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PROVOCATIONS

On *Wired for Success*: A Practical Plan for Adding Value to the College Experience

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Having spent a good portion of my career in leadership roles at AASCU schools, I know firsthand the many ways these state comprehensive universities have helped shape the future of higher education, particularly when it comes to promoting academic quality and access through leading-edge programs, research, and technologies. I was delighted at the chance to serve AASCU as a Senior Fellow, tasked with, among other things, authoring a book about the role of online education in powering higher education reform and new business models. Kathy Harvatt, an accomplished education writer, eagerly agreed to help me with the project.

Like any scholarly publication, *Wired for Success* (AASCU, 2013) began with a great deal of research, which included both an all-encompassing literature review and a series of in-depth discussions with the “gazelles” of higher learning – those fast-running thought leaders, who are boldly forging new and more effective academic directions on campuses across the country. Yet with each study we read and gazelle we interviewed, it became increasingly obvious that when we talk about transforming higher education, the public discussion invariably revolves around *access* and *affordability*. And while these issues are certainly important, they are fueling our current fixation on and disproportionate investment in largely untested, magic bullet solutions like competency-based education, \$10,000 degrees, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). What is more, in our fervor to promote these quick-fix approaches, we have failed to confront the real elephant in the room – the waning *value* of a college education.

In truth, there is plenty of evidence to support the need for a radically different *kind* of higher education; one that provides students with the relevant knowledge, skills, and experience they must have to hit the ground running in a changing world and a changing workforce. It is certainly a formidable challenge that will require multifaceted solutions and significant trade-offs. But in our reticence to tackle it head on, far too many of our college graduates are now caught between a rock (crippling student loan debt) and a hard place (a highly competitive and volatile job market), with degrees that while still necessary, are not particularly valuable.

Nevertheless, in our search for answers, Kathy and I uncovered more than a few “pockets of genius” out there on AASCU campuses, inspired by administrators and faculty who, instead of succumbing to fads or pandering to con-

vention, are busy realigning the attitudes and principles, norms and practices that have driven the academic enterprise for centuries. As a result, we came to see our project as a unique opportunity to reframe the discussion around student success (rather than institutional survival), using these pockets of genius to exemplify what we can and should be doing to ensure it. So what began as a tome about online education evolved into a practical “playbook” for implementing the learning experiences, environments, and technologies as institutional structures and strategies that will add value to a college education, based on what we know about the present and can reasonably predict about the future.

For us, the bottom line is obvious: today’s college students are heading into an economy unlike anything we have experienced in the past. In this new economy, the driving force is innovation; the overall objective, customer value creation; and the laser focus, sustainability. In making the shift, employers are scouting well-rounded employees, who not only possess discipline-specific skills, but also demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, interdisciplinary knowledge and intercultural competence, civic engagement, and social responsibility. By the same token, they are in the market for new graduates who are creative, critical, and collaborative thinkers and self-directed learners, prepared to confront the increasingly complex and ambiguous challenges that lie ahead.

Yet as imperative as they are, these attributes are not being cultivated in most college classrooms, given our continued reliance on the old “factory model of higher education,” with its textbook-driven, teacher-centered, talk and test methodologies. And even as employers step up their demand for new hires with a wider understanding of the world, a growing number of college administrators and trustees, federal and state legislators are beginning to push for a more narrowly focused curriculum, with a greater emphasis on professional and technical education. Consequently, our graduates face increasing obstacles to gainful employment, at a time when there are not enough jobs being created to accommodate the rising number of four-year degree holders.

In providing an honest assessment of what it will take to better educate our students for *their* future, *Wired for Success* proposes a step-by-step plan (with dozens of outstanding examples), grounded in solid research and years of professional experience. This plan begins with the fundamental need for new academic models and effective instructional approaches that promote the expert knowledge and complex skills our students must have for professional success and effective citizenship. To achieve this objective, we will have to design academic environments and learning experiences around neuroscientific research that proves our brains are far more productive when stimulated by repetitive and meaningful experience that is active, collaborative, multi-sensory, and authentic.

Equally important, we must ensure equitable access to a comprehensive curriculum that fosters at least four specific aptitudes, known to be essential in today’s innovation economy: perspective-taking, structural knowledge de-

velopment, interdisciplinary understanding, and integrative thinking. In addition, this curriculum should incorporate abundant opportunities for civic engagement and global study, along with an integrated career education component that empowers students to develop, package, and market their unique talents, relevant skills, and appropriate experience.

Colleges and universities would also be well-advised to think of digital technology as more than just a wide-ranging academic delivery system. In fact, it affords an extraordinary platform for engaging students and faculty alike in learning experiences that *are* active, collaborative, multi-sensory, and authentic. Even basic applications like Skype and Twitter enable them to connect and communicate in real time with experts, colleagues, and peers from anywhere in the world. We have also developed sophisticated multi-player simulations and videogames that immerse learners in complex problem-solving activities and role-playing exercises, which are either too dangerous or too expensive to replicate in real life. Moreover, interactive technologies can be used to customize the learning environment, while spontaneously adapting course content and teaching methods to match the learning pace.

It should also be noted that while good teaching is at the heart of student success, most college faculty members begin their careers with little or no formal professional training in either the intricate science of learning or the fine art of teaching (outside of, perhaps, brief stints as graduate assistants). Although this lack of training might have been acceptable when cognitive science and technology-enhanced learning were still in their infancy, times have definitely changed. Thus, if we are to provide a better value on academic investment, we must step up our efforts to support effective teaching with ongoing, evidence-based faculty development—a recommendation wholeheartedly endorsed by professional associations like AASCU.

To their credit, college presidents and their boards are beginning to talk more openly about transformative potential in the push for reinvention. Still, far too much of the discussion revolves around *disruptive* innovation—a trendy business concept predicated on advancements in technology, which continues to feed our focus on access and affordability. And while this approach has encouraged a noteworthy round of institutional experiments, most of them are conducted “offshore,” so to speak, through wholly separate operational units, with completely different business models—turning innovation into a parallel venture, rather than a campus-wide commitment.

On the other hand, nearly all of the gazelles we interviewed see innovation as an intentional, inclusive, and *continuous* process of improvement that requires equal portions of discipline, imagination, and patience, along with a willingness to think big, start small, and scale quickly. It mobilizes stakeholders around the mission of achieving an ongoing series of *small wins*, which, more often than not, pave the way for *big changes*, by providing momentum, encouraging new insights, and eliminating serious impediments that frequently stand in the way of comprehensive and sustainable reform. When done well, continuous innovation optimizes an institution’s talent and teamwork, energy

and resources to create, capture, and deliver increasingly greater value for the students it serves. And because this model facilitates a safe haven for collective experimentation, it ultimately engenders an institutional culture of change that is as proactive as it is holistic. Equally important, it offers a framework for both the collaborative faculty research and the ongoing public dialog we must have to ensure a more viable academic enterprise going forward.

No doubt the pressure for American colleges and universities to reinvent themselves will only intensify, driven in large part by exorbitant tuition rates, spiraling student loan debt, and an ever-tightening job market. But as difficult as this transformation promises to be, I hope our book will not only inform, but also inspire the process, by showcasing some of the many AASCU schools that are working overtime to deliver a better value on academic investment. To be sure, their extraordinary achievements are proof positive that with collective action, research-driven models, and carefully selected technologies, we can “wire” our students, as well as our institutions, for success—now and in the future.