

## Taking the Corona Crisis as an Opportunity to Think Strategically

Nathan Dickmeyer,

March 30, 2020

Colleges and Universities have reacted superbly to the Corona Virus crisis. They have shifted from face-to-face instruction to online instruction with a speed that defies, I believe, their own expectations. Certainly, there have been glitches. Last week, I noticed that phone conferencing was crashing, but instructional software seemed to be holding up remarkably well, given the sudden increase in volume.

As soon as college and university leaders can step away from the fray, I urge them to think about the strategic implications of what we are seeing and, in fact, have been seeing.

Thinking strategically means reconsidering product, production, delivery, and/or markets.

**Product:** To most institutions the product is the degree, even though many people who make an initial investment in their higher education never receive one. The value of the product is equated with the reputation of the institution. Institutions establish their reputations by their ability to select the best students.

The best select the best. The mediocre select the mediocre. At least that is the popular myth. A degree means that someone was socialized sufficiently to survive a given curriculum at an institution of a given reputation and that one has had the financial support to do so. More and more, however, the myth is breaking down. In a recent talk with a human resources team at a well-known investment bank, I learned that they had stopped recruiting exclusively from Ivy League schools. They were using predictive modeling to discover the skills and traits of their most successful employees. Testing and modeling were leading them to recruit from a much broader range of schools.

The value of a degree has fallen, even from the best schools. It doesn't tell an employer enough about a student, even with a transcript. Not many employers can put a team together to develop predictive models. Institutions must develop a more appealing product than a degree.

Some institutions have begun a shift toward the selling of competencies. The shift has been hesitant, connecting each degree with minimum levels of competence in English, numeracy, and, perhaps, technological savvy. Further evidence is seen with "badging" and "micro-credentialing." "Badging" has the potential to widen the competencies offered by colleges and universities to areas of interest to employers, like team skills and creativity.

**Production:** I would divide production into three areas: guidance, content creation, and certification. As our current fully online experience will soon prove, there is little money to be made in content creation. Everyone is doing it. Guidance and certification are where the action will soon be.

Guidance means understanding which competencies are needed in what areas and which competencies will be needed next. Guidance also means knowing where to find the best content and experience at the preferred modality for each person. Some people learn best visually, others aurally. Some of us learn best by teaching. Experience includes internships, job shadowing and mentoring. Guidance, however,

will be much more difficult than matching time slots with required course offerings, the nature of current academic advising. Fortunately, good guidance will foster a lifelong relationship with a student. If competence is the product. Then, in our ever-changing world, four years will hardly be enough.

Certification means an unimpeachable attestation of the student's competence in an area. This is different than course grading, a suspiciously self-serving process where a faculty member assesses his own ability to motivate a student to learn some, unknown portion of a discipline. I see these certifications backed by video evidence of a student mastering the area, where this evidence is maintained by the student in a Blockchain file, matched with the various (for there need not be a single certifying agency) institutions' abbreviated official certification transcript.

The use of rubrics in badging is particularly convenient to this approach. While earning a badge for writing, a student might also give evidence of her skill at advancing an argument within the writing rubric.

With Blockchain the student could choose which outside firms searching for potential associates with appropriate sets of capabilities could view the video files of mastery.

This strategic shift should be particularly appealing, given the current challenges of administering fraud-proof tests online. The certification industry will, I predict, be the most lucrative of the three areas.

Delivery: Lecturing to a classroom of students is dead. Students should be able to choose a method of content delivery that works best for them. Finding and choosing the best set of learning modalities should be a person's right. There are many ways to learn. A student may enjoy watching a dramatic lecture but might also use an audio book or a paper book as well. I think the online Kahn Academy is terrific. A student might want to combine many modalities, including working in teams.

With the full shift this semester to online learning, tutoring may become more popular, because students will not need to make a special trip to the tutoring center. Perhaps a market of buying and selling tutoring will encourage students to master a subject well enough to repay a tutoring debt with later tutoring.

Right now, your faculty are overloaded. An online class size of fifteen is good. Twenty is tolerable. Twenty-five is tough. If you move your thirty and thirty-five student classes online, the burden can be overwhelming. Your faculty are trying to move content online, present lectures, lead discussions, guide students and evaluate them. For a semester they will be heroic. After that, they will break down. They cannot handle all those roles at once with average-sized classes.

Some of your faculty will be good at presenting content. Those with a knowledge of jobs in their area may give good guidance. Those who can work the technology will be good at leading discussions and pointing students to other content sources. Some may not be good at any of these. A few may be good at several. A faculty of only discipline specialists may not be ready for any strategic movement.

Markets: As institutions find that the production of content has little economic reward, the current stratification of the higher education market will shift. The ability to provide guidance remotely will erode advantages of proximity. Quality will no longer correlate with the performance of applicants but with the ability to provide appropriate guidance. Institutions will find that they must build advantage in ways that appeal to the needs and dreams of potential students.

Who will give the best guidance for people who would like to start their own business? Who can help someone shift from business to a career as a writer? These are the questions that people will be asking.

Does this mean the end of small, liberal arts colleges? Unless the government changes its education funding practices away from degree pursuit, probably yes. If funding for education becomes a national entitlement with equal support for all, then the colleges could transform to fit current needs and technologies. (Not wanting to fit any ideology, I support non-need-based entitlements for health, education, food and housing and a flat, high income tax with no deductions.)

Colleges could evolve into three loosely connected centers of activity: a residential center, a guidance center, and a certification center. The residential center would continue the social development activities. It might consist largely of apartment complexes, childcare and athletic facilities. Varsity athletes would be paid. Many of the residences would offer development of skills needed by young people living away from their families for the first time. While some faculty might continue with content development, others might be head tutors or advisors in the guidance center, and others might be professionals in the development of certification activities.

Does all this mean that your university or community college is going to be devoured by its center for continuing studies? Well, frankly, I think so, eventually. Will this be incremental or dramatic, like the virus? My guess is that it will be incremental at first, then dramatic. How will we know it's coming? Well, first your MBA and business degrees will lose their luster (and enrollments). Then, your serious students will start taking a few micro-credentials from your continuing ed folks. Then student services will have a lot of success with badging for "non-academic" skills. Then students will start complaining more about lectures and not showing up, and your faculty will only teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Then your employers will start complaining that even your liberal arts majors don't have the skills they need. Then your marketing group will focus on the wonderful social life on campus, having little else to sell...

Wait! Wait! Isn't all this already happening?

Please! Step back! Think strategically about your options and how you are going to survive the next twenty years.

[Special thanks to Jane MacKillop, Dean, School for Continuing & Professional Studies, Lehman College, City University of New York, for her continuing education of me on continuing education and advice on this article, and Fleurin Eshghi, Associate Vice President for Instructional Technology, Fordham University. All errors and exaggerations are my own responsibility, however.]