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Hybridization

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Our Universities: Hybridization

Universities will change to meet changing student needs. Some within the higher education establishment fear looming changes. Change should be embraced by them for the opportunity offered to diverse students.

“Many of the most powerful forces driving change in higher education come from the marketplace, driven by new societal needs, the limited availability of resources, rapidly evolving technology, and the emergence of new competitors such as for-profit ventures. Clearly in such a rapidly changing environment, agility and adaptability become important attributes of successful institutions.”

James J. Duderstadt, President Emeritus, University of Michigan

Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana and now president of Purdue University, nearly got it right June 6, in Orlando, while addressing a group of for-profit educational leaders. He’s interested in “results in higher education,” not a particular mode of delivery for a degree. He suggested that, for some, online education is the way to go.

What he leaves out of the equation is the power of tailored hybrid programs that meet the needs the 21st century college student. The new demographic defies categorization and cannot be put neatly in any box.

It is formal education one-at-a-time.

Students will increasingly secure educational opportunities from multiple sources: for profits, online, community colleges, four-year institutions, and a growing multitude of free sources. For two decades the tin-foil-hatted prognosticators predicted traditional universities would be dinosaurs. They were and are wrong.

Gutenberg’s gadget probably spawned the same fear: After all, why would you need a lecture hall when books were readily available at low cost? The dinosaur is not the campus, but the idea that a student will attain education from a single source.

Daniels misses the point when he suggests that the competition is between different universities offering different delivery methods for knowledge insight and communication.

Burger King got it right when it proclaimed “Have it your way!” The student is climbing in the driver’s seat deciding what works best for him or her. This view demands more from faculty and leadership at all institutions of every stripe: a sincere effort to recognize the strengths, weaknesses, costs, compromises and opportunities of various delivery methods and an honest appraisal of those in meeting the individual needs of students. Likewise the accrediting infrastructure must have a more open mind about what works and how it serves in a quality

experience. Academic standards should not get thrown under the bus but must be viewed differently.

This thinking is the antithesis of one size fits all.

Imagine a student in pursuit of a bachelor's degree completing 54 credits at a local community college. She then transfers into the Bachelor of Science program at a brick and mortar establishment...with 40 of her credits. She begins studies and, after a semester, transfers 6 credits back to the community college to attain her associate's degree. (This is called "reverse transfer" and the associates' degree becomes a no-cost "mile marker." It seems like a good idea.) She then takes a 6-credit study abroad program with the University of Southern California, doing so carefully so the courses transfer into the undergraduate degree at SIU. Along the way she picks up a 4-credit physics course from MITx online: free. She needs to pay for competency testing so the credits will transfer, but it's the best in the world. Free. And it goes on and on.

"She" is a married mother with two children who started at a community college when 36 years old. Fifteen years later, she finished her undergraduate journey, as her children started theirs.

Nobody sets out to attain a degree in this fashion: could not plan it if you tried. But agile universities, serving motivated students with intelligent faculty and leadership, create degree plans one-at-a-time, from diverse sources, to meet the needs of individual learners.

Now put this ever-changing sequence of opportunity tuned to cost and need in a bag, shake it up, and roll it out.

That's a picture of what universities are going to look like. Inside the ivy covered box thinking won't work.

Agility, thoughtfulness, and determination of those who offer educational experiences, and those who accept them, will be the glue that holds the enterprise together: Hybridization, not tradition.