2. Adaptability and flexibility

As Drummond explained, *"In such a fast-moving environment, the alignment is very important... but the flexibility also, sometimes to adapt the learning outcomes to the changing strategic priorities, is considered very important."*

The study revealed how closely these qualities were tied to the human dynamics of partnership. Drummond highlighted what clients most often describe as provider missteps: *"Template responses... a sales-first tone... and lack of follow-through."*

Clients want partners who show care, curiosity, and genuine relational engagement. One HR leader put it plainly: *“If a provider isn’t as curious about our company as we are, we’re probably not going to work with them.”*

Drummond connected these findings to the broader tone of the conference: *“In this age of technology and AI... one of the things that can differentiate us is exactly the human connection.”*

Discovery as the New Program Management

Building on this, Bhatia asked a pointed question: if the best partners help diagnose the issue before proposing a solution – as suggested in this study - how well does the sector support the discovery phase? And what would it take to do better?

Malefakis began with candor about faculty dynamics: *“How curious are our faculty?... Particularly those who’ve been doing their thing successfully for several decades — they may not be listening as closely as they need to be listening.”*

The risk, he said, is that schools, “go to the answer before we’ve really understood the question.” He recalled a quote from the report: *“Don’t just tell us about your next program. What’s coming next? What is the research happening at your school?”*

For McLeod, this touched directly on AACSB’s work: expectations for flexibility and alignment are not new, “but the environments are changing... organizations are changing, the nature of work is changing, the geopolitical environment is changing.” This requires faculty to move beyond the “ivory tower,” engaging more deeply with practice, co-creating research, and translating findings into accessible forms.

Kallelil added a sharp formulation: *“Discovery is the new program management.”*

For two decades, he argued, the sector perfected program management. Now it needs to perfect discovery: *“Can we co-design with clients? Can we co-define the problem? Are we even chasing the right problem?”* He noted that for many providers, *“the RFP is the first engagement — and that usually should be the last thing we are doing.”* Drummond agreed that deeper discovery demands more time and intentionality: *“Maybe we are not able to do this with every client... but with some selected clients it is a very worthwhile investment.”* He cited a company from the study that appreciated a provider who met monthly even when no program was underway — a vivid example of alignment built through continuity rather than purely transaction-driven.

Bhatia summarized this segment succinctly: the discovery phase is where relational, human qualities matter most — deep listening, curiosity, and connection — supported, but not replaced, by tools like AI and data.

Spotting Strategic Shifts Earlier

The conversation shifted to the strategic role providers play. Many clients are not coming simply to “train,” Bhatia noted, but because something is changing. How can schools help clients spot early signals of learning needs?

Kallelil offered a striking example from the early days of AI. A major consulting firm approached XED saying, *“We are going through an existential crisis... our clients have AI now and they can do things far better. All those billable hours are gone.”*

XED convened the firm at a partner school to explore AI-enabled value creation — an example of how early partnership can shape strategic adaptation.

Malefakis connected this to a story shared elsewhere in the conference: a school taking on a sophisticated sustainability initiative with no guarantee of future business. *“Sometimes you just have a one-day offsite... you haven’t gotten a commitment, but you have a deep conversation about what keeps them up at night — and what they’re optimistic about.”* Those conversations, he said, are often what clients remember.

Drummond added that this kind of partnership requires new internal competencies, for example around supporting business development with data-based insights on a clients’ own market or industry: *“We need to be able to bring insights about the sector [to our clients]... not only understand their questions, but bring our own interpretations, to start from a different point.”*

Practical Applications: Using the Research Internally

Malefakis pointed to one of the most actionable components of the report: a series of spider graph plots mapping these sets of desired qualities and capabilities against different provider types – from coaching firms, to consultancies, to business schools – showing how they are perceived in the market against each one. *“If I were still at a school, I would be going through these with my team... assess your strengths and weaknesses on the elements clients are looking for.”*

This, he noted, is a direct and practical way to translate research into capability-building.

What Research Should Come Next?

Bhatia asked the panel to look ahead. What should UNICON study next?

Kallelil focused on the learner’s experience: *“Our customers are changing... more demanding than ever. Faster, better, younger than ever.”*

He proposed two lines of inquiry:

- **Crashing the learning cycle** — “What takes a long time to learn... can we bring it down through immersion or experiential activity?”
- **Longevity of learning** — “Can we ensure that whatever they learned is retained over a long period of time? Can it be measured?”

Drummond emphasized the growing importance of geopolitical literacy. He described speaking with the HR head of a global agribusiness whose entire value chain was disrupted by geopolitical shifts: *“They were not prepared years ago... are we ready to interpret these changes and help our clients?”*

McLeod noted the tension between trust-building (which takes time) and rapid co-creation (which clients increasingly expect). She suggested business schools could learn from consulting firms’ approach to systematic communication.

Malefakis urged UNICON to draw from its global footprint: *“The future is not equally distributed... oftentimes the periphery is more advanced than the core.”* Innovations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America may signal where executive education goes next.

The Research-Practice Divide: A Moment for Change

The discussion then turned to AACSB's Research Impact Framework, which McLeod described as an effort to address a longstanding issue: *"Too little of business research is reaching business audiences... too little is creating resonance."*

In their survey, they received nearly 1,000 responses from academics — but fewer than 15 usable responses from business leaders, *"That in itself is a data point."*

The framework aims to "promote greater intersectionality" across disciplines, engage external stakeholders earlier in the research process, and encourage language that is actionable rather than academic. McLeod suggested that executive education sits at the heart of this entire effort: *"You all are the closest connection between the business school and the business community."*

Trust at Scale: What Digital and Hybrid Models Must Preserve

Bhatia asked how human connection and trust can be maintained when many programs are scaled digitally. *"Purely with digital connectivity... it is harder to create trust,"* Malefakis acknowledged, whose work with Emeritus spans global, large-scale online programs. But he argued that in an era of deep fakes, polarization, and eroding trust in institutions, business schools hold something distinctive: *"Universities have sought the truth since the 1600s... people trust these brands in a way they don't trust political parties or what they see on their screens."* This credibility, he said, continues to matter deeply even online.

Bhatia noted from the research, that reputation "still gets you into the door," but qualities like flexibility and relational care "are how long-term partnerships are built."

Early Signals: What Clients Are Asking For Next

Asked what early signals they were hearing from clients, the panel painted a vivid picture of a workforce in transition. Kallelil shared a revealing pattern from XED's classrooms. Participants — often CEOs or soon-to-be CEOs — initially say they are there to "learn AI" or "learn leadership." But after deeper probing: "Nobody's happy.

Everybody's unhappy... the CFO wants to be CEO. The CHRO wants to be CEO. The CEO of a small company wants to be CEO of a large company." People are seeking better lives, not just new skills. This, he argued, calls for providers to rethink post-program engagement: *"Why do we acquire these clients with so much pain and cost and then let them go?... If you said you wanted to be your boss in three years, why don't we stay with you and help you get there?"*

Malefakis highlighted the "hunger, the thirst for competitiveness" in the Global South — far more pronounced, he said, than in Western Europe or the U.S. He encouraged schools to look beyond traditional markets.

Drummond returned to the theme of community. At FDC, he noted, *"people are anxious... they want to discuss with people from other companies."* Business schools can serve as "a safe place" for such dialogue — not simply as content providers, but as conveners.

Closing

As the session concluded, Bhatia previewed upcoming research — including a joint study from UNICON and Naxed Insight into how AI is reshaping demand, delivery, and learning partnerships — due out Spring 2026.

In many ways, the panel brought the conference full circle. Across a week centered on humanity, meaning, voice, and legacy, this final session underscored that the future of executive education will be shaped not only by technology, but by humanity: curiosity, care, alignment, trust, and the relationships we nurture over time.



Doing Good: Collaborating for Positive Change and Meaningful Work

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from
UNICON's Team Development Conference 2025
hosted by the Office of Executive Education at the
Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School

