Engaging on Purpose in Higher Education

In the world of higher education, the needs are great, possibilities powerful, and partners diverse. Students are facing a future that increasingly requires deeper learning *and* labor-market-valued credentials, along with relevant work experience *and* civic engagement opportunities to help them take meaningful steps on the path toward living well and actively participating in today's rowdy digital democracy. In the United States, state and federal governments, foundations, and associations are constantly calling for more—and more diverse—students to successfully complete higher education journeys to fuel the economy and brace us for a road ahead that promises innovation and uncertainty. Finding funding for these needs has been challenging, to say the least. The painful "new normal" is significantly lower funding with significantly higher expectations. Addressing this new normal will require a purposeful engagement of *all* members of the higher education sector.

Thankfully an explosion in new tools, techniques, policies, and practice is at hand. Walk the halls of leading higher education membership association events (e.g., AASCU, AAC&U, APLU, AACC), the EDUCAUSE annual conference, or an ASU GSV Summit, for example, and one can't help but be wowed by the possibilities. Those of us who are educators and who love experimenting to improve and expand education opportunities should do our best to make the most of the moment. We are entering a golden age of learning fueled by societal needs, economic imperatives, compelling digital tools, imaginative educational practice, and advanced data analytics that together can truly help us all, across the higher education sector, stretch the boundaries and improve the outcomes of our educational systems.

Not surprisingly and quite appropriately, these innovations and experimentations are accompanied by conversations about intentions and impact, calls for scale and sustainability, and dialogues about age-old truths versus seriously limiting folklore. The reverberations of these conversations are ringing in strategic planning sessions, among faculty senates, and even with students. Regarding the last, I wrote an "open letter" to students in the July/August 2012 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review.* There I made the case that we will be hardpressed to make a difference with all of this technology innovation and energy if the students themselves don't commit to finding their purpose, engaging deeply, and bringing the best of growth mindsets and tenacious attitudes into the mix.[1]

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Furthering these innovations and conversations in the golden age of learning demands on-purpose and intentional engagement among all sector players. Throughout my more than twenty years of work in higher education, I've had the great fortune of serving the field in academic, administrative, association, foundation, and corporate roles. Moreover, I've consulted with civic bodies, regional collaborations, statehouses, federal agencies, and foreign governments. From each of these vistas, I have seen a different view of the possibilities, problems, people, politics, and more. Based on this experience, I've learned it is vital to do the hard work of catalyzing real engagement around the shared interests of education sector players, early and often, to allow needed change to take hold.

For example, regardless of how significant the impact of new technology tools or teaching practice is in improving student learning, without accreditors or regulators to establish policy that makes the exciting tools accessible or the innovative practices practical, they are unlikely to make a difference for most students outside of well-meaning pilot programs. In another example, if a regional education ecosystem of K–12, community college, and university players can't effectively engage one another and partner around improving student outcomes, students will often find themselves needing to hop from an island of innovation into another sector and being punished by a lack of curriculum transferability or technology compatibility.

An especially important and often neglected area for purposeful collaboration is between higher education institutions and the vendor community serving this space. Often, irresponsible actors or standing traditions have kept these connections at bay. However, at their best, these collaborations can be marked by authentic engagement, shared learning, and catalytic innovation. The Society of College and University Planning (SCUP) embraces this type of deep engagement with the vendor community, emphasizing that to lead in infrastructure, academic, and financial planning, its members must sit side-by-side with vendors to solve problems.

Likewise, in October 2015 I had the pleasure of co-chairing, with Tracy Schroeder, the first meeting of the EDUCAUSE Corporate Membership Advisory Committee (http://www.educause.edu/about/mission-and-organization/governance-and-leadership/member-committees/corporate-membership-advisory-committee). In the meeting, members made it clear

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that they were most interested in "real conversation" with educators in a sector that is changing quickly. Many noted that this could be *the* strategic value of their EDUCAUSE corporate membership, even more so than the impressive exhibit floor of the EDUCAUSE annual conference. They wanted deeper dialogues around coming trends, shared learning in different sector dynamics (e.g., community colleges, four-year institutions), and conversations about what educators see as their biggest needs. Indeed, several members noted that without this engagement, *they are in danger of simply providing high-tech instrumentation to the practice and policy status quo.* Or worse, some vendors might design tools and technologies that are so far afield that they sound good in a pitch meeting for venture capitalists but carry no resonance with educators or students.

If, however, there are more vehicles for authentic engagement between the education field and the vendor community on tough problems such as developmental education, student retention, deeper learning, credential completion, and the need for relevant life and job skills, *hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of hours of time and effort in research and development could be put into helping the education field address its most pressing problems.* For these reasons, Charles Thornburgh and I founded Civitas Learning as a social-purpose organization, adopting a mission stating that we wanted to work closely with leading colleges and universities to help them make the most of their data in order to enable a "Million More" students each year learn well and finish strong (http://www.civitas learning.com/mission/). We especially wanted to inform innovation on the front lines of learning, to democratize data for faculty, advisors, and students. With organizations like EDUCAUSE catalyzing engagement around powerful purpose in education, especially during this dynamic time in our field, higher education vendors will be better positioned to bring significant resources and stellar talent to bear to support learning and completion goals. For example, ERP vendors can be ready

earlier with capabilities to manage innovative financial aid strategies, LMS vendors can power competency-based models, advising services vendors can enable non-traditional advising strategies, publishers can integrate open education capabilities, and analytics systems can help institutions better leverage the diverse and deeper active-student data at hand to gain insight, take thoughtful action, and continue learning as they develop and implement new practice and policy.

Of course, the vendor sector does include some self-interested people who are not focused on improving student learning and completion. I'm not denying that. Engaging with these folks can be exhausting and nonproductive and should be avoided at all costs. By the way, I've also met, in all sectors in and around higher education, plenty of other self-interested people who are not focused on improving student learning and completion, and the same admonitions apply. Thankfully, however, those people who are not focused on student success are greatly outnumbered by the incredibly talented people who want to help dedicated educators thrive and hard-working students strive. It's why they chose the sector in the first place; it's the purpose that drives their work. And if we can all engage *on purpose*, we're more likely to make the most of the golden age of learning while making a difference in the lives of millions of students traveling on higher education pathways. ∎

Note

1. Mark David Milliron, "An Open Letter to Students: You're the Game Changer in Next-Generation Learning," *EDUCAUSE Review* 47, no. 4 (July/August 2012), http://er.educause.edu/articles/2012/7/an-open-letter-to-students-youre-the-game-changer-in-nextgeneration-learning.

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