Drivers of Change in Higher Education

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted at the EDUCAUSE annual meeting in October 2009 by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/er/DriversOfChange>.

Gerry Bayne: Although the mission of higher education has remained the same for centuries, the environment in which that mission exists is changing dramatically. Could you talk about some of the current drivers of change? What is driving the shift in the higher education environment?

Tracy Futhey: There are any number of drivers that affect all of us. Accountability to the public and the cost of higher education form a significant driver. And the current economic situation makes that even more evident. For those of us in the IT world, the pace of technology change is a huge issue. Tagged right along with that is the consumerization of technology. The complexity of our jobs is now much less about deciding on a technology and bringing it to our campus and is much more about contending with technologies that people have been using for ten or fifteen years.

Rick Luce: We live in a global world and in an increasingly competitive environment—one that is far more competitive than in the past. That's a driver. Also, I think the expectations of students, in terms of what they're going to tangibly get out of their experience, are significantly different from twenty or thirty years ago. Unfortunately, in my view, these expectations are much less about coming out of college educated and knowledgeable about the world but instead with expectations about specific skills and where those fit in the workforce.

It used to be that knowledge doubled every seven years, but now, in some of the sciences, that time is said to be about every three and a half years. Thus this enormous engine called higher education and the research going on in higher education are leading to significant changes in terms of scholarly communication—in how we communicate the results of what we're doing.

Joel M. Smith: I would add that on the research front, there is actually an increasing dependence on our universities to do the research that is essential for the future of the nation. This has happened slowly. There is a much more complex relationship today among industry, the government, and universities. And I think that's driving change in the way we do research.

One other thing that we're all concerned about is the need for access. There were literally hundreds of thousands of students turned away from colleges and universities this year—not because they didn't have the qualifications to get in, but because we couldn't provide the resources to actually educate them. And that's simply in the United States. When that is scaled globally, it's something we have to think about when we think about the future. Access is going to be a very powerful driver.

Bayne: Rick mentioned education becoming more job-oriented, more industry-oriented. What are the changing demands of students?

Smith: That's a great point. We deal with “consumer students.” We deal with students who expect a climbing wall to be available in the gym. They certainly have huge expectations for the information technology that we will provide to them. We are facing some real questions about whether we can afford to meet all of these consumer demands. For example, are colleges and universities going to compete over what they provide outside of the learning experience? Students are absolutely far more demanding these days, I think, than they were twenty years ago.

Futhey: I think they're less demanding in a different way. They're so used to dealing with technology that they are willing to experiment with it. They know technology is not fully baked. They'll say: “Oh, that link didn't work. That's OK.” In that way, they're more forgiving.

It's an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand are this consumer and consumption feel and how the students interact with us. But on the other hand, they're willing to say: “It's not a big deal. I'll see if it works tomorrow.” That's a little schizophrenic for those of us on the IT side—those of us trying to understand how we can deliver the environment they're after. Can we even put our finger on what that environment should be?

Luce: I'd like to take that idea just a little further. Students do have a consumer sort of mindset. For example, they'll see this new tool in Google, released a month ago, and ask: “Why isn't it on the iPhone for the university?” But the flip side is not just the willingness to accept that some things are broken but, in many cases, a lack of critical thinking skills to evaluate where things come from, how solid they are, and so on. That creates a real need—one that could be viewed either as a burden or as an opportunity. But there is the need for us to fill in that gap.
**Smith:** I think students are actually fairly good at learning. But learning how they learn is a skill they’re going to need, because learning doesn’t stop. They’re going to have to retool almost immediately on graduating, in part because of that doubling of knowledge that Rick mentioned. So focusing on information literacy and focusing on teaching them metacognition—helping them to learn how they learn best—will be very important. And that is going to vary for individuals.

**Luce:** I agree with that point, but I would expand it from students to a need for information literacy and technology literacy for the faculty as well. Many of our faculty are age forty-plus and come from a generation where they grew up without these tools, so there’s a real knowledge gap between where students are with these tools and where some of our senior professors are.

**Smith:** That’s true.

**Bayne:** If we were to transform the student experience, what would it look like? What would we do differently? What difference would those changes make for the individual, the workplace, and society?

**Futhey:** I’ll throw out an idea that is related to what Joel said earlier, about engaging students in the learning process. The students are actually involved in helping to educate themselves and are much more interactive in those roles, rather than simply being recipients of information handed down. One of the things that students in this new engaged and interactive generation are going to want to do is bring their experiences front and center to the learning. They want to learn based on what their peers see and know about these topics every day. So I think that involvement of students—learning by doing, learning by being engaged—is a way that we might look at changing the model from the traditional over a period of time.

**Luce:** What you just said, Tracy, takes on great importance when we begin to think about having moved from an era in which students primarily came to college immediately out of high school. Now many more adults, mid-career, are coming back to school. And so the needs of students are very, very different. That experiential base Tracy mentioned—the leveraging of experience and where that fits in—becomes highly relevant. In principle, it will leave us all with the challenges of how we can move from our cookie-cutter notion of what we’re doing to something that’s far more agile and customized, individualized.

**Smith:** Another thing that has changed substantially is the effort to give students an undergraduate research experience—trying to involve them far more in project-oriented classes in which they’re doing the sorts of things we’re talking about. In the research experience, students are actively engaged in something that’s authentic. And as we know from the learning sciences, this makes a huge difference. Students are not just doing a table-top exercise but are engaged in something that is actually contributing to the body of knowledge. Doing so significantly enhances their learning.

**Futhey:** Yes. And they are doing something that’s really meaningful to them. You talk about research, but this applies even to non-research activities. This notion of completely separated disciplines and activities is outdated. Once we leave college, life isn’t like that anymore, right? Once students graduate, get jobs, and become members of society, those straight barriers and lines around the courses and categories of learning become irrelevant.

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