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Implications to the traditional higher education model in a time of new economic and demographic realities

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Abstract

In the world's developed countries the tendency is to a decreasing or stagnant, aging population. Traditional higher education has occurred early in life with little retraining in adulthood. The current demographic and economic realities demand a change in the role of traditional higher education as it must be more flexible and portable. Higher education must play a central role in the lifelong learning process as new technologies become available. Changes will occur with or without the approval of the established higher education hierarchy as businesses and governments demand quicker, cheaper, and better delivery methods to the current system. Technology is changing at such a rapid pace that the current higher education system must retool as well.

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Report Theme: Implications to the traditional higher education model in a time
of new economic and demographic realities

The global population continued to grow from 3.04 billion in 1960 to 6.97 billion in 2011 (1). During this same period, the population of most developed countries either was stagnant or decreased because of declining fertility rates of 2.1 in the United States and much lower in the European Union and what was the European Eastern Bloc and Soviet countries, including Russia. The only exceptions were those developed countries where there was an increase in population based on immigration. It is widely accepted that developed countries must maintain a fertility rate of 2.1 (2)¹, to maintain their population. If this demographic trend continues, then their overall population will continue to shrink with fewer younger people being born. This trend also equates to a change in higher education in developed countries where the typical university student is very different from a generation ago.

As more industrial and manufacturing positions leave the developed countries to the developing countries and the developed countries' economies become more service and technology based, there is a need for a better and more flexibly educated workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics for the United States in a recent news release stated: "The average person born in the latter years of the baby boom (1957-1964) held 11.3 jobs from age 18 to age 46, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nearly half of these jobs were held from ages 18 to 24 (3)²." A higher percentage and raw number of secondary school students see the university as their path to success and older students see the need for more education or a different education to meet the needs of an ever-changing workforce. In the United States, a 2012 Fast Facts internet report from the National Center for Education Statistics stated: "In fall 2012, a record 21.6 million students are expected to attend American colleges and universities, constituting an increase of about 6.2 million since fall 2000 (4)" This record is comprised of a majority of women and more students of every age group. It is evident why more people desire a university education when one considers the increase in earning power with the median earnings for young adults

¹ [2,p3]

² [3,p1]

with a bachelor's degree in the year 2010 at \$45,000 as compared with \$29,900 for a high school or equivalent diploma in the United States (4).

The above numbers are for the United States, but are not that different for other developed countries. Much has changed in the first millennia of higher education from the early cathedral schools and universities of Europe that were primarily used as a means to train the clergy. The United States was no different in this respect as Lucas stated in his book, *American Higher Education*: “Just as Emmanuel College of Cambridge had been founded in 1584 to educate clergy “at once learned and zealous, instructed in all that scholars should now,” likewise, Harvard, established according to its charter *pro modo Academarium in Anglia* (“According to the manner of the universities in England”), was to raise up a literate and pious clergy (5)³.” More people are going to the university today for the first time, or they are returning, in most cases, for vocational reasons as universities offer degrees in many areas of vocational and scholastic interest. A university education today is viewed as an investment to future or continued security and advancement in the job market. Long gone are the days when one went to the university to get an education for the sake of the education.

With the birthing of this new higher education reality came at least three major issues: increased governmental interference; changes in delivery mode; and the student as a consumer. Each of these issues will be addressed in their turn.

As the universities in the world have increased with the demands of the population, so has government control. Governments, increasingly, are demanding public, and in some cases, private universities what to teach and how to teach, not based upon sound teaching techniques, but rather upon the realities of revenues and the needs of the job market. It makes little difference that they provide smaller revenue streams and require more in the form of tuition increases. One American example is The University of Virginia that has a \$2.6 billion budget for 2012-2013 and only \$154.4 million or 5.8% is contributed by taxpayers through the state budget

³ [5,p104]

(6). Private universities in the United States are not exempt from this interference as most accept federal and state monies in the form of Pell and other grants which beholds them to certain federal and state requirements. There has been much talk in the United States from some of the elite public universities of becoming private, but the cost of buying the buildings erected with state and federal monies over one hundred years and longer is prohibitive. Some private universities, like Hillsdale College (in the United States colleges and universities are equivalent) in the state of Michigan, will accept no federal or state monies, as they wish to have no governmental interference (7).

Coupled with government demands are those of business of the developed world that require a more educated workforce. The higher education that they need is one of flexibility so their staff can take course work convenient to their schedules and portability so that their degrees will have value globally. If these needs cannot be met, then businesses will go to the for-profit universities, or supply the education needs of their staff with in-house instruction. Periodically, businesses need universities to help retrain staff concerning new technology and other areas. This may require only one or two classes, or maybe a short seminar in some cases, but it is important that universities have the ability to meet those needs with quality education.

With the advent of the internet and multimedia, educational delivery methods have forever changed. The days of the professor standing before the class giving a lecture from yellowed, time-stained notes, although not perhaps over, are nearing extinction. Most professors utilize, at a minimum, Power Point presentations rich in multi-media as required by the internet and cell phone generation. Some students never see their professor as an increasing number of traditional and non-traditional students alike prefer the flexibility of an online class. Some students don't purchase a physical book as they utilize their Kindles and other e-book reading devices. Are these and other newer types of educational delivery methods superior to the classroom experience of fifty years ago? The research continues on the efficacy of

online, other distance delivery, and multi-media rich courses as it relates to what is the learning, rather than the grade, outcome. These newer delivery methods are driven by the government as they see these methods as cheaper alternatives to the brick and mortar classroom and also by the student who cares less for the university experience and more about the degree and the increased income that it brings.

Perhaps the biggest change in the academy is in answering the question: “Should the student be treated as a consumer?” As the university has become more reliant upon government and tuition revenue streams, they also have become more compliant with the needs of these constituencies. The research into the linkage between the entitlement mentality, as it relates to higher education, probably began eighteen years ago with Morrow making the point that true achievement requires effort and skill, and the more of both applied, the greater the achievement (8). This research and later research in America, New Zealand and Australia, and Great Britain present a troubling picture of students being similar to consumers with education as the product (9) (10) (11) (12). In this consumer or entitlement higher education culture (made up primarily of Millennials, those born between 1982 and 2002), it is this student that expects to have choices and control over those choices (10)⁴. This consumerism outlook is not discouraged by the advertising campaigns of the universities and the catering to the many wants of the student. It has become, in many respects, a “red queen’s race,” as the students require more as consumers. So the university, in an effort to attract the students and their revenue, continues to build better student centers, sports facilities, and luxurious dormitories (13) in an effort to make their university stand out among the others. Often, the university is in constant building mode. This in turn drives the cost of tuition up with no increase in the level of education offered. Students understand that they have been empowered as consumers to request and receive concessions. This has created a culture where the university student wants instant gratification, with little work, and the professoriate wants to see sustained exertion and advancement, over time, indicating true learning

⁴ [10,p4]

and eventual achievement by receiving a degree that has significance and not just a birth type of certificate that shows you were there for the event, but shared little in the effort (10)⁵.

The consumerism attitude that persists also affects the professor administration relationship. In the United States, most universities receive state and federal revenue based upon some formula, including the number of students and sometimes the success of those students. This often places at odds the professoriate that views education as the goal of the university with administration that must keep students satisfied so that they will continue to stay and pay and keep the university doors open. There is increasing pressure placed upon the professoriate from both the students and administration “to do what it takes to make the student successful.” Of course, the professoriate views student success as a two-way street, requiring effort from the student and the professor, whereas administration and students often view student success as a teaching issue only. With the advent of such internet venues as “Rate Your Professor” and the public rhetoric contained therein (14)⁶, the professoriate is at risk to become little more than an entertainment or beauty contest with no connection to the teaching and learning function required in the classroom. If the student likes your jokes or the way you look, they can give you a chili pepper for being “hot” on Rate Your Professor, but few, if any, comment on how much they learned from the course. They will also often comment on what you wore, how difficult or easy the class was, and if you were nice or not. This process often repeats itself when rating the professor in the classroom (a process that is required at many American universities) and frequently carries weight for rank and pay adjustments. As the professor gets pressure from all sides to ensure student success, it becomes increasingly difficult to follow the correct path and some give in to the pressure and look the other way while students plagiarize and worse. Grade pressure appears to be a bigger issue at for-profit universities where there have been documented accounts

⁵ [10,p5]

⁶ [14,p6]

of professors reporting “we were constantly told to lower the bar, that we were helping poor people (15)⁷.”

In conclusion, higher education continues to evolve. As demographics change and fewer children are being born in developed countries, there is a shift towards a higher percentage of the population pursuing one or more higher education degrees. This shift sees more of the population in all age groups bound for the university, either in person or via distance education to complete their first degree, or to finish a graduate or second degree for a better or a new position. There is a great demand for higher education for all who desire it, but with great demand comes a great responsibility within the academy to ensure the achievement equals the effort and this responsibility should be assumed by the students, professoriate, and administration. A degree must not be looked upon as a right. Students must be given access to the university, but that does not mean they are to be guaranteed success.

Any proposed change in higher education should be instituted slowly with the requisite research to confirm that it provides an equivalent or better learning level. Educators must be cautious of the evils of money, understanding that money is needed to operate higher education, but not at the risk of prostituting the education process. Higher education is now seen as the ticket to continued success by governments and individuals, and, as with all things that have perceived value, there will be pressure to cheapen so that it can be attained for less. The academy cannot allow the value of higher education to be devalued.

Businesses, governments, and individuals now view education as a lifelong process and the system of higher education must adapt to meet these new requirements, but not at the cost of the education process.

⁷ [15,p1]

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