Modernizing U.S. Schools of Education

Undergraduate and graduate schools of education, products of the Industrial Age, need to be modernized for a new era. The questions are: How best can they be modernized? What does modernization entail?

The Current Situation
The situation of education schools is not unique. It is the same situation at all U.S. social institutions. The country is undergoing profound, continuing, and accelerating change as it makes the transition from a national, analog, industrial economy to a global, digital, information economy. However, our social institutions—including government, media, health care, and higher education—were created for the former economy. As a consequence, they don’t work as well as they once did and appear to be broken. They need to be rethought for the global, digital, information economy.

This is being accomplished in two ways today: by repairing or reforming the existing institutions; and by replacing or reinventing them with new versions created for the emerging era. Repair is more common in the not-for-profit sector, particularly in heavily regulated industries such as higher education, in which the bar for replacements to enter is set high and financial incentives for doing so are perceived as low.

In contrast, in the for-profit sector, replacement is the norm. Competitors, would-be replacements, spring up when existing institutions are slow to respond to environmental changes, barriers to industry entry are low, and potential financial rewards for success are high. This is what occurred in the newspaper industry. Existing newspaper companies found their financial model to be failing as they suffered substantial losses in advertising revenue and readership. They were slow to adopt new technologies, and when they finally did, they were unable to monetize the technologies. The “newspaper business” was open to competitors because newspapers did not control the four pillars required to sustain themselves and drive away competition:

1. They did not control talent—journalists and staff who are mobile and today more mobile than usual, given the substantial layoffs of reporters by newspapers.
2. They did not control news content. In the Internet age, anyone can create content.
3. They did not control distribution of their product; they shifted from being physical entities, paper products requiring delivery, to virtual entities requiring only the Internet.
4. They did not control product consumption or audience: anyone with access to a mobile device can now get the news, often without charge.

The result is that the newspaper industry has been transformed. The great newspapers of the past are in decline, and new media are in ascendency. Today, the Huffington Post is valued at more than the Boston Globe and Washington Post combined.

In education, the changes that occur are likely to be the same—whether accomplished by repair or replacement. They will be dictated by the needs of the times, not by the method of change employed. The years ahead are likely to bring many of the changes I wrote about a decade ago in an EDUCAUSE Review Leadership column. The number of providers of higher education will increase, including traditional colleges and universities as well as for-profit and nontraditional organizations such as libraries, museums, and school districts. Driving this growth is a convergence of knowledge-producing organizations, ranging from media companies and software makers to zoos and symphony orchestras. All are seeking to reach larger audiences and are using the same technologies to do so; they are producing courses. In addition, the for-profit sector sees potential investment opportunities in higher education: it’s a growth industry, government-subsidized and countercyclical, with large, predictable, and rising payments up front.

The multiplicity of providers will offer education 24/7 in a variety of formats—face-to-face, online, and blended—and in durations and designs that vary widely from traditional college/university courses and that, accordingly, do not fit the historic Carnegie unit/credit definition. Technology, software, and advances in cognitive science will permit instruction and education overall to be increasingly individualized and tied to each student’s preferred learning style. The result is that student choice, not only of institutions but also of desired pedagogies, will boom.
There will also be a shift in the focus of education, mirroring the nation’s transition from an industrial to an information economy. The industrial model of education is characterized by common processes, fixed time, and an emphasis on teaching. This will give way to the information economy’s concern with common outcomes, variable time, and emphasis on student learning. Current college transcripts and degrees are geared to courses, credits, and seat time. In an age of unlimited choice and extraordinary diversity of educational experiences throughout a lifetime, coupled with the growing concern with learning outcomes, dossiers will be necessary to record achievements earned, competencies mastered, and microcredentials obtained. Time- and process-based degrees may wither in importance.

Modernizing Schools of Education

For the past several decades, education schools have been the subject of a rising tide of criticism. I have been a champion—but also one of the critics. In the belief that what is needed is a remedy, not more brick throwing, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation has developed initiatives to modernize education schools. The first question the Foundation needed to ask was how to accomplish this—by repair or replacement? The conclusion was that both are essential.

The future requires replacement. Like the entire education system, education schools are based on an anachronistic, industrial model. This is true not because they did something wrong but because the world changed. Education schools need to be reinvented, as does higher education generally. Though we may believe we know exactly what the replacement institutions should look like, these education schools of the Information Age still need to be developed. This will happen through innovation, experimentation, improvement, and hothouse modeling. It will be many years before the Information Age school of education can be brought to scale.

However, our schools and children cannot wait for the new model to go to scale. The present demands repair. More than 90 percent of school leaders and teachers are being prepared by education schools. We need stronger education schools and excellent teachers and school leaders now.

The Woodrow Wilson Foundation put two eggs in the repair basket and one in the replacement basket. The initiatives in the repair basket sought maximum impact by focusing on whole states. Today this translates into the state-based Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship, involving twenty-eight colleges and universities in five states—Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio—and an MBA Fellowship for school leaders in Indiana, New Mexico, and Wisconsin. Fellowship recipients in both programs are high achievers who agree to teach or administer for a minimum of three years in high-need, in-state schools. Participating higher education institutions are required to transform their teacher/school leadership programs into clinically based and disciplinally rooted programs that join schools and institutions as well as colleges of business, arts and sciences, and education. Three years of mentoring follow graduation. Incentives and accountability are high. Results have been good: high retention rates and student achievement in graduates’ classes.

Despite the good results, the existing education school model is fundamentally flawed; a reinvention strategy allows the rethinking of the education school de novo. Toward this end, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and MIT are collaborating to create the Woodrow Wilson Academy of Teaching and Learning (WW Academy), a laboratory and graduate school of education offering programs in teacher education and school leadership. MIT, one of the world’s preeminent universities at the cutting edge of innovation in higher education, will serve as the incubator for the WW Academy, and the WW Academy will serve as a lab for MIT, which does not have an education school but does have more than 120 initiatives in teaching and learning. The hope is that the Academy can serve as a resource center. It will throw out the clock and fixed seat time, replacing them with programs that are time variable, competency based, blended, modular, simulation and clinically rich, adaptive, and rooted in learning science—the directions in which we believe education is headed.

The entire program will be open source, permitting education schools and other providers to adopt all or any of it. The research will be targeted to policy makers—governors, chief state school officers, state higher education executive officers, and legislators—as well as colleges/universities and other education providers.

Conclusion

We need to rethink all of our social institutions. Each requires a combination of repair and replacement strategies. Even if wholesale replacement is possible, the traditions, values, and histories of the existing institution—its unique strengths—must not be lost in the race to create tomorrow. As stated by the authors of the famous 1828 Yale Report (written in defense of the classical curriculum), the question is not whether to change quickly or slowly, a lot or a little. The issue is to know the purpose of a college. That sentiment can apply to any other social institution as well: a school of education, the media, a health care system, or government.

Note


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