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Virtual Universities Could Produce Only Virtual Learning

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Consider this scenario: Success, income, and recognition are dependent upon the possession of a particular credential. The sole providers of it are in desperate need of income, and the content and prerequisites for earning the credential are defined entirely by the providers.

Some providers are honorable, professionally committed to maintaining the integrity of their credential despite declining income, deteriorating facilities, and eroding salaries. Others reason that to survive and to increase income, shortcuts can be made in the requirements for the credential.

Soon, outside entrepreneurs see that not everyone who wants a credential is being served by the current providers. They attempt to enter the field, selling easy credentials under the guise of their being"non-traditional,""modernized," "technologically enhanced,""customer oriented," and the same, or virtually the same, as the traditional credentials.

Enter politicians pressed by rapidly growing demands for limited resources. Since some providers of the credential receive tax support, the politicians see several options for resolving their financial concerns:

* Force publicly supported providers to charge more for their credentials or find non-public support.

* Reward providers who find ways to offer credentials more cheaply and efficiently.

* Create a substitute provider.

This is the backdrop that I see for the recent decision by 13 members of the Western Governors Association to create a "virtual regional university," now officially to be called Western Governors University. (The Governor of my state, Texas, has not endorsed the plan to date, nor have the Governors of Alaska, California, Kansas, or South Dakota.) The governors backing the plan say that the purpose of the new entity"is to overcome bureaucracy, tradition, and turf in higher education" through a network of college and corporate courses, which will be offered through telecommunications technologies. Credit could be given for courses offered by businesses for their employees, and such courses, combined with courses offered by participating colleges, could count toward degrees. The degrees will be based not on the usual types of evaluation and grading systems, but rather on students' demonstration of various competencies and their performance on proficiency tests.

Thus, at a time when publicly supported universities are becoming merely"publicly assisted" and states are offering financial incentives to institutions that find ways to change institutional behavior and trim costs, these governors are linking hands with business leaders to try to create a degree-granting entity offering only on-line instruction.

One of the principal backers of the proposal, Utah's Governor Michael Leavitt, has been quoted as saying,"We'll be working closely with industry to learn how to measure competencies based on performance." He explained that a student could define the competencies that he or she wanted, and the new university would devise a degree program for that student. Mr. Leavitt also said that an employer could say,"Here are the competencies that I want for my employees," and the university would put together a degree to meet that demand. The instruction could be offered by producers of educational software, as well as by traditional institutions and corporations.

The governors endorsing the plan have each promised to try to contribute $100,000 in state funds to the project and hope to raise another $6-million to $10-million from foundations and corporations.

The governors' plan has some limited potential for delivering credentials to our citizens if it is confined to such areas as skills training, remediation of educational deficiencies, and related credentialing. Yet, if the project is not handled with care, it has enormous possibilities for harming higher education as we now know it in this country, particularly if it is largely controlled and organized to meet the demands of employers. It could well become the model for displacing more-traditional higher education. The stated and implied goals of satisfying industry, bypassing faculty members, and providing mass credentialing at low cost through technology have much appeal to some politicians.

Those of us in higher education have learned some lessons from past experiments -- for example, allowing students to design their own degree programs and granting college applicants academic credit for work or life experience. Students generally should not be permitted to design their own degree plans, because they don't know what they don't know. Nor do many people in the course of their jobs perform tasks of such breadth or intellectual substance that the work should be deemed adequate to constitute a university credential or credit toward such a credential.

Similarly, proposals to let employers heavily influence the design of degree plans are equally wrong-headed. The problem lies in determining what employers really need. They may not realize it, but the key is not what a person can do upon graduation, but rather what potential he or she has gained to respond to the unknown and to changing circumstances. A college degree does not primarily represent perfected skills, competence in performing repetitive tasks, or practice in manipulations of equipment or data. It represents learning to see events in context and in perspective, the ability to formulate and consider options for future action, and comfort in dealing with new challenges. Most creative work may, indeed, be done alone with a pad and pencil or before a keyboard. But learning often takes place in groups and in face-to-face exchanges, not in front of a TV screen or computer monitor.

I challenge you to ask a top executive three questions, preferably in separate conversations: What do you expect of a college graduate during the first few months on the job? After a typical employee has been with you, say, 10 years, what kind of educational deficiencies are likely to have turned up? When you are sorting through your middle and upper management looking for people to promote, what inadequacies in educational backgrounds do you frequently see?

I'm confident that these conversations will produce three very different definitions of what higher learning should be doing for our workers. To the first question, a typical answer is, "I want someone who can titrate a substance" or"design a span that won't fall down" or"keep an accurate set of books." To what their employees need 10 years later, a typical answer is, "I need people who know how to supervise, how to organize group work, how to mesh the pieces of our corporation." And to the last question, you might hear,"I am embarrassed to send some of our college graduates to social occasions; they can't talk about anything but their jobs. They don't know how the world works or what came before now or what the consequences of alternative decisions might be. They don't see how everything is connected, or at least related. It's as though the world started with Katharine Hepburn -- if they even know who she is."

The answers to the last two questions indicate the types of knowledge that industry is *least* capable of helping employees acquire on the job, after a college education is completed. Letting employers, rather than faculty members, define the content of a college education would quickly get us more *training* than *education* for our citizens. And odds are that few of the people who are not introduced to a general education in college will develop an appreciation for it later.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher, predicted before World War II the depredation of civilization that would be perpetrated by trained experts, narrowly focused technologists, and specialized"new barbarians." The world was soon to see, as he had warned,"how brutal, how stupid, and yet how aggressive is the man learned in one thing and fundamentally ignorant in all else." The danger that we face in a technological society is that the people with the most highly specialized skills -- rather than those with the broadest education or the best values or understanding of relationships -- may come to occupy the positions with the greatest influence.

Some college faculties do need to be shocked into changing how instruction is delivered. Costs do need to be contained. Runaway duplication of programs must be curtailed. Replicating expensive patterns of greatness and reputation from the past must cease. Building new brick-and-mortar campuses is a thing of the past. Instructional telecommunications can play a constructive role in

dealing with such concerns -- but around the edges, nt as a complete substitute. For example, a course may be effectively enhanced, at reasonable cost, with a case study on a CD-ROM that enables students to demonstrate how they apply principles, sources of information, and procedures developed in class -- and then to see the various outcomes of their choices. The machine can record for the professor the time spent by each student on the assignment.

Abhorrent as it may be to some politicians and business leaders to leave control of the content and quality of courses and degree programs in the hands of faculty members, encouraging new entities to offer credentials will only exacerbate the confusion that employers already face as they try to determine which institutions and degrees signify the level of learning or competence that they seek in their employees.

When technology in higher education is used appropriately, with its quality overseen and controlled by faculties, it can contribute, and already is contributing, to genuine learning. But the kind of virtual university envisioned by the Western governors seems likely to produce only virtual learning.

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