Reset and Reimagine

While reinforcing the value of higher education as a provider of a quality education for work, life, and citizenship, the authors in this issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* have reset and reimagined many of the elements of today’s colleges and universities. This process begins with the audience. Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), suggests that we should decide “which ‘higher education’ we have in mind and what problem we want it to solve.” Today’s new business models are designed for the tens of thousands of learners who need more quality education in less time.

One part of the traditional business model of higher education is business to consumer (“B-to-C”): colleges and universities market themselves directly to students. At SNHU, the College for America (CfA) instead uses a business-to-business approach; corporations engage CfA to provide education to their employees. The target is not millions of students but, rather, a select number of large employers.

The direct connection with employers is an important element of the new business models. Michelle Weise, Senior Research Fellow in Higher Education for the Clayton Christensen Institute, reimagines institutions fusing “mastery-based learning with modularization, leading to pathways that are more agile and more adaptable to the changing labor market.” For Weise, modularization is a game changer. “When learning is broken down into competencies—rather than by courses or by subject matter—modules of learning can be easily arranged, combined, and scaled online into different programs for very different industries.”

The result is competency-based education (CBE), in which “educational attainment can now be untethered from time,” says LeBlanc. As a consequence, how students pay for their education can change too. Students can pay a flat “subscription” rate for a set period of time and can complete as many competencies as they want. Many current business models assume that cost and quality go hand-in-hand. But with CBE, low cost is not necessarily synonymous with low quality or with a lonely endeavor. As Weise explains: “The online competency-based education providers who are in the vanguard are redefining what it means to be high-touch. They are developing technology to ensure that learning is fixed and that time is truly the variable factor: assessments are built in to the system to verify students’ proficiency; often students can take assessments multiple times in order to master the competency; and instructors can rely on an analytics dashboard and, like a personalized tutor, can cater to students’ needs when necessary.”

Although one might reasonably assume that personalized learning is costly because it is tailored to the individual, Peter Smith, President of the newly launched Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU), reminds us: “Personal learning, though specific to each learner, may have many common elements across multiple learners’ experiences. There need not be and will not be one million unique solutions for one million individual learners. But there can be a personalized learning plan for each person—a plan that connects the learner and his/her history to a chosen future.”

The learner as an active shaper of his/her learning is another element in these new business models. Smith adds: “Emerging understandings of how to organize and employ data to identify and then meet learners’ needs, based on an assessment of what they already know, have
created an environment in which learners, with good data and good advice, can make their own educational decisions. Reflection-based assessment is another way students can more actively shape their education. “Active reflection and the development of evidence to support the claims of learning transform the learner's experience from passive to active engagement and understanding. . . . People who successfully complete such an assessment not only do better academically after completing a portfolio but also graduate in significantly higher numbers.”

These new business models may be precisely what many students need. Weise sums it up: “Online competency-based education can even out the playing field by taking students to the farthest point possible in their learning experiences, regardless of their starting point, race, geographical location, or family income. With high standards of proficiency and quality and with outcomes aligned to employability, it can build a dramatically new value network that changes the rules of the game for the common good.” In short, we can reset and reimagine the rules for higher education.

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