Rethinking the Rules

Although higher education is reputed to be slow to change, the rules surrounding “it can’t be done” have been shifting dramatically. Many of today’s “rules” would have been unthinkable a few years ago:

- Colleges and universities are no longer the only providers of college courses. Think of StraighterLine.
- Class size has gone from dozens to hundreds to hundreds of thousands. Think of MOOCs.
- Credentials are being offered outside the academy. Think of badges.

The status quo is being reshaped by entrepreneurs, government, and the academy itself. New institutions, such as Southern New Hampshire University, are predicated on principles of disruptive innovation. New business models, with disaggregation as their core element, are emerging. MOOCs (massive open online courses) symbolize a shift in the rules. As Phil Hill writes in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, even the most traditional institutions are reconsidering what it means to be a college or university in the connected age: “Online education should now be considered part of any institution's strategic planning process, even if the decision is to not offer online education.”

Innovation hinges on rethinking the rules. In “Business Model Innovation,” Christine Flanagan quotes Clayton Christensen: “You don’t change a company by giving them ideas. You change them by training them to think a different way.”

One “different way” of thinking involves using the emerging field of service science as a way to provide a perspective on the forces reshaping higher education today. In their article “Ten Reasons Service Science Matters to Universities,” Jim Spohrer, Dianne Fodell, and Wendy Murphy describe service science (the “science of win-win”) as “the application of knowledge and resources for the benefit of others.” As they explain, colleges and universities are complex, adaptive systems. These service systems “manage and provide for housing, transportation, safety, health, food, water, energy, education, and entertainment. All of these systems have a series of interactions, costs, and interdependencies. . . . Service systems require smart people, technology, and business leadership. The quality of life for students depends on the quality of their education and their experiences in college.”

According to Mary Jo Bitner, Amy Ostrom, and Kevin Burkhard, the key to this service-oriented view of higher education is to “focus squarely on the student experience as a way of creating value for all stakeholders.” A core tenet of viewing higher education through a service lens is that value is co-created by the consumer, meaning that value lies in the experience itself rather than in the “thing” provided. Service blueprinting can help higher education leaders “redesign, reinvent, and reimagine their educational offerings and service processes from the student’s point of view.”

Focusing on the student experience can also lead to the direct participation by students in business model innovation. In her article in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, Christine Flanagan talks about putting design into the hands of students. For example, the Business Innovation Factory (BIF) Student Experience Lab partnered with Utah State University to suggest ways to enhance students’ engagement with the institution. Blending their experiences, broader research, and training in design, students developed a prototype that has been adopted as a model for student services. Flanagan states the desired vision: “Innovation—whether student-led, student-driven, or student-centered—will be just another routine competence, much like budgeting or auditing.”

Richard Culatta offers still another way for higher education to rethink the rules: innovation clusters. The interconnection of basic research, product development, entrepreneurship, and test-bed sites in
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such clusters allows the market to innovate much more rapidly. These regional innovation clusters, first
developed in fields such as biotechnology, have been established in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and Phoenix,
among other cities. Rethinking the tradition of the institution as the data custodian, Culatta also suggests
that we empower students with their own data: “Data about learners is spread across a variety of systems at
various institutions. Students can often see their data online but may have no option to take it with them.”
If students could control their own data, they might create learning profiles and educational portfolios,
ultimately allowing them to make better decisions about “which classes to take, which colleges to attend,
and how much to pay for tuition.”

Finally, one key rule that higher education leaders must rethink is the habit of “going it alone,” accord-
ing to Brad Wheeler and James Hilton. In “The Marketecture of Community,” the authors note: “We must
find ways to be more effective in solving the problems that face us all. Communities can be an essential part
of the solution.” Many investments in information technology do not result in competitive advantage or
comparative advantage. The solitary approach, write Wheeler and Hilton, must give way to new models for
buying clubs, cooperative communities, and collaborative communities. Higher education faces a partner-
ship imperative.

The old rules of “it can’t be done” are being flipped into questions of “why can’t we do that?” So much is
possible. We can learn new approaches, we can innovate business models, and we can provide even greater
value. Rethinking the rules must be part of higher education’s discipline of innovation.

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