

Technology News & Innovation in Higher Education

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Perks and Pitfalls of Alternative Pathways

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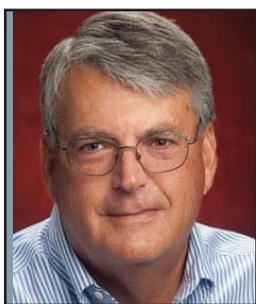
By Meris Stansbury, Editor

“Change management” is a phrase that’s picking up even more steam than usual in colleges and universities around the country as almost every department on campus is being swept up in higher education’s reinvention.

But outside of using a trendy catch phrase to encapsulate the many changes on campus – from system overhauls in IT to reimagined admissions and enrollment strategies – what does it really mean to manage the change culture?

Here, institutional leaders, researchers and higher education consultants discuss actionable steps and key considerations to not only successfully manage the campus constituency’s worries, but enact effective cultural changes that will resonate for decades to come.

Use the 5x5 Matrix for Planned Change



By Brent D. Ruben and
Ralph A. Gigliotti, Rutgers
University

As much as we would like there to be a simple algorithm for leading change in higher education, no such formula exists. That said, there are a number of core concepts that are instructive (Kotter, 2016; Ruben, et al., 2008). In our experience, successful change initiatives depend, first and foremost, on leaders who have a good understanding of the dynamics of change; forces that impede change; and strategies for overcoming sources of resistance, along with the willingness and ability to use this knowledge to

develop and implement a systematic process for the change initiative. In fact, as we discuss in our recent book on the subject (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2016), the ability to understand and lead change is a critical competency for leaders in higher education.

What follows is a five-step model for higher education leaders as they wrestle with the challenges of organizational change (Ruben, 2009). The first of these stages consists of gaining *attention* and clarification for the need for a change. The next step is the *engagement* of relevant internal and external stakeholders. Upon receiving a general acceptance of the proposed direction(s), the process moves forward with the critical stage of *commitment*. Next, commitment must translate into *action* – the stage where many leaders tend to begin, yet are often met with great resistance. In the final stage, a change must be accepted and fully *integrated* into the very fabric and culture of an organization, or else it lingers and ultimately fades from practice.

Five additional factors are critical in guiding planned change efforts. Each of these is *cross-cutting* – that is, these five concepts play a vital role in the tasks associated with *each* of the five stages of change:

1. *Planning*: defining the change plan.
2. *Leadership*: defining and designating appropriate individuals or teams to guide the change initiative through the five stages.
3. *Communication*: designing and implementing a process of information-sharing, listening, and collaboration with those involved with, knowledgeable about, and/or affected by the planned change.

4. A focus on *culture*: taking into account the organization's language, history, norms, rules, and traditions that may influence the dynamics of change.

5. *Assessment*: developing and implementing a systematic approach to monitoring progress and outcomes as the change process progresses.

Overlaying these five cross-cutting success factors (listed horizontally) across the five stages of change (listed vertically) produces a Five-by-Five Matrix for Planned Change, as illustrated below (Ruben, 2009; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2016). The matrix displays the five stages of change as columns and the five cross-cutting success factors as rows. Each cell represents a point of intersection between the two sets of considerations, and each highlights an important area for attention by academic and administrative leaders as they undertake a change initiative.

Five-by-Five Matrix for Planned Change

STAGES >	1. Attention	2. Engagement	3. Commitment	4. Action	5. Integration
FACTORS					
1. Planning					
2. Leadership					
3. Communication					
4. Culture					
5. Assessment					

We have found that the matrix provides an exceptionally useful framework for thinking about a planned change strategy, and also serves as a helpful tool for developing and implementing that strategy in higher education. This can be done by a single individual, but in general, the benefits are greater – both in terms of the quality of the finished product and the value of the process – if it is developed in a collaborative way by the team with responsibility for the change effort.

We have found that the MPC matrix provides

an exceptionally useful framework for thinking about a planned change strategy, and also a helpful tool for developing a systematic approach to a planned changed strategy.

Brent Ruben, Ph.D., is executive director and Ralph Gigliotti is assistant director for Leadership Programs at the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University.

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It's About Mitigating the Sense of Loss

By Karlyn Borysenko, Zen Workplace

Here's what you need to understand about change management: People are NOT afraid of change.

They are afraid of loss. Loss of responsibility, loss of time, loss of a process they may have spearheaded and take great ownership over – the list could go on.

Change management is the process of mitigating the sense of loss that results from an emotional connection to the work. The absolute best way that you can do that is to make sure that people have a chance to feel that their concerns have been heard, understood, considered, and explained within the overall context of the situation.

As the land of peer review and faculty governance, higher education is notoriously slow to change. This context is critical – it means that your only path for success is to plan for what may seem like a longer-than-ideal timeframe in order to give your faculty and administrators a chance to participate.

Transparency is crucial – if your leadership team goes into a closed-door meeting and makes inflexible decisions with no community involvement, you can expect to have a problem on your hands.

But transparency on its own does not lead to buy-in. You can hold as many town halls as you like, but if the audience feels they were just for show, then it will have defeated the purpose. People don't need to have their ideas implemented to buy into a new way of doing things...but they do need to feel as though their ideas were heard and taken seriously. After all, you're asking them to let go and "lose" things they may have worked really hard on and poured their passion into. There's an emotional attachment there. Approach them as humans – not as an obstacle in your way of "doing business."

After spending more than a decade in higher education, Karlyn Borysenko founded Zen Workplace, a consultancy dedicated to helping organizations create amazing workplace cultures that drive morale, productivity, and bottom-line results. Learn more at www.zenworkplace.com

Why the 'C' in Cloud Means Change

By Shelton Waggener, Internet 2



The emergence of cloud computing generated considerable uncertainty in IT organizations. Many were concerned: "How will we secure the solution? How can we guarantee the environment? Will we be locked

into a vendor, who will control the technology and will jobs be outsourced?" While these were valid concerns, I was surprised at the depth of feeling by IT professionals. These are professionals who never saw an "on" button they don't want to push, a Unix command they couldn't master, or a scripting language they wouldn't analyze. I hadn't seen another technology platform generate this level of angst – so why now with cloud computing?

In a word: speed. Not the speed of CPUs, Networks, spinning disks or applications of which technologies are so accustomed. This time it's the speed of change.

Perhaps more significant than the pace of change is the fact that this time it isn't driven by the central or departmental IT organization – it is driven by the expectation that institutional IT should be responsive, dynamic, mobile, easy-to-use, and provide a "better" experience than IT departments have traditionally provided. The competitive or **economic moats** that may have existed previously are now falling by the wayside, as IT organizations are no longer the center of technology innovation or early adoption. Today, technology groupies span generations and the previously tribal language of technology has been infused into the common daily lexicon. Apple products (among others) are cultural phenomena, media coverage about innovation is everywhere, technology podcasts and YouTube videos regularly top the charts, and the "app economy" is now

‘bigger than Hollywood’. These trends are difficult to ignore. If you are an enterprise IT professional today, you face a new reality: accelerating change is happening and you must adapt or face irrelevance.

Today, the critical question for CIOs, IT leaders, technology professionals, and staff members is now: “Are you prepared to pick up the pace and embrace your own change?”

Shelton Waggener is the senior vice president of Internet2 responsible for the NET+ portfolio of services.

Harness the Power of Data and Analytics to Show What Could Be

By **Darren Catalano**, **HelioCampus**



Higher Education is at a tipping point. External and internal factors, including an increased focus on student success and decreased revenues from historically reliable sources, are putting pressure on institutions to

become more efficient and show better results. As data professionals in higher education, we must make a compelling argument that we are part of the solution by highlighting our capabilities and showing the university “the art of the possible” when it comes to unlocking the value in our institutional data.

In order to facilitate meaningful conversations and to elevate our role, we must be more proactive and engage the university community in a new way. Before we would ask: what are your requirements? What do you want? And then build, test, and release. Those days are in the past. We can no longer show up to meetings with a blank sheet of paper. Now, we need to show what could be.

To achieve this, institutions should focus on

building a data platform that connects disparate data from sources across the university enterprise and transforms the information into flexible data models. By combining datasets, we can analyze transfer, retention, and graduation rates in comparison with admissions data to see differences in profiles; combine prospective student and pre-enrollment data with retention data to spot significant retention impacting variables; and look at first-term class registration patterns to determine the impact on course success. Cloud vendors such as Amazon Web Services (AWS), enable sophisticated data modeling by providing cost effective computing power and scale that previously was not easily accessible by many institutions.

Analytics in higher education has never been more important and those institutions that thrive will use their data as a competitive advantage. Cultural change does not happen by accident but rather it is the result of a consistent intentional effort. In order to facilitate cultural change on campus, follow these five lessons learned:

- 1. Invest in a solution**
- 2. Organize for performance**
- 3. Empower leaders to use data**
- 4. Embrace transparency**
- 5. Highlight success**

Data has the ability to make transformational changes within an institution. Our job is to take the complexity out of the data and present it in an easily understood and consumable fashion.

*Darren Catalano is CEO of **HelioCampus** and former vice president of analytics at **University of Maryland University College (UMUC)**. Prior to working in higher education, Mr. Catalano honed his skills as a data professional in the private sector building business intelligence teams focused on finance, accounting, sales, marketing and customer operations analytics.*



Boldly Go by Mastering the Elements of Change

By Stephen Schoonmaker,
Cross Country Leadership
Solutions

Higher Education is an iconic part of society. For centuries we stood immovable as Plymouth Rock, preserving knowledge through traditions of scholarly transference elevating selective students to roles within a learned segment of citizenry. Our strength was reliability; reassuring amidst the turmoil of time and inevitable change. Higher Education leadership was focused on safeguarding campuses against change, and minimizing disruption.

Today's Higher Education resembles the Starship Enterprise – its mission: to explore strange new funding models; to seek out new emphases on student success through integrated services, and new learning modalities relevant to today's generation; boldly preparing students to go where no one has gone before. Today's Higher Education leaders must be Masters of Change, not merely Preservers of the Past. To do this we must focus on six elements of CHANGE:

1. Change requires Courage – visionary, innovative leaders are seldom popular on campus. To lead change you must move ahead to see beyond today's horizon, but not too far that you disconnect from those leading alongside, or following.

2. Change must be Holistic – never change for the sake of change. We must build upon the foundation of our campus' mission, and strategic goals, for success and sustainability.

3. Change involves Action – campuses love to talk. Enacting change takes strong leadership to get the campus community walking that talk towards the changes we seek.

4. Change is Never-ending – it's a process, not an event. Celebrate milestones along the way. Create times of rest to coast with our momentum,

but never stop moving forward.

5. Change engages Growth – Leading Change often means blazing trails that are untested, unfinished, and unrefined. Growing into change means being willing to risk making (and owning) mistakes, adjusting and correcting as we go.

6. Change transforms Exponentially – we cannot compartmentalize change. By its nature change is systemic; therefore, we must think from a systems perspective to anticipate the far-reaching consequences of the changes we enact.

Change is inevitable for Higher Education in today's fast-paced society. The longer we hesitate to embrace this culture of change, the further we fall behind; the more we risk becoming irrelevant. Leaders can learn to be positive change agents on campus; however, it's a new role for a new paradigm in Higher Education which many still grapple with – and struggle to sustain.

Dr. Stephen Schoonmaker is a life-long learner and educator, who has led in colleges and universities for over 20 years and runs his own consulting firm, Cross Country Leadership Solutions, LLC.

5 Steps to a Culture of Change



By Lige Hensley, Ivy Tech
Community College

Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana is one of the largest higher education institutes in the United States, with more than 175,000 undergraduate students. In 2014, Ivy Tech launched a **comprehensive data analytics project** on the Amazon Web Services cloud. From that process, here are five things we learned about managing your culture of change:

1. *Know what the goal is.* Clearly understanding the goal is not as easy as it seems. Tactical goals can obfuscate or even conflict with strategic goals. Problems can mislead efforts from the true root

cause. Deadlines, timelines, emotions and politics can all play a role in determining the goal of any change. It's crucial that you and your team sift through all of the noise and understand the real goal of a change. Understanding what you're trying to do is the first step to success.

2. *Understand how things work.* This is where you ensure you're not making things worse. You'll need to get all your expert's together and fully discuss how things work today and how a change will impact your operations. You'll want the front line workers along with your best "world view" managers. If it's a technical change, get your architects involved. If it's a people process, make sure the most knowledgeable team members are there. Ask questions, poke holes, and beat things up.

3. *Plan, plan, plan.* Discuss timelines, impacts, what-if's and risks. But above all, communicate. Overt communication works better than covert communication. The more complex the change, the more communication and planning you'll need.

4. *Collect feedback and data.* Every engineer will tell you that a good system incorporates feedback.

For example, if you're adding a day care center to increase retention, you probably expect an increase in class attendance; or maybe more library patrons. Collect this data, get relevant feedback and see if your change is having the desired impact. If not, don't be afraid to take that feedback and adjust your plan accordingly.

5. *Don't be afraid to lead.* Understanding your goal, having a solid, well thought-out plan, communicating that plan, executing it and then measuring your success will put you in the best possible position to achieve your goal. If things go sideways, figure out why and change the plan. Your team will respond positively a leader who is engaged and willing to respond thoughtfully.

After implementing a few changes, you'll get better at it. If you're not careful, you may end up with a culture where your team embraces change!

Lige Hensley has been the Chief Technology Officer at Ivy Tech since 2010. Previous to Ivy Tech, he has worked in IT in a variety of industries such as manufacturing, telematics, health care and information security consulting.



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8 Strategies for a successful tech rollout

Great tech products are a reflection of the needs and values of the community they serve. These eight strategies can help ensure that new initiatives get real traction on campus.

By Andrew Barbour

For university IT leaders, unveiling a major tech initiative can be a bit like handing out Halloween candy: The customers run the gamut from quiet pixies to absolute ghouls, some complain about the quality of the treats, and others have a nagging suspicion that you've put razor blades in their apples. It doesn't have to be this way. Handled well, the rollout of a big IT project should unfold more like an adult Christmas, with customers receiving presents they've wanted and thought about for a long time. In interviews with IT leaders at a range of institutions and companies, *eCampus News* identified eight strategies to help colleges ensure that constituents see their next big IT project coming with a bow on top.

1. Secure Support from the Top

This is an old chestnut, but it's no less important for that. The blessing of the top dog can give a project a sense of value and urgency that is hard to achieve otherwise. "Having key buy-in and support at the senior leadership level is critical," said Pete Young, senior vice president for analytics, planning, and technology at the University of Maryland University College, which launched an Office of Analytics several years ago that was recently spun off as a separate company, HelioCampus. "The full engagement of the president was fundamentally important to our success, and it's something we've heard echoed by many other institutions."

While diktats from above can sometimes bulldoze a new IT initiative into place, meaningful

change occurs only when leadership embraces — and steers — the cultural shifts that often accompany major IT initiatives. "You can't underestimate the culture change involved," said Young, explaining that President Javier Miyares led the analytics charge at UMUC by constantly asking to see all the relevant data when considering new issues. "This is where strong support from the top comes into place."

2. Create a Sense of Ownership

The most fervid support from the top can accomplish only so much if the end users feel as if they have no stake in a project's success. "Whatever you're trying to do, you need to get your faculty members and all of your stakeholders to understand the problem and take some ownership of it," said Jarrod Morgan, chief operating officer at ProctorU, an online proctoring company that he cofounded while working as director of technology at Andrew Jackson University. "I can't tell you how many times I've seen initiatives that are really well thought-out struggle because the communication from the administrator — the one who understood the problem they were trying to solve — didn't get all the way down to the implementers."

In Morgan's view, faculty and staff must have an opportunity to talk about the issues and grapple with the implications, either in face-to-face meetings or web conferences — it's not enough to send out an e-mail blast. It's a message echoed by UMUC's Young, who encourages schools to undertake a consultative phase with faculty and

staff. "You need to understand their operations, understand their challenges, and then figure out a way to help them solve those problems," he said.

At the same time, Young cautioned against giving faculty a chance to blue-sky their desires. "You never want to start from a blank sheet when you're trying to build a new capability," he said. "You're better off asking, 'Would you find this useful? Could you use this?' Then they're more likely to say, 'Wow, that's excellent, but what if we did it this way?'"

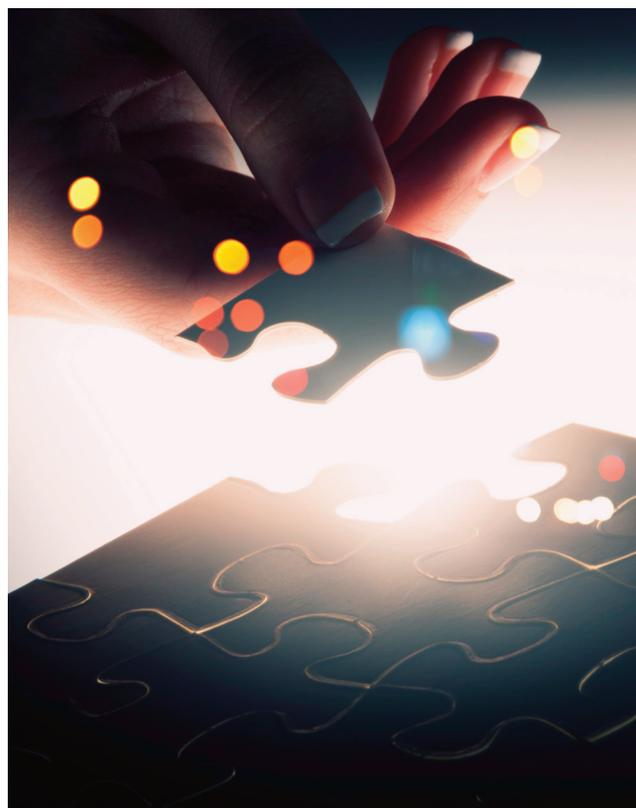
3. Focus on the Problem, Not the Technology

For all but a few faculty members, the technology angle is probably uninteresting or, worse, intimidating. To build a sense of ownership among faculty or staff, keep the focus on the problem that needs to be solved rather than on technical nuts and bolts. "If you can get faculty members to understand the problem, then you've opened the door to conversations that would have been a little more difficult otherwise," said Morgan.

It's an issue with which Otto Benavides is all too familiar. The director of the Instructional Technology and Resource Center for the School of Education and Human Development at California State University, Fresno, Benavides has plenty of experience introducing faculty to technology as part of the Collaborative Classrooms program, which is designed to put students at the center of the learning experience.

"For faculty who are technophobic, if you begin talking about this button and that button, or how you connect Apple TV to the Wi-Fi, you've lost them right there," he said. "I try to emphasize the pedagogical use of the classroom rather than how the technology works."

During training sessions, for example, Benavides broke faculty members into groups and gave them a team task to complete. One exercise involved collaboratively researching various South American countries online and then creat-



"If you can get faculty members to understand the problem, then you've opened the door to conversations that would have been a little more difficult otherwise."

ing a presentation, while Benavides monitored their progress and provided assistance as needed. "At the end of the session, everybody knew how many buttons there were, they knew how to get into the Mac, and they could select the Wi-Fi for this or that," he recalled. "We never talked about Wi-Fi. We never talked about Apple TV. We just talked about the way to share what they were doing."

4. Be Prepared to Change the Organization

At Fresno State, technology is aiding the transition from the old sage-on-the-stage pedagogy to the concept of the guide on the side. Changes like

these are fundamentally altering how faculty and staff work in higher education, and it's important for institutions to adapt to these evolving roles. Otherwise, schools run the risk of simply layering new responsibilities and duties onto old job descriptions.

"Everybody defaults to the work trickling down to the faculty member," said Morgan. "With education technology changing as fast as it is, you can have a 'drip, drip, drip' effect, where in a few years you've got faculty doing all sorts of things that were never really intended at the beginning."

To avoid this scenario, study the possible impacts of any technology initiative on individual positions, departments, and the organization as a whole. "A lot of schools are asking the questions, 'What exactly is the role of the faculty member here? What do we take off their plate and entrust to other staff and faculty?'" said Morgan. "As a result, we've seen new job titles pop up in the last few decades, such as education technology specialist or curriculum developer."

If new technology can inspire dread in faculty and staff, it's nothing compared with the fear that

said Kenneth Green, founding director of The Campus Computing Project, which studies the role of technology in higher education. "There needs to be a clear statement about why the school is doing this and how it benefits the institution in aggregate, as well as academic units, departments, and individuals."

5. Take Small Steps

While everyone loves the idea of hitting one out of the park, tech wins are best notched up through a steady stream of singles. "Big-bang projects are a thing of the past," said Young. "You can't spend two years building something and then pop it out of the closet at the end. You want to attack small problems, show some success, demonstrate capability, and then continuously innovate and iterate."

By taking small steps, organizations can also ensure that they don't expend resources on a solution that may ultimately not pan out. "In a lot of cases, you don't know you're going to get it right the first time," added Young. "Spending a huge amount of effort and time to come out with some

"When you introduce a new piece of technology, you don't understand the full ripple effect that's going to happen. Obviously, if you dive in deep, you're going to have a pretty large ripple effect and a lot more chance for big problems."

often comes with organizational shuffles. That's why it's vital that everyone understands in concrete terms what any new technology initiative means and why it's needed. The more open the communication, the better. Like employees at any organization, campus faculty and staff don't like surprises.

"Any rollout has to be done very carefully, with a lot of user education and conversations with folks who may have significant concerns about the process, so it's not perceived to be top-down,"

monstrous reveal, only to realize that you've missed the mark, is really disappointing."

Pilot programs are probably a good first step for avoiding this fate. Plus, they provide a controlled space in which to study the impact of new tech solutions on the campus community. "When you introduce a new piece of technology, you don't understand the full ripple effect that's going to happen," said Morgan. "Obviously, if you dive in deep, you're going to have a pretty large ripple effect and a lot more chance for big problems."

6. Perform Due Diligence

Given the speed at which educational technology is changing, it's unrealistic to believe that any institution can—or should—develop all its solutions in-house. In today's environment, working with vendors is almost unavoidable. Choosing the right vendor is another question entirely, however.

"If I had to pick one mistake that colleges make when they undertake a major IT project, it's not fully vetting vendors to figure out whether or not they are in line with them philosophically," said Morgan. "They don't take that extra step to understand who the vendor is, where they come from, and whether it's someone who can be trusted with their data."

The task of mapping vendors' offerings to the needs of a specific campus can be a painstaking process, further complicated by the budget squeeze felt by many colleges. For his part, Green believes most institutions do a good job of kicking the tires of prospective vendors, but he urges vendors and colleges to hash out the scope of any project to the fullest extent possible. According to his 2015 Campus Computing Project survey, more than 25 percent of public universities experienced major cost overruns or unexpected costs during the deployment of a major ERP.

In Green's view, a case that ended up in court nearly 20 years ago is emblematic of how these overruns occur: "The client said, 'Well, the provider over-promised and was not clear about a lot of the implementation issues.' The provider said, 'The client kept changing the work orders and wanted a lot of customization on top of the base application.'"

Detailed conversations with vendors can go a long way toward eliminating such misunderstandings, but another invaluable resource for vetting vendors is peer institutions. Unlike corporate America where trade secrets are jealously guarded, higher education tends to be far more

cooperative. "Campuses do a lot of consulting with one another," said Green. "They're very willing to talk with their peer institutions about their relationships with various technology providers."

7. Avoid Excessive Customization

Too much customization of a vendor's product can delay and even derail an IT project. Not only are the upfront costs higher, but subsequent upgrades and improvements also come with higher price tags—not to mention the compatibility headaches that often arise when customized systems need to talk with one another. In many cases, too the customization is simply not necessary.

"There is a tendency for universities to emphasize how they are different rather than how they are the same—we all want to be our own snowflake," said Ted Dodds, CIO and vice president for information technologies at Cornell University. "But, underneath it all, a lot more is the same from university to university than reality is a differentiator."

8. Maintain Support After Launch

When a team has been working on a project for months on end, the natural inclination is to move on after it launches. Big mistake. The most critical phases still lie ahead as end users start to employ the technology in their everyday work. "You have to make sure that you set up a structure that supports the stakeholders who are going to use the solution, and maintain that support structure going forward," said Morgan.

Initial staff training can go a long way but, like a plant, any technology initiative will wither if it's only watered as a seedling. "You need to have periodic check-ins and a way to support people if they forget their training two semesters from now," said Morgan. 

Andrew Barbour is a contributing editor for eCampus News.

Perks and Pitfalls of Alterna

Career and Technical Education (CTE), competency-based learning, digital badging, credit-by-experience, and micro-credentials are becoming some of the fastest-growing, and oft-discussed, learning pathways in higher education as students seek entry in today's increasingly selective job market. But do these non-traditional on-ramps to higher education really work? Implementations within institutions; and are students really getting their investments' worth? We asked two higher education experts—one specializing in education research and one in policy and practice—to explore the benefits of alternative higher-ed pathways, as well as the roadblocks and pitfalls to their success. The article argues that new learning pathways are needed for today's diverse student body seeking entry into the job market. It also discusses the programs' problems in implementation and adaptation of multiple career-based pathways. The article argues that antiquated policy is hindering the overall vital pathway between CTE and bachelor degrees. For more information, visit ecampusnews.com/symposium. There, we also welcome your thoughts on this important topic.

3 Alternative Pathways Primed to Disrupt Higher Education

These pathways will bolster higher education, but incumbent institutions will have a tough time adapting them due to stagnant business models that aren't set up for support.

By Alana Dunagan, higher education researcher, Clayton Christensen Institute

Driven by technology and globalization, the pace of economic transformation is more rapid than ever. As competition for jobs increases globally, the premium for education has never been higher. Adult learners are flocking back to higher education in droves and seeking new skills to approach an ever-changing job market. These learners now make up a majority of post-secondary students, and their needs are different than the traditional four-year residential experi-

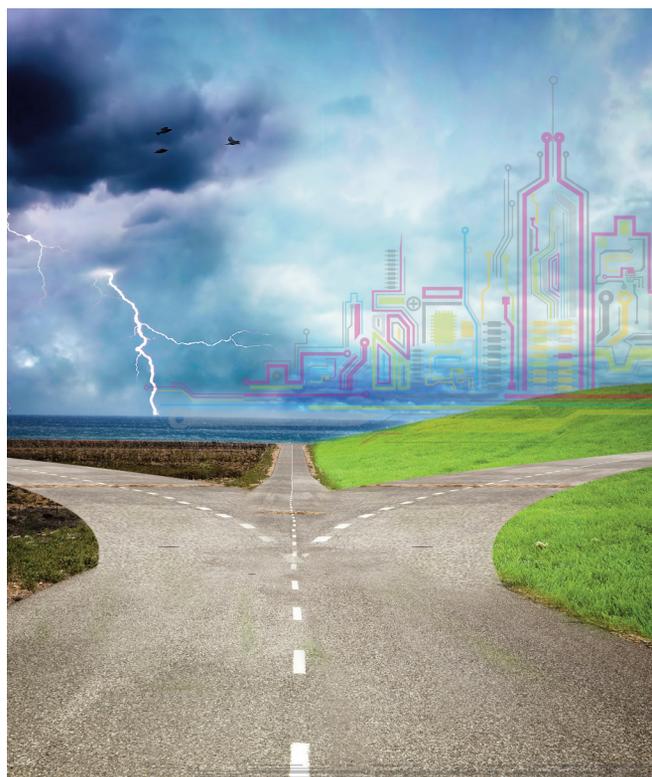
ence pursued by many students just out of high school. The swelling ranks of non-traditional students – in addition to **\$1.2 billion in recent EdTech investment** – are stimulating the development of new approaches in higher education, in ways that may change education – even the traditional variety – forever.

Adult learners are eager for pathways to higher earnings and find value in competency-based programs that send clear signals to potential employers about their skills and capabilities. These pro-

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Alternative Pathways

credentialing, and coding bootcamps are part of the new landscape of higher education—mainly due to the promise of that postsecondary ed always lead to successful careers? In this month’s Symposium, two essays—discuss the overarching benefits of these pathways. Though both agree that non-traditional pathways are needed in the current job market, Dunagan discusses traditional pathways, while McCarthy relates how these pathways can also be read at a different angle. — **Meris Stansbury, Editor**



Too many higher education on-ramps lead to dead-ends

The resistance to creating more pathways to the BA is one of the least appreciated factors driving our stubbornly low degree attainment rates.

By Mary Alice McCarthy, senior policy analyst, Education Policy Program at New America.

Despite growing enrollments in higher education over the last three decades and large investments aimed at improving college access, our degree completion rate has grown only modestly. **From 2000 to 2015**, enrollments in higher education increased by 28 percent, but the percentage of Americans with a bachelor’s degree grew by just 5 percent. While the trend is in the right direction, the rate of growth is **substantially lower** than in many other countries.

There are many reasons why Americans are struggling to earn bachelor’s degrees, the most obvious being the rising cost of higher education. But among the least appreciated obstacles is how hard we make it for students who enroll in career-oriented certificate and associate degree programs to continue on to a four-year degree. These “career and technical” (CTE) programs are designed to help students move directly into a job in two years or less. Not surprisingly, given today’s tough labor market, the programs are very popular, particularly among adult and low-

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grams range from online bachelor's degrees to coding bootcamps, but many of them are struggling to fit into the existing regulatory and financial aid systems. Critically, however, they are finding acceptance with potential employers and changing the way the labor market thinks about credentials.

Three main alternatives are finding traction: badging, bootcamps, and competency-based programs.

In Its Infancy: Skills in a Granular, Transparent Format

Badging is the most nascent, but it fills an important need for showcasing information as job seekers look to communicate their skills to employers, and as employers look to evaluate candidates. In a traditional bachelor's degree program, students take a variety of courses from an institution and are granted a degree upon successful completion of a sufficient number of credit hours. This degree is intended to indicate a student's academic accomplishments and workforce-readiness—but employers are increasingly finding these credentials to be poor indicators of a worker's capabilities. Even searching through a candidate's transcript tells employers little about the skills a potential hire might bring to the table.

Badges, on the other hand, are designed to communicate skills and accomplishments in a granular and transparent fashion. Ultimately, badges could allow students to unbundle a bachelor's degree and seek credentials for specific skills, and employers could match candidates with open positions based on their ability to get the job done. Badging is not yet widespread, but with interest from a number of higher education institutions, we would expect to see a pick-up in skill-based credentialing over the next five years.

Skilling-Up Quickly in Niche Tech: Only if You Make it Through

In the world of high tech, coding bootcamps have stormed onto the scene over the past several years and promised to turn novices into skilled coders through programs that range from 10 to 20 weeks. [Course Report's](#) 2015 study of bootcamps found an 89 percent job placement rate and an \$18,000 salary increase for graduates—not a bad return on tuition, which tends to run between \$11,000 and \$14,000. Bootcamps advertise on the basis of their job placement rates—forcing them to develop both relationships with potential employers, as well as tight alignment between curriculum design and the needs of the workplace.

Enrolling in a coding bootcamp, however, is not a golden ticket to a tech job. To graduate, students have to meet the standards of their programs, which tend to be competency-based. Some bootcamps offer students the opportunity to recycle through the program at no additional cost if they can't master the coursework on their first round.

These programs are growing rapidly, but the concept has yet to broaden out of software design and into other industries.

CBE Degrees for Skill Showcasing: Employers Still Hazy

Competency-based degrees, enabled by online access and courseware technologies, have also seen tremendous growth. These programs, in many cases offered by traditional institutions, seek to award credentials based on learning and mastery rather than credit hours. This allows students to progress at their own pace, which could be faster or slower than that provided by a standardized learning environment. It also allows employers to have more granular information on students' capabilities and skills.

Although enrollments in these programs are climbing, [employers are still getting up to speed](#) on competency-based education and what it means.

Are These More Than Trends?

Until recently, higher education has been slow to evolve. Accreditors have focused on making sure that higher education institutions follow established processes and procedures, which means that institutions are rewarded for being similar rather than different. Federal financial aid dollars for traditional programs that focus on credit hours and in-person learning have been limited, although this is starting to change.

Interestingly, the market is also beginning to solve the financial issues posed by non-traditional degrees that may not be accessible to financial aid; for example, many coding bootcamps have preferred “financing partners”: external, private lenders that provide loans to students.

Traditional learning models have been protected not only by regulation, but also by the mystique of the four-year degree. With limited ability to assess competencies and skills, employers have used the bachelor’s degree—and the prestige of the institution that granted it—as a proxy for the information in which they were really interested. So far, bootcamps have provided the clearest evidence that this won’t always be the case.

Will traditional institutions begin to incorporate these new trends into their programming?

So far, there are limited examples of established institutions adopting alternative credentialing. In fact, what has been notable so far is the lack of success in implementing innovative pathways, even where institutions have made impressive efforts to do so.

Examples include ASU’s Global Freshman Year, which saw plenty of uptake in terms of MOOC registrants, but resulted in few completions and a de minimis percentage of students who were actually eligible for credit—plus it remains to be seen how many will follow through with application and pay for credits. And there was also the University of California’s UC Online that spent millions on marketing—and three years later had one student sign up.

It’s Part of Disruption

Although these outcomes may seem surprising, the results are right in line with the theory of disruptive innovation, which posits that incumbent institutions will have a tough time adapting disruptive innovations for the simple reason that their business models aren’t set up to support them. Institutions may believe that there is no compelling reason to change, but even those that do try to innovate may find that new initiatives are smothered by the inertia of the larger organization, as Michelle R. Weise and Clayton M. Christensen write in their report on competency based education, [Hire Education](#).

Many schools have launched MOOCs through Coursera and edX and offered them for free. Yet, we have yet to see many traditional institutions willing to offer diplomas for online coursework at prices significantly less than the tuition paid for the brick-and-mortar experience.

Instead, we expect to see new entrants and innovative partnerships with employers lead the way in alternative pathways to credentialing. Observing the path of disruptive innovations in many other industries leads us to suspect that these alternative credentials, initially targeted at non-traditional students, will find their way into mainstream higher education programs. Employers will place value on the transparency of knowing the precise skill sets of potential hires and come to favor this approach over the mystique of a four-year degree from a prestigious institution.

As competency-based credentialing becomes more prevalent, even traditional students may come to favor programs that give them mastery in particular skills, which they can then bring into a competitive labor market. In this way, alternative credentials aren’t likely to remain “alternative” for long. [eCN](#)

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income students who need to balance their educational needs with other financial responsibilities. In fact, the programs make up the fastest growing segment of higher education today, encompassing between one-third to forty percent of all undergraduate awards.¹

While some of the students in these programs may not be interested in ever earning a bachelor's degree, recent surveys of community college students indicate that a large majority are.² Many of these students simply cannot afford to spend four years in school before getting a decent job, and are trying making the best of two bad options: choosing an educational program that will lead to a job but not a bachelor's degree, or enrolling in a bachelor's degree program they may never complete because of the expense and time it requires. And while some of the non-transfer programs lead to secure jobs that pay very good wages – as much, and in some cases more – than a bachelor's degree, most do not. The majority of the programs lead to entry-level jobs that will be hard for students to advance beyond without further education and training.

An Historical Issue

Learning for work has never been well integrated into American education policy or practice at any level below the bachelor's degrees. The marginalization of vocational programs has a long history in the United States that continues

to exert a powerful influence over the educational trajectories of the students enrolled in them.

When the Higher Education Act was first passed in 1965 it did not include vocational programs. They were added as part of the 1972 amendments that also created the Pell Grant program. But these programs, while eligible for federal financial aid, were kept at arm's length from the more traditional academic programs designed to lead to bachelor's degrees and beyond. In fact, they were considered terminal in nature and the college credits earned through them were explicitly designed not to transfer to a bachelor's degree.

It is this distinction between terminal vocational programs and academic programs that led community colleges to organize their course offerings along the lines of "transfer" and "non-transfer". It also explains why there are over two thousand non-degree granting institutions in our federal student aid programs (e.g. cosmetology schools, massage institutes, etc.), and why credits from for-profit colleges, which tend to specialize in one and two-year career education programs, almost never transfer to a public or private nonprofit institution.

One would be hard-pressed today to find a policymaker or administrator talk about any educational programs as "terminal". But that doesn't mean that it has gotten much easier to transfer credits from vocational (CTE) programs to BA pathways. As recently as 2011, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) **issued guidance** to its members on the need to ensure that any credits an institution

¹Undergraduate certificates make up 25% of all undergraduate awards and NCES estimates that 60 percent of associate degree awards are in CTE fields. In 2012, this corresponded to just under 1.6 million awards, or forty percent of all undergraduate awards (certificates, associates, and bachelors). See Mary Alice McCarthy, "Beyond the Skills Gap: Making Education Work for Students, Employers, and Communities." (Washington DC: New America, 2014), p.9. https://www.newamerica.org/downloads/20141013_BeyondTheSkillsGap.pdf.

²*Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream: The Report of The Century Foundation Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal*, (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2013), 12.

accepted from another corresponded to “more than a training experience.” The letter explicitly references the threat to the quality of bachelor degree programs posed by “recent innovative educational pathways [that] have the potential to blur the commonly held distinction between transfer programs and non-transfer programs.”

There’s No Easy On-Ramp

For SACS and other regional accreditors, maintaining the integrity of the bachelor’s degree means ensuring that students take a large number of general education courses during their first two years of college. It is this pyramid structure of the bachelor’s degree, which requires students to start with the broad base of general requirements before they specialize, that makes it so difficult to map on to. In fact, it is the reason why community colleges offer two types of associate degree tracks: those designed for transfer to a four-year institution and those designed for students wishing to start their career.

The transfer degrees are made up almost exclusively of general education courses that mirror exactly what a student could have taken at a four-year institution. It has little stand-alone labor market value, but students who complete it can transition to a four-year institution as a junior, with the bottom of their pyramid complete. It is this kind of guidance that makes it easy for students to transfer almost any humanities or social science course from a community college (e.g. Introduction to French Cinema, Detective Fiction) and almost impossible to get credit for a course on welding or automotive repair--what counts are the general education credits, not the technical learning.

Forcing a Bad Choice

Forcing students to choose between programs that will either help them pick up valuable skills in the short-term or lead to valuable credentials

in the long-term does not make sense. But our higher education system is surprisingly unfriendly to efforts to connect academic and vocational pathways below the bachelor’s degree. This resistance to creating more pathways to the BA is one of the least appreciated factors driving our stubbornly low degree attainment rates: we have too many entry points into higher education that are dead-ends.

It does not have to be this way. Vocational education does not have to be terminal. In fact, the best vocational systems in Europe provide a series of connected programs that start in high school but can lead to advanced degrees. A number of countries are building out “higher vocational” sectors, with polytechnic or applied universities and degree programs that provide

Forcing students to choose between programs that will either help them pick up valuable skills in the short-term or lead to valuable credentials in the long-term does not make sense.

opportunities for advancement for those who started their education on vocational tracks.

Similar efforts are underway here in the United States, but are fighting an uphill battle. Since the 2000s, a growing number of states are allowing their community colleges to award select Bachelor’s of Applied Science (BAS) and Bachelor of Science degrees, enabling students to start and finish a four-year applied degree at a single institution. The degrees address two of the major barriers to four-year degree completion at once: the inevitable loss of credit upon transfer and the limited range of applied degree options at most four-years institutions. A growing number of competency-based bachelor degree programs at four-year institutions like Brandman University or University of Wisconsin-Extension

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are designed to help graduates of CTE programs build on their knowledge and skills to complete a four-year degree rather than start over.

Imagining Real Pathways to Success

Imagine a higher education system that created multiple pathways to a four-year bachelor's degree. There would be the traditional pathway, with students starting and finishing their degree in the same institution, first completing their general education requirements and then spending the last two years focused on their major. For students looking for a more affordable route or who can't quite get into the college they want right off the bat, there would be the pathway that begins in a community college transfer program and ends with the student graduating from a four-year institution.

And there would be a third pathway for those students who want to start their college education with some technical training that they can use to get a job and work for a while; when they're ready, they can return to college and

resume their studies, but with the understanding that their skills and work experience have educational value and are worthy of college credit.

This would be a more flexible approach to the bachelor's degree that honors the purpose of the general education requirement more than a rigid set of rules around exactly how many credits a student must have to graduate.

A higher education system in which students can start their journey to a four-year degree and beyond with high quality training in a specific occupation would be a great help to many people. As the data continues to mount on the difficulties non-college graduates face navigating today's tough economy, we need to rethink and reengineer how students can advance toward a bachelor's degree and beyond. That will mean challenging some traditional notions about the difference between "education" and "training" – an artificial distinction that has hampered efforts to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Students have already figured out they need a combination of practical skills and general knowledge, and that one does not come at the expense of the other. Now we need our higher education policies to catch up.

Call for Topics!

eCampus News editors are looking for interesting, relevant Symposium topic ideas for 2016. What are the polarizing issues under debate in higher education? What are the topics generating the most buzz but need well-informed commentary from experts in the field? Are you an expert in your field and feel there's an area under-discussed? **We want to hear from you!**

CONTACT eCN Editor Meris Stansbury at mstansbury@ecampusnews.com and let her know your thoughts. All suggestions are welcome.

Silicon Valley invests in micro-learning

Entrepreneurs give “10 minute” micro-learning insights on social knowledge platform EdCast.

<http://www.ecampusnews.com/top-news/silicon-micro-learning-390/>



Urgent: This innovation myth needs to end

First-ever report reveals the most prolific innovators in the U.S. are not young entrepreneurial college dropouts; rather, highly educated immigrants with STEM degrees

<http://www.ecampusnews.com/research/innovation-innovator-myth-350/>



10 tips for recruiting diverse students

A new survey breaks down the ways that under-represented students go about their college search, as well as their communication and technology preferences

<http://www.ecampusnews.com/technologies/recruiting-diverse-students-279/>



Should institutions have better “employer leadership?”

Brief outlines how employers can work to strengthen the talent pipeline from colleges & universities under current accreditation regulations.

<http://www.ecampusnews.com/campus-administration/talent-pipeline-employer-277/>



Using Video to Improve Online Course Completion and Student Engagement

Distance education faculty coordinator and online instructor uses Camtasia's video creation platform to engage students in the online learning environment

When Tracy Schaelen started teaching online about 15 years ago, the experience was very “text heavy” with few graphics or photos, let alone videos. Students were relegated to reading information online—a process that was anything but engaging and did little to reinforce Schaelen's instruction and direction. Fortunately for teacher and student, the online learning experience has improved dramatically along with technology, devices, and Internet bandwidth.

“As technology has progressed, we've been given a great opportunity to breathe new life into online classes,” says Schaelen, distance education faculty coordinator at Southwestern College. “Video gives my students another way to learn and communicate in the virtual environment. It makes the course feel more like a learning community and less like a reading assignment.”

“By using screencasting to walk them through the process, I'm able to direct them and show them how to make contributions that meet my expectations.”

With about 17,000 students, faculty members at the Chula Vista, Calif.-based institution have been using TechSmith's Camtasia screen recorder and video editor for the last three years. Schaelen uses most of the platform's tools when developing videos for her students. “Not only do the videos keep my students interested and engaged,” says Schaelen, who teaches several classes of her own and supports the online teaching efforts of 200 other faculty members, “but they're also pretty fun to make with Camtasia.”

Using the video platform, Schaelen makes and introduces a new video each week. Through the screen-

casting function, for example, she creates 3-minute “previews” of what's coming up in class and what students can expect from upcoming learning modules. “These videos build enthusiasm for the week ahead,” says Schaelen. “It also helps to prevent procrastination by prompting students to think about what's coming next.”

Schaelen also uses videos to teach tricky or complicated concepts that don't translate well into text. Collaborative learning exercises, for instance, require several steps to complete successfully. “Before I started using video, 10 to 15 percent of my students never even got to the ‘participation’ point,” says Schaelen. “Or, they were already off track when they did get to that point.” To solve the problem, she uses video to show students where to go, what to do, and examples of what their contributions should look like.

“By using screencasting to walk them through the process, I'm able to direct them and show them how to make contributions that meet my expectations,” says Schaelen, who also uses video to give students individual feedback on their work. Using a sample student, she walks pupils through the grading process, shows them the course rubric, and explains color codes. “I'm able to show them all of this from the student's point of view,” says Schaelen, “and really help them understand the feedback and grading process before they even get started.”

Being able to walk students through how they will be evaluated in advance is particularly critical in the online education space, where there's little or no opportunity for face-to-face interaction with instructors. Forced to figure things out on their own, students will often make their own way through courses and then fail crucial tests because “no one knew that they needed help,” says Schaelen.

To provide an additional layer of support, Schaelen also creates how-to screencasts to address important issues like how to leave a post on a discussion board, how to access grades, and how to join a

group. "These short tutorials really take the stress out of online learning for our students," she says.

Other benefits Schaelen has seen since implementing Camtasia in 2013 include fewer "stressed out, panicky emails" from students (particularly during the first few weeks of school), the ability to speak directly to

videos have helped them learn course concepts and improve. "That's a far higher percentage than any other tool that I've ever used," says Schaelen.

In addition, completion rates for online courses have also improved by about 19 percent since she started making the videos, and students are continually providing positive feedback on Schaelen's videos. "Video feels like you are interacting with the teacher, rather than seeing a bunch of text," one student wrote. "Sometimes it's hard to interpret plain text. Her facial expressions tell me more than text would ever tell me."

90% of pupils say the videos have helped them learn course concepts and improve.

pupils in a one-to-one environment, higher retention rates, and improved success rates. She collects data from students throughout the semester for every class, and says over 90 percent of pupils say the



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The future of textbooks looks like this

New, comprehensive data reveals the inevitability of digital textbooks and course materials; same old issues of quality, cost, and access.

By Meris Stansbury, Editor

Faculty and students may still prefer print to digital, but spikes in print costs, as well as a demand for personalization, is pushing digital textbooks and course materials to the implementation forefront. But are any faculty really going digital? Which content distributors will thrive? What are the implementation concerns? And when will going digital really happen?

Thanks to two massive surveys and reports by the [National Association of College Stores \(NACS\)](#) and the [Independent College Bookstore Association \(ICBA\)](#) in partnership with the [Campus Computing Survey \(CCS\)](#), faculty and student perspectives on going digital, as well as the trends moving forward into digital textbooks and course materials, are highlighted.

Why the Push?

According to the NACS report, the traditional model of course content creation and distribution (faculty-authored and publisher-produced textbooks) is being challenged, thanks to new digital players and learning content formats, such as: open courseware, open educational resources (OER), and adaptive/personalized learning — all of which promise lower costs and better outcomes.

The ICBA and CCS report notes that, indeed, quality and cost of course materials for students emerge as the key factors that drive the decisions of college faculty about textbooks and other course materials. Key findings from a fall 2015/winter 2016 survey of 2,902 college and university faculty at 29 two- and four-year institutions found that 97 percent of faculty surveyed report their own assessment of quality as the top

factor in their selection of course materials. Ranked second was the cost of course materials for students.

Outside of the two major issues of costs to students and increased accountability through built-in analytics and options for personalization, other forces are contributing to the push, explains the NACS report; for example, as more students move to online courses, more students source their learning content online and in digital form. Also, student rentals, and borrowing, of new and used books in on the rise, as well as the use of legal (and illegal) download websites.

“[Also,] Amazon has entered the college learning content ecosystem with its Amazon Campus Program,” notes the report. “Its scale, brand power, and technology leadership is a game changer.”

Why the Pushback?

Though the faculty surveyed in the ICBA and CCS report note that quality is their utmost concern when choosing textbooks and course materials, and NACS states that personalization and analytics functions within digital are largely considered features in digital textbooks, less than half (45 percent) of the faculty surveyed in the ICBA and CCS report agreed/strongly agreed that digital course materials provide significant added value content not available in print.

Also, only 44 percent said they would be more likely to use digital textbooks and course materials if they offered analytics and reports on class performance; only 35 percent said that digital course materials provide a more effective learning experience than print; and only 27 percent said that digital course materials have a beneficial

impact on student learning compared to print.

And though NACS “expects a growing shift towards digital in the next 3-to-5 years,” thanks to data collected from its latest [Student Watch survey](#) from Spring 2015 that showed the use of digital course materials slowly but steadily climbing in use by about 3 percent during the 2014-15 academic year, ICBA and CCS say the shift to digital will be a very slow process.

Asked when they thought the majority of their course materials would be primarily digital, almost 25 percent of faculty surveyed indicated “never,” while 17 percent said by Fall 2020, and 9 percent by Fall 2022. Yet, in contrast, 16 percent of faculty surveyed said that a majority of their current course materials were digital as of Fall 2015, and 34 percent anticipated primarily digital

fit of going digital is the lower cost of course materials. Yet, many faculty, especially in community colleges, also report that their students don’t own the tech platforms required to access digital content. Consequently, many of the students who might benefit most from lower-cost digital and OER course materials are not able to do so.

Mentioning OER, the ICBA and CCS report also reveals that 39 percent of faculty surveyed said they’d never heard of OER, while 36 percent indicated that they knew little about OER but had not used or reviewed OER materials. Only 11 percent were currently using OER in their classes, and only 4 percent were using OER in their own classes and also making their own course materials available. [Read: “[3 legitimate reasons why faculty aren’t using OER.](#)”]

Also, only 44 percent said they would be more likely to use digital textbooks and course materials if they offered analytics and reports on class performance; only 35 percent said that digital course materials provide a more effective learning experience than print; and only 27 percent said that digital course materials have a beneficial impact on student learning compared to print.

course materials by Fall 2018.

“While the transition from print to digital course materials may be inevitable,” stated Fred Weber, CEO of ICBA, “these new data make two things clear. First is that the pace of change is much slower than anticipated by publishers, administrators, digital advocates, and campus IT professionals. And second, most faculty are not convinced that digital products have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.”

Another problem is the issue of access, explained Casey Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project and the conductor of the ICBA survey. “The survey data reveal a core conundrum regarding cost and access to digital course materials, and especially OER materials. Faculty overwhelmingly report that a major bene-

Faculty surveyed said that quality and cost were again the two top factors in their consideration of OER adoption; and perhaps because most had little exposure to OER, faculty said they expect the movement to primarily OER materials in their courses to be slower than digital.

Critical Considerations for Implementation

According to NACS, “every institution will need to consider a multidimensional and boundary-spanning learning content strategy if the transition to digital learning content and courseware is to proceed smoothly.

An all-campus plan is critical, states the report, as failure to do so could fragment the student experience as content varies from course to

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course, and as untested courseware and services are adopted and discarded. It's also critical because, unmanaged, students may become frustrated with the gap between digital courseware's capabilities and the faculty's use (or non-use) of it.

Other key considerations include:

- Shifting to digital/OER will also affect academic policy, technology, student privacy, pedagogy, instructional costs, course materials accessibility, incentives, revenue management, and more.
- Developing an effective all-campus policy and strategy should begin as soon as possible and include all relevant campus stakeholders and service providers.
- Carefully evaluating models for delivery of course materials, as well as formats.
- Knowing copyright, fair use, and licensed content for compliance.
- Knowing the implications for control of offerings, pricing, revenues, and service levels compared to the economies of scale and expanded options for students when using third-party solutions.
- Understanding and helping student's understand their ability to use financial aid to purchase their course materials.

Seek Out the Campus Bookstore

ICBA and CCS' survey reveals that 72 percent of faculty participants agree/strongly agree that the campus bookstore is a trustworthy and objective source for information about course materials; and 59 percent report that their campus bookstore can play an important role helping faculty select and effectively use digital curricular course materials.

That's a sentiment strongly mirrored in the NACS report, which emphasizes that campus

bookstores acting as an institutional aggregator can offer the "smartest and most effective student success support services [to] win hearts and minds."

"As the course materials and retailing experts on campus, the professionals who manage the institution's store should play a key role in making decisions about course materials and related services supporting student success in the future," it states.

Moving forward, NACS believes that quality, large digital distributors are ones that harness their ability to scale to negotiate favorable pricing. Quality, small digital distributors will use customer, campus, and industry knowledge to better serve students; for example, by implementing a "concierge service (online or in-person) to guide students through the content options universe and match course materials to their profiles/needs."

But this level of customization offered by smaller digital distributors should occur on campus, too, explains NACS, as an emerging student learning and success services market becomes essential for success.

"Campuses could create a one-stop physical and virtual environment [i.e. a [campus bookstore](#)] that aligns providers of instruction and services – library, dean of students, academic advising and related student services, residential life, tutoring, career counseling, and placement... this could be a differentiator for institutions in the future."

For much more detailed information from the NACS report, read "[Mapping the Learning Content Ecosystem: An inquiry into the disruption, evolution, and transformation of the learning content ecosystem.](#)"

For more detailed information from the ICBA and CCS report, read "[Going Digital: Faculty Perspectives on Digital and OER Course Materials.](#)" 

Looking beyond the numbers: The rise of the test-optional campus admissions

Institutions at varying levels of test-optional implementation report resounding success across multiple factors.

By **Bridget McCrea**

The number of schools that “deemphasize” the ACT and SAT in admissions decisions in *U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges Guide* (2016 Edition) **currently exceeds 200**—an indication that the “test optional” college campus could soon become the norm rather than the exception. Institutions like Wake Forest University and George Washington University are openly revealing the impetus behind—and results of—their own test-optional efforts, while smaller schools are also experimenting with the idea of looking “beyond the numbers” and using multiple, non-test-oriented factors when admitting students.

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, which has been tracking the rise of the test-optional school since 2004 (view the entire chronology online [here](#)), reports that 37 new colleges joined the fray between winter 2014 and winter 2015 semesters alone.

Bill Hiss, former dean of admissions at [Bates College](#) (test optional since 1984) in Lewiston, Me., co-authored a [National Association for College Admission Counseling \(NACAC\)](#) study that explored the impact of using GPAs and other non-test-related measures when admitting students. **The findings** were extensive and well publicized, but essentially boiled down to one simple fact: the difference between cumulative GPAs and graduation rates of “submitters” versus “non-submitters” was 5/100 of a point and 6/10 of 1 percent, respectively.

“By anyone’s statistical calculations, those are trivial differences,” says Hiss, who adds that the NACAC study opened a lot of colleges’ eyes to

the value of the test-optional campus, particularly for first-generation college students, minorities, those from low-income households, and those with learning disabilities. “Two years later,” says Hiss, “not a month goes by that I’m not talking to another college that’s thinking about going test-optional.”

In this article, we’ll look at three colleges that are at different stages of the test-optional movement. One helped pioneer the movement over 30 years ago, another has been test-optional since 2003, and the last one just adopted a test-optional policy during the fall of 2015. We’ll hear why and how they made the transition, the parameters they use for admissions, the test-optional challenges they’ve faced, and how the decision has worked out for the institutions and their students.

Students Take Center Stage

Every student who applies to Bates College gets his or her moment in the spotlight—that time when admissions counselors are reviewing folders that could include anywhere from 15 to 25 potential “stage lights.” Testing could be one of those lights, notes Hiss, but the biggest emphasis is placed on high school transcripts, followed by essays, recommendations, interviews, other projects, and extracurricular activities. Geographic diversity, legacy qualities, and minority status also come into play.

Hiss says this multi-pronged approach has helped Bates College overcome an issue that all institutions grapple with: the instance of “false negatives”—or, a test result that incorrectly indi-

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cates that a particular condition or attribute is absent. In the college setting, false negatives can mislead schools into assuming a “student can’t do good work here,” says Hiss, who estimates that 30 percent of non-submitters in the NACAC study performed well in college despite “less strong” test scores.

“If we had a medical test with a 30 percent rate of false negatives, and that said you had the disease when you really didn’t, would that be okay?” Hiss asks. “The same principles apply in the college setting, where putting more spotlights on the prospective student makes the entire process more accurate.”

The test-optional campus does present some challenges for schools that have historically placed high emphasis on applicants’ standardized test scores. According to Hiss, Bates’ faculty was initially concerned that the new policy would scare off high-scoring students who would somehow think the school wasn’t interested in them anymore. Hiss says the fears were unwarranted, namely because most applicants know of someone who has had to go beyond test scores to get into the college of his or her choice (i.e., participated in relevant extracurricular activities, taken leadership roles, etc.).

There are also more applications to sort through. According to Hiss, Bates’ applicant pool expanded from 2,200 to 6,500 students when it stopped requiring standardized test scores. “It doesn’t happen in every case, but most test-optional colleges have seen steady and clear increases in applicants,” says Hiss, who adds that most colleges that begin to move in the test-optional direction tend to follow through with it. “Hundreds of schools over the last 30 years have taken this route; I’m only aware of a few that decided it wasn’t right for them.”

Making the Switch

One thing that always bothered Angel B. Perez about the traditional decision process was the fact that standardized tests are not necessarily the best predictors of college success. “Then why are they required?” asks Perez, VP of enrollment and student success at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn. “And, are there other ways we can give students the opportunity to represent their predictability for success during the application process?”

Last year, Perez presented these arguments to Trinity College’s faculty, board of trustees, and admissions team. Using his past experience at a different test-optional school as foundational proof, he was able to get everyone on board with a new admissions policy that kicked in last fall. The idea caught on quickly among applicants, nearly half of which did not submit test scores. “I’m blown away by that number,” says Perez. “I didn’t expect that many students to take us up on that offer so quickly.”

Perez, who sees anxiety over the new SAT format – and over testing in general – as one of the key drivers of that quick adoption. On a more global scale, he says the test-optional approach helps schools net a higher percentage of engaged, interested, and intellectual students who just may not test well, for whatever reason. When reviewing applications, Perez says Trinity College’s admissions team looks at high school grades, curriculum, and – perhaps most importantly – context. “All grades are not created equal,” he points out, “so look at how the individual has performed academically in the context of what was offered at that particular high school (i.e., honors courses, AP courses, college prep courses, etc.).”

Trinity College also pays “very close attention” to teachers’ recommendation letters and uses them as an indicator of what the student will “be like in the classroom,” says Perez. “I look for keywords like curiosity, engagement, participation, and perseverance.”

From a practical perspective, Perez says man-

aging the test-optional institution is more difficult than putting a high emphasis on test scores. “You can’t be formulaic about it; you can’t just say this GPA plus this SAT equals a ‘yes,’” says Perez. “We read every file twice before it goes to an admissions committee for a third review. For 7,000 applications, that’s 21,000 touches spread across a staff of 11 people. It’s a lot of work in a 3-month span.”

Technology helps to ease some of that burden. For example, Trinity College’s admission department recently started using **Technolutions Slate**, which includes customer relationship management (CRM), outreach, travel management, online applications, and online reading. “With the volume of applications we’re managing, we could never be reading files on paper,” says Perez. “We just couldn’t do it.”

Appealing to a Broader Pool

For its 2015-16 school year, **Pitzer College** of Claremont, Calif., fielded 4,149 applications and admitted 12.9 percent of those students (536 total) with an average GPA of 3.93. This “Class of 2019” comprises 40.1 percent students of color, 8.2 percent international students, and 11.8 percent first-generation college students. A test-optional campus since 2003, Pitzer made the move after finding (via its own study) that there was no direct correlation between its students’ academic success and standardized testing.

Since Pitzer stopped requiring the SAT or ACT for admission, the campus has seen a 58 percent increase in diversity, an 8 percent increase in GPA, and a 39 percent increase in applicants with a 10 percent increase in retention. The college has also doubled the number of students from low income, first generation backgrounds.

According to Santiago Ybarra, interim director of admissions, the institution uses a holistic approach to student admission with emphasis placed on high school transcripts, recommendation letters, leadership positions, work history,

involvement in school and community activities, and commitment to Pitzer’s core values. The latter is especially vital, says Ybarra, and something that really can’t be “tested” for.

“For us, the admissions process is really about ‘fit,’” says Ybarra. “Of course we look for strong academics and preparedness for college, but we’re very centered on a set of core values that include social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural understanding. When we talk about selectivity, we’re talking about the individuals who adhere to one or more of those core values—not the highest GPA, the best testing, or the most extracurricular activities.”

Ybarra says Pitzer’s test-optional policy also helps the school reach those populations that don’t necessarily perform well on standardized tests, but that would be a good candidate for the school. “Someone who has a high GPA but who is worried that a 520 verbal SAT score will lower his or her profile might not even apply here,” says Ybarra. “But when you take the testing component out of the equation and talk to them about it during school visits and presentations, their ears perk up.”

Leveling the Playing Field

Hiss, of course, isn’t surprised at the way schools like Trinity College and Pitzer College have embraced the concept of the test-optional college campus. And based on the number of schools that have joined the movement over the last few years, he expects more institutions to move in this direction in the coming years.

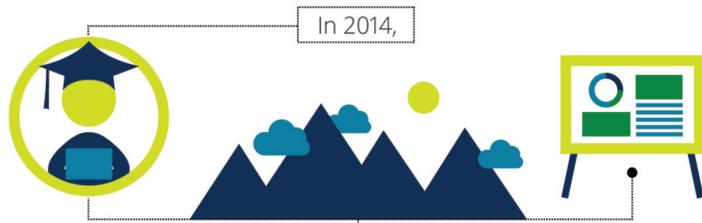
“The idea that a single, standardized test can accurately measure millions of different people over a wide span of cultural differences and intelligences is a monstrous and hurtful trip up a blind alley,” says Hiss. “I think optional testing is a piece—and only a piece—of a step toward trying to level the playing field.” **eCN**

Online Report Card

Tracking Online Education in the United States

Distance Education Enrollment Year Over Year

Distance enrollments keep rising, even as overall enrollments drop



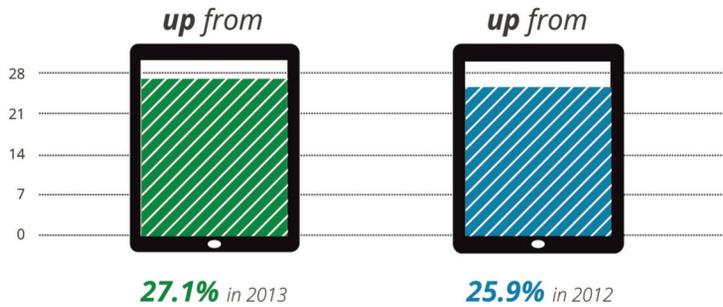
In 2014,

5.8+ million students

are taking **at least 1** distance education course

THAT'S

28.4%
OF ALL
ENROLLED STUDENTS
WHICH IS

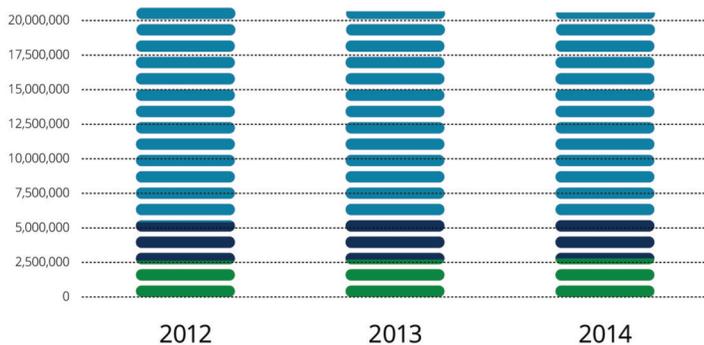


Source for enrollment data: National Center for Education Statistics IPEDS

Enrollment by Type of Course—Degree-granting Institutions



over **2.8 million students** are taking courses **exclusively** online



- █ Not enrolled in any distance education courses
- █ Some but not all distance education courses
- █ Exclusively in distance education courses

The Growth of Distance Education Year Over Year

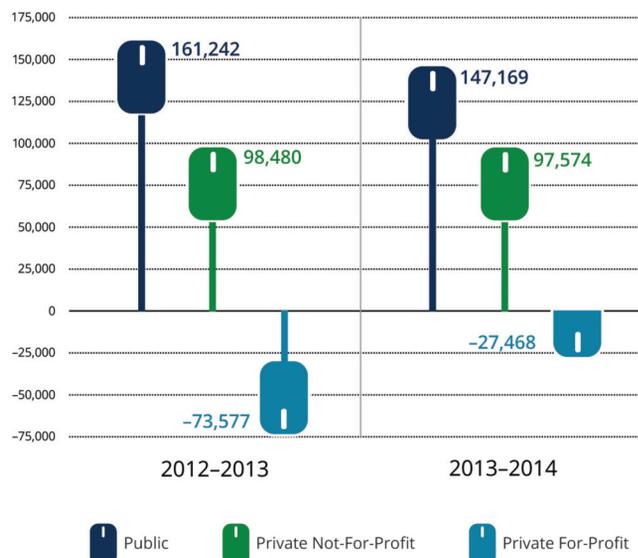
Public institutions saw
147,169
new distance enrollments
in 2014



**PUBLIC &
PRIVATE NOT-
FOR-PROFIT
SCHOOLS**

are *growing* year over year, while
FOR-PROFIT ENROLLMENTS
decreased again

Change in Distance Education—Degree-granting Institutions



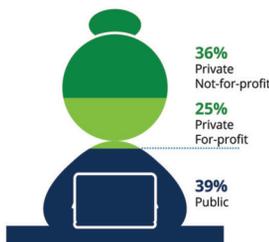
Enrollment by Institution Type Year Over Year

67% of all distance education students are enrolled at **public institutions**

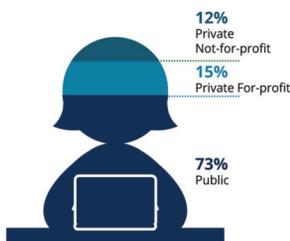
TOGETHER,
**PRIVATE FOR-PROFITS
+ NOT-FOR-PROFITS**



OF DISTANCE ENROLLMENTS
BUT
their presence is far larger
in *graduate programs*



**61% OF
GRADUATE DISTANCE
EDUCATION STUDENTS**
are enrolled in private institutions



**27% OF
UNDERGRADUATE
DISTANCE
EDUCATION STUDENTS**
are enrolled in private institutions

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