

HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION: *MUST WE HAVE A CRISIS AS A CATALYST?*

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As dismal economic news keeps rolling in (especially unemployment and underemployment statistics), we have a rare opportunity by using a crisis – a terrible thing to waste – as a vehicle to enable transformation in the delivery of higher education that would be resisted during good times. It should not take a crisis to do sensible and practical things, but usually it does.

We now have the opportunity to rethink the core conventional wisdom regarding the delivery of higher education that has previously guided us and, if continued, will likely become the seeds of our destruction. With the current fiscal crisis acting as catalyst for examining change, there are two examples of major shifts used to weather economic crisis, one of which achieved systemic transformation in the design and delivery of higher education. The entity that can serve as the example for this new thinking did not, in fact, even wait for a crisis to act, but rather used an approach to strategic thinking and planning that altered what it did and what success it garnered. The approach is equally valid for public and private organizations.

Higher Educators often labor under unexamined assumptions, including: (1) increased funding will bring better results while reduced funding will bring disaster; (2) we already have appropriate curriculum, which is correctly divided into courses, programs, departments, and

schools, and the content of our curriculum is unique and requires stand-alone integrity; and, (3) what higher education uses, does, and delivers is valuable for preparing the citizens of tomorrow to survive, thrive, and contribute to society.

Three universities provide cases-in-point to responding innovatively to a recession-induced fiscal crisis in order to transition from business-as-usual to useful transformation. The Arizona State University demonstrates how dramatic changes might be made within a university (Capaldi, *Change, July-Aug, 2009*), as well as did the Florida State University (personal communication with President TK Wetherell). On the other hand, predicting instead of waiting for crisis, one institution saw hard economic times coming, re-thought what they should deliver, and then transformed themselves: the Sonora Institute of Technology (ITSON) in Mexico (Rodríguez & Lagarda, *Performance Improvement Quarterly, 2009*).

Arizona State University (ASU) and Florida State University (FSU) both used a draconian reduction in budget to rethink and reorganize the institution by merging academic curriculum content and at the same time redefining the way in which the institution was organized and operated. ASU closed one program and merged 13 to save \$13.4 million. FSU merged 5 pro-

grams, suspended 19, and made 6 programs become self-supporting to meet a funding reduction of \$35.8 million. These changes represent a transformation, at least in the eyes of those impacted, which challenged conventional wisdom.

The Sonora Institute of Technology (ITSON) over 16 years ago sensed that they were short of reliable and sufficient funding, and did not wait for crisis to hit. Instead the ITSON redefined its institutional objectives and then restructured its multiple-campus operations to primarily focus on societal impact through adding measurable value to ecosystems. All three universities, typical of the economic challenges of higher education, have achieved major changes – transformations – which are clearly different from conventional wisdom and operations of higher education.

The reality is that the world has changed dramatically – a paradigm shift – and what we have always done in the past, no matter how good we are at doing it, will no longer suffice. We have to look to new and responsive ways of thinking, doing, and contributing, and so-doing we have to, as suggested by Shumpeter, *creatively destroy* past ways, means, and vehicles that once served us but now must be eliminated.

Internal transformation. Higher education-delivered results reality – contrary to the conventional wisdom of many on campus – is not rationally uniquely divided into conventional courses, programs, departments, schools, and campuses. With the pressure of economic hard times, Arizona State University and Florida State University went from a classic organizational model to an integrated organization of faculties, programs, and curriculum that reduce the non-academic support requirements. In the same vein, a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, Taylor (April 27, 2009) calls for a similar but not as well articulated approach and suggests the urgency for breaking down of usual curriculum and organizational barriers. It would be unlikely that such a dramatic shift would be considered, let alone approved, if there were not a fiscal crisis to enable it.

Another institution – the ITSON – went further and stepped back and outside its own walls and questioned its purposes by asking “if our university is the solution what’s the problem?”

External transformation. Is it time to rethink the mission of higher educational agencies? What do we use for our *missions*? The conventional “excellence in teaching, research, and service” is not rigorous and valid enough upon which to base the futures of learners and faculty. It is not accurate enough to plan, design, deliver, evaluate, and continually improve higher education. This flies in the face of comfortable-but-ineffective statements of intents such as exemplified by Harvard (among almost all others here and abroad), which are philosophical, inspirational, and devoid of measurable and valid criteria.

As a practical and ethical alternative, institutional objectives should be based on what it delivers to staff, professors, students, and its communities, and sensibly defined by the value of what graduates and leavers are able to do. Criteria should include what results it should deliver in terms of learners’ ability to support themselves, become valued and valuable human resources, parents and citizens, and at the same time help create the desired world for tomorrow’s child. Such data-based higher education objectives that are rooted in adding value to society is called “Mega thinking and planning.”

Contrast a conventional “excellence in teaching research and service” vision and mission with that of the Sonora Institute of Technology (ITSON):

The ITSON is part of a society that continually improves survival, health, self-sufficiency and welfare of its citizens, generating high value-added contributions to society and knowledge economy. The ITSON, through partnerships, supports and ensures that regional communities apply knowledge and technology that enables the successful development of its infrastructure, cultural, social, economic, resulting in an environment that provides a sustainable livelihood and opportunities for its residents.

Using Mega planning for 16+ years, the ITSON has committed that institution to taking a shared responsibility with communities to build regional ecosystems and thus adding measurable societal value.

The consequences of this proactive shift has been a dramatic increase in the ITSON's national ranking, major expansion of campuses, improved learner performance, higher levels of funding, and the creation of partnerships and business incubators, including a Performance Improvement and Accomplishment Institute with 20 independent sponsors that serves external and university clients... all using Mega/societal planning.

It is possible, practical, and ethical to apply new paradigms for success and transformation in higher education. Doing so requires that everything one uses does, produces, and delivers add measurable value to external clients and our shared society – something that is now assumed by higher educational institutions. They never seem to measure it, so we cannot ever be sure we are getting value-received. There are, however, higher educational organizations that have demonstrated how transformation is possible. It changed things that should have been done at any time, but crisis opens the door. To not change to purposely add value to our shared society – to question and revise current objectives – is perhaps shortchanging our society in the name of conventional wisdom. Just cutting or seeking more money will not bring about the major changes in higher education that will best serve our national future.

Key References

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