

Coming In From the Cold: Three Trends That Are Shaping the Future of Higher Education



The assumption that higher education's status quo is working, and that there is no need for change, is the biggest impediment to the innovation and transformation of institutional models and structures.

It is critical for continuing and non-traditional education leaders to keep track of major trends impacting the higher education space. We can serve as incubators or laboratories at our institutions that promote the development and growth of new and more effective methods of transferring knowledge and cultivating individuals with new skills and abilities that allow them to better participate in building society. We promote educational entrepreneurship.

Educators are attentive to the rapid evolution of the global economy and the fact that international challenges are more complex than those we have faced since the early 20th century. We were established to shift higher education to meet the changing needs of society when veterans returned to use the GI Bill and when women entered higher education and the workforce in increasing numbers, among other reasons. The social and economic landscape has changed dramatically over the decades, but academic institutions must develop new, more effective strategies to lead us through these social and economic changes to prepare working adults to succeed in the new economy.

Through our outward focus and research capabilities, we monitor the needs of new and underserved populations and incorporate and apply the best practices and knowledge from traditional disciplines and pedagogies to create new methods of meeting the needs of these groups. This is one kind of incubation that can have a transformative impact on standards for course and program delivery.

Continuing and professional education leaders design new curricula by combining research of workforce trends and industry competencies with their institutions' best educational strategies. We serve as partners to faculty and programs and schools that focus on research and residential education to elevate the conversation beyond the false binary of traditional/non-traditional to the lifecycle of the learner at all stages of the learning, professional and encore career trajectory. Driven by access missions and the drive to reach a high number of students who are eager to learn, we develop scalable models that leverage technology and creativity to expand and revise modalities. Our experiments, pilots in technology-mediated education, have had an impact on classroom-based learning for educators and students at every level. Online education is a prime example, as are the many variations of teaming up technology with competency-based education for adult and professional learners. The field of graduate professional education is yet another arena that arose quickly upon the recognition of higher-level abilities required to build workforces across fields and industries. It is critically important for continuing education leaders to position ourselves at the center of the network of education, industry, government and non-profit areas so we observe and respond to the constant flux in the needs of society, technological changes, and growth in professional knowledge demand.

To my mind, there are three major trends shaping the futures of both continuing and traditional higher education:

1. Regional and international campuses

Many of us have been involved in the establishment and management of regional and international campuses as part of our institutions' outreach strategies. While many of these efforts are thriving, anecdotally, most of them fail financially and fail to draw new student populations. The ones that succeed do so because they have strong financial support and also meet a clear unmet demand, rather than attempting to create new demand. The successful ventures have been established in collaboration with the communities into which they are planting new roots and they have thoroughly researched and know the cultures into which they are moving. The successful relocated campuses know and are able to capitalize on how their brands are perceived in that region, whether domestic or international. For example, from an American perspective, some international ventures were borne out of a particular country's desire to build a stronger educational system in partnership with select American institutions, so these are true collaborations rather than isolated attempts to capitalize on or compete in a market perceived as rich. Other governments are investing in education at higher rates than the US, and are savvy about studying and incorporating successful Western models into their own systems. The delivery of international education requires the expertise to contextualize that education and the engagement in discussions with countries about their political and educational systems. Many regional campuses, originally part of institutions' global outreach strategies, are failing and closing their doors, but new ones are being established each year, so this is an important trend to continue to analyze and monitor.

2. Education/corporate partnerships

Many academic institutions are expanding professional and executive education units to provide custom programming to a variety of organizations seeking to build leadership skills among their employees, help re-tool elements of their workforces in specific competency areas to allow the firms to be competitive, and to advance the knowledge and credentials of managers and leaders to improve the profile of the organizations and to retain employees. Institutions are finding that various schools on campus leverage alum and other connections to build business relationships with major companies, and at times this results in multiple approaches from an academic institution to the same firm: the classic right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. These scenarios are prompting schools to centralize the corporation outreach strategies, much in the same way that advancement strategies are centralized and coordinated. Decisions also must be made about how and whether to approach many small organizations, or pursue the largest that have training budgets and large and distributed workforces. The trends to watch are how effectively academic institutions manage these relationships, and to what extent organizations are building their own internal educational resources, hiring instructional designers, or outsourcing to private firms that specialize in organizational development and training.

3. Competency-based education

The implementation of competency-based education (CBE) has primarily taken place at the undergraduate level and we have seen some outstanding innovations through SHNU and Arizona State, but it may be that we have not discovered the best value of this approach. Post-baccalaureate programs, graduate professional education, and certificate programs may lend themselves better given the radically different business models required to execute CBE. The Education Advisory Board (EAB) recently published a report *Three Myths About Competency-Based Education* which persuasively challenges the assumptions and expectations that CBE is in high demand, that it is faster and lowers costs for students and institutions. As we watched the arc of interest and popularity with MOOCs, we will probably see a similar arc with CBE and eventually watch it settle in the panoply of delivery methods that meets the needs of specific audiences and specific levels of learning, but it most likely will not replace existing structures of baccalaureate and graduate education.

Though all three of these trends are critical to the present and future of higher education, their relative degrees of importance depend on the highest impact on the most people. As such, I would suggest that competency-based education should be foregrounded as a trend that leaders should be monitoring. CBE has prompted discussions about how we teach and learn like no other phenomenon since we started engaging with issues of design and assessment due to the rapid expansion of technology-mediated education. In traditional education, time is fixed and mastery is variable. In CBE, mastery is fixed and time is variable. Thus, we must make decisions about what knowledge and skills must be demonstrated and cultivated, regardless of trends in technology, delivery and packaging, or metrics and credentialing. However the latter force us to question the malleability of our structures and if they are, in fact, impeding best teaching and learning from taking place for certain audiences.

In any curricular design for baccalaureate programs, or graduate professional education, or executive education, the knowledge and skills to be taught are often those at the core of a liberal arts education: writing skills, critical thinking skills and quantitative reasoning. What is the best way to achieve the knowledge, abilities and literacies to elevate the quality of work and creativity in industries and organizations from non-profit to government, and to apply and contextualize them across cultures and nations?

CBE, like technology, is forcing us to look at the structures that deliver liberal arts education to all populations, how that can be done with a variety of methods and how these core abilities are critical to success across fields and disciplines.

Of course, bringing these innovative approaches to postsecondary learning can be a challenge. Often, new trends are immediately compared to the existing norm, but they are held to standards higher than the norm. For example, teaching with technology was met with opponents who argued that academic honesty issues would proliferate. They asked what proof could be produced that online learning was as good as f2f learning, without offering a foolproof methods of assuring academic honesty and uniform excellent outcomes in traditional classrooms. At the core is the need for education leaders to balance risk and potential growth with tradition and stability. Every new idea and venture is immediately met with criticisms based on why it does not fit the existing structure, or why it threatens the current model. The assumption is that the current models and structures should not change. This is the biggest challenge.