The Real Double-Shot

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Blog: Higher Ed Gamma [1]

If the future of higher education is the question, Starbucks is not the answer.

While the Starbucks-Arizona State University partnership got all the news last week (and far too many "venti" jokes), I would argue that we actually missed the real big story: Western Governors University (WGU) got top marks for its teacher preparation programs from the US News & World Report's sponsored rankings done by the National Council on Teacher Quality [2] (NCTQ).

The Starbucks story is glamorous, with big money, big names, and a seemingly scalable model for corporate-university partnerships. But at heart it's simply yet another pathway into a pre-existing university system which will simply hire more adjunct faculty to teach more of the same courses in the same old way. While I am impressed by Starbucks' savvy embrace of the "access to higher education" storyline, I am dubious about any long-term implications.

Instead, I want to suggest that the real story is that WGU's competency-based secondary education program was, according to NCTQ, the number one teacher preparation program [3] in the country. That's right: an online, no classes, no faculty program bested UNC-Chapel Hill (#17), Vanderbilt (#43), and UC-Berkeley (#57).

There is, as you might imagine, a huge back-story to this, with many of us in the teacher preparation world scoffing [4] at NCTQ's rankings. Given that just ten percent of all teacher preparations submitted information to NCTQ, there are lots of reasons to be dubious. (My institution, for example, did not submit data.)

But I want to step above such specific details for a moment to suggest that it is relevant and, indeed, remarkable, that what used to be the distinctly peripheral idea of competency-based education in higher education has now become an assumed and expected part of the discussion. (Dare I say the word "disruption"?) Put otherwise, NCTQ did not blink, did not even deem it necessary to provide a footnote, did not question, that a competency-based program could be or should be ranked, much less ranked number one. It just accepted WGU as yet another teacher preparation program good enough to be compared with the heavy hitters of higher education.

That, dear reader, is the really big story because competency-based education, for better and worse, fundamentally undermines the notion of the credit hour and "seat time" as sacrosanct within higher education. Moreover, it does so through a mechanism – clear, definable, and measurable outcomes – that dovetails perfectly with the current storyline of access and accountability whereby "all students deserve a quality education."

In one respect this appears logical and benign. We want to be able to figure out whether students are learning what we say they should be learning. The skills, knowledge, and attitudes of future classroom teachers, for example, should be clear and assessable. WGU's has done a fine job in articulating them (see here [5]); and even though smart folks can disagree on the details, I have little to quibble about the big picture of what counts as "good enough" in such proficiencies.

This is, by the way, why I believe that competency-based education has been embraced by everyone from the US Department of Education's request for experimental sites [6], to the for-profit sector [7], to even AAC&U [8], which is currently developing a "portable and proficiency-based framework for general education." (I'm on one of the subcommittees.) Competency-based education is criterion-based, so it spells out clearly and concisely what proficiency looks like and asks the student to demonstrate it. Either you have it or you don't. Clarity. Efficiency. Objectivity.

Which, if you are a regular reader of this site, sounds a lot like what folks talk about when they talk about the disruption of higher education.

I've recently argued [9] in this space that we are on the brink of a fundamental reorientation of how we think about teaching and learning in higher education as digital learning technologies become ever more powerful and acceptable within higher education. The alignment of such technologies with the mainstreaming of competency-based education has massive implications. Namely, any seemingly clearly stated learning objective is automatable since any singular and solvable outcome can be reverse-engineered to scaffold students to the "right" answer.

In other words, I am pretty sure that one could develop a fairly automated, self-contained, adaptive learning management system with built-in tutoring support and real-time computer-based natural language assessment to help students learn about and then adequately describe, for example, "how learners construct knowledge and acquire and retain skills" and just about every other competency listed by WGU.

In so doing, such a system would allow any and every student on the planet to potentially gain the requisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes for becoming a classroom teacher. (To be fair, one usually also needs to have the "opportunity to practice" such competencies in an actual classroom.)

What this makes vivid – and highly problematic – is that competency-based education, much like the MOOC craze of the last two years, presumes that education is solely the "opportunity to learn" a predefined and well-defined set of learning objectives. Not to be too cliché about it, but this is the classic mistake of thinking of education as the filling of a pail rather than lighting of a fire, of transferring information rather than transforming knowledge.

It ignores that the "opportunity to change [10]" is the key to how we must prepare teachers, and, to be honest, how to take seriously the vision and mission of higher education. For competency-based education avoids the reality [11] that much of a quality education is about learning how to handle ill-defined problems with well-defined knowledge. This is why, for example, both MIT [12] and Harvard [13] have quietly but systematically begun to internally rethink the use of MOOCs as but another component of a blended residential education; for there is, as folks at MIT have come to acknowledge, a "magic beyond the MOOCs [14]."

In the end, Starbucks will not transform higher education. But at least they know that a good cup of coffee is more than just the drip-drip-drip of knowledge.

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