The Shape of Higher Ed Yet to Come

Submitted by Michael Patrick Rutter on July 7, 2014 - 9:12pm

What might higher education look like a decade from now? Will it be pretty much as it is today? Or will cost pressures, debt burdens, shifting student demographics, and demands for accountability, affordability, and access produce fundamental transformations in how higher education is structured and delivered?

I am a historian, and my hindsight is far sharper than my foresight. But as a thought experiment, let me speculate.

First, a caveat. Any generalizations about the future of higher education must be qualified by the fact that post-secondary education isn’t a single entity. It consists of institutions with drastically different missions, student bodies, and sources of funding.

Some institutions may be more immune to change than others. Research universities with substantial endowments, generous alumni support, and extensive research funding may well withstand the pressures to evolve, while those institutions which are more vulnerable to the loss of students to for-profit and non-profit online providers, community colleges, and early college offerings in high school, might evolve faster.

Conversely, research universities, with their highly selective student bodies, may prove more eager to take advantage of their comparative advantages: Their well-developed research labs, rich archives, and network of connections to corporations, foundations, and art museums, and to integrate these more tightly into the undergraduate experience.

So what do I forecast?

**Prediction 1: The higher education landscape will become even more diverse than it is today.**

The days when higher ed could be divided into distinct tiers defined by admissions standards, size, prestige, and geographical, research, or vocational orientation are giving way to an ever more complicated, chaotic landscape. High schools in growing numbers offer courses for college credit; an increasing number of community colleges provide bachelor’s degrees; and four-year institutions are offering industry-aligned courses of study and expanded online offerings. Meanwhile, students are voting with their feet, acquiring credits from an ever expanding number of providers.
Prediction 2: The fixed fifteen-week semester will increasingly coexist with other options.

Already, many institutions are experimenting with unconventional formats, ranging from winter terms, mid-semester and vacation period mini-courses, and five-to-eight week accelerated courses. I anticipate this trend accelerating, as institutions offer variable-paced competency-based modules and a host of other alternatives to the standard semester.

Prediction 3: The learning experience will become more student-centered and less course-centric.

When students are asked, in exit surveys, to describe their most memorable academic experiences, few mention specific courses. Instead, they refer to informal learning opportunities (including conversations with faculty outside of class), immersive learning experiences (like study abroad), or projects they undertook.

I suspect that in the future more institutions will experiment with interdisciplinary and collaboratively-taught immersive learning experiences that do not conform to conventional 50, 75, or 120 minute class which meets once, twice, or three times a week. I also expect that colleges and universities will offer expanded opportunities for mentored research experiences, supervised internships, coop work/study programs, and service-learning projects.

Prediction 4: Curricula will be optimized.

Today, academia tends to treat optimization as a dirty word, as if it were simply a way to trim costs, curtail student options, and eliminate faculty freedom to teach whatever they wish. But offering thousands of courses and hundreds of majors is not necessarily in students’ best interest, since it often makes it very difficult for students to navigate the path to a degree.

If the number of duplicative service courses or narrowly-focused boutique courses declined, then faculty members could devote more time to other, potentially more meaningful mentored educational experiences or to designing, developing, and delivering immersive learning experiences. At the same time, curricular pathways could become more intellectually coherent and better aligned with each discipline’s learning objectives.

Prediction 5: Mentoring will occupy a greater role in faculty members’ professional lives.

Faculty members are most likely to remain essential if they focus on precisely those roles that only they can offer. These include directing research projects, training students in essential skills, modeling professional practice, and offering the kinds of intensive, face-to-face support and advising that is much too rare in higher education.

Prediction 6: Campuses will embrace technology in ways that are very different from today’s PowerPoint slides or digitized lectures.

Next-generation uses of technology include personalized, adaptive learning pathways that are responsive to student confusions and prior knowledge; content automatically tailored to student interests; embedded diagnostics and remediation to address gaps in understanding; automated advising; learning dashboards; sophisticated simulations; and serious gaming.

Prediction 7: The major, the minor, and the degree will no longer be the “be-all” and “end-all” of higher education.

Alternate kinds of credentials -- badges, certificates, and specializations -- will almost certainly become
more important. In many instances, these will be awarded by a provider other than the student’s home institution.

Prediction 8: The higher ed system will be structured differently.

At least some elite privates and flagship publics will decide to educate more students, not in a traditional face-to-face, residential format, but online, at learning hubs at various locations, or through low-residency models. Precisely how these institutions might brand these programs (whether, for example, they will be explicitly called “extension” courses) remains, of course, to be seen. Some institutions are likely to draw no distinction between their online, hybrid, and face-to-face degree programs.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the for-profit and non-profit sectors will change profoundly. Some for-profit corporations may well follow the example of Deloitte and establish their own universities. Others, like Starbucks, McDonald’s, and Hilton, will partner with existing institutions.

Perhaps the most dramatic development will involve the growth of consortia of non-profits (whether as members of confederations of institutions, including community colleges, or as state systems) which will work together, not only to offer less-commonly-taught languages or subject matter (as some schools already do), but to develop clearinghouses of courses with articulation agreements allowing easy transfer of course credit.

Prediction 9: Institutions will aggressively pursue secondary revenue sources.

Current business strategies, involving a reliance on adjuncts and an increase in philanthropic donations and research dollars, will be supplemented by other approaches, notably expanded and aggressively marketed continuing education programs.

Prediction 10: Pressures for change will intensify.

Who, or what, will drive the changes I anticipate? Government almost certainly will insist that colleges enroll a minimum percentage of Pell Grant eligible students, raise completion rates, and improve graduates’ employment outcomes. Students and parents will likely demand that colleges award credit for prior learning and adopt more liberal credit transfer policies. Corporations and foundations will continue to promote an outcomes-oriented, competency-based education. Meanwhile, the market, by providing an increasing number of options, will create an environment where institutions must constantly rethink their approach if they are to thrive.

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