The Future of Learning
12 Views on Emerging Trends in Higher Education

On behalf of our campuses, we need to seek out change, to be more flexible, more thoughtful, and more open to student decision making, and to build outcomes measurement feedback into integrated planning.

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Note: In 2005, Herman Miller, Inc. - a Zeeland, Michigan-based furniture manufacturer, convened a series of leadership roundtables in an attempt to predict what trends would affect higher education in the year 2015. Representatives from research universities, state colleges, community colleges, private institutions, and architectural and design firms participated in exercises designed to brainstorm about the future. Their collective thoughts were combined into a list of 12 predictions, which were revised in 2009 to reflect the current global economic situation.

Faced with diminishing resources, advances in technology and increasing enrollments, colleges and universities are striving to find a balance between innovation and tradition to remain relevant and current in a rapidly evolving world. These 12 predictions have been identified to inform and assist colleges and universities in that endeavor.

1. Globalization will influence and shape all aspects of teaching and learning.

Global higher education mobility is a rapidly growing phenomenon, with over 2.9 million students seeking an education outside their home country—a 57 percent increase since 1999 (Institute of International Education 2009). Thomas Friedman (2005), in his best-selling book The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century, offers this observation about globalization and the contributing role of technology: "Never before in the
The wide range of ability, preparedness, background, opportunity, and motivation of higher education students will require more varied and holistic approaches to inclusive learning.

Colleges and universities seek and recruit an increasingly diverse student body, yet there is internal resistance to dealing with the learning issues that come with the diverse abilities, aptitudes, and skills possessed by the current generation of students.

How well are today’s students prepared to deal with college-level learning? Private liberal arts colleges and research-based universities are particularly challenged by the diverse abilities and lack of preparation of many students. As a result, there are concerns being voiced by faculty in all sectors as to whether the core mission of the institution should include developmental or remedial coursework.

Another issue is the increasing realization that the adult population has literacy issues that extend to include technology competency, problem-solving ability, critical thinking, and communication competency. These issues must be addressed to maintain a competitive workforce in an information age.

Teaching methods and pedagogies, institutional resources and commitment, and the traditional ways of engaging students must be reexamined to meet the contemporary needs of students and workers in the United States.

The demand for more experiential, outside learning opportunities will require faculty to respond thoughtfully and proactively.

The newest generation of college students has a preferred mode of activity and interaction that does not align well with the current educational system. Writer and educational consultant Marc Prensky (2001) who coined the term “Digital Natives” writes that today’s students are not interested in large lecture halls. They prefer informal small-group discussion often through text messaging or e-mail, as a means to gain an understanding of curriculum content. They choose search engines to find information and frown on library-centered research methods or the local course management system (CMS). The social nature of Digital Native students, as well as their desire for experiential learning, sends a message to educators that it is important to embed interaction into the college curriculum.

The importance of interaction is not new; learning studies have consistently demonstrated that students learn more when they interact with material with each other, and with faculty. The increasing preference of students for more experiential learning is part of the increasing demand for programs that develop practical job-enhancing skills. As long as there is a significant gap in student and faculty perceptions regarding the role of each in determining the degree and amount of experiential opportunities to be pursued, there will be the potential for alienation, discomfort, and disagreement.

In addition, colleges need to work with employers to provide faculty with industry “externships” that will update and refresh their knowledge of on-the-job requirements. Involving industry in more meaningful ways—providing input; assisting in curriculum development; offering internships, apprenticeships, co-op experiences, and service learning; and serving on program advisory committees—can help faculty understand the need for involvement and active engagement in the teaching and learning process.

Colleges and universities will be expected to deliver more education in less space—to increase their learning per square foot.

There are two aspects to this statement: (1) the expectation that higher education, in the face of unparalleled fiscal challenges, will be asked to do more with less, and (2) the need for colleges to become more efficient when responding to calls for greater accountability.

It is doubtful that the planners who designed existing classrooms had technology, innovation, and change in mind when those spaces were in development. It is more likely that durability, usability, and cost effectiveness were the driving principles. Too often, questions about multiple...
pedagogical approaches, functionality and flexibility, access to technology, and the human needs of the room (such as lighting, temperature, acoustics, adaptability, and comfort) were lost in the rush to complete the project on time and under budget.

Technology has significantly affected the world and its presence is strongly felt in education, where its growing popularity has increased pressure on an outmoded infrastructure not designed to support the demands of bandwidth, wireless capabilities, and increased power usage. While virtual learning will increase over time, there is no reason to eliminate the place-bound campuses and locations in which government and private educational institutions have invested over the years. But the likelihood of massive funding for new capital construction or extensive renovation is small, given current circumstances.

To be fully accountable, colleges must find ways to respond to their constituents by demonstrating that deep and meaningful learning takes place in their facilities. Stronger metrics that accurately assess learning are needed to assuage concerns about the accountability of higher education in tough economic times.

5. Advancements in technology will drive ongoing changes in all aspects of college and university life and offer new opportunities to enhance and broaden learning experiences.

Today’s students bring with them not only a desire for experiential and collaborative learning, but also a technological competence not seen in previous generations. Older faculty, trained in another era without the benefits of today’s technology, might teach as they were taught and resist changing their pedagogy or only grudgingly increase their technological competence.

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There is no service or activity conducted in higher education that will not be increasingly affected by advances in technology. It is time to conduct a comprehensive and holistic institutional review of this rapidly growing tool.

6. Interdisciplinary learning will become increasingly common and popular.

One often heard criticism of higher education is that its structure resembles a group of silos—separate colleges, divisions, or departments that rarely interact. Creative, innovative teachers who want to explore the multidimensional aspects of their subject matter are still held to the Carnegie unit, the need to break down content into 50-minute classes and three-credit courses. Creative initiatives such as the learning community movement and interdisciplinary studies programs occasionally are successful but they are in the minority.

How can a college change its way of doing business to deal with the new generation of students who seek a more collaborative, interactive, and experiential education? Again, technology may be the lever that accelerates change.

For example, the Internet introduces the student to a vast array of data, information, and knowledge. The physical limitations of the collection in a brick-and-mortar library are gradually replaced by limitless opportunities for primary source research by the student, who becomes increasingly self-directed. In time, the role of the faculty evolves from the traditional model—lecture, assign, and evaluate—to one in which they help the student identify a course of directed research and study in a set of appropriate disciplines, critique progress, and learn with the student throughout the research process.

Ultimately, the faculty-student relationship is changed, and the curriculum becomes a co-designed course of study in which the student contracts for a learning experience with mutually-agreed upon outcomes while the faculty member monitors, assesses, and certifies student progress. Freed from the classroom, faculty will be able to collaborate with colleagues throughout the college to design programs of study that may be called interdisciplinary, codisciplinary, or transdisciplinary. Most importantly, the goal is to make the curriculum challenging, rich, and diverse.

7. Students will take much greater control of their own learning as proactive producers and managers of their own learning solutions, materials, and portfolios.

In recent years, there has been a contentious discussion about the concept of the student as a consumer or customer. There are concerns that such an approach lowers quality, dilutes the authority and role of the teacher, and places the college in a passive, reactionary role. This resistance is natural; since expectations for a college education have remained remarkably consistent over the past several decades...
Interest in online learning is surging for a variety of reasons including flexibility in scheduling, family and time constraints, cost of transportation, dissatisfaction with traditional academic scheduling, and economic pressures. More asynchronous interactions with learning institutions provide needed flexibility in the student’s life.

If students are becoming more proactive regarding their educational choices, then teachers must rethink their approach to the classroom and laboratory and become directors, not dictators, of student learning. The Internet offers the student a vast array of data, information, and knowledge and provides limitless opportunities for primary source research, which, as noted previously, is becoming increasingly self-directed.

Just as our society has moved from a manufacturing to a service economy, so will higher education eventually be seen as a service-oriented institution, rather than as a manufacturer of knowledge. And, ultimately, if a student sees himself or herself as a customer—paying the bills and having high expectations of receiving educational value for the money—the student will go, or log on, to the institution that fulfills an immediate learning need.

8. The average age of students will continue to rise; the mix of cultures, ages, and learning styles will become increasingly varied and rich.

The student body is getting older. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), between 1995 and 2006, the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 33 percent. Enrollment of people 25 and over rose by 13 percent during the same period. From 2006 to 2017, NCES projects a rise of 10 percent in enrollments of people under 25 and a rise of 19 percent in enrollments of people 25 and over (National Center for Education Statistics 2009). For many colleges, evening and weekend classes look more like adult education centers than the traditionally youthful college environment.

Community colleges enroll 46 percent of all undergraduates in the country—almost 12 million in early 2009. The average age of the student body in two-year colleges is close to 30. Full-time students are in the minority. Women make up almost 60 percent and minorities make up 36 percent of the enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges n.d.). Given its low cost of tuition and local appeal, this sector of higher education will continue to grow and become more diverse.

There is another demographic issue that education must address: the fundamental age distribution of our population is changing at a brisk pace. In 1900, only 13 percent of the population was aged 50 or over. In 2000, it was 27 percent (Hansen 2005).

According to Toossi (2004), the highest growth rate in the U.S. workforce is among workers aged 55 to 64. By 2015, nearly one in five workers will be 55 or older. Many will want to continue working; yet will need retraining to acquire new skills. Colleges and universities in the United States are best qualified to provide this training. However, teaching groups of students of varying ages, background, and abilities will be a major challenge for colleges in the future.

9. Competition for students and resources will force colleges and universities to sharpen their brands and identities and to distinguish themselves in new ways.

The current economic situation has created many challenges for higher education. Publicly funded institutions are facing cuts at the state and federal level, and endowments are declining in value as fluctuations in the stock market diminish investments. According to FinAid (2009), a leading financial aid Web site, tuition tends to increase on average about eight percent per year. This tuition inflation rate means that the cost of college doubles every nine years. For a baby born today, tuition will triple by the time the child matriculates to college.

To attract qualified, motivated students, colleges and universities must find ways to appeal to the best and brightest. In this regard, they are no different than corporations that seek to attract the most talented workers. A positive image translates into sales for corporations and enrollment for higher education institutions.

Many aspects of the educational experience have direct branding implications. From student recruiting and admissions to alumni giving, community relations, faculty engagement, staff culture, quality of academics, and the entire student experience, the brand image of an institution is created by and reflects many institutional dynamics. Just as business leaders have increasingly focused on branding as the marketing means to shape identity and appeal for their product, colleges and universities need to understand the needs, expectations, and perceptions of their stakeholders and constituents and align their brand accordingly.
Universities need to understand their stakeholders and align their brands accordingly.

10. Colleges and universities will become increasingly important parts of regional economic development, both in creating growth and taking advantage of it. The relationship between campus and community is becoming increasingly interdependent. This is primarily because of the growing demands of economic development and the role colleges and universities play in the training and retraining of the workforce.

No country can achieve sustainable economic development without substantial investment in human capital. If the United States wishes to retain its leadership in an increasingly competitive world, it must equip its citizens with the skills and abilities to succeed in a knowledge-based economy. Investing in an educational system that develops and trains our human capital will produce future increases in productivity and profitability. The relationship between economic development and education is symbiotic.

Forward-thinking educational institutions will engage business, labor, economic development, and workforce organizations in their region in developing holistic approaches to strengthening training programs through collaborative educational career pathway programs, student internship programs, and cutting-edge curricula.

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Colleges and universities must be more proactive in participating in local and regional economic and workforce development issues. They can position themselves as centers that bring together and strengthen various regional endeavors. They are the logical convenors of initiatives that strengthen the local economy. Connecting strongly with governmental economic development organizations will increase local support at a time when higher education is challenged by an uncertain economic future.

11. The structures of educational institutions and the types of employment relationships between them and faculty will continue to multiply; inequities among faculty will cause tensions.

The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers (Schuster and Finkelstein 2006) has provoked considerable discussion with its pessimistic view of the future of the professoriate. The author's data-driven research predicts a large increase in the use of part-time faculty with lower wages and no benefits, a decline in full-time and tenure-track appointments, a shift in the arts to the professions, increasing workloads, wages falling behind inflation, and large applicant pools for fewer positions. The culmination of these trends may lead to a stressful, fraught working environment.

There is another cloud on the campus horizon—faculty are aging. Data reveals that in 1987, the age structure among most faculties could be described as uniform, with 25 percent of the full-time instructional staff less than 40 years old, 50 percent between the ages of 40 and 54, and 25 percent aged 55 or older. However, the professoriate aged rapidly during the next decade, so that by 1998, only 18 percent of faculty were less than aged 40, while over 31 percent were 55 or older. More recent statistics confirm the gradual aging of the faculty (Clark 2005).

Senior faculty, seeing retirement savings and investments shrink because of the economy, are now much less inclined to retire. Continued employment of faculty beyond normal retirement age diminishes prospects for promotion among eligible younger faculty, reduces the number of new hires with the potential to bring revitalized energy to academic departments, and increases labor costs. Yet delayed retirement might help institutions respond to increased numbers of students while maintaining veteran instructional resources and keepers of institutional memory.

In the current economic climate, academic leaders should reexamine personnel policies and engage in strategic planning, not just to fill positions when they become open but to select a new generation of faculty who can deal with a technologically sophisticated, diverse, and growing student body.

12. Accountability and assessment tools will continue to become common in defining institutional effectiveness.

Historically, quality in higher education has been defined as adherence to self-defined standards, with accrediting agencies overseeing academic enterprises. While other countries regulate higher education through a government
ministry the United States has opted for a system of voluntary self-regulation. Over time, criticism about the relatively static rate of change in higher education, low completion rates, and poor workforce preparation has increased.

The Spellings Commission is the latest group charged with recommending a national strategy for reforming postsecondary education, with a primary focus on how well colleges and universities are preparing students for the 21st-century workplace (U.S. Department of Education 2006). A significant motivation behind the Spellings Commission’s formation was the fear that the U.S. higher education system was deteriorating and failing to prepare the workforce for the rigors and competitiveness of a global marketplace. Not unexpectedly, the commission’s report was met with sustained and vocal criticism from the education establishment.

The greatest concern was focused on a commission proposal that would create a public database in which statistics and other information about colleges and universities could be viewed by anyone in order to provide necessary accountability. The database could eventually contain items such as the learning outcomes of students. The commission argued that colleges might have a more vested interest in the success of their students if this information were made public to prospective students and their parents. The critics argued that it would be virtually impossible to develop a uniform national academic measure because of the many diverse subject disciplines and concentrations (Romano 2006).

There is a dangerous link between the funding challenges referenced earlier and increased calls for accountability, a situation that legislatures and governmental agencies could use to leverage unwilling colleges into cooperation. Publicly funded institutions must be accountable to their principal stakeholder—the public. Should colleges continue to resist implementing solid assessment systems and accountability measures, they risk exacerbating an already tentative relationship with their benefactors. It is better to be proactive in assessment than to be reactive to external mandates.

Looking to the Future

Each of these 12 predictions provides both a challenge and an opportunity for colleges and universities. Scanning the horizon for future trends that could impact the educational enterprise is a wise expenditure of institutional time and energy, assuring a strong, resilient, and vibrant academy for future generations.

References


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