

The Future of Higher Education

History is full of amazing stories of very successful businesses and even entire industries that failed to understand and thus rejected the opportunities presented to them, causing their downfall. In one momentous example, Alexander Graham Bell made a presentation of the telephone to the board of directors of Western Union (the “telegraph” company) and offered to sell the company the patent rights for \$100,000. The board turned down the offer. The meeting minutes explained the Western Union decision: “No one would ever do business without a written record, over a telephone.”

Leaders in higher education should take away several lessons from this story. First, the managers were complacent and not thinking about the possibility of being displaced by new technology or new products. Second, the managers were further insulated by a “not invented here” syndrome. Unconsciously, management could not accept that someone from outside the organization could supplant its well-established product. Third, the managers didn’t ask, “What do our customers think?” Fourth, the managers didn’t hedge their bets. They didn’t ask: “What if competitors acquire this, and it takes off? Should we buy it just in case?” Finally, before raising issues with the board, the managers didn’t have the issues reviewed by all the appropriate channels within the organization, especially younger people, who could have added insights given their creativity and greater stake in the future.

Given the extraordinary success that higher education has enjoyed over a very long period, it is vulnerable to becoming

the “victim of its own success.” The challenge for higher education is multifaceted:

- Overcome the tendency toward hallowed tradition and the status quo
- Formulate a vision for achieving the purpose of education in the Information Age
- Redesign the lecture-based learning model to meet the very different needs of the Information Age
- Redesign the product and service offerings to meet the ever-changing needs of students and society
- Rapidly develop the processes and tools required by the redesign of the education system

A New Learning Paradigm

The Industrial Age model of education, with its teacher-directed, lecture-based system, is obsolete. A new system is required for education, a system that allows all individuals to meet their unique learning requirements. This new learning system will dramatically increase productivity so that learners are educated and ready for the workplace at age eighteen. The following are selected key elements of a proposed new system design: the Community Learning Center (CLC).

Self-Directed Learning. Success for all requires mass customization and a new model based on self-directed learning and multi-age groupings so that everyone can progress at his or her own pace. Self-directed learning allows learners to immerse themselves in areas of passionate interest, build on their strengths, and dramatically increase their productivity. Instead of covering a standard curriculum, learners develop a personal vision

for their aspirations and “reverse-plan” programs to fulfill them.

Multi-age Grouping. A self-directed multi-age structure allows learners to learn from each other and creates a “scaffolding” that provides learners with role models. Principles and methods of learning are the same for all ages. In the CLC, all individuals enter the learning system on their fifth birthday. A learner can request a “certificate of learning” at age sixteen or older (most will do so at age eighteen), based on demonstrated accomplishments and prior evaluations.

The Open Learning Environment. Large lecture halls and small seminar rooms, though useful on certain occasions, are relics of ancient educational models that place the learner in a passive mode. Instead, a large, open space that can accommodate 150–175 self-directed learners facilitates interactivity and cross-disciplinary learning and increases the utility of learners as a resource for each other.

Teacher or Professor as Facilitator and Learner. In the CLC, the teaching role is transformed from lecturer to facilitator, allowing much greater interaction with individual learners. A team of five facilitators interacts with and learns along with all of the multi-age learners. The multi-disciplinary team of facilitators spends several years with the learners, greatly increasing the team’s understanding of individual learners’ needs and establishing a natural accountability for the facilitators’ performance.

Assessment Integrated with Learning. Self-directed learning includes self-assessment, a vitally important skill for lifelong learners. Learners’ timely documentation of their progress is fre-

quently reviewed with facilitators. In the CLC, learners periodically demonstrate their capabilities and accomplishments relative to their plans before a panel of learners and facilitators (supplemented by a portfolio of their work). Unlike traditional testing, this assessment process is a celebration of success and a learning opportunity for all.

Purposeful Work. By empowering learners to help other learners, schools gain a valuable resource, while learners practice their learning and working skills and achieve the sense of personal mastery needed for the dynamic workplace. Learners' success as teaching aids will become known throughout the community. Community agencies and businesses will seek out learners to participate in important projects, providing opportunities for learners to apply their knowledge and to work with responsible adults.

Apprenticeships for Developing Skills and Entrepreneurial Attitudes. As learners demonstrate success in their apprenticeships to the schools and in community work, opportunities emerge for high-quality internships with business and nonprofit organizations. The sharing of this work experience with learners and faculty bridges the divide between the school world and the work world.

Technology as an Enabler of Self-Directed Learning and Self-Organization. Instead of merely automating the present system, technology in the CLC enables the new learning paradigm. Information technology is pervasive: groupware for dialogue and collaborative learning; access to Internet courseware; applying system dynamics. Also, periodic seminars on trends in technology, conducted for learners and the entire community, help bridge the "digital divide."

Lifelong Learning. The accelerating pace of change and the shift to a brain-powered economy mean that careers and knowledge requirements will change more frequently. After a few years, the CLC can expand its regular program in order to develop and deliver lifelong learning services to the community.

Higher Quality, Lower Cost. CLCs are very sensitive to continuous improvement. All costs directly relate to learning processes. The typical CLC of 150–175 learners operates effectively with five to six facilitators,

at a cost at least 20 percent less than the cost of operating a typical public school.

Spectacular increases in student learning are possible when the educational system design is rooted in discovery-based, self-directed learning and linked to involvement in purposeful work. Shifting the system from one based on love vs. fear, freedom vs. control, and creativity vs. conformity generates a passionate commitment to learning and enables ever-increasing levels of learning and accomplishment. It is therefore possible to acquire far more in a K–12 system than in a K–12 plus four-year-college system.

Competition

K–12 and higher education have experienced increasing costs for many years. This situation, coupled with online learning techniques, is creating opportunities for education companies. These companies currently represent a small fraction of the higher education market, but they are growing at approximately 15 percent per year.

The corporate training industry poses a different kind of threat. Although companies are outsourcing lower-level jobs to overseas firms, some very large and successful companies are "insourcing" the training of corporate managers and high-level executives. The threat is not so much the possibility that these firms will take market share from the MBA graduate schools but that, through success in this market and their network of relationships, they will utilize their considerable knowledge, training resources, and reputation to enter the field of evaluation and certification of learning capabilities. The value of a certificate of particular skills from a highly regarded business firm could trump the credentials of a college or university diploma.

The third education market segment, the K–12 education companies, may be off the radar screen for higher education leaders, but they represent by far the largest threat, though in an indirect way. The K–12 education industry is in serious trouble. After decades of poor performance and no improvements in productivity, the opportunity for profits in K–12 is now high enough that a number of for-profit corporations will invest sufficiently to promote a higher-quality, lower-cost model. As described above, the new model will

demonstrate that with self-paced learning, thirteen years (K–12), including internships, provide ample learning to qualify for entry-level positions.

The new learning industry is certain to be born. It's only a matter of time and of where it will start. I should say where it will "explode" because there are already a number of schools that operate under these principles. But it is not an industry that can be built by simply buying a patent. This is a service, and those in this service business need to passionately believe in the concepts and purpose to attract the right people. It also requires a critical mass of installations to begin to have any impact on the system as a whole. There are 300,000 CLCs needed in the United States and 6,000,000 needed worldwide. Undoubtedly, many entrepreneurs will love tackling this opportunity.

Options for Higher Education Leaders

If higher education leaders do not fix K–12, for-profit education companies will. Higher education leaders have four options:

1. They could sit on the sidelines and watch another educator get bloodied in the minefield that is public education. I wouldn't blame them.
2. They could identify colleagues in up to ten states and create a "coalition of the willing" to transform K–12 education in those states. I'd admire them and offer whatever assistance I could.
3. They could open a CLC on or near a college/university campus and use it as a national demonstration site and/or as a site that their colleagues' children could attend (as a perk and in exchange for helping with the installation).
4. After retirement from their college or university, they could start another career by opening a CLC in town or close to their grandchildren.

I've already done option 3 (it works), and I'm looking forward to option 4. After that, only 5,999,998 new community learning centers will be needed.

Morton Egol is Chief Executive Officer at Wisdom Dynamics, LLC. He is the author of the book *The Education Revolution: Spectacular Learning at Lower Cost* and of the forthcoming book *A Vision for America*.