

## Quality Innovation in Higher Education

Ed Klonoski, President, Charter Oak State College

What can we say about the future of innovation in higher education and whether those innovations will improve quality outcomes for learners? Let me begin by defining my terms. First, I believe that “higher education” includes all learning that is meant to produce personal or workforce improvements. This learning can be provided by accredited higher education institutions, unaccredited organizations, businesses, the military or social organizations. What all higher education has in common is not who provides it but the level of sophistication to which it aspires. Higher learning includes facts, information, theoretic underpinnings and approaches to new knowledge acquisition. Secondly, what I mean by “quality outcomes” is learning that can be measured and which produces the result(s) it claims for itself. And finally, I am using “innovation” to mean the creation of something of value—a good or a service.



Ed Klonoski

Charter Oak State College, my institution, has been an “alternative” provider of higher education for its entire 45-year history. As one of five degree-aggregation colleges, we began as an institution that compiled learning acquired elsewhere—we offered no courses for the first 25 years of our history—into an accredited degree. The degree-aggregation colleges were the first to implement portfolios for credit, to embrace non-collegiate learning for credit, testing for credit, flexible credit transfer policies and among the first to offer online courses for adult students. All of us applied the principles of competency-based learning to our programs. We looked for ways to measure what students knew and could do rather than insisting that they learn it all from us.

The innovations that we created and embraced have certainly spread. Online learning is the most dynamic growth area in higher education and it is producing new not-for-profit mega universities. Competency-based programs continue to grow as they work to develop successful business models. Most importantly, the idea that we should measure what students learn and can do rather than what inputs went into that learning is now the dominant model for new program design across the industry.

The one innovation that has not caught on is flexible credit transfer and this applies to credits from traditional collegiate providers and the new alternative providers. While students continue to attend multiple institutions and try to bring their prior learning to their new institutions, that process is still awkward, leaving millions of dollars in coursework to be repeated. And even worse, we have [over 31 million working adults](#) in America who have credits but no credential.<sup>1</sup> This issue could be ameliorated by a learning outcome measurement system.

The very organization of higher education is dramatically changing/innovating and that shift is not finished. It is also not obvious whether this will have a positive impact on quality. First, the number of educational providers is multiplying rapidly, more rapidly than the quality assurance structures (i.e., accreditation) can accommodate. Most of these new providers are not traditional colleges. In addition, the structures within traditional higher education providers are changing. We have online universities—Western Governors University, Southern New Hampshire University and Arizona State, to name three—that are

over 100,00 students strong and operating across the country. While each of these is regionally accredited, they are not regionally specific (despite the geographical references in their respective names). But as these institutions swell, the number of institutional mergers, acquisitions and closures continues to mount. Against those two realities—dramatic expansion by a few and enrollment declines among the many—lots of traditional institutions have created online programs that co-exist uneasily with their on-ground offerings. This trend is most noteworthy among the public colleges and universities where, believe it or not, [nearly 70 percent of the online coursework](#) in traditional higher education is provided.<sup>2</sup>

Second, on-demand learning is now available from providers in the business sphere, the military, higher education, the MOOC providers and various trade organizations. In short, this is how consumers approach learning. They or their organization defines a learning need, and they “subscribe” to a provider who can meet it. Online pedagogy means that geography is no longer a limiting factor and the access issue is on the way to being solved. But how will we provide consumers with a quality measure so they can buy on-demand learning products that are worth the price?

The third innovation involves expanding the idea of “accreditation” beyond its current confined definitions. Today, we use the various accreditation rubrics to tell us who is NOT in the club. These accreditation labels function more like the *U.S. & New World Reports* rankings than *Consumer Reports*. They define who has a good reputation rather than who is producing a product worth the price. I have been involved with multiple attempts to broaden accreditation and make it focus more on outcomes than inputs. The federal government has proposed ideas like the hated Gainful Employment rules as an attempt to move quality assurance from inputs to outputs. All these efforts have moved the needle, but none of them have disrupted the status quo...yet. To reduce the confusion around who the accreditor is, I predict that the federal government will soon force a more consolidated approach to accreditation. Consolidating accreditors will force that community to agree on a single set of learning standards and that will positively impact quality.

And fourth, we come to artificial intelligence, an innovation which is beginning to find its way into the learning process. All of us who offer online learning understand that our delivery systems can be harnessed to provide real-time clues into how each of our students is learning. These clues allow us to know when and how to provide intrusive advising and increase the success of our students. If my credit card company can know when I make a purchase that is not typical of me, then online learning providers will be able to harness the huge amounts of performance data inside their systems to offer students similar interventions. These interventions will improve quality outcomes.

But I posit that this ocean of performance data will also provide the means to measure not just how well our students are progressing, but what they are actually learning. Once we understand what successful learning looks like in data terms, we will be able to measure that learning. And once we can measure it, we can create a single, outcomes-based “accreditation” system. Yes, there is work to be done and problems to solve in using this ocean of data before we are routinely improving student progress and distilling measurable learning outcomes, but the potential reminds me of the early Internet. In the early 1990s, few could imagine how we were going to be able to overcome the technical hurdles that would merge technologies like GPS, hand-held devices and video streaming. But if we have learned one thing over the past 40 years it is that technical problems are eventually solved. So I am optimistic that we will use the performance data our systems are collecting to produce innovations that improve quality by measuring learning and learning providers.

Higher education continues to evolve and innovate. Changes in the size and number of our institutional organizations are not yet finished and their effects on quality are uncertain. But changes in how we design learning—widely applying the principles of competency-based learning—are clearly going to improve the quality of our learning products. And finally, accreditation is slowly moving toward a single set of standards while the ability to measure outcomes keeps growing. Both of these innovations will improve quality. So I believe we have every reason to be optimistic about the future.

---

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jon Marcus, Report: *31 million Americans have college credits, but no degree*, July 29, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017*. Babson Survey Research Group, e-Literate, and WCET.

Copyright 2019. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. All rights reserved. The views and opinions expressed in this Op-Ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

One Dupont Circle, Suite 510  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-955-6126 Fax: 202-955-6129