Change and Choice

The world is changing. Higher education is changing. Information technology is changing. The implication seems to be that we need to change or risk falling behind the times. However, change is not inherently good or inherently bad. Perhaps we should pause to talk about choice, not just change.

When confronted with change, what is an institution to do? The best it can. That means choices must be made. These choices will not be the same for all institutions. They shouldn't be. Some institutions choose open enrollment; others are highly selective. Some institutions will host MOOCs; others will decline. Some institutions maintain computing labs for students; others don't. Some outsource data centers; others expand their own. Some institutions have rapidly developed their online programs; others have decided to remain residential-only. Sometimes the choice is change. But not always.

Making no decision is a choice as well. Although avoidance might not be the best institutional strategy, going with the crowd or accepting the prevailing wisdom may actually be capitulation rather than choice. Choice involves knowing about an institution and its needs and understanding the position of the institution in the broader educational ecosystem.

All institutions will make choices. How can institutions make good choices?

- Know what is happening in the higher education environment. No institution exists in a vacuum. For example, the number of external providers of education and services has exploded.
  - The University of Phoenix is thirty-six years old. StraighterLine was founded in 2009.
  - The “value chain” of services existing within an institution has become a web of internal and external providers. For example, an institution can choose to outsource its online program development to firms such as 2tor or Altius Education.
  - Instead of a traditional lecture, courses are being “flipped.”
  - Badges may become an alternative to certificates or credits.

The environment can change quickly. As George L. Mehaffy notes in his article in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review: “Venture capitalists spent $429 million to support new education enterprises such as Udacity, Udemy, University Now, Coursekit, Courseload, CourseRank, and Coursebook.” Tomorrow’s environment will be different from today’s.

- Know the numbers. In their article “Technology and the Broken Higher Education Cost Model,” Rita Kirshstein and Jane Wellman remind us: “Unless the use of technology, whether in instruction or in the operation of the institution, is guided by an understanding of higher education costs and cost structures, its use will not fix the problem of a broken higher education cost model.” Although the numbers don't tell us everything, numbers often rebut assumptions. College finances are an example. Whereas the public believes colleges are spending more, spending per student has actually been flat in many institutions and declining in others. The good news may end there, however. “State subsidies have declined, forcing institutions to increase tuition in order to offset the losses,” Kirshstein and Wellman caution: “Many administrators and faculty within colleges and universities also are unaware of their real spending patterns.” Choice is guided by facts, and facts are often numbers.

- Know how to experiment. As Shel Waggener suggests in “E-Content: Opportunity and Risk,” we need to get started. Experiments will help us to make better choices. “Rather than waiting for things to settle in the market before making a decision, institutional leaders should get involved

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immediately by trying some pilots.” Waggener reminds us that even if campus leaders haven’t decided on an approach, students may have. Students can serve as an early evaluation team, a trend-watching committee, or a user community.

Making a choice is hard work. Institutional leaders should be as clear as possible about why the choice was made and about the ramifications of the choice. For example, if the institution has chosen to host MOOCs, was the choice about reducing the cost of instruction or was it about spreading the institution’s brand? How does the MOOC fit the institution’s portfolio of investments? Is the MOOC provider’s business model a good fit with institutional values? Does the provider sell student information to potential employers or advertisers? Is it acceptable for courses to have named sponsors? Does the platform provider require proprietary terms and conditions that claim ownership of course content? If credit is offered, can the identity of the student be verified?

As Mehaffy concludes: “Examine every practice, every assumption. Be guided by data, not habit. Constantly collaborate. Innovate wherever possible. Develop a welcoming attitude to change. And never be satisfied with the status quo.”

Change is a choice. The best choices are informed choices.

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