



## **When the Comfort Zone is the Danger Zone: Adapting to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner in Higher Education**

---

*During a presidential primary season where party elites on both sides of the aisle have been unpleasantly surprised by widespread dissatisfaction, those of us in higher education should engage in some tough self-reflection regarding our constituents--about how we serve students and why. Institutions looking to strengthen their long-term viability will focus on developing a portfolio of programs and services that not only reflect "core" missions but are also responsive to student demand and economic trends.*

### **Three Key Features**

One consistent trend in American higher education in the post-WWII era is an expansion of the ages and backgrounds of people seeking its benefits. And this has proven a challenge in many ways for the academy, since the type of educational experience provided to the political and financial elites of the nation a century ago is different from what is needed and expected by the veteran of Afghanistan, the working single mom, the older student juggling work, family, and school. And the NCES projects that not only are older students here to stay, but their numbers are projected to increase by 20% by 2023.<sup>1</sup> Colleges and universities have made some changes in curricula, scheduling and services in an attempt to serve these students, but these have typically been adjustments on the academy's periphery, exceptions rather than rules.

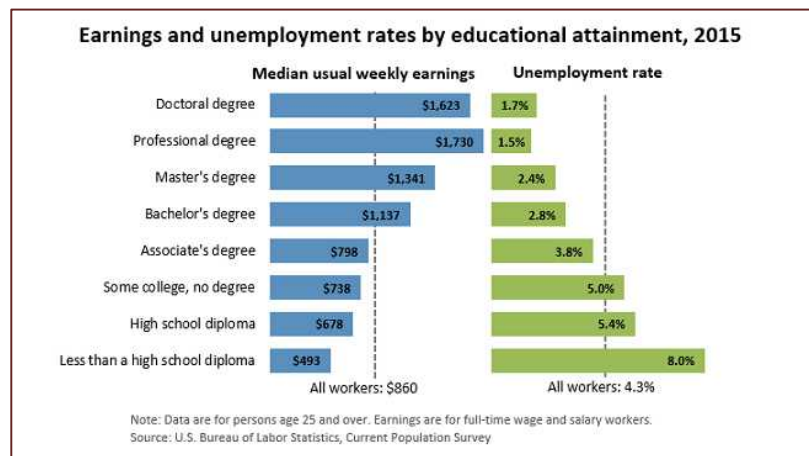
*...in higher education, the comfort zone is the danger zone.*

There are three important characteristics of programs that successfully serve the needs of the majority of college students in the US today: value, access, and efficiency. These are characteristics that cut across all aspects of higher education. They inform elements of the educational experience as different as degree areas, program design, delivery methods, and student support. And examining programs through the prism of these three characteristics yields some valuable insights into how to strengthen contemporary approaches to higher education.

We could argue that a real shift is needed in how the academy understands itself and its mission. Higher education is a service industry; it provides access to knowledge and assistance with the acquisition of competencies. And the time has come when the vast majority of learners in higher education are what used to be termed “non-traditional.” So it is essential for institutions seeking long-term viability to respond to contemporary needs. Simply put, colleges and universities should deliver education in the ways that students need and want, not in the ways that are familiar to a self-replicating group of professors and administrators. To date, large scale structural challenges in higher education—rising costs in student acquisition and in educational delivery, declining federal and state funding, public skepticism—have been met with largely cosmetic changes. The academy may appear to be liberal politically, but is deeply conservative when it comes to its structure and functioning. But an unthinking fidelity to the way things used to be sets the stage for some real existential challenges for many institutions. In contemporary higher education, the comfort zone is the danger zone.

## Value

The good news about higher education is that demand is still strong: Americans assume that a college degree is a key element in upward mobility and professional advancement. And recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics bears this out: high school graduates are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as individuals with bachelor’s degrees and college graduates with a four year degree make almost \$500 a week more than high school graduates.<sup>ii</sup>



But the public is clearly concerned about the costs of higher education, about declining state and federal support, and the strain tuition places on middle-income families and the resulting levels of student debt. In addition, at a time when there is widespread American skepticism about institutions in general, there are persistent expressions of doubt regarding the overall quality of a college degree, which were given nationwide visibility in the Spellings Report of

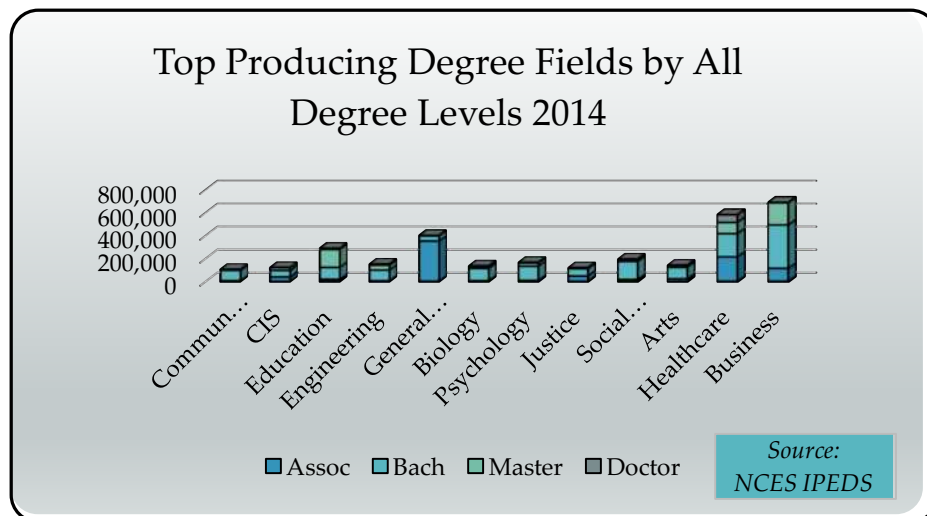
2006 which noted the “remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students.”<sup>iii</sup>

When we combine a general acknowledgment about the worth of a college education with growing concern about its cost, we are left with a stress on value: what the cost/benefit ratio is for students and their families. Value balances the reputation of an institution against the cost of attendance and the impact a degree will have on a student’s life. It is a middle- and working-class concern. Students from a higher economic stratum seeking a traditional-style education at one of the nation’s elite colleges and universities are certainly cognizant of institutional reputation and its impact on their lives, but their calculations are of a different nature.

And this elite perspective is a minority one in higher education today. What were once considered “non-traditional” students make up almost three quarters of students.<sup>iv</sup> They are working full or part time, are not residing on a campus, and frequently have dependents or significant others. While traditional elite higher education is often considered transformative, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners view their educational journey as transactional. For them, the dream of a college education is one where they must balance the future impact of a degree against its cost. As a result, value is a major concern.

*While traditional elite higher education is often considered transformative, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners view their educational journey as transactional.*

This heightens a public interest in the correlation between college study and career. While the Liberal Arts may conceptually lie at the heart of higher education, students today are clearly focused on value in terms of the impact their major and degree will have on their lives beyond the classroom.



Here again, students are focused on the transactional nature of the college experience: obtaining a degree leads directly to career opportunity or advancement. This is an important insight for those of us on the “inside” of higher education. While we focus on the process of educating students, since this is what we do on a cyclical basis, students experience this process only once. While getting into college was a concern, they are now resolutely focused on getting out and getting on with their lives. As a result, we in the academy often seem to be focused on means and not ends, on the abstract and not the practical, a perspective decidedly out of synch with our students’ needs.

## Access

If 21<sup>st</sup> Century students have complex and busy lives, then their capacity to engage in higher education in the traditional way is significantly compromised. Balancing work and family, unable to devote themselves to the leisure of a full-time residential experience, they desire access to higher education, but often find a poor fit between their lives and the way college is organized.

Over the last few decades, this has resulted in the growth of a variety of innovative approaches to higher education designed to enhance accessibility. Features of these programs include changes to instructional design (andragogy, not pedagogy), scheduling, and delivery. Technology has had an important impact on higher education, facilitating delivery methods that transcend the limitations of time and space through online and hybrid delivery, asynchronous offerings, etc. Online education continues to grow and today one in seven students in higher education is enrolled in a fully online program. Of particular note is that the most significant growth in this category is at private, not-for-profit institutions. And demand for online learning is growing among both “traditional” and “non-traditional” students.<sup>v</sup> Finally, we note that the academy itself is grudgingly coming to terms with online education, with MIT releasing a report that singles out online learning as playing an important role in higher education for its ability to customize learning, remote collaboration, just-in-time scenarios, continuous assessment and blended learning.<sup>vi</sup>

*... all too often we in the academy assume that our instructional innovation has solved the challenge of access. Congratulations are premature.*

But all too often we in the academy assume that our instructional innovation has solved the challenge of access. Congratulations are premature. The academic-oriented opinion that the customer is *not* always right has bled into other service aspects of our institutions. As a result, there is a real disconnect between consumer (student) expectations and reality. To fully commit to enhanced access also requires innovation in services that surround the purely academic

experience as well. Colleges and universities are organized and oriented around “traditional” patterns of educational interaction – with full-time resident students who are between 18 and 22. Institutional services are offered during “business hours” and are disaggregated across separate functional areas (each of which featuring discrete forms, processes and locations). In an era where consumers are increasingly accustomed to integrated, on-demand service platforms that feature “one-click” functionality, academia still has a long way to go to meet the service standards common in economic and social life today. In a nutshell, students are a type of consumer. Institutions need to provide high quality customer service in and out of class and across the student lifecycle.<sup>vii</sup>

## Efficiency

The combination of strategic design and delivery of programs creates efficiency. Prospective students are presented with information and services that are designed to streamline their access to higher education. Services, including academic ones, are focused on outcomes and hence can display a flexibility in design and delivery that puts student needs first and acknowledges that much of the way colleges and universities operate is designed with staff and faculty convenience in mind, not with a primary focus on student needs.

Of particular importance is the ways in which institutions leverage digital technology to attract and serve students. While not a total solution for reigning in growing costs in higher education, digital technology holds the potential for streamlining processes, eliminating redundancies, sharing information across silos and improving the effectiveness of outreach. The end result can be organizations that better serve their clients, a basic recipe for business success.

*... one in three private colleges failed to achieve goals involving application volume, net revenue, and yield. ...the average discount provided for first-year students at private colleges stands at 46 percent. And yet..., the methods enrollment managers use to promote their institutions have changed little for decades.*

This is a critical point. A recent report from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*<sup>viii</sup> notes that institutions across the board are experiencing shifts in student demographics and growing financial constraints. Student needs and expectations are growing; many institutions are having difficulty meeting them. There is widespread concern about value in higher education. About one in three private colleges failed to achieve goals involving application volume, net revenue, and yield. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the average discount provided for first-year students at private colleges stands at 46 percent. And yet, in this challenging environment, it is also the case that the methods enrollment

managers use to promote their institutions have changed little for decades. Clearly, there is room for improvement.

Forward-thinking institutions will examine their fundamental stance in regard to the ways in which they serve students. Successful approaches will generally have these characteristics:

- ∞ Programs have a market orientation—there is strong demand by consumers for programs with direct linkages to employment.
- ∞ They are clearly structured—they present a concrete roadmap that leads to program completion and credentialing, demonstrating both value and efficiency.
- ∞ They exhibit innovation—in terms of delivery and structure, and utilize various delivery modalities and technical adaptations (ensuring access, for instance on mobile devices) as well as staffing and service models that employ non-traditional structures and processes to increase access, value and efficiency.
- ∞ They are customer friendly and digital in their approaches—services are integrated, bundled and streamlined to serve student needs; digital resources are leveraged to attract, communicate with and serve individuals across the student lifecycle.
- ∞ They embrace an enhanced digital marketing and communication strategy, focusing on intuitive, uncluttered homepages and microsites, optimization across technical platforms (once again, we stress mobile devices) and the pursuit of multichannel approaches to student communication is needed throughout the student lifecycle.<sup>ix</sup>

In short, the ways in which we structure programs and services in higher education can play a key role in strengthening long-term institutional. Today, as never before, colleges and universities must focus on developing a portfolio of programs and services that not only reflect “core” missions but are also responsive to student demand and economic trends.

### The Author

John J. Donohue is a higher educational professional with more than twenty-eight years’ experience in higher education teaching, administration and leadership. He has served as tenured professor, dean, vice president, provost and acting president. He is an expert on curricular design and program development and currently serves as Chief Academic and Development Officer for Synergis Education.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Hanover Research. 2015. 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology. Arlington, VA; Hanover Research, p.21.
- <sup>ii</sup> See see [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_chart\\_001.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm)
- <sup>iii</sup> A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education. 2006. US Department of Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Choy, Suan. (2002). *Findings from the Condition of Education 2003: Nontraditional Undergraduates*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/analyses/nontraditional/index.asp>  
See also Center for Law and Social Policy. (2011). Yesterdays' Non-traditional Student is Today's Traditional Student. Washington DC: CLASP. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Nontraditional-Students-Facts-2011.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> Keypath Education. 2016. 2016 Higher Education Benchmarks. Retrieved from <http://info.keypathedu.com/the-2016-higher-education-benchmarks>. See also (See IPEDS data <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>)
- <sup>vi</sup> Wilcox, Karen E., Sanjay Sarma and Philip H. Lippel. 2016. Online Education: A Catalyst for Higher Education Reforms. Cambridge, MA: Online Education Policy Initiative, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p. ix.
- <sup>vii</sup> Hanover Research. 2015. 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology. Arlington, VA; Hanover Research. P3
- <sup>viii</sup> Webster, Dan. 2016. The Admissions Perspective: How Academic Leaders Are Facing a Continuously Changing State of Admissions. Washington, DC; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- <sup>ix</sup> Hanover Research. 2015. 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology. Arlington, VA; Hanover Research, pp13-14