

All That Glitters

I can hear the siren song of distance learning, the Internet, and the cornucopia of new technologies. I am enthralled with their promise, offering higher education the largest megaphone in its history and the capacity to reach more students than ever before imagined. I am taken with their potential to extend the campus limitlessly, offering students across the world instruction anytime/anyplace: twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, wherever they may be.

I am convinced all of these new possibilities will ultimately transform higher education. I can imagine a future with three types of institutions: brick (traditional campuses); click (virtual colleges/universities); and brick-and-click (a combination of the two). I can see a multitude of new and existing providers of postsecondary education, including traditional higher education; for-profit institutions; not-for-profit institutions other than colleges/universities; for-profits in content industries; for-profits in software; and an endless array of permutations. I suspect that in the years ahead, competition among these new providers will cause the faculty to loom larger than the institutions at which they work. This will cause a sea change, much as occurred in Hollywood when power shifted from the studios to the actors. Content providers inevitably triumph over content distributors.

I believe we are headed to a more individualized and learner-centered model of

higher education. I envision students having a voluminous menu of postsecondary education options and mixing and matching among these options throughout their adult lives. I see the combination of brain research and software development producing learning materials and pedagogical methods geared to each student's learning style. And I suspect the profusion of learners

dent (and Williams College alumnus) James A. Garfield as having Mark Hopkins, the nineteenth-century president of Williams College, on one end of a log and a student on the other.

I am aware that the for-profit sector has more discretionary money and can move far more quickly than higher education. I talk with entrepreneurs who, cognizant of the buckets of money being



Illustration by Steve McCracken, © 2005

choosing among the plentitude of postsecondary options, each offering education in its own fashion, will cause those of us in higher education to deemphasize degrees in favor of competencies. At the same time, I worry that colleges and universities will be left out of these changes because our governance processes are so slow and the new technologies represent such a sharp departure from the notion of the personalized education of the ideal college—described in 1871 by U.S. Presi-

made by the University of Phoenix, increasingly view higher education as needing a private-sector remake like that experienced by the health care industry, which was also perceived as low in productivity, high in cost, cautious with technology, and poor in management. I observe these entrepreneurs eyeing the low-hanging fruit of lucrative high-volume/low-cost programs, like the master's in business administration, and gearing up for a piranha-like world in which

competitors will nibble at the most profitable college and university programs, counting on higher education to respond too late.

I know all these things. As a college president, I have only one question: What should I do about them? In New York City, I have watched as Columbia and New York Universities lost millions trying to create for-profit online learning businesses. I have seen many for-profits go belly-up with visions of megabucks dancing in their heads.

Teachers College has dabbled in the Internet and distance learning. We learned some things about what works—but probably more about what does not work. We know that the notion “If you build it, they will come” is wrong. We know that the Internet is a niche market in which programs need to be well targeted. We know that most students still prefer real people to a wholly online program. We know that degree programs are more attractive to students than are random courses or certificate programs. We know that the price that students and major buyers, such as school districts, are willing to pay for online education is a lot lower than tuition at private colleges and universities. We know that school districts are less interested in prepackaged than they are in customized programs. We know that when for-profits team up with colleges and universities, for-profits are prone to treat the higher education institution as a subcontractor with a useful brand name. We know that as far as partners go, publishers may be the only organizations that move more slowly than colleges and universities.

I think colleges and universities have three options. First, they can eagerly embrace the Internet and distance learning and make, alone or in combination, a major commitment to entering the marketplace. This requires a multimillion-dollar investment. It assumes that the institution's reputation is of such quality, its

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products are so good, and its tuition is so affordable that students will choose the institution over the plethora of other possibilities. It assumes too that the institution can learn from examples like Phoenix and can avoid the mistakes that cost many colleges and universities so much in the past. Finally, this option also assumes that it is not too late to enter this market.

Second, colleges and universities can wait. They can monitor what is happening, experiment with distance learning, and seek to enter the marketplace after many of the initial entrants have made their mistakes and left the field. This option is certainly safer, but the fact is that the country will not need hundreds of distance learning educators. Only a small number of major providers will be required, with the greatest rewards going to the successful early providers. The question is, when will it be too late to enter this already very crowded space? Colleges and universities could find themselves in the same position as Barnes & Noble vis-à-vis Amazon.com.

Third, colleges and universities, particularly residential colleges, can reject the idea of distance learning in favor of creating the best-possible brick campuses for their students. Many students and their families continue to want face-to-face, campus-based educations. In this option, technology and the Internet would be used principally to enhance the residential experience.

Each institution has to make a decision about which approach to take. Not to make a decision is to put the institution at risk. As my Teachers College colleague Jim Borland is forever reminding me, *Tyrannosaurus rex* was once a great brand name. I just wish the choice were easier.

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