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Musings on the Future of Higher Ed: The Best of Times

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As reviewed in the first of this two-part series, higher education is stressing from the impact of changing market conditions, economic pressure on cost controls and students ability to pay, increased public policy accountability demands and a more regulatory approach to accreditation, and the challenges presented by the digital revolution.

Nowhere, perhaps, is all of this more manifest than in the adult, graduate, professional development and continuing education arena. Regardless of the fact that almost 75 percent of all students are now clustered in this sector, on most traditional campuses it remains a stepchild or, at best, treated like a cash cow.

On many private and regional public campuses, that cash flow emanated from teacher education programs, accelerated licensure programs, master's degrees or professional development workshops. That market is now evaporating due to economic pressures on K-12 systems, public policy shifts no longer requiring teachers to earn a M.Ed.



There are five significant areas for opportunity available for institutional leaders who can take advantage of the transformations of the continuing education industry.

to secure their position or to earn salary increases and the proliferation of cheap online programs.

In just the past week, a Buffalo business journal described the dwindling teacher ed program at a SUNY branch in western New York; a Pennsylvania public announced it was shifting resources away from education to other growth areas; and conversations with several small private schools dependent upon teacher education to undergird their

budget revealed them scrambling to develop alternative offerings.

Ironically, they're looking to enhanced adult and professional development revenue to solve the challenge and bolster their operating margins.

What are they planning to do?

From 50,000 feet, five clear trends are emerging:

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

1. Job Training is Key

It's not too large a stretch to predict that professional development — that cluster of one-off workshops, seminars and certificates — is now adult education. In fact, the term "adult education" is inadequate to describe this emerging post-traditional, lifelong learning phenomenon. With the possible exception of Rockhurst University, no higher education institution seems to have grasped the opportunities available to them of becoming the next Fred Pryor Seminars group or of competing with Dale Carnegie LLC et al in the non-credit arena.

2. Credentials are Evolving

Steps are, however, being taken as higher education's credentials are being unbundled and then restacked, leading from badges to certificates to associate degrees to bachelor's degrees to post-baccalaureate certificates (essentially offering the components of a major without the core curriculum; e.g. a marketing certificate for holders of bachelor's degrees in non-business subjects that only includes marketing courses) to ratcheting up the lattice as master's degrees proliferate.

3. Emerging Markets Demand New Approaches

Meeting the challenges of market demand (approximately 30 million Americans have college credit but no degree), economic demands for low prices and job readiness, public policy's new focus on degree attainment and technology's

opportunities for distributed delivery, degree completion programs are the next big thing. Either as straightforward degree programs completing incomplete transcripts, or prior learning assessment initiatives, or competency-based programs that measure not seat time but content/skill mastery, or programs blending some combination of each, degree completion is seen as the path to meeting President Obama's ambitious goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

While the egalitarian and human development potential of such programs is great, such as Southern New Hampshire University's "College for America" and Starbucks' partnership with Arizona State University, the degree completion agenda has an underside. As the economic value of a college degree to its holder is increasingly challenged while at the same time public policy wonks point to its value to local communities, a proliferation of ersatz degrees could create two negative consequences. Firstly, a Gresham's Law phenomena of bad degrees driving good degrees out leading to, secondly, a sharper divide between social strata. This has always been true, but will the drive to produce more degrees intensify that reality to the disadvantage of those whose degree came via alternative means?

4. Customer Service is a Differentiator

Customer service, customer service, customer service — many institutions now realize their students have been to Disney World

or shopped on Amazon and expect the same good service in higher education. No longer can colleges practice "WAYMISH" ('why are you making it so hard' for me to: enroll, give you my money, continue to stay enrolled, etc.) with account offices not talking to the registrar and neither one talking to the office of adult/professional education. Adult students seek convenience; any superfluous hurdle placed before them sends them to the school down the street. It's really just that simple.

5. Aging Adults Need Programming All Their Own

Lastly, slightly off the mainstream, is an emerging growth opportunity for non- or post-traditional programmers. In partnership with their development and advancement offices, the provision of cultural enrichment programming to retiring baby boomers is both an enrollment and a fundraising opportunity. No school has yet mastered it, although many have variations. Think the 92nd Street Y and apply its model to a college near you.

Conclusion

This has been a fly-over look at the emerging world of adult and professional education; a deeper look would seek best practice examples of each. For now, suffice it to say that higher education's future is going to be non-traditional in many senses of that term, including that which might be considered a "back to the future" revival of a reimagined adult and continuing education.

The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper dedicated to non-traditional higher education. It is the brainchild of **Destiny Solutions**, a company that creates software for universities and colleges to help them successfully attract, manage and maintain their non-traditional students.