You're the Game Changer in Next-Generation Learning

By Mark David Milliron

In reading the recently published EDUCAUSE e-book *Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies*, I came to the realization that many of us in higher education are "preaching to the choir." In addition to talking to each other about innovation and change and transformative educational technologies and techniques, we need to be talking to those who are most affected by our choices: *our students*. Here, then, is my open letter to students.

The pages of *EDUCAUSE Review* are full of examples: educators' and technologists' blood, sweat, and tears poured into new educational technologies and techniques, over hundreds of thousands of hours, to bring next-generation learning to life for you, the student. Article after article speaks of the challenge of changing tired traditional systems and leveraging energized novel technologies. Pick any heroic metaphor—it's been used by an author in these pages to talk about how difficult the task is. But still these educators and technologists stick to it, innovating in the hopes of inspiring and better enabling your learning.

The magazine's publisher, EDUCAUSE, helps lead a project called the Next Generation Learning Challenges (http://www.nextgenlearning.org/), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The foundations are investing millions of dollars to catalyze cutting-edge work in blended learning, analytics, and new institutional models powered by technology—all in the hope of radically improving how you learn, navigate your degree plans, and succeed on the pathway to the possibility that is education.

You can't say that we—the educators and technologists—aren't trying. Evidence of innovation in technology and education is everywhere. But if you're really interested in seeing a truly next-generation learning infrastructure put in place for most students, don't hold your breath. The process is a slog that is getting only more difficult. Indeed, the effort may in fact be a waste of time.

I say that because the most-needed voice in this conversation is not ours. We in the ed-tech world have been talking, visioning, and showcasing innovation for decades. Based on the results to date, I don't think our voice is enough. I've come to the conclusion that the voice that will push real change is *yours*. Indeed, if you—the students—are willing to accept a set of key educational responsibilities as you stand up for your core educational rights, *you* might be the real game changer we need in catalyzing next-generation learning.

Key Educational Responsibilities

I'll be blunt here. It's going to be hard for you to be heard as a credible advocate if you don't first lay down the gauntlet. That happens when you own key educational

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responsibilities and make the demand that if you fulfill these, you expect your claim to your core educational rights to be taken seriously. Simply put, your doing so could change the conversation completely—to one that is more literally and figuratively constructive. What follows are some of the key educational responsibilities you need to own if next-generation learning is going to take shape.

Get On-Purpose

No one can do this for you. Yet, it's almost impossible to succeed in education without being willing to do the hard work of asking why you're on the educational journey in the first place. Know the answers to the following questions: Who are you doing this for? What are your goals? What is your vision of how your credential will serve you? What is your overall purpose? Moreover, you have to *own* this purpose—it can't be a dream borrowed from a parent, spouse, boss, or counselor. It's far too easy to quit if that's the case. Learning is not an accidental journey. Knowing your larger purpose enables you to do what comes next.

Engage

Although we—the educators and technologists—certainly are going to work hard to make education more enjoyable, it will still mean effort on your part. This is not edutainment; it's education. To do this right, we need to co-create the learning moments. Engagement means literally transforming the way you think and committing yourself to building those skill-sets you don't currently possess. It's a transformative process, and transformations are rarely easy. Your purpose will help—particularly when things gets confusing. But you have to be okay with doing the work. To put it another way: you

have to be willing to engage at a high level.

For example, you have to be willing to work in and with new models, new technologies, and new techniques. Too many students have been trained in a traditional model that says: "We'll lecture at you, and then you fill out the multiple-choice test." It's a predictable model, but not very effective. However, by the time these students reach higher education, they have it down. As a result, when innovative instructors try something different, something that requires a higher level of engagement, the instructors are often punished in evaluations because they are breaking this all-too-predictable pattern. If you want us to innovate and really bring next-generation learning to life, you have to engage at a higher level and demand more "out of pattern" experiences.

Be Tenacious

Beyond engagement, good learners are tenacious. They have a mindset that is built not on believing statements about how smart or dumb they are but on knowing that progress comes from conscious effort. You have to deeply believe that if you engage, you can learn. This is called having a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Tenacious students understand that effort and outcomes are to be celebrated far more than assessments of talent.

Moreover, you need to commit to self-regulating. It's okay to mess up and get behind. It happens. But successful students are quicker at getting back on course. You may have to delay gratification, which means fully understanding that some learning takes time and that the pay-off from education comes over a lifetime, not a few months.

Core Educational Rights

If you're willing to get on-purpose, engage, and be tenacious—which is what educators say they so wish they had in more of their students—then you should declare, loud and proud, that you expect your call for a set of core educational rights to be honored. You should know that your willingness to stand up for these

rights has the power to both ground and guide the build-out of the next generation of learning. I'm sure you can think of more, but at the core, you have the right to learning-centered, data-rich, high-value pathways to your educational goal.

Learning-Centered Pathway

Although tradition may be a valuable thing, it is often used by educators as a convenient excuse not to change. There may be power and purpose in a tradition; and if the tradition can be shown to be important in your learning, then it should be re-embraced and continued. However, when you own your responsibilities, you should also aggressively claim your core right to expect that we will have the courage to examine the past and inspect proposals about the future and that we will keep the likely impact on your learning at top-of-mind. Our decisions, models, and innovations should be based, first, on learning.

Oftentimes, focusing on learning may mean *not* using technology. And that's a great thing too. Techno-zealots assume that more technology is always better. As anyone who has sat through the "death-by-PowerPoint" lecture can attest, this is absolutely not the case. Learning is not about how loud the bells ring and the whistles blow.

Your assertion of the core right to a learning-centered educational environment will help us tackle a host of issues around new technologies and new models in a more focused way. With your learning at the true north of the journey, our conversations will have to come back to whether or not what is being proposed or paid for *works*. The work at Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative (https://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning/), which is using human learning science to tune online and blended learning experiences to maximize learning gains, is an excellent example of this kind of discipline.

Data-Rich Pathway

A dirty little secret for you: every year, millions of dollars are being spent to col-

lect data on you—*your data*—for legislators, administrators, and governing boards (among others). Some legislators' use data to beat colleges up for not doing enough; some administrators put data into glossy booklets sent to alumni to raise money; and some governing boards compile data into dense spreadsheets to tell accreditors about the quality of colleges and universities. There are so many data organizations that I don't want to start the list here for fear of leaving a few hundred out. Rest assured that the local, state, and federal levels are all getting data about you—again, *your data*—and using it for their purposes. In most cases, pulling it all together takes them a long time. In fact, you may be long gone from the institution by the time your data is reported, but you'll be in there somewhere.

Again, if you're going to step up to your responsibilities, then you have the right to push your college/university to use your data *first* to help *you*. Amazon uses your data to suggest books. Facebook uses your data to suggest friends. iTunes uses your data to suggest playlists. Guess what? Your college/university can and should use your data to suggest ways to better navigate your learning path, regulate your learning experiences, and access your learning resources and supports. Why should everyone else know how you're doing before you know how you're doing? Think of how a data-rich environment could inform your decisions on your learning journey.

The EDUCAUSE e-book *Game Changers: Education and Information Technology* has some great examples of what might be possible if you had a truly data-rich environment: from Valencia College's interactive Life Maps to track your education journey, to Austin Peay State University's Degree Compass to get you on a

solid path to your credential, to the University of Hawaii's STAR system to help you graduate on time.[1] Purdue University offers another example, using its Course Signals to tell students, in a select set of courses, when they are off or on track. Every time students log in to their course, they see a traffic light indicating that students who took similar actions succeeded (green light), did okay (yellow light), or failed miserably (red light). At my own institution, WGU-Texas, the learning-centered progression, one-on-one mentor model ensures that students and faculty engage on learning data early and often and that both regulate learning and navigate to completion. With these examples, we know it's possible to make this kind of data-rich experience work, but without your voice, most of these models will never move beyond these institutions.

Again, it's your data. You have an inherent right to it. It should be used first to help you in your learning journey. Of course, we have to protect your privacy and ensure that your data is not used in inappropriate ways—which is no more of a challenge for us than it is for financial institutions and health-care agencies. The fact remains that you will find it hard to be tenacious and to self-regulate as a student if you don't have good information to tell you when you are on or off track. Without access to your data, selecting courses, choosing degrees, and finding help with learning becomes a maze of old systems, delayed reports, and random Google searches.

We need your voice to better target the energy, effort, and expense around data. With your help, we can get your data first to the front lines—to you, teachers, and advisors—rather than to legislators, administrators, and governing boards. The folks in health

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care and the consumer world understood this principle a long time ago. You can help higher education get there a little more quickly.

High-Value Pathway

Value in education is a tricky subject. But at the core, you should claim your right to an educational process and credential that leads to value in the world of work and that promotes your deeper learning. Value in the world of work is an easy-enough concept: your credential should help you obtain—or move on a continued path to obtain—a good job in the promised career field. We in higher education should do the work to ensure that your learning is tied to the competencies expected in these career paths. Moreover, that process should be ongoing. Our programs, courses, and assignments should be connected in a high-value way to what you are going to face as you apply your learning.

You have every right to demand that our classes, programs, and credentials are timely, relevant, and useful.

You also have the right to expect deeper learning. You need to push for a core set of critical, creative, social, and courageous learning experiences. You have the right to expect that rather than simply more of the same rote memorization work, we will offer you learning opportunities that stretch and strengthen your critical and creative learning muscles. Chris Dede, the Timothy E. Wirth Professor in Learning Technologies in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, calls this asking you to solve "wicked" problems. He uses elaborate augmented reality systems to challenge students to dive deep into problem solving and get creative about constructing solutions.[2] You should also expect that we will engage you in more collaborative learning, because that's how the worlds of

work, citizenship, and family operate. You have the right to significant social learning—whether it's social-media based, tech-infused, face-to-face, in groups, or intercultural/international. These skills are often the key to helping you get a job, keep a job, or start the company that will create the jobs. And you should expect that we will foster in you the courage and capability to learn for a lifetime.

Here's a hard truth: because of the rate of change in industry and society, we are probably preparing you for jobs that don't exist yet and life experiences you can't anticipate. Unless you can and want to retire at the age of thirty and you have a crystal ball showing you the twists and turns of your coming life, you'll likely be deep in learning again soon, and it will likely involve these deeper learning skills.[3] You have the right to a learning experience that will prepare you to both live and learn well.

You're the Game Changer

So much effort and energy is going into visioning, planning, and taking on projects around the next generation of learning. We're trying hard to listen to you and create a more engaging and useful learning environment. But this work is constantly getting stuck.

We need a tipping point. We need something to catalyze this effort and energy and take it to the next level. We need *you* to step up to your responsibilities and assertively claim your core rights, adding your collective voice to this mix. Your voice not only will support this movement but also will guide it. Moreover, your push for more learning-centered, data-rich, and high-value educational pathways has the potential to help not just you but millions of future students to live better and more fulfilled lives. ∎

Notes

1. Diana G. Oblinger, ed., *Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies*, e-book (Louisville, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 2012), <http://www.educause.edu/game-changers>.
2. Chris Dede, "Technologies That Facilitate Generating Knowledge and Possibly Wisdom: A Response to 'Web 2.0 and Classroom Research,'" *Educational Researcher*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2009), pp. 260–263, <http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/4901642/Dede_response_Greenhow.pdf?sequence=1>.
3. See "Deeper Learning," The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation website, <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program/deeper-learning>.

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