Future Thoughts

As the New Horizon department editor for EDUCAUSE Review, I've had numerous companies contact me about their products and services. While I appreciate the endless supply of innovative ideas and solutions, I have noticed that there is no clear consensus about what the future of higher education will look like. So I asked representatives from four diverse companies to share their assumptions about the future—the assumptions on which they build their companies or products.

Sean Corcorran, General Manager, Steelcase Education

This is a difficult time in higher education. Students, parents, and policymakers are all questioning the cost/benefit of a college degree. They want to see better access, more relevant teaching models, and the support to ensure completion in a reasonable timeframe. New technologies like MOOCs and online distance learning were developed in an effort to revitalize a centuries-old educational model, to provide access and flexibility. Although it's clear that many improvements are needed, some existing educational models remain relevant.

The integration of technologies such as MOOCs, lecture-capture systems, and video telepresence has broadened students' access and choice and made education more “location agnostic.” But there's still a major challenge in creating high-quality, engaging, and seamless experiences for online and distance learning students and educators. Most institutions are not there yet, which means that traditional face-to-face learning models in higher education will continue. Digital learning materials such as e-books have worked to reduce costs and provide a more personalized learning experience, yet studies show that millennials prefer reading from print books for both deep reading and enjoyment.¹ For this reason, I don't see traditional books going away anytime soon.

Yes, technology's role in education will continue to grow, but so will the significance of face-to-face learning. Teaching is less dependent on one teacher delivering content in broadcast mode to students sitting in rows of chairs while quietly listening and taking notes. Teaching today needs to provide students with the opportunity to acquire skills in critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, and creativity, as well as the soft skills employers require in the workplace: interpersonal, collaborative, and presentation skills. Effectively teaching these higher-level cognitive and soft skills is difficult to do remotely; thus, the need for physical learning spaces will continue to be crucial. With the more active integration of technology, the educator's role will continue to expand outside of content delivery, allowing more time for interacting with and mentoring students.

For this style of learning to take place, educators need active learning environments that support the new activities and behaviors driven by new pedagogical methods. Most of today's classrooms are static and lack the flexibility needed for the diverse teaching methods emerging today. When the space, furniture, and technology can readily adapt to students' learning preferences and the new pedagogies being used, the classroom can more effectively support how students learn best. College campuses must be equipped with the more active, learner-centered environments needed to prepare students for the future workplaces they will enter. This means learning environments should offer a range of spaces, including group work, lecture, and quiet spaces.

To succeed in this changing environment, higher education institutions must change as well. The majority of colleges and universities cannot rely on historical brand equity alone but will have to create more effective differentiation and employ more robust business models to stand out and survive in today's competitive environment. This is true in any competitive market—higher education is no different.

Pano Anthos, Founder and CEO, GatherEducation

Synchronous learning online will gain favor as schools and students understand the power of engagement. Online offers a number of improvements over strictly physical classrooms, but online asynchronous has severe limits in maintaining student engagement and accredited learning in a vast number of topic areas.

Abstracted virtual reality learning will hit mainstream for two key reasons: (1) we can create or re-create visual environments that reinforce the learning; and (2) abstraction from physical appearance using avatars allows for personalization without being too connected to the person. The social impact is similar to that of schools requiring everyone to wear a uniform: it's an attempt to remove social stigma from the learning process. Similarly, avatars allow students to take on personas for one of two reasons: (1) they can protect themselves from social peer measurement; and (2) they can try on different personas.

Abstracted virtual learning will also enable accelerated instruction models. A seventh-grader taking twelfth-grade calculus, for example, would not fare well in a physical class due to the social challenges. But online and abstracted, the students will not be distinguishable.

Mobile will be the footprint of the future as online access frees students to take courses from wherever they are instead of being tethered to a desktop computer.
Global student bodies in synchronous settings will be possible with technologies that provide interaction without relying on video—aka gaming tech. Video will not scale in synchronous situations in over 50 percent of the world due to bandwidth challenges, even though wi-fi penetration will grow. Delivering online, synchronous classrooms on 3G networks will open up the rest of world to learning opportunities.

True virtual reality and augmented reality technologies will be slower to go mainstream, since the effort to put on glasses of any type means costs and changes in user behavior. When such technologies become seamless and unobtrusive accessories, they will move toward mainstream.

Joe Belsterling, Founder and CEO, MajorClarity

Many people, believing that higher education is on the brink of substantial transformation, are trying to predict what the next ten to twenty-five years will bring. Although I do not think there is any way to know for sure, I do have some thoughts. First, I do not think the shift will be as tangible as many others believe. For instance, although innovation like the Minerva Project is undeniably disruptive and aspirational and will certainly have its market, I am skeptical that it will scale enough to take over higher education. I believe the in-person community is, and will continue to be, a fundamental piece of college.

The two segments of higher education that I believe will change most significantly in the coming years are the recruiting process and the curriculum. Institutions spend nearly $3.5 billion per year on recruiting (calculated by multiplying cost per student and total enrollment), most of which is used on inefficient, increasingly outdated means—especially since 62 percent of students prefer web-based engagement from colleges and universities, and that percent is only growing.

Innovation in the curriculum, or what institutions focus on teaching, is occurring faster than ever, which is driving dramatic change in the job market. I think it is a given that institutions will put more emphasis on technology and computer programming. But in addition, the job market will continue to evolve more quickly than educational institutions can preemptively keep up with, and for that reason, I believe that rather than preparing students with specific knowledge or a specific skill set, institutions will transition into providing a widely adaptable skill set to students. Yes, this is the basic concept of the liberal arts degree, but what I’m referring to will be “Liberal Arts 2.0.” Think “liberal arts” meets “technology.” I cannot say exactly what this will look like, but I am confident it is on the way.

Anthony Showalter, Co-Founder and President, Pear Deck

Many technology innovations in higher education over the past two decades have been about organizing information and systems in a logical, asynchronous way. There are now hundreds of adaptive and personalized technologies that are focused on delivering, in an automatic and isolated way, the right content at the right time for a specific learner.

I believe that one of the largest greenfields for innovation is the real-time classroom. How can technology transform the actions that take place within the walls of a lecture hall? How can technology have an awareness not only of individual learners but also of the social context around them? The current state of hardware/software clickers, for example, is just scratching the surface of what will be possible. The real-time classroom will also include things like contextual help, smart grouping for discussions and peer review, better and more engaging formative assessments, and powerful real-time analytics.

I’m sure EDUCAUSE Review readers have assumptions about the future as well. Please share them in the comments section online or in social media with the hashtag #HiEdFuture.

Notes

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