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POST COLLEGE

Quality Higher Education Doesn't Need to Cost So Much

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As the U.S. continues to look for ways to increase the number of college graduates, the primary roadblock is the cost of college -- tuition increases outpace the rate of inflation every year. In fact, for more than 20 years, the cost of higher education has grown at a faster rate than that of health care.

So why does college cost so much? There's a widely held belief that high cost means high quality and that we can't reduce the cost of college without sacrificing quality. There is no evidence that this is true.

One of the signs that an industry has become "mature" is when more is spent without increasing or improving the output. This is the case in higher education, where costs continue to climb at a rate that is not proportionate to the number of graduates we're producing. And, there's no evidence that graduates are entering the workforce better prepared for their careers.

So can we make higher education more affordable without sacrificing quality?

Most discussions about college affordability focus on how to pay for it or cutting costs around the edges without actually changing the way we educate. While increasing financial aid and decreasing student loan rates help students pay for college, they simply delay the inevitable -- the average student graduates with about \$20,000 in student loan debt. And, we know these measures won't be enough; a 2010 study by McKinsey and Company estimates that to meet our goal of leading the world in college graduates again, we'll need to increase the productivity of higher education by 23 percent.

The answer lies in using technology to rethink the way we deliver higher education. Technology has increased the productivity of almost every other industry. However, in education, technology has generally been an add-on cost rather than being used to improve teaching and learning or as a means to increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Even the majority of online colleges and universities simply use technology to deliver traditional classroom education -- that's still instructor-led and based on a set time period -- through the Internet. As a result, most online higher education is no more affordable than traditional education.

If we hope to achieve significant improvement in the cost of higher education, we must use technology to create new, affordable models that customize learning to individual needs and expand access while maintaining quality. As a nation, we must support institutions that are what Clayton Christensen of Harvard calls "disruptive innovators" -- those that are using technology to provide high quality higher education at a lower cost.

At Western Governors University (WGU), we have used technology to create an affordable model for higher education. A nonprofit, online university established by a bipartisan group of U.S. governors, WGU is self-sustaining on tuition of \$6,000 per year for most of our programs, and while other institutions are increasing tuition annually, WGU's tuition has only increased once by \$200 since 2006.

The WGU learning model uses technology to provide interactive instruction that allows students to learn at their own pace. This model, called competency-based education, measures learning rather than time and is tailored to the individual needs of adult learners -- the average age of a WGU student is 36.

Instead of requiring all students to complete the same classes, all lasting four months, WGU has created a model that allows students to move quickly through material they already know so they can focus on what they still need to learn. Students advance by successfully completing assessments that measure competencies, such as exams, papers, and performance tasks. Faculty, all full-time, serve as mentors instead of lecturers, leading discussions, answering questions, and helping to motivate students and keep them on track. Because students can accelerate and there is no limit on the number of courses they may complete in each term, the time to graduation is much shorter -- the average time to complete a bachelor's degree is just 30 months, which also saves on tuition costs.

True affordability means delivering the same quality at a lower cost. The best way to gauge quality is to look at results. In addition to completing their degrees faster, students graduate from WGU prepared for work in their degree fields. In a recent survey of WGU graduates, approximately 65 percent reported that they had received a raise, promotion, or new job as a result of their WGU degree. And, in a 2011 survey of employers of WGU alumni, 98 percent rated the preparation of WGU graduates as equal to or better than graduates of other universities -- 42 percent rated it better.

The WGU model demonstrates that a high-quality college education can be affordable. It is time for all of us in the U.S. higher education community to take advantage of technology to rethink education. Technology offers us many opportunities to improve our output by customizing learning to individual needs, increasing productivity, expanding access, and most importantly, improving quality and affordability.

Dr. Robert W. Mendenhall is the President of Western Governors University, a nonprofit, online university with more than 32,000 students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In the past several months, Dr. Mendenhall has been invited to the White House and the Senate to present the WGU model and show how WGU uses technology to change the way higher education is delivered. WGU offers more than 50 bachelors and masters degrees in the high-demand fields of business, information technology, K-12 teacher education, and health professions, including nursing. www.wgu.edu.