

Reflections on the Issues of the Moment

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Throughout the spring of 2013, I toured higher education's conference circuit as both a participant and observer, and came away with a good sense of the issues occupying the attention of American higher education during this period. Mindful of the velocity of change that characterizes our profession, I share with you ten of the most common themes and concerns that currently affect or have the potential to affect the educational landscape. MOOCS (MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES)

Within a relatively short period, MOOCs have become a topic about which everyone has an opinion. MOOCs dominated discussions related to technology, access, and cost. Where their sustainability once appeared to be a concern, various applications and business models have started to emerge. Based upon what I heard at multiple conferences, this is what MOOCs do well:

- Deliver state-of-the-art continuing education: This is their best application to date in the eyes of some.
- Provide access to a form of 21st century textbook, as Nick Anderson of the *Washington Post* and Joseph Harris, a visiting professor at Duke, have observed: Not only do they provide reputation-enhancing visibility for faculty, they also aggregate more eyeballs than is typical for most printed texts. There is every reason to expect that the publishing industry will soon be using MOOCs as a way of drawing attention to their new releases.
- Help institutions market programs that may have difficulty getting noticed otherwise: The Berklee College of Music, for instance, is using a MOOC as the

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equivalent of a free sample for a multicourse program in guitar to generate awareness among students who might otherwise not be familiar with the institution and its curriculum. Once they have sampled this offering, students will perhaps consider enrolling in follow-up courses (and paying full price) that are delivered in a more traditional online format.

- Enhance institutional brands: “Name” schools are seeking to share their excellence broadly and for free, especially outside of the US, where 60 to 70 percent of past MOOC participants reside. Given that over half of the world’s population is under the age of 25, the accessibility of MOOCs is likely to increase in importance internationally, especially in countries where cost would otherwise be a barrier.
- Inform research: The leadership of edX has publicly stated that their MOOCs are an educational experiment conducted primarily for insights into effective pedagogy and integrating technology into the learning process. Others have suggested that this form of instruction is providing a remarkable diffusion of innovation. Institutions that were formerly very skeptical about traditional forms of online learning have been captivated by the prospect of a model that America’s best-known institutions have validated.
- Provide instruction for purposes of degree completion: This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of MOOCs. While few question the quality of the instruction, albeit highly impersonal, and woefully lacking in the production of successful completers (now between 1 and 7 percent), issues of learning outcome assessment and student identification are of concern. When tens, even hundreds of thousands of participants (one MOOC has reported over 200,000 participants in a single offering) are involved, these issues are magnified. The American Council on Education (ACE) has approved five MOOCs for credit, a move that has been greeted with a mix of anticipation (for those who want to establish a bridge

between knowledge, learning, and an accepted credential) and skepticism (as some institutions suggest that they will not accept such recommendations without a deeper understanding of how the ACE arrived at its conclusions).

CREDIT

The ACE's approval of a handful of MOOCs has raised the larger question of creditworthiness. With an ever-increasing number of non-collegiate learning options—from employer training to “The Great Courses”—and with the growing awareness that learning can and does occur beyond the classroom, some are questioning the way in which creditworthiness is determined, and who does the determining. This has been the near-exclusive domain of the American Council on Education. And while there is no question as to the value of this service, especially for post-traditional learners, many are starting to ask whether the ACE can continue to serve as the sole national determiner of creditworthiness. At the same time, others wonder whether “credit” is even relevant at a time when competency-based credentialing is on the ascent.

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LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Speakers at multiple conference sessions pointed out that valid outcome assessments are a growing need, both for determining institutional effectiveness (of interest to accreditors and the DoE) and as a means for considering the acceptability of learning gained from outside the academy (for degree purposes). Whether the concept of credit goes or stays, there seems to be agreement that there is a need to measure learning in a more sophisticated and valid manner, wherever it is gained.

Questions abound as to whether we can continue to rely on what some see as imprecise and often arbitrary methods of determining the degree to which learning has taken place. As one presenter lamented, “The more accurate we seek to be in the evaluation process, the greater the work for us.” Volumes of exams and essays must be read and graded. Often, some fear, a textbook publisher's test bank becomes the default. This was contrasted in one session with the British system, where learning is assessed by third

parties (also of the faculty) who prepare examinations based on outcomes called for in the syllabus, independent of instructor input. A panel of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) pointed out that this is similar to the process used in credit-by-examination preparation, where subject matter experts set learning objectives. Psychometricians then construct and vet the final examination for validity and reliability. In conversations on this subject, there was broad agreement that accreditors, regulators, and politicians can be expected to look more closely at the degree to which learning is occurring and how it is being assessed.

COLLEGE COSTS AND FINANCIAL AID

The issue of affordability was much discussed this spring, both in formal presentations and in individual conversations. Most participants were aware that US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the Department of Education want to overhaul financial aid in 2013 while also encouraging institutions to do more to control tuition increases. Cocktail conversation at the Washington conferences, particularly, painted pictures of a system where institutional entitlement to Title IV aid would be determined by a formula that combined tuition history, graduation rates, and gainful-employment data to determine appropriate levels of participation. Other areas for potential regulations include fraud detection and prevention as well as efforts to force greater state oversight, especially for online programs.

What is receiving surprisingly little discussion is the role that government plays in increasing the cost of a degree. According to the ACE, since the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008, the Department of Education has issued more than 150 new regulations. Some of these have resulted in greater costs for institutions and reduced access for students because many online providers withdrew from states with the most onerous rules. All of these new regulations require analysis as to applicability, expenditures to ensure compliance, and in most cases, data collection and reporting to ensure accountability. While many new regulations were undoubtedly necessary and others appear less so, the lack of consideration as to the cost of regulations does not seem a concern.

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REGULATION

As noted above, the last reauthorization of the Higher Education Act brought a tsunami of new federal regulations. While many were intended to rein in abuses real and imagined, especially by the proprietary sector,

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several also extended to the not-for-profit sector, public, and private. Capitol Hill watchers believe that higher education can expect to see more of the same in the coming year, but this time they predict that it will be coming from all quarters: House, Senate, Department of Education, and the White House. According to *Inside Higher Ed* reporter Libby Nelson (writing in ACE's Winter 2013, "The Presidency"), "... the president himself, not just his policy advisers, is said to be personally interested in college affordability and tuition prices." Senator Tom Harkin, chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, is said to be seeking provisions in the next reauthorization bill that will place additional restrictions on for-profits and, he hopes, curb the

abuses identified by his much-publicized investigation of 2012. Others in the Senate are seeking tougher policies on those using aggressive marketing to enroll veterans under the GI bills. One conference regulatory briefing noted that there is still a need to develop implementing regulations for the veterans' protection legislation that the last Congress passed. Washington soothsayers also note that Secretary Duncan continues to push gainful employment—this time for all.

An interesting observation made at the annual conference of the University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) was that the administration has seemingly been unable to distinguish between traditional and post-traditional learners in their policies and metrics. Much of the regulation now being experienced appears to assume that 18- to 24-year olds studying fulltime in a classroom still dominate American higher education.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Discussions around quality seem to be on the minds of both traditional and post-traditional institutions. Powered by MOOCs and the desire for transferable credit, the spotlight is now on how this can be best achieved. In an

example of the complexity of this issue, it has been noted that although the ACE has determined that five early MOOC courses should receive credit, some receiving institutions are not so sure. While no one has questioned the quality of MOOC-delivered instruction, questions persist as to how to measure the learning outcomes of such offerings.

At the “Summit on Assessment” sponsored by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in February, concerns were voiced about how to determine the quality and academic fit of such non-collegiate offerings as MOOCs, Open Educational Resources (OER), corporate training, and even “The Great Courses.” Some presenters suggested that the time may have come for multiple types of quality assurance, guided by agreed-upon standards, transparency, and some form of oversight.

The question of what constitutes quality in higher education does not appear to concern only nontraditional forms of instruction. At both the ACE and AACC conferences, presenters drew connections between the quality of the learning experience (usually in a classroom) and student persistence. While online programs typically require instructors to complete training in online teaching methods, there are rarely comparable expectations for classroom instructors, it was noted. As a result, one audience member pointed out that students often withdraw from courses perceived as intolerably boring or poorly conducted. Others commented that the multiplicity of such experiences may be contributing to students dropping out short of a degree. The problem even reaches to the most prestigious institutions: at this year’s Davos conference MIT President Rafael Reif stated, “We have spectacular researchers who are lousy teachers. That is sad.” (Eric Hellveg, “Eight Brilliant Minds on the Future of Higher Education,” HBR Blog Network, 1/29/13)

COMPETENCY-BASED CREDENTIALING

The recent Department of Education decision to authorize Title IV financial aid for a competency-based associate degree program at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) has attracted wide attention and was the subject of a presentation before the Boston Higher Education Innovation Council in March 2013. Interestingly, credits and credit hours are not units of measure with the SNHU program, which uses competencies instead.

A number of other, primarily adult serving institutions, including Excelsior College, intend to follow suit. Such programs now qualify under the direct assessment provisions of financial aid regulations, a previously

unused avenue to aid. With Department of Education recognition and seeming support, it is expected that other institutions will be drawn to this option, especially for post-traditional students. But movement in this area raises many questions for all of higher education, such as the role of faculty, the meaning and measurement of competency, and the body that measures competency.

REMEDICATION

Closely related to both the quality issue and the administration's completion agenda is that of college readiness. It has been estimated that more than 60 percent of first-year college students are not ready for tertiary work due to weaknesses in their ability to write or to solve basic math problems. As a result, such students must often take developmental courses that carry neither credit nor financial-aid entitlement. This increases cost and time to credential, if the student persists at all. According to discussions at the ACE, AACC, and UPCEA conferences, the lack of college readiness is a major barrier to degree completion for both traditional and post-traditional institutions. Tools to address this concern are being developed by initiatives that range from the Khan Academy's tutorials (profiled at the AACC conference) to Excelsior College's Online Writing Laboratory (OWL). Both are available for free and to all.

THE SKILLS GAP

Aside from Anthony Carnevale's reference at the AACC Conference in San Francisco, this topic appears to be receiving more attention from the US Chamber of Commerce and the nation's employers than from the higher education community. While a May 2013 Gallup Poll of college CEOs revealed that 44 percent felt that their institutions could do a better job of meeting the needs of employers, the majority were reasonably satisfied with their current performance. However, even as unemployment hovered near ten percent in recent years, employers reported difficulty in finding applicants with needed skills. The Institute for a Competitive Workforce (ICW) at the US Chamber of Commerce reports that three million jobs are open in fields where advanced education is needed: engineering, computer science, cybersecurity, nanotechnology, etc. As Carnevale points out, the percentage of our workforce with any degree is actually falling. It is estimated that over 60 percent of our workforce, or 93 million workers, hold no academic credential beyond a high school diploma. This has led to

passage of the “Brains Act of 2012,” which increased the number of work visas for foreign nationals with a STEM degree. Is this a new form of job outsourcing, or a desperate attempt to keep American industry competitive? Employers, unions, and politicians are likely to turn up the heat on this issue in the coming year.

THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

Whether we call them “adult,” “non-traditional” or, as I prefer, “post-traditional” students, their day has come. While it has taken an agonizingly long time, higher education is awakening to the fact that its future does not reside with a shrinking population of adolescents studying full-time on college campuses. In fact, as most readers know, only 15 percent of current degree seeking students (of which there are roughly 20 million) fit this profile. If we are to meet the president’s goal for greater degree attainment and a more competitive workforce, colleges and universities of all types are going to need to reach out to those already in the workforce, as well. With the exception of some smaller traditional independent schools, this message seems to have been heard. Even the American Council on Education, with its mostly traditional member institutions, is working to better serve post-traditional learners. Molly Broad, president of ACE, has taken the lead in bringing attention to lifelong learning and degree completion. ACE commissioned the “manifesto” for post-traditional learning that was written by Louis Soares earlier this year. AACC, CAEL, and UPCEA have also long been known for their work on behalf of adults.

The post-traditional market, long ceded to for-profit institutions, represents a tremendous opportunity for those colleges and universities seeking to diversify beyond the 18- to 24-year-old population. However, in so doing, many of those presenting this spring made clear they will have to do it differently. Variations of traditional daytime classroom lectures will neither attract nor retain the older, working, time-constrained student.

MOOCs, competency-based credentials, prior learning assessments, portfolios, and much of the headline-grabbing innovation that we are now seeing are aimed primarily at meeting the needs of older, experienced individuals. Knowledge, skills, and a credential are being sought to maintain economic competitiveness along with that of their employer and our coun-

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try. This does not require that they follow the academic paths of the past.

CONCLUSION

American education is in the process of being transformed—into what we are not yet sure. Economic, political, technological, societal, and demographic pressures are forcing change as never before seen. With this change has come a blinding array of concerns and considerations. While easy to feel overwhelmed by these dynamics, there are reasons for optimism. In the aggregate, I saw thousands of colleagues, peers, suppliers, regulators, and informed observers at the various conferences I attended. These bright, caring professionals shared a concern for our system of higher education and a commitment to maintain its position as one of the best in the world. Together, we will chart a course through the whitewater we are now in. 🌊