

The Coming Critical Challenges for Public Higher Education

The emerging critical challenges for higher education occur in four areas that began to surface about ten years ago. They are now evolving at geometric speed and interacting with one another to further increase the rate of change. The environment we find ourselves in is changing, our responsibilities are changing, and so too must universities change.

- *Resources and Demographic Trends* -- The worrying but uncertain economic conditions over the next 10-15 years, coupled with changes in the diversity of students, population growth, and infrastructure requirements suggest new approaches are required to match needs and resources. Public support for universities is becoming a smaller percentage of state revenues and of university budgets. The portion of the university budget increasing is from grants and contracts (primarily federal). As the state support for institutions decreases, questions arise on whether it is indeed a public university. What happens when a public university does not believe it is primarily a public institution? In addition, the state and federal governments are facing an increased need for making difficult choices among competing programs. These factors require that we question whether universities can continue their current approach to funding and their methods of identifying priority activities.
- *Learning Styles and Places* – There are no longer only a few places for “teaching” to occur (such as classrooms or laboratories). Rather, “learning” takes place in many locations (such as classrooms, learning centers, cafes, field exercises, informal gatherings, and internet), and in many ways (such as lectures, independent study, collaboration, gaming, simulations, and debates). Technology and connectivity have made some of these changes possible by allowing access by essentially everyone to very large data sets or specialized information at any location and at any time. The learner of tomorrow will have grown up with these changes in technology and will have more experience from a variety of learning styles than current students. We are in the process of transforming the importance of learning in one place to learning in a combination of places and approaches, and moving from teaching (focus on the teacher) to learning (focus on the student or researcher). The combination of new learning places and how students now learn will have a significant effect on how universities deal with the curriculum and the faculty. We have not seen this scale or complexity of change before.
- *Focusing on Basics* – What is the purpose of a university? The purposes are generally to benefit society through such activities as educating the workforce, developing an informed citizenry, seeking answers to practical and theoretical questions, preserving and extending the frontiers of knowledge, and transforming lives. How a particular university accomplishes this depends on its location, its specific mission, and its funding opportunities. Some universities, for a variety of reasons, have greatly enhanced economic development through spin off companies or patents, or through the multiplier effect of research activity within the local community. But universities also have caused a reaction from some of the state funding sources, because of actions such as rapid tuition increases, duplication of efforts, not addressing the needs of the workforce, or a perception of worrying more about research than teaching. Studies have addressed all these issues and we are not unfamiliar with the arguments. However, universities appear to be heading into a time where they need to clearly define the basics of what a university is expected to do and to address them appropriate to its particular setting.
- *Competition and Cooperation* -- While competition and cooperation have long existed in some disciplines, today’s environment requires a greater cooperation among universities in the learning area (such as sharing curriculum or joint enrollment for selected courses) and similar cooperation with private and public sector institutions. Resource constraints and technology availability make such cooperation easily accomplished if the mindset is developed to overcome resistance from the traditional campus community. Cooperation has long existed, to varying degrees, among the campus research communities, but it needs to be extended to other parts of the university. At times of resource constraints, we need to remain competitive when appropriate, but cooperate so we build on each other’s strengths and specializations rather than unnecessarily duplicating activities.

While the basic purpose of a university is not changing, how universities accomplish that purpose in the 21st century, with the resources and constraints that seem to lie ahead is an open question. What is clear is that universities will have to change the way they do business. What is not clear is how this might best be done. This change will not come easily, even for those that understand the need. The military (and subsequently some businesses) have a term for the environment we too are facing: the VUCA World -- Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.