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Feature Article

Let Disruption Fix Higher Education The time has come for teaching-model universities

By Henry Eyring

Recently Professor Clayton Christensen has been exploring the application of his disruptive innovation theory to education. In a May-June 2008 [article](#) for *BizEd* he looked at business schools. In his latest book, *Disrupting Class* (the subject is K-12 education). This leads us to wonder — what does disruption look like when applied to higher education?

A quick snapshot of the state of higher education in the U.S. reveals some troubling trends. Students have been hit with the irony of skyrocketing tuition costs and decreased access to faculty. The federal government [estimates](#) that the average cost of a 4-year degree has grown by 76 percent over the past 10 years.

From the federal government's perspective, U.S. higher education is broken. Congress and a commission led by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings have been searching for a fix. The Spellings Commission released its final [report](#) in 2006, calling for higher quality, increased affordability, and greater access for college students.

Congress passed a couple of acts in 2008 meant to decrease the cost of a college degree. A sign of their fiery resolve, [one includes](#) "lists designed to embarrass colleges that increase their tuition significantly."

Though well-intended, these attempts will likely flounder in a stark structural reality. What the federal government is really asking for is a disruptive innovation in higher education.

Fortunately, there is such as disruption going on, though it has been little noticed by the general public so far. Higher education has adhered to research since the first modern universities were founded, during the Renaissance. This model sucks money, faculty resources and attention away from students and towards research, publishing, and in some universities, major athletic programs.

What's needed is an alternate approach, based on teaching rather than on research. The teaching model, which is beginning to take hold in some U.S. universities, focuses money, faculty resources, and attention to preparing students for the workplace. Let's examine these two models more closely.

Research universities vs. teaching universities

The table below illustrates differences between the prevailing research model and the teaching model. The research-model university has two main “Products”: research and/or high-profile intercollegiate athletic programs.

	Research Model	Teaching Model
Structure	Lighter teaching loads; faculty emphasis on research and publishing; professionally coached intercollegiate sports teams; two semesters per year	Heavier teaching load; faculty emphasis on innovative course development and online learning; student-led intramural sports; three semesters per year
Product	Research; high-profile sports programs; preparation for research, academic, and athletic careers	Preparation for the workplace
Customer	Academy (faculty peer groups); government agencies and corporate research divisions; prospective employers of graduates; alumni; sports boosters and fans; professional sports teams (recruiting)	Students; prospective employers of graduates; government (from piqued interest in serving students); alumni

It should be noted that not every university with a high-profile athletic program has an equally high-profile research program, and vice versa. However, for the purposes of this analysis, the main issue is that these universities focus on activities other than educating students.

This becomes clear when looking at the “Customer” section of the table (customers are listed in order of importance). Note that the research university’s most important Customer group is the “Academy” — the university’s faculty and administration, as well as peer groups and refereed journals within the various academic disciplines.

The research university also serves alumni who see major research success as a source of pride and a reason to keep donating to the university. Government agencies and corporate research divisions also are customers of the research put out by research universities.

Universities with a high-profile focus on athletics could have an even more complicated customer base that would include alumni, sports fans, and the professional athletic organizations that some of their players are drafted into. College football alone is a huge business. According to an August [Forbes cover story](#) on University of Alabama head football coach Nick Saban and his nearly \$5 million annual compensation package, Alabama's football program had \$54 million in revenue in 2007 and an estimated \$32 million profit.

This is not to say that the research university does not serve students. It is to say that for these universities, students are a small part of a large, interconnected web of customers that research universities serve. We would suggest that students are, in fact, perhaps the customers with the least importance in the eyes of the research university. And educating them is not the research university's highest priority.

In contrast is the teaching-model university. Here, the "products" are students who are well-prepared for the workplace. Students would be on top of this customer list for the teaching university. Government comes next, with its stake in making sure public universities are serving the public.

Alumni have a stake as well, especially since well-prepared graduates could also spur alumni giving and alumni recruiting of students. And also on the list of customers served by the teaching university would be businesses that employ these well-prepared graduates.

How do these two models differ in practice? The main difference lies in the way faculty are utilized and funds are allocated. Research university faculty have lighter teaching loads, with more of their time spent on research and publishing. Classes generally take place two semesters per year. Summer sessions are usually offered, but not required, and most faculty members would not teach in the summer.

At the teaching university, faculty members are focused on teaching and developing courses. Some such universities do not offer tenure at all, and those that do tend not to require publishing and research to qualify for tenure. Instead, brilliance at classroom teaching and course development is rewarded.

Most colleges that take a teaching-model approach also run on a three-semester schedule, offering better scheduling opportunities for students. For example, at BYU-Idaho the academic calendar is divided into three equal semesters: winter, summer, and fall. Students are admitted to one of three tracks: summer/fall, fall/winter, or winter/summer. Students are "off-track" for one semester each year, and they stay on the same track through graduation. Such a schedule allows more opportunities for students to attend and flexibility for students to pursue internships and jobs.

What makes the teaching model disruptive?

In prioritizing the needs of other customers before the needs of students, the research model misses the students' job-to-be done — to be well-prepared for the job market. The research model also presents barriers of cost and accessibility to a large number of current nonconsumers of higher education.

Therein lies the disruptive opportunity for teaching-model universities. These universities provide a good-enough performance for the students' job-to-be-done. Teaching-model universities also have an advantage in that their "product" is priced low enough and is accessible enough to appeal to prospective students who are shut out of research

universities because of costs and an inability to succeed without more time and attention from faculty.

It's important to note that the top-tier research universities, public and private, are exempt from both this goal and this disruptive process. First, the job of many students at such schools is to prepare for a specific kind of job market, that of higher-level research, technology, academic, and even athletic careers.

Also, gigantic endowments insulate most top-tier research universities from the need to serve students. Thirty-one private colleges have [endowments](#) of at least \$1 billion each, according to the National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities (NAICU).

The real danger is to the mid-tier private universities, which would be left in the dust by such a disruption. Comparatively, they'd be under-performing on research and teaching, although not necessarily on athletics. Perhaps they'd look down at the treadmill of inadequate funds and PhD talent on which they've been running, and recognize the futility of chasing schools such as Harvard and the University of Southern California, a powerhouse in college football for much of this decade.

If they were smart, they'd switch to the teaching model — where the potential lies. The result would be an efficient U.S. higher education system. U.S. graduates would be better prepared to compete with the surge in educated labor from China and India.

How to drive disruption in higher education

Congress and state governments could tag-team to change higher education in the U.S. by making the teaching model viable on a broader scale. For example, Congress holds some funding purse-strings for public universities. The federal government [provides](#) about a third of the funding for public universities and a fourth of the funding for private universities.

Congress could alter its appropriation of higher education funds to shift a higher percentage of funding to institutions that place their focus on teaching rather than research.

However, much of the work of reforming higher education will fall on state legislatures and boards of education, since they are responsible for setting policies that affect most public higher education.

These bodies could mandate a move to the teaching model in their public universities. This needs to be done strategically, by leaving one or two of their universities as flagship research and sports institutions to lead the state's brand.

In practice this concept has been highly problematic as the second-tier public universities perceive quite rightly that the only prizes worth pursuing are the titles of flagship research institution and/or sports powerhouse.

For example, in Texas there has already been a great deal of [discussion](#) about the Legislature's intent to "lift up" one of the public universities to national research prominence, such as University of Texas and Texas A&M already have, by selecting another public university for such emphasis and increased funding.

The end result, unfortunately, has been stalemate, with seven universities all currently classified as "emerging research universities" vying for this prize. None of these universities are vying to become the best place for students to learn — there's no funding mandate attached to that. If there were, perhaps this entire concept would play out differently.

Teaching and research models at the state level

Here's how this concept could work. In Utah, for instance, Dixie State College could be renamed "The University of Utah at Dixie." It could then move to the teaching model and avoid a drop in brand value by riding on the sports and research reputation of the University of Utah. The University of Utah could increase its performance in sports and research with the funds freed up by the end of copy-cat programs at smaller Utah schools.

As Dixie State rose along rankings suited to the teaching model, and the University of Utah became stronger along the research path, the Utah higher education brand would be built state-wide. This would end Utah's redundant investment in competing research and sports brands like Southern Utah University, Utah Valley University, and Dixie State.

Individual universities should be handled carefully during this transition. The University of Utah gets about three times the tax [funds per student](#) as Dixie State does. Their faculty should be presented with a trade-off: on the one hand, funds for research and the job security of tenure; on the other hand, fatter paychecks and the fulfillment of helping students.

Larger salaries could be sourced from the numerous economic boosts that come with the teaching model. For instance, online courses and a three-semester track are cost-efficient and reach out to traditional nonconsumers such as working adults. The 46 percent of working adults who participate in education are an often-ignored market.

Also, not just Congress, but states, could award a greater portion of tax funds to universities that embrace the teaching model.

The third boost in revenue could come from alumni gifts. If a university's graduates are better prepared for the workforce, they might feel a stronger tie to their alma mater and be in a better position to give. Revenue from all three of these sources could justly be passed on to the faculty working for it.

The fulfillment of helping students would come through increased teaching loads and teaching for a full three semesters each year. This needn't be a net increase in work, though, because the higher teaching load would replace research and publishing demands. Those

demands would be lessened if tenure — job security — became based on teaching excellence and not on success at research, publishing, and sports.

Conclusion

This is only a snapshot of a large, complex issue. The threat of impending disruption can sometimes clear complexity and cause those in disruption's path to reconsider their strategies.

If the U.S. public higher education system is able to take advantage of the disruptive forces in its midst, the result could be an efficient system of higher education that would include a majority of universities that grow along the teaching model, and a few institutions that stick to research and/or athletics. This is not inconsistent with the Spellings Commission report, which asserts that value should be placed on “*research* that contributes to the growing fund of knowledge.”

David Breneman, a professor of the Economics of Education at the University of Virginia, is ready for a new wave. Frustrated with the lack of response to the Spellings Commission Report, he [asked](#), “Are governors and state legislatures... likely to seek ways to hit higher education with the proverbial two-by-four in order to get our attention?”

The answer seems to be yes, but if state governments and Congress take calculated swings, they can knock higher education in the direction of disruptive innovation. From there, the “invisible hand” of self-interest will take the reins. As Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) [stated](#), “We are redoubling our commitment to college students.”

That's the will, and this is the disruptive way.

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