Some Trends in Higher Education in 2014

Undergraduate Choices

According to Van Der Werf and Sabatier in *The College of 2020: Students* published in 2009, the traditional model of college is changing, with hybrid class schedules, night and weekend meetings, and online learning proliferating. The traditional model of face-to-face learning on a college campus will exist but will be a smaller part of the whole picture. Students are demanding more options to make it easier for them to fit classes into their lives.

Students are making decisions for many reasons, including price, convenience, and strengths of the institution. More students are looking for lower-cost alternatives to attending college -- three-year degrees, online learning, and part-time learning are options they seek. Students expect more from college. Van Der Werf and Sabatier say students want access to discussions, office hours, study groups, and lectures online, yet many still want and need a traditional college experience. Colleges and Universities must provide many options simultaneously and be flexible enough to change as the market changes. By 2020, students may be taking up to 60% of their courses entirely online.

Undergraduate Programs

In *The College of 2020*, the authors state that students want to design their own curricula that fit their individual styles. “Colleges that attempt to cram their styles down students’ throats on the basis that it is ‘good for them’ may quickly find themselves uncompetitive.” In his Huffington Post article, “Welcome to the Campus of 2019,” the President of Bethany College, Scott Miller, states that traditional academic structures will need to be redefined moving forward. Interdepartmental course offerings, collaboration on global study-abroad and other initiatives that pair once-separate disciplines will lead institutions to revisit the traditional departmental model. Duke University’s faculty senate in fact took up this discussion in January 2013 ([http://today.duke.edu/2013/01/acconversation](http://today.duke.edu/2013/01/acconversation)), deciding to keep the existing departmental model but attempt to create scholarly teams that crossed disciplines. Faculty governance and tenure and promotion questions will have to evolve with these changes. In the end, it will lead to more interdisciplinary curricula for students, and more cross-disciplinary activity for faculty.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) has recently become a frequent topic among leaders of higher education. Programs defined as competency-based use outcomes as the sole means of determining whether a student earns a degree or credential, replacing the credit hour. Students may present work experience, portfolios of work, or other evidence of learning. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “[This] type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student.” Western Governors University is already issuing degrees based on competencies, and the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning has used funding from the Lumina Foundation to partner with fourteen colleges and universities to develop faculty and staff knowledge of CBE. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) has issued a policy on such programs, requiring that institutions engaging in these programs outline the structure of direct assessment and hybrid work, and establish clear competencies that will lead to the degree, in addition to meeting several of their existing principles.
A close relative to this is “prior learning assessment,” which awards credit based on professional training and personal experience, but awards credit. This is done to a small extent at UNCG already, through placement tests and military transcript evaluation. For either CBE or prior learning assessment, in order to respond to such a structure, faculty need to be engaged in the discussions of what is appropriate for students, the discipline, and the institutional degree.

Technology

Mobile computing devices will continue to drive how students want to access learning materials, and how faculty access their work. As The College of 2020 states, “[The] next generation of collegegoers... are restless with the traditional forms of learning and eager to incorporate into their educations the electronic tools that have become omnipresent in their lives: smartphones, laptops, and iPods and iPads.” Maximizing its impact in a positive way is a challenge. MOOCs, flipped classrooms, hybrid courses and other delivery modes are desirable to students. Hybrid courses, in particular, are gaining in popularity for institutions of higher learning, and studies have found that hybrid classes are at least as effective as fully-face to face classrooms. However, teaching and learning in these modes is often significantly different from teaching in a traditional classroom. Faculty and students need to be prepared for changes, as does the institution’s infrastructure. Additionally, faculty and staff access their email, files, and the internet for work purposes throughout the day. The University's technology infrastructure needs to be scaled to that use, as well as academic access for students.

Graduate Programs

Integrated into the teaching and learning environment, and often bridging both, are graduate students. As students, they face the challenge of decreased funding, which translates into fewer of them being awarded stipends, and those stipends being smaller than they were in the past. At some institutions, graduate programs are shrinking in size and number by design. At others, they are shrinking because students are reconsidering the cost and benefits of the degree. And as they shrink, teaching assignments are affected as institutions adjust to cover the lost instruction that teaching assistants provide.

Career Preparation

President Obama has also set a new goal for the country: that by 2020, America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. The purpose of this goal is to “ensure America’s students and workers receive the education and training needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow.” In a 2012 survey conducted of employers by the Chronicle of Higher Education, it appears that employers agree with the link of higher education to preparedness, but offer direction for what preparation matters most. Seven out of 10 employers believe colleges are going a “good” or “excellent” job of preparing successful employees, but over half of employers reported being unable to find qualified candidates for job openings. For employers, college major is the most important academic credential, but internships is the single most important credential overall for recent college graduates to have on their resume in their job search among all industry segments. Extracurricular activities, like professional clubs, athletics, and service, are valued more than GPA, relevance of coursework to position, and college reputation. Only responders at the Executive level placed more value on academics.
The Chronicle survey offers 5 conclusions:

1. Colleges and universities should seek to break down the false dichotomy of liberal arts and career development – they are intrinsically linked.

2. Colleges and universities should support rich experiential opportunities that truly integrate the liberal arts with real-world learning as communication skills and problem solving skills. These are in high demand, seen as lacking, and seen as a college’s responsibility to teach.

3. Colleges and universities should view the working lives of their students not as a challenge, but as an opportunity, given the weight employers of all kinds place on experiential elements of a recent graduate’s resume.

4. For colleges and universities an “employment brand”, a pillar of a larger “outcomes brand” matters. If an institution is not known to employers, graduates will suffer the consequences when seeking jobs.

5. Colleges should go beyond a vision of majors articulating to specific careers. Majors matter to some extent, but in many cases, college major is not the determinant of career entry. A college should approach career development as career exploration for a great many of its students guiding and supporting students with the right mix of solid liberal arts skills and content knowledge.

Accountability

Following the White House’s support of more higher education degrees is the demand for accountability. The College Scorecard developed by the federal government is intended to help students choose a college that is affordable and consistent with their educational and career goals. The Scorecard provides information on cost, graduation rates, loan default rates, amount borrowed by students, and employment for every degree-granting institution in the country. Accountability measures the outputs of an institution in terms of its graduates, employment of graduates, and their debt burden. Institutions, including faculty and staff members, need to be aware of their own data and how it will be used.

Finances

Decline in state- and federal-funding has created a greater dependence on dollars from tuition, research, entrepreneurial ventures, and philanthropic activities to support public institutions. Partnering with private entities for auxiliary services has gained in importance. Competition for students has also taken on great importance for finances, and more and more institutions are enrolling international students in response. Each of these entities – research, fundraising, international student support, etc. – demands resources for management and oversight. Institutions need to be prepared to address the various requirements of these new opportunities.

References:


SACSCOC Direct Assessment Competency-Based Educational Program Policy Statement, December 2013.

