Higher Education 2.0 and the Next Few Hundred Years; or, How to Create a New Higher Education Ecosystem

Three important developments stand to dramatically change the way we think about degree programs and pathways:

1. The rapid adoption of competency-based education (CBE) programs, often using industry and employer authority for guiding the creation of the competencies and thus programs
2. An eventual move to suborganizational accreditation, with Title IV funds available for credits, courses, and microcredentials offered by new providers in new delivery models, part of the accelerating trend toward “unbundling” higher education
3. Increasing recognition that postsecondary education will no longer be contained to the existing and traditional degree levels but will instead be consumed at various levels of granularity—less than full degree programs and continuing throughout lives and careers

If these game changers come to fruition (and they are already taking shape today), we will see an exciting new ecosystem take hold in higher education. Together, these developments are poised to end the monopoly that traditional higher education holds on post-secondary education and to erode the sole authority it has over what counts for quality and relevancy. Smart and agile institutions will respond and even thrive in this changing environment. They will do so alongside new competitors as more providers emerge to compete for students, making the higher education marketplace diverse and robust.

Of course, we have already moved past the simple model of students entering an institution, following a largely prescribed course of program study, and finishing with a degree that was carefully designed by faculty members. There is no longer only one pathway to a degree: students often cross the degree finish line with any number of unconventional zigs and zags in their journey, including prior learning credits, ACE credits for military training and education, transfer credits from more than one institution, changes of major, certificates earned, and more. Some of those educational experiences will “count” toward the completion of their degree. Others will be relegated to the elective column (adding cost and time to completion). Still others will not be accepted at all, depending on the policies of the institution that is trying to make sense of a student’s learning path.

A lot of this system inefficiency is based on the broad reliance on the three-credit-hour course, which tends to be more about content coverage and seat time than about what students actually learn. As any seasoned academic administrator will explain, much of any curriculum is a reflection of faculty stakeholder and scholarly interests and is less about well-articulated learning outcomes and the competencies students will need for the workplace and beyond. That makes the curriculum very difficult to revise and improve.

However, the rapid growth of CBE programs, especially direct-assessment versions (more fully decoupled from the credit hour and the course construct), shift the topic of learning to the following question: “What do students know, what can they do with that knowledge, and how do we know in both cases?” For the first two parts of that question, designers of CBE programs increasingly turn to industry to map the competencies to high-demand fields and the needs of employers. In a sense, CBE educators and employers are now using the same currency of exchange.

Also, industry is not sitting idly by the phone waiting for higher education to call. General Assembly, a leader among the new sector of programming schools (aka coding boot camps), has launched its own credentialing system, the GA Credentialing Network, in partnership with companies like GE and PayPal. The National Association of Manufacturers has developed a broad range of skill certifications for its employers, a system of “stackable” credentials (http://asq.org/manufacturing-skills-certification.html). In 2011 Emily DeRocco, the president of the Manufacturing Institute, said: “To develop our solution, called the NAM-Endorsed Manufacturing Skills Certification System, we joined with several other leading industry groups to create a system of nationally portable, industry-recognized credentials. These credentials—and the training required to obtain them—certify that an individual possesses the basic skills required to work in any sector of the manufacturing industry.”

With increasing pressure to place graduates into meaningful work, with gainful employment regulations being debated, and
with growing interest in just-in-time education at the subdegree level (and thus the proliferation of certificate programs), we will see the competency work of industry take an increasingly elevated position alongside the very good competency work being done by established higher education entities like AAC&U’s GEMs project and WICHE’s Interstate Passport Initiative.1

As these new CBE frameworks continue to inform learning pathways, often for credentials less than the degree program, there remains no way for a financially needy student to access Title IV funds. That may very well change. An enormous amount of energy among Washington policymakers—on both sides of the political aisle—is being directed to rethinking Title IV to better support CBE models. Although promising efforts like the Department of Education’s experimental sites in CBE include only regionally accredited institutions, there is interest in new accreditation programs for subinstitution credentials (e.g., courses and programs and certificates) that could include new providers as well as offer “safe” innovation space for traditional providers who might be chafing against the constraints imposed by their existing accreditors.

If Title IV funds can be aligned with such a CBE accreditation program, quite possibly through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the federal government will blow life into a new part of the higher education ecosystem. Performance-based funding models for CBE programs would align the goals of everyone (student, government, employer, provider), would greatly diminish the waste in the current system, and would reward success. We would see educational offerings that align with workforce needs (based on demonstrable competencies) and that also align with the financial support system that would give access to learners. Students reentering the workforce might start with a more immediately useful credential, build on it toward a degree, and then periodically (throughout their careers) access additional credentials as their careers change, industries evolve, new competencies need to be mastered while old ones fall away, or opportunities arise.

This is a vision of a more flexible, higher-quality (in terms of clarity in the claims we make for student learning and proving them), more rational system than the one we have now. But countless barriers stand in the way of realizing this vision, including the following:

- The need to develop a CBE accreditation program that both supports innovation and ensures quality
- Fundamental questions surrounding CBE, where we still lack an agreed-upon taxonomy and nomenclature
- The need to rethink important aspects of Title IV funding, currently based around the credit hour, while protecting the taxpayer against fraud and abuse of the kind we have seen far too often
- How to bring onboard traditional institutional stakeholders, many of whom will be threatened by an opening up of the higher education marketplace to new providers

The effort requires substantial changes in the regulatory frameworks in which higher education exists, but there is resolve in this direction from both the current administration and Congress. Regional accreditors, widely seen as an inhibitor of CBE innovation, are now more positively engaged and are working on new CBE guidelines for good practice. A number of traditional institutions, including the University of Michigan and the University of Texas, are developing CBE programs. New providers, such as General Assembly and Pluralsight, are providing alternative credentials that are in high demand and that lead to good-paying jobs.

The prospect of more credentials from more providers can seem a little daunting. Employers already struggle with the proliferation of certificates that may or may not have any real portability or definition. Moreover, many students want clear pathways outlined for them, despite the DIY advocates for self-directed learning. However, as new CBE-based credentials are built, they carry the backing of competencies and rigorous assessments. They thus lend themselves to standard setting and data/algorithm-driven technology solutions better than do traditional courses and programs. Students, seeking clarity for their program choices, will increasingly use and thus validate platforms (e.g., Parchment) that make sense of the alphabet soup of credentials that we might otherwise fear.

Not so long ago, popular music was dominated by a handful of music companies and outlets. MP3s, streaming music, the iTunes business model, Kickstarter, and new intellectual property models have created a new music ecosystem. We have seen an explosion of new music of every kind, available in multiple forms, through multiple channels, at more affordable prices, unbundled. Consumers now control their listening in ways unimaginable even ten years ago. Those changes were painful, and many stakeholders, unable to adjust to a new industry ecosystem, disappeared or were greatly diminished. Higher education, infinitely more complicated, may nevertheless be on the cusp of a similar revolution, leading to a new higher education ecosystem.

Notes

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