innovation in higher ed? Are you kidding? The business of higher education is so not innovative. To suggest that higher education is innovative is like suggesting that ham sandwiches can fly.

Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration. Take me to task: what is my definition of innovation? To be clear, when I'm talking about innovation in higher education, I'm talking about “a new idea, method, or device.” Or, to offer a synonym: “novelty.”

Sure, in higher education we teach classes on entrepreneurship and innovation. Some of our institutions may even have a program or two that we consider to be novel in the way they sequence the learning or in their formative methods such as hands-on apprenticeships, internships, student-led research, and so on. But we must not fool ourselves: such innovation is not applied to the business of higher education.

Sadly, if we don’t change how we do business, many of our institutions won’t be here in another five years. I’m not talking about Clay Christensen’s disruptive innovation, in which “disruption is a predictable pattern across many industries in which fledgling companies use new technology to offer cheaper and inferior alternatives to products sold by established players.” If I were talking about that (and I’m not), I would be talking about how our established institutions would be put out of business by others offering cheap and inferior product. Instead, I want to focus on those of us in higher education and on what we do to continuously improve—to repeatedly make new—the product we offer to our customers: our students. I believe the colleges and universities that are no longer here in five to ten years will be gone not because they failed to compete with cheap and inferior offerings but, rather, because they failed to distinguish themselves in a saturated marketplace. They failed to renew their product offerings. They failed to deliver to hopeful graduates the career-readiness those students expected, using methods those students could best absorb, respond to, and learn from—learn from!

Getting back to higher education’s failure to innovate. . . . What about online learning? Wasn’t that an innovation? Not really. For one thing, it didn’t originate with higher education: we borrowed it from the corporate world. We can’t claim it as our own business model. Nor did it fundamentally change the way we do business. Call it a bolt-on to the “same ole, same ole.” Higher education is exceptionally slow to adopt new methods, devices, and practices. In general, something new has to be proven in the corporate world and at one or two colleges/universities that we consider peers before a case can be made to try it out at our own institution. That’s because the case will involve assessing risk to...
the institution, and we can't do that until we have the data borrowed from those first adopters.

I'm involved in educational technology—in facilitating and building awareness, among my faculty, of technology that enables new methods of teaching and learning. Yet sadly, even the innovations in that slice of the business cannot be said to originate within higher education, with the one exception of student-led startups. If the students themselves can gain traction with an idea, then the risk footprint to the institution is already small in terms of cost, damage to reputation, and failure to launch, since those are all borne by the student principals of the startup.

Within our institutions, even our research institutions, we have no incentive, and certainly no straightforward process, for entrepreneurial research that can become the new de facto "business" of higher education.

Every generalization has its exceptions, of course. In this case, one exists at Georgetown University. Under Vice Provost Randy Bass, the Designing the Future(s) initiative (https://futures.georgetown.edu/) is an incubator seeking to answer the question, “What should a Georgetown education look like in the next ten or fifteen years?” This effort fits my definition of innovation because it is a novelty: it begins with the current business fundamentals and deconstructs them all to see if they are still serving teaching and learning. No rule is sacrosanct, be it the 16-week semester or the credit hour or the 9-month calendar. The innovation that Georgetown hopes to foster is being created by higher education, to be applied to higher education business. And that is true innovation by any definition of the word.

Are there other examples of ham sandwiches that can fly? I came across a promising one when I attended the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) Annual Meeting in January 2018. I was introduced through Kristen Eshleman, director of digital innovation at Davidson College, who led a session. At Davidson, Kristen leads efforts to define and pilot discrete manageable experiments in change. The experiments are mission-aligned, have accountability and metrics built in, and are designed to manage risk while finding the change points that Davidson’s traditional liberal arts mission can use. It's a different approach from Georgetown's but does create the requisite siloed “R&D” department that can lead to transforming the way Davidson does the business of higher education. In addition, Eshleman is involved in the 2018 version of an event called the Harvesting Academic Innovation for Learners (HAIL) Storm (http://thehailstorm.org). Georgetown will be represented at the gathering as well. This small but powerful event is held annually by invitation only. And that's probably because such a small number of us have begun to think the way they are thinking.

Would you be one of them if you could? Do their stated goals below scare you? Or invigorate you? Do you have other ideas for effective innovation in the business of higher education?

Share learnings from across our community on successes—and more importantly, failures—within experimentation efforts for the purpose of institutional transformation.

Establish communities of practice around the most pressing opportunities and challenges facing innovation leaders within higher education (e.g., new business models; culture change; moving from pilot to scale; innovation accounting; etc.).

Address external disruption by building the case for advancing institution-led innovation, both within our individual institutions and across the sector.

Note

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