Webster University: A Case Study in Innovative Academic & Organizational Designs for Tertiary Education in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Background: Given rising expectations for higher education institutions to rely more on private sources of funding, there is a search for viable models and directions that promise success. But the models used by successful institutions are often unique and not applicable to institutions needing guidance.

Aims or focus of discussion: The aim of this paper is to review the development of Webster University, as a case example of how it has met the complex challenges facing private higher learning institutions. The analysis seeks to identify themes and guiding principles that can benefit other institutions.

Arguments / comments / suggestions: Five themes explain how Webster University developed from its origin as a small Catholic college in 1915, to achieve its status today as a vibrant, independent, international university with 107 campuses and worldwide enrollment of 21,000. The themes include: (1) commitment to a clear mission; (2) global education programs; (3) diversity of students; (4) personalized learning; and (5) embedded technologies. The themes are conceived as guiding principles that can be shaped and customized to the needs, characteristics, and the particular circumstances of other institutions. The themes also have room for many creative solutions and directions, yet unknown or untested.

Conclusion: The case study of Webster University's development gives credence and validation for other institutions to trust the visionary thinking, creative energies, resourcefulness, and commitment of everyone involved toward a viable, relevant and successful institution for the 21st century.

Keywords: innovations, higher education, 21st century learning

韋伯斯特大學：廿一世紀高等教育的創新學術機構設計實例研究

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摘要

背景：由於高等院校越來越依賴私人資金的狀況，我們有必要檢驗各種資助方式以便找出成功的模式。 成功的院校經常有特殊情況以至它們的經驗不具備普遍性。

探討重點：本篇文章以韋伯斯特大學為例探討該大學如何應對私立大學資金來源的複雜問題。我們的分析注重揭示具有通用性的原則和主題。

討論和建議：五項原則主導了韋伯斯特大學的發展史：從一 個 於1915年 開始的小規模的天主教會學院，發展成至今如此活躍和有生氣、備有107個校園和21000名各國學生的國際大學。韋伯斯特大學應用的原則包括：（1）堅持明確的辦學目標；（2）全球教學課程；（3）多種學生來源；（4）關注個體學生學習；（5）採用創新技術。以以上原則為指標，可以推廣到其他院校。 根據它校特徵更改後滿足需求。這些原則需要不斷改善以便適應未來的需求。

結論：這篇文章探討韋伯斯特大學的發展史，用於指導其他院校建立一套完整的體系。 在21世紀中成為有創建性的，生氣勃勃的， 與社會相關的成功的高等院校。

關鍵詞：創新、高等教育、21世紀學習

Introduction

The topic of the 2011 Hong Kong Teachers' Association (HKTA) Annual Conference – Privatization of Tertiary Education – is compelling and challenging. Expectations are rising for higher education institutions to rely more on private sources of funding. Private institutions everywhere are searching for viable models that promise success. But the models used by successful institutions are often unique or idiosyncratic, and hence not applicable to institutions needing guidance. Successful institutions tend to be ones whose mission, strategic plans, policies and programs help them navigate through recurring global economic crises, inter-institutional competition, and the unpredictable waves of public funding. How do we build viable and successful self-financed higher education institutions? The aim of this paper is to use the development of one institution, Webster University, as a case example of how it has met the complex challenges facing private institutions of higher learning, past, present and future. Implications for other institutions are drawn from this discussion.

This paper is a descriptive, quasi-historical review of innovations at Webster University, from the perspective of a 30-year veteran professor of education and international studies. It aims to list a sampling of Webster University's distinctive and innovative characteristics which may be instructive for other institutions. It is not the intention of this paper to advance Webster University as a model to be emulated for organizing or funding tertiary education. An underlying working assumption in this paper is that the ways of organizing and funding tertiary education for success is not formulaic. Instead it is based on creative, nimble and visionary leadership, and the courage to choose unconventional paths with sometimes uncertain outcomes.

Today, Webster University is an independent, international university with 107 domestic and international campuses, with an average class size of 11. Its enrollment of 21,000 students worldwide in 2010, included 77% graduate students and 23% undergraduates. There were 8,000 students at Webster University's home campus in St. Louis (Missouri, USA), of which 58% were graduate students and 42% were undergraduate students. Students come from all 50 states in the USA, and 129 countries worldwide. Students enrolled at Webster's European campuses came from 101 different countries. Those enrolled at Webster's Asian campuses come from 34 countries. Its endowment is US$70,300,000; and its annual operating budget is US$194,500,000 (Webster University, 2011a).

Tuition varies among the campuses. At its home campus, tuition is US$570 / credit hour for undergraduates, US$585 for graduate students; US$475 for graduate education students, and US$665 for online classes. The full-time undergraduate tuition is US$21,688. Seventy-one per cent of undergraduates receive financial aid. A total of US$185,950,619 of aid was awarded to 13,479 students (Webster University, 2011a).

Five themes explain how Webster University developed from its origin as a small college in 1915, to achieve its international reach today. The themes include: (1) commitment to a clear mission; (2) global education programs; (3) diversity of students; (4) personalized learning; and (5) embedded technologies. The themes are conceived as guiding principles that can be shaped and customized to individual needs, characteristics, and the particular circumstances of other institutions. The themes also have room for many creative solutions and directions, yet unknown or untested.

Commitment to a Clear Mission

The clarity, currency and distinctiveness of the first mission statement guided the development of the institution. In hindsight, the mission statement itself seemed to anticipate the institution's achievements and success.

In 1915, the Sisters of Loretto founded the first Catholic women's college west of the Mississippi River to meet the need for women's education in the heart of America. This small college in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri later became co-educational in 1962, to become independent (private, non-denominational) in 1967, and international in 1978 when it opened its first international campus in Geneva. In 1983 it changed its name from Webster College to Webster University. Nearly a century since its founding, it is still fulfilling the same goal: to meet the unmet needs of students in an ever-changing world. Accredited since 1925, Webster has aimed to provide personal attention and individualized academic foundation to help students achieve their professional, academic, and personal goals (Webster University, 2009).

In 2008, the University published a revised mission statement which stated:

> Webster University, a worldwide institution, ensures high quality learning experiences that transform students for global citizenship and individual excellence. (Webster University, 2011b)

With this mission statement, Webster University sought to go beyond the traditionally exclusively academic, ivory tower role of a university. It meant that the university aimed for its students, faculty and administrators to be engaged in the world as responsible citizens, as leaders and even as change agents. Although Webster University already practiced many elements that supported global citizenship, its articulation in the mission statement brought attention, clarity and focus to it. It inspired a university-wide conversation about "what is the meaning of global citizenship at Webster University" and how this is demonstrated in all aspects of the operation, management and functioning of the university. A bold mission statement like this one is challenging the university community. The community must ask itself whether this mission is meaningful for its members, and then to ensure that it is on track to meeting the mission effectively.

Webster University is presently organized into five schools and colleges: (1) The College of Arts and Sciences; (2) The George Herbert Walker School of Business and Technology; (3) The School of Communications; (4) The School of Education; and (5) The Leigh Gerdine College of Fine Arts. The graduate and undergraduate programs and curricula in all schools and colleges are designed to emphasize authentic, real-world learning. Classes are offered online or face-to-face in the classroom. They offer a blend of theory and practice that students find engaging in the classroom and relevant in the workplace (Webster University, 2009).

The clarity, boldness and distinctiveness of the institution's mission statement helped bring local, national and international attention to the institution. The organization's will and commitment to seek practical and effective ways to fulfill the goals and values embodied in the mission statement facilitate the realization of these aims and the institution's ultimate success.

Global Education Programs

Webster University's global campus network provides opportunities for students to experience new ideas and expertise wherever they may emerge, carrying out the mandate of its founders by going where there is need. This has resulted in the university expanding into an international network of more than 100 campuses and is still growing across North America, Europe and Asia (Webster University, 2009). The first extended campus site outside the St. Louis area opened in Kansas City, Missouri in 1972. In an era of decreasing student enrollments due to increased competition in the local student market, the extended campus network was an important innovation that resulted in increased enrollment system-wide, as well as in St. Louis.

International campuses include Amsterdam and

Leiden in The Netherlands; London (UK); Geneva (Switzerland); Vienna (Austria); Bangkok and Cha-am in Thailand; and Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chengdu in China. Webster University partners with the U.S. military, and has military campuses on over 40 U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force bases across the continental United States. In addition there are over 50 Metro Campuses located throughout the USA. Although Webster University is classified as a private / independent institution, these partnerships with the U.S. military show significant government involvement with the institution.

Webster University's global reach enables it to offer unique programs that attract even more students. There are study abroad programs for semester-long study in Austria, China, England, Japan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Thailand. The Center for International Education (CIE) promotes international opportunities and activities for the University and wider communities. It administers the international studies major and certificate programs, and serves as a resource for faculty, students and staff through its support of grants, internships, fellowships and other resources. The International Business Internship Exchange (IBIE) places Webster students in overseas internships that provide intense, intercultural immersion experiences. Reciprocally, students from Japan, Germany, Ghana, Mexico, the U.K. and other nations complete internships in Missouri (Webster University, 2011a).

Most recently the Global MBA program and the Global International Relations program were developed to provide graduate students with a full master's degree program they can complete in 13-months, while living and studying at five or more Webster University international campus locations. These high profile programs attract students, not only to the globalized travel programs, but also to the regular online programs, and to traditional in-classroom programs at campus locations throughout the network.

Like no previous time in history, we are unmistakably aware of an interconnected, globalized society. It makes perfect sense that educational institutions should be rooted in this globalized context. The campus footprint must be global, not only in terms of physical geography, but in terms of its student body, and its intellectual and academic resources and expertise. Over many decades, Webster University has used its extended campus network, its international campuses, and its study abroad and student exchange programs to expand its global footprint. Today, increasing mobility and electronic communications technologies provide greater opportunities for globalized education for all institutions, whether or not they have the experience of actual extended or international campuses.

Diverse Student Body

Even more important than the breadth of Webster University's programs, is its depth, and its unique approach to meeting the needs of each student who enrolls. From traditional college age students to adult learners, Webster is known for embracing the diversity of its student body. It has become a leading provider of graduate studies for the U.S. Military at more than 40 military campuses across North America (Webster University, 2009).

Webster University has more African-American graduates and more graduate minority students than any other U.S. college or university. It has among the highest number of Hispanic graduate students as well (DIHE, 2011; PRNewswire, 2010). Webster's national rankings in 2010 included (PRNewswire, 2010):

- First among traditional, non-profit universities in Total Minority master's degrees, all disciplines combined.
- First among traditional, non-profit universities in African-American master's degrees in all disciplines combined.
- First among traditional, non-profit universities in

Total Minority and African-American master's degrees in Business, Management, Marketing and Related Support Services.

- First among all universities in Total Minority and African-American master's degrees in Psychology.

Webster University students represent more than 100 nationalities, giving students at all campuses the first-hand opportunity to learn about other cultures from their classmates. The diversity of the student body and small class sizes make it possible for classroom and online experiences to include stimulating discussions, collaborative problem-solving and team projects. In this diverse and dynamic environment, the university still maintains a unified and integrated curriculum. The curriculum, the students and the faculty form an interactive triangle. They all work together. Students and faculty learn from each other, as well as each group from their peers. These learning experiences equip Webster University graduates with intercultural competence and global citizenship skills, hence providing them with solid preparation to work and live in a global economy (Webster University, 2009).

Personalized Learning

Webster University hires excellent full-time faculty (n=184 in Fall 2010), but also a cadre of 2,000 professional practitioners as adjunct faculty members across its extended campus network and online programs. This large base of full-time and adjunct faculty makes for personalized instruction with an average class size of 11; and a student-to-faculty ratio of 14.7 to 1 (Webster University, 2011a). Adjunct faculty members are particularly valuable in bringing their expertise and experience in communicating real-world solutions to real-world problems into the classroom. Throughout the university's network, learning activities are practical, personalized and student-centered.

Small class size means greater opportunities for deeper learning through hands-on exercises and simulations, field-based practicum experiences, service learning projects, and individualized feedback. The stimulating and rigorous learning environment is particularly suited for the working professionals from local businesses, industries, schools, and government organizations. Classes are available at night, on weekends and on compressed eight- or nine-week terms, making education achievable and accessible to everyone (Webster University, 2009).

The small class size and personalized instruction is especially appropriate for developing skills for the fast-changing 21st century workplace which require flexibility of thought, creativity, and collaborative problem-solving ability. Webster University's focus on personalized learning helps keep the learning environment relevant to emerging needs of the 21st century global citizen.

Embedded Technologies

Various technologies play a significant role in the institution's ability to meet expectations for living and working in the 21st century. Today, technologies are ubiquitous and embedded into all aspects of living and working. Educational institutions are expected to embed technologies in not only its main teaching, research and service roles, but also in the operational functions (marketing programs, fiscal management, personnel affairs, etc.) and physical facilities (utilities, housekeeping, maintenance, etc.).

The university's **online library system,** *Passports*, connects the extended and international campuses to the home campus' state-of-the art Emerson Library, as well as to all other libraries world-wide. This enormous repository of information is available to students and instructors anywhere and anytime. Students have telephone and email access to reference librarians who can guide them on their library research assignments. Students from any campus

may check out circulating books easily. The books are sent within 48 hours with a return addressed envelope (Webster University, 2009).

Electronic communications technologies are vital to providing student services that reach students wherever they are located geographically. All students are connected to the university's **online writing center.** They are invited to submit their class writing assignments online, where qualified writing specialists review the student's work and offer suggestions for improving their writing (Webster University, 2009).

The university's **career services office** provide resources to students and alumni preparing their resumes and portfolios for careers, full-time jobs, and internships. Students may meet with a career services specialist via toll-free telephone, or one-on-one video conferencing. The career services specialist can help a current student choose a major, or guide a graduate in making a career change (Webster University, 2009).

Online courses and programs allow students to come to class and to study with other students across the university's global campus network, regardless of their geographic proximity to a Webster campus. Using state of the art technologies in classrooms, Webster University provides the same quality resources to faculty and students across all campuses in its network (Webster University, 2009).

In 1999, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) and the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree programs were the first fully online graduate degree programs to be launched. In 2011, there are 30 undergraduate and graduate programs and certificate programs which are delivered as 100% online programs. Twenty-eight percent of students are currently matriculating in online programs.

Another innovation in technology-embedded education was the **hybrid** (international travel + online

courses), which began in 2004. Hybrid courses are designed for graduate and undergraduate students who are not able to spend a full-term in traditional study abroad experiences. These courses combine a full-term online class with a 1-week to 10-day travel to an international destination related to the topic of the course. Hybrid courses combine the most effective methods from traditional face-to-face instruction with those of online instruction. Recent hybrid courses have included (Webster University, 2011c):

- Legal and Tax Systems (Western Mediterranean)
- Cultural Capitals of Europe (Austria; France)
- Tuscany Photography (Tuscany, Italy)
- Global Issues: Japan (Tokyo/Kyoto/Osaka/ Hiroshima, Japan)
- Globalized Legal Studies (Leiden, The Netherlands)
- Commerce in China (Shanghai/Chengdu, China)
- Global Issues: China (Hong Kong/ Shenzhen/ Guangzhou)
- Global Issues (Austria; Czech Republic)

Popular **social networking** technologies (*Facebook, Twitter, Youtube*, blogs, webcasting, wikis, etc.) have also been integrated into teaching and learning situations, faculty and student research, and co-curricular programs at Webster University. Blogs and wikis enable faculty and students to publish their reflections, learning insights, research, or creative work for a wider audience than just their teachers or classmates. The integration of social networking tools in teaching and learning activities communicates to students that the university is in step with the times. They function as tools for supporting the development of global citizenship skills, which is the key plank in Webster's mission statement. The social networking tools facilitate communication with "friends" who may have different cultural backgrounds or perspectives than oneself – hence developing intercultural competence, empathy, curiosity and openness to others. It is also a public message that the

University considers these technology developments to be relevant, legitimate, and valuable tools for living and working in the digital age.

The Global Forum (http://webster.edu/theglobalforum) combines several electronic communications tools including webcasting, video-conferencing, and online discussion /text messaging/chatting. Webster University has conducted conferences and global citizen "summit meetings" using this innovative format. In March 2010, "Mr. Truman Meets Hiroshima: On the Future of Nuclear Weapons" involved a historic videoconference meeting between representatives from the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum (Independence, Missouri, USA) and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (Japan). This first time meeting brought together the museum representing the first (and only) head of state to order the use of an atomic bomb, and the museum representing the city where that atomic bomb was dropped. With a worldwide online audience of over 1,000 viewers, The Global Forum included a historian, a former governor of Missouri, and a 75-year old *hibakusha* retelling his experience as a school-boy on August 6, 1945 when the bomb fell in Hiroshima (Webster University, 2010).

Other Global Forum events included (Webster University, 2010):

- The Global Forum: On the Future of Space Exploration
- The Global Forum & Student Summit on the Meaning of Global Citizenship
- Women's Rights as Human Rights: Finding Voices, Making Choices, Webster University's Spring Human Rights Conference
- Hope For Japan: Rebuilding For Our Common Future

The Global Forum format makes it possible for students and faculty across the worldwide campus network (as well as other interested citizens) to participate (viewing and chat discussions) in the conference or meeting. This is a significant accomplishment toward the vision of an institution of higher learning for the global age. It demonstrates the possibility for a learning experience in a truly global learning environment. The common experience shared by participants everywhere may be seen as a starting point for a "global conversation" and a "global learning community."

Conclusion

The five themes – (1) commitment to a clear mission; (2) global education programs; (3) diversity of students; (4) personalized learning; and (5) embedded technologies – explain and frame the important choices Webster University made about its direction, its strategic plans, its policies, its personnel and its programs. The particular choices and decisions other institutions make will differ from those that Webster made. But the underlying thinking, collaboration, and effort made in the service of the five guiding principles are likely to be the same among institutions that succeed and thrive. This case study of Webster University's development gives credence and validation for other institutions: They too can trust the visionary thinking, creative energies, resourcefulness, and commitment of everyone involved toward a viable, relevant and successful institution for the 21st century.

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