

Your Customer's Voice: An Innovation Roadmap for Professional Education

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INTRODUCTION

Innovation is in vogue in the increasingly competitive and globalized higher education landscape. This is particularly true in the world of serving working professionals in continuing higher education. Global media, university boardrooms, and faculty senates are alive with talk of “disruptive” innovations that include competency-based credentials; massively open online courses (MOOCs); adaptive learning technologies; and \$10,000 bachelor’s degrees. In this sea of possibilities for innovative programming and curricular directions, higher education leaders often take their cues from peer institutions or the business world, adopting innovations that others are prioritizing. Too often, however, colleges and universities do not consider the voice of the consuming public—in particular, that of prospective students—in creating a roadmap for innovation and growth. Successful innovation is not simply about creating a bold new business model or disruptive technology but must be responsive to evolving market needs and benefit customers—students and other constituencies—through new approaches. As a result, any innovation agenda must be built on an understanding of what students and the public are demanding of professional education. Listening to your customer’s voice can help sort through the noise of interesting and nascent ideas in order to prioritize and focus on initiatives that will meet the needs of students and the public.

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In the spirit of continuous innovation and maintaining alignment with evolving market needs, Northeastern University places considerable emphasis on regularly surveying prospective professional students and other parties. This type of true market research is forward-focused and takes place

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outside of and alongside the more standard surveying (e.g., student course evaluations, admitted student questionnaires, alumni surveys) that is common in institutions of higher education.

At a broad level this article will build on the results of a number of Northeastern's marketplace surveys and opinion polls over the last year and make a case for fundamental innovations that professional students and others are demanding. Subsequently, suggestions and recommendations for prioritization are given for continuing higher education leaders to consider. While many of these survey-driven insights are confirmatory or not surprising (e.g., high interest in more online and accelerated programs), the research provides a sense of the relative interest and demand for various types of innovations, as well as other nuances. With the survey and poll-driven insights forming the core, the analysis that follows also integrates other data sources, market trends, and examples of institutional innovations.

The innovation areas reviewed include:

- Online education.
- Hybrid/Blended models.
- Competency-based education and MOOCs.
- Accelerated programs and courses.
- Experiential learning, cooperative education, and employer alignment.
- Global curriculum and experiences.

ONLINE EDUCATION AND HYBRID/BLENDED MODELS

It will come as no surprise that public interest in online education programming is high. But how is online education perceived relative to other options? While research supported by the Sloan Consortium and other groups has long tracked attitudes regarding online education among academics, consumer opinion is surprisingly less studied. A national opinion poll conducted by Northeastern in fall 2012 found that about half of all respon-

dents—49 percent—believe that online education is of a similar quality to traditional modes of study. Interestingly, acceptance of online education was even greater among younger respondents to the poll: 61 percent of those between the ages of 18 to 30 (often referred to as “millennials” or “generation Y”) believed that online education was of similar quality, and a strong majority of 72 percent of this age group reported that they would enroll in an all online university if the quality were comparable and cost half as much. Of course, with respect to entirely online universities and reduced costs, there are still relatively few online only institutions and only a handful of early examples of significant price innovations in online degree programs (such as the recent Georgia Tech/AT&T/Udacity MOOC-driven \$7,000 master’s in computer science announced in May 2013). Still, this poll data suggests that acceptance of online education is growing and that younger people in particular—to day’s traditional-aged and graduate students and the cohort of adult learners of tomorrow—are increasingly willing to consider nonconventional online education options.

While both the availability of and enrollment in 100 percent online degree programs and courses continue to grow, an underappreciated fact is that Northeastern’s tracking surveys of prospective adult students—which have focused both nationally and regionally—have consistently indicated these professionals’ preferred mode of study is a hybrid or blended mode that combines online and in-classroom study. In recent surveys, approximately two-thirds (66 percent) of survey respondents preferred a hybrid model to about 17 percent that preferred online only or traditional in-classroom instruction only. “Hybrid” encompasses a broad spectrum that ranges from mostly online with some classroom/in-person interaction to predominantly in-classroom/in-person with some online study. As for the ideal mix of online and in-classroom learning, the strongest interest seems to be in programs that are mostly online, with in-person/face-to-face class meetings every few weeks. Additionally, interest in a blended model appears even higher for graduate students than for adults returning to complete a bachelor’s degree. In polls of the general public, almost 90 percent of re-

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spondents agreed that hybrid programs provide more flexibility and choice and more benefits than online courses alone.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND MOOCS

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Public opinion polls also point to real interest in competency-based education and MOOCs, two forms of learning that have lately dominated the discussion about disruptive innovation in higher education. A majority (60 percent) of those polled by Northeastern see value in granting some form of certification or credit for prior experience. In February 2013, Gallup and the Lumina Foundation jointly published a paper titled “America’s Call For Higher Education Redesign.” This poll found even greater interest: 87 percent of Americans said that students should be able to receive credit for knowledge and skills learned outside the classroom, and 70 percent believe that mastery of that knowledge, not time spent in the classroom, is what matters in awarding credit. Competency-

based education has been gaining traction slowly at the institutional level, with Western Governors University and Excelsior College long leading the charge. More recently, Capella University, Southern New Hampshire University, and Northern Arizona University have been pioneering new models in this area. In March 2013, the US Department of Education released guidelines for institutions seeking to offer programs using a direct assessment model, and this type of policy development alongside market trends and innovative institutional examples herald new momentum for competency-based education. The next few years will be critical in establishing a clearer sense of demand for competency-based models, as shown by enrollment growth in these programs. This approach is ready to move beyond nontraditional, adult learner focused institutions and embraced by a broader range of colleges and universities, both private and public.

Other poll results point to interest in MOOCs as well as possible linkages between MOOCs and other more traditional educational paths. A modest share of those polled (37 percent) nationally see value or authenticity in granting degrees to students who design their own courses of study through high quality, open online courses (among the younger, 18-30 year old population, the share is slightly higher, at 44 percent). Similarly but with stronger

conviction, half of those polled believed that replacing introductory-level courses with online courses of similar quality at a lower cost would be valued (and this rises to nearly 60 percent among 18-30 year olds).

As with other innovative models, the younger population appears more willing to embrace MOOCs. Recognizing that these young learners will become the next generation of CE consumers, continuing and professional education units must take into account these dynamics. Surely the growth of MOOCs in higher education is impossible to ignore, as the phenomenon has spread rapidly among accredited colleges, with hundreds of courses now offered and dramatic growth over just the last year. Assuming that MOOCs are here to stay, it is up to institutions to determine how to integrate and innovate within this dynamic space.

ACCELERATED PROGRAMS AND COURSES

Accelerated programs and courses are surprisingly underdeveloped in higher education, with many institutions still wedded to traditional course lengths and cycles, even in continuing higher education programs. A 2008 benchmarking study of more than 50 leading continuing higher education units by research firm Eduventures found that more than half of units offered no accelerated degree programs, and that accelerated programs typically represented less than 10 percent of a unit's program portfolio. Beyond continuing higher education, accelerated programs are even rarer. Meanwhile, of the adults polled in Northeastern's national survey, 38 percent felt that it was important to shorten the time required to earn a degree to three years. Almost 50 percent of the 18-30 year olds thought that a shorter time to graduation was important, indicating this next generation is willing to accept nonconventional timing and models.

Significantly, when the prospective adult learner population was surveyed, almost 75 percent were interested in some sort of a fast-track program (e.g., an intensive, 12- to 18-month degree). Likewise, 76 percent were interested in accelerated courses, where participation was for 6-12 weeks rather than the traditional semester. Again, this is further evidence of student/consumer interest in these more flexible options available more systematically across a wider range of institutions and programs. In recent

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years, Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies has experimented with various fast-track degree programs at both the master’s and undergraduate levels. These have been among the college’s most popular offerings, and perhaps even more compelling, these programs feature exem-

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plary student retention and satisfaction rates. All parties are clear winners when well-designed, accelerated programs can improve student outcomes and return on investment while responding to market interest.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, COOPERATIVE EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYER ALIGNMENT

Employability is at the forefront of today’s higher education marketplace, and many institutions worldwide are beginning to embrace work-integrated learning, experiential learning, and cooperative education. A December 2012 study from McKinsey & Company, “Education to Employment,” argues that finding the solution to global youth unemployment requires that “education providers and employers actively step into one another’s worlds,” and that the “education-to-employment journey is treated as a continuum.” In a recent book and in an August 2012 commentary, Whar-

ton School labor market expert Peter Cappelli offered a similar prescription for addressing the perceived skills gap in US labor markets, pointing out that employers are not investing adequately in training existing staff nor are they making significant enough efforts to partner with colleges and universities to define educational programs that meet their needs.

As Northeastern is well known for its unique experiential learning model and has more than a century’s worth of experience in this arena, it was of interest to ask the national audience their perceptions about these types of models in order to understand whether consumer interest maps with the calls of various thought leaders, policy makers, and foundations to move in this direction.

Cooperative education is the most common model, in which students can alternate semesters of academic study with full-time paid employment in their chosen field. Across the board, the notion of cooperative education was well received: 88 percent of the respondents believed that such models prepared graduates to find employment in today’s job market, developed

candidates better prepared for the real world, and helped students develop more applied skills and real-world experience. A significant 90 percent of respondents believed cooperative education was a good way to help students find the right career path for them.

Given that the adult learner population typically skews older and that it consists most often of working professionals, it was fascinating to find a relatively high level of interest (60 percent) among prospective part-time, adult students in corporate residency / cooperative education-type models, e.g., a rotational component including paid, many months full-time work experiences integrated into the educational experience.

It was also not surprising to find strong interest in programs with an experiential employer project, internship, or career experience component: 72 percent expressed interest in this type of curriculum / career integration, underscoring the need for connectivity between degrees / curriculum and what employers are seeking. This theme was further emphasized when prospective students defined the characteristics of a high quality program: faculty with real-world, industry experience; highly successful alumni and career outcomes for graduates; and innovative curriculum designed in collaboration with employers and industry. That is, ties to the employment landscape are at the core. This type of alignment and partnership between industry and academia is key to meeting students' needs, and because professional and continuing education units often sit at the intersection of these worlds, this becomes an exciting arena for innovation. While employer alignment is common in professional programs for part-time students, experiential learning and cooperative education represent new areas of innovation and challenge.

GLOBAL CURRICULUM AND EXPERIENCES

The theme of globalization dominates the higher education landscape, as evidenced in the recruitment of international students; expansion of study abroad opportunities; development of international research collaborations; and the establishment of branch campuses worldwide. Nationally, 78 percent of respondents to Northeastern's poll felt that an important part of college was the opportunity to study or work abroad and gain a global perspective. This was a common belief across all age groups, young and old. In the case of the working adult student population, universities often pay little attention to this and many focus on the globalization of the on-campus, residential, undergraduate experience. Yet, 50 to 80 percent

(this varied by region) of surveyed prospective adult students indicated that a global/international orientation was an important consideration in their enrollment decision about part-time programs. Interestingly, this is echoed in Northeastern's hundreds of meetings and interviews over the

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last three years with major employers, who underscore the need for global and intercultural competencies in their professional workforce.

Global orientation is evident in a variety of emerging models, including, global rotational programs where students can learn at a variety of physical locations across the world as, for example, the University of Southern California's Global EdD or international rotational MBA programs at Rutgers University and Hult International Business School. At Northeastern University, student interest in international cooperative education opportunities has surged 60 percent over the past five years. As the university has become much more global and has built a network of employer partnerships, partner sites, and opportunities around the world, new opportunities are being opened up not only for undergraduate students, but for part-time professional students as well.

CONCLUSION

To keep pace with market trends—and indeed, to stay ahead of them—higher education institutions and their professional and continuing education units must continually evaluate the needs and interests of their customers. The higher education environment today is rich with experimentation and innovation, which makes these exciting times. However, innovation and new investment should be grounded in evidence and reflect customer demands rather than reacting to the direction of peer institutions.

The common axis across the innovations explored in this article is that they each increasingly take higher education institutions, their programs, and their ways of thinking beyond traditional boundaries, whether with respect to the distributed nature of online delivery; breaking down credit-hour limitations through competency-based models; disrupting the traditional semester through acceleration; integrating with the world of work

and employment; or dissolving borders by bringing global perspectives and experiences from the outside into the curriculum. These innovation priorities articulated by higher education customers reinforce the idea that we are rapidly moving beyond old, prescribed educational models or local and regional service areas, and entering into a more distributed, dynamic, and somewhat uncharted territory. This new territory will require continuous and thoughtful assessment of market trends as well as a more intentional integration/connectivity between the curriculum and student experience and the world outside the ivory tower. And it all begins by listening to what your customer tells you. 