Higher Education in the Connected Age

By DIANA G. OBLINGER

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YOY. DIY learning. “There’s an app for that.” Such fragmentation and consumerization might seem dysfunctional for higher education, yet surprisingly, the result is a vibrant system—thanks to the connections inherent in information technology. Connecting is about reaching out and bringing in, about building synergies to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Connecting is a powerful metaphor. Everyone and everything—people, resources, data, ideas—are interconnected: linked and tagged, tweeted and texted, followed and friended. Anyone can participate.

The authors in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review describe a vision of higher education in the connected age. The possibilities are transformative. In “A New Architecture for Learning,” Rob Abel, Malcolm Brown, and Jack Suess describe an environment that “offers new ways to connect things that were previously considered disparate and ‘un-connectable’: people, resources, experiences, diverse content, and communities, as well as experts and novices, formal and informal modes, mentors and advisors.”

The need for this transformation is real. Although higher education works very well for millions of learners, it does not work for all learners. There are millions more whose lives could be transformed by education. In addition, colleges and universities have their own needs for transformation: escalating costs, decreased funding, increased regulation and oversight. Globally, the power of education could literally change the world.

When things and people are connected, they form pathways. One activity feeds forward to another. Learners understand the progress they have made, the improvements they still need, and what will come next. With connected learning, the focus is on these pathways—not on gates or gatekeeping. With connected learning, the idea is to connect-the-dots: to connect learning with life. The connections are valuable whether the experience is residential, hybrid, or online. Connected learning is engaging, customized, flexible, affordable, accessible, and lifelong. The connections enable the construction of pathways that can guide learners and institutions. But the connections and pathways are not only within higher education. Chris Dede and his fellow NSF workshop participants report: “Effective educational models are emerging that blend academic instruction with workplace experience, including remote internships and immersive simulated apprenticeships.”

Being connected requires information technology: infrastructure, policies, data, systems, and more. “The new landscape is both complex and ‘messy,’” according to Abel, Brown, and Suess. When things and people are connected, everything and everyone can be disconnected and reconnected. Parts of the educational enterprise can be outsourced to external providers, as well as insourced. Business models can—and will—change. Open educational resources and peer-learning are disrupting the cost equation. Competency-based models and prior learning assessments allow learners to receive credit for what they already know and to pay only for the education they need, changing both the cost and the time required. In the MOOC model, the course is free but the credit is not. Courses, credits, and services can be bundled or unbundled.

William G. Bowen, President Emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton University, points to options for the changing business model. In “The Potential for Online Learning: Promises and Pitfalls,” he writes: “The greatest opportunity to raise productivity lies in an imaginative rethinking of how to schedule courses, how to make more efficient use of fixed plant, and how to facilitate the flow of students through what should be viewed as an ‘educational system,’ not a static set of programs and rigid scheduling conventions. The real trick is to use technology to both raise completion rates and reduce time-to-degree.”

The three essays in “Higher Education: New Models, New Rules” illustrate changes in assumptions, as well as implications for public policy. Burck Smith, CEO of StraighterLine, observes: “Public and non-profit higher education institutions have turned to ‘outsourcing’ companies that will quickly stand-up an online program

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in exchange for 40–80 percent of the revenue from that program.” Judith S. Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, goes further: “Non-institutional education is upon us: collegiate instruction is increasingly being offered outside of colleges and universities.” And Louis Soares, Vice President for Policy Research and Strategy at the American Council on Education, suggests that policymakers explore finance, regulation, and innovation to enable this connected age for higher education.

Creating (or re-creating) higher education in the connected age is hard work—and the stakes are high. Professor Henry C. Lucas, Jr., writing from the point of view of someone who has adopted new technologies and pedagogies, explains: “I can testify that (1) teaching in a new way is frightening, and (2) preparing online and blended courses and MOOCs takes an incredible amount of time and effort.” In his article, Lucas cautions that there are three possible outcomes. “The first is to morph one’s business model to accommodate a technological disruption. The second is to abandon one’s present business model and adopt a new one. . . . The last is to fail.”

As Dede and his colleagues aptly conclude, the barriers to transformation are not “conceptual, technical, or economic. The primary barriers are psychological, political, and cultural. We now have all the means necessary to implement effective educational models that can prepare all students for a future very different from the immediate past. Whether we have the professional commitment and the societal will to actualize such a vision remains to be seen.”

The connected age for higher education is here. Are we ready for the future?