

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2014

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

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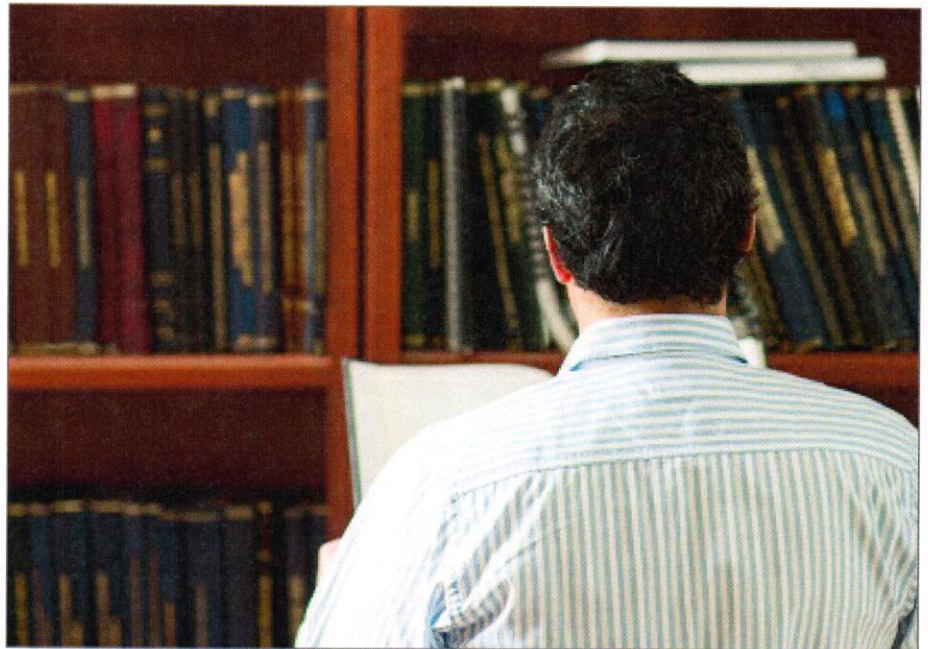
Charles Dickens has been misquoted so often it seems apt to say for higher education's future that it's not clear whether these are the best or worst of times.

Moody's predicts 1,000 colleges will either merge or close in the next 10 years; small, underfunded colleges watch discount rates climb while enrollment nudges downward, and regional public institutions experience similar changing realities. In the current climate, even the elite 300 privates and flagship publics anxiously scan the horizon.

Yet, virtually every day, higher education media feature stories about entrepreneurial institutions exploring innovative new ventures, educational technologists touting new programs to solve this or that pedagogic or administrative challenge, and even the launching of entirely new institutions (the Minerva Project, for example).

Yes, the worst and the best of times.

Malcolm Forbes once said, "There is no such thing as a problem, only an opportunity in disguise." In this two-part series, we will first look



The higher education landscape is transforming at all levels, but with the challenges of change come the opportunities of advancement.

at the problem; the worst-of-times scenario. Then, in part two, we will identify a few of the not-so-hidden opportunities amongst the challenges; the best of times.

That the current higher education landscape is fraught with challenges — as the old maps say, "Here be dragons" — ought not to be news to anyone. The challenges come in four big buckets that intertwine and overlap with one another, creating a frothy stew of fears and expectations.

These buckets are the market, the economy, public policy and technology.

1. Market

Both demographically and psychographically, higher education's market is mutating. Demographically, the market is moving south and west, is aging, is increasingly female and is increasingly made up of minority students. While there is not yet a

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“minority majority” phenomenon, that new reality is approaching.

As a result, the concept of traditional and non-traditional student cohorts has been rendered increasingly meaningless. With only about 25 percent of students filling the 18 to 24, full-time cohort, the notion of a traditional student has become less and less relevant. Seventy-five percent of all students are not full time, are over the age of 24 and are seeking education in a “just-in-time” convenience format. This places traditional colleges with their bricks and ivy and their prerequisite-laden, one-size-fits-all curricula at a distinct disadvantage.

Psychographically — attitudinally — higher education finds itself on the defensive. For the first time in living memory, higher education must defend its worth. The liberal arts are under assault and education that doesn’t immediately prepare a graduate for the world of work is everywhere in retreat.

Yet, for the nimble and innovative, herein lies opportunity.

2. Economics

Higher ed’s inexorably rising costs and subsequent high prices threaten to render it unaffordable for all but the affluent. Regardless of whether those high costs are the result of a profligate industry unable to discipline itself and resist the allure of rock walls and hiring the next administrator, or whether they are the legitimate costs incurred in a technology-driven

industry staffed by highly educated professionals, the fact remains that families and adult students cannot afford it. The result has been spiraling tuition discount rates and surging student debt.

Again, however, for the nimble and innovative, herein lies opportunity.

3. Public Policy

Public policy makes identifying those opportunities urgent. Public policy’s contribution to the issues swirling about the enterprise comes in two flavors. First, decreasing public subsidies, which, in the past year, have stabilized and even begun to reverse with slight increases in state funding. The second issue is the shifting character of accreditation as the Department of Education slowly emerges as the accreditor-in-chief, with regional accreditors becoming its enforcement arms. Their focus, first in the for-profit sector but now in all sectors, has been retention and graduation rates — the college completion agenda.

Yet, again, however, for the nimble and innovative, herein lies opportunity.

4. Technology

Seen as both threat and savor, technology’s bucket literally runneth over. While the administrative cost savings of replacing relatively low-wage clerks with high-wage IT department staffers might be illusory, the complete automation of all administrative tasks is no longer optional. The real excitement, however, is in pedagogy

where the merger of lessons from neuroscience on how people learn with ever more student-centric learning modalities — think big data, continuous feedback or gamification — create the potential to reinvent education by making it not teacher but learner centric. It’s true some of the initial efforts were less than brilliant (such as the early Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs) but product/program development, like learning, is iterative. While MOOCs 1.0 or 2.0 have been less than pedagogically thrilling, MOOC 9.0 should be something to behold. Look at your handheld mobile device today and recall your cell phone of 10 or even five years ago.

This quick scan from 50,000 feet of current realities reveals an industry with a shifting consumer mix, a mature industry competing on price, an industry beset by increasingly aggressive regulators and an industry riding a wave of technological innovations challenging it to reimagine its core identity.

For those intent on serving the 75 percent of American college students who are not 18 to 24, full-time students, this is a swirling stew of opportunity.

This is the first of a two-part series by Andrew Roth exploring the challenges and opportunities of the modern postsecondary landscape. In the second part, Roth will take a quick tour of some of the most promising opportunities higher education has to offer.

The EvOLLution 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.