

WHITE PAPER

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Re-imagining higher education

On October 23, 2012, Tapestry Networks convened a small group of thought leaders selected to represent diverse perspectives on post-secondary education reform.¹ The discussion was held in New York City, and included leaders with experience in government, public and private institutions, foundations, and accreditation agencies. *For a complete list of participants, see the Appendix on page 5.*

Participants agreed that the US higher education system faces significant challenges in the absence of meaningful reform. These challenges are described in the white paper, “Value in postsecondary education,” which was shared with meeting participants in advance of October 23.

Discussion highlights

Participants offered several important insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the higher education sector.²

- **A “system in distress” is ripe for innovation**

Participants generally believe that the status quo is not financially sustainable for many traditional colleges, with the possible exception of elite institutions. One participant remarked, “Higher education is in distress. Most schools ignore this. ... Elites will do just fine; others will go out of business or combine.”

To overcome the challenges that threaten higher education, reformers must challenge long-held assumptions about the traditional model of delivering education. As one participant said, “If we can re-imagine the design and delivery, not little changes, now we’re talking about success.” Innovation is not just about technology. One leader said, “We’re going to find ways to validate smaller atomic pieces – to

¹ The meeting was facilitated by two Tapestry Networks partners, one of whom subsequently left the firm to found SkyBridge Associates. This paper draws on content originally published by Tapestry Networks in January 2013, and is used under license.

² The discussion was conducted under a modified version of the Chatham House Rule whereby names of participants and their affiliations are a matter of public record, but comments are not attributed to individuals or their organizations.

show that one year at college is worth something.” Another added, “Whether MOOCs³ or something else, there will be a myriad of ways to innovate.”

- **Employers have an opportunity to influence higher education reform**

Many participants believe that the active engagement of employers would not only benefit the workforce, but would also positively affect the entire higher education ecosystem. One education leader asserted that “we so ignore the market side of higher education that we forfeit the power to shape it.” Quality assurance has long been driven by the supply side (i.e., accrediting bodies and institutions); however, some felt that engaging the demand side (i.e., employers) might help ensure other meaningful measures of quality are considered. One participant asked, “How do we intrude on the demand side to change the experience of consumers, and how do we incentivize institutions?” Another participant agreed: “We need feedback from the field. Only with this information can we adjust.”

- **Competency may displace “seat time” as a measure of student achievement**

In lieu of traditional “seat time” measures, many participants want to explore how institutions could grant degrees based more on demonstrated competencies. In the words of one participant, “We need to recognize and validate skills. An employer will say, ‘Can you do that?’ Currently, the whole idea of a degree is based on seat time. We need to have the ability to document what people know.”

- **More degree-granting capacity is required to support workforce needs**

Though degree-granting institutions continue to educate students, their contributions do not currently meet the increasing workforce needs for high quality, competency-based degrees. One participant noted, “Twenty-three million more degrees will be needed in the next 30 to 40 years.” Moreover, several participants worried that “the system is not serving [underprivileged students] ... We need to give opportunity to more Americans.” Otherwise, “the consequences are not only devastating for [underprivileged citizens], but also for our economy.” Another participant asserted, “We need programs focused on learning outcomes to produce more degrees at lower costs, while reducing inefficiency.”

- **Reliable, transparent, and comprehensive data will inform decision making**

Many participants highlighted the value of data, since, as one participant noted, “Without data, you can’t hold anyone accountable.” The group recognized that transparent, reliable data across institutions would reveal important insights. “We

³ MOOCs refer to massive open online courses, offered by organizations such as Coursera, Udacity, and edX.

need to move forward to an integrated data system. We're in the dark, throwing darts at a dartboard."

Suggestions varied, but focused mostly on better integrating data sources over a longer period of time, to, as one participant recommended, "develop a system to collect data as students graduate and work." Another participant said, "Data and outcomes of job placement and earnings need to be made available to institutions. Maybe then institutions will say, 'Maybe we need to cut that program.'"

- **Federal and state governments can be levers for change**

One participant said that change initiatives are well advised to "follow the money," much of which is provided directly or indirectly by governments. Even though state and federal higher education policies would ideally be complementary, one participant said, "I don't know how to bring the federal and state governments together, they are so different. Federal funding keeps going up and up and the states are starving. There is a real philosophical and fiscal disconnect." Moreover, one participant noted that "the government can have a role in making higher education important to employers."

Several participants noted that federal Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization is likely to begin when Congress returns in January 2013, which will present an opportunity to influence public policy. One participant said, "Congress is woefully uninformed. We need to get smart about how to finance higher education. The people around the table need to understand that Congress is starving for new ideas." Others concurred, such as one who stated that "employers need to be engaged in reauthorization" and that "we need input from a new set of players."

Next steps

Many agreed, as one participant said, that it is important to bring "more people at the table than ever before," because "sectors will not change unless part of a broader effort." One participant asserted, "People are starved for a group like this."

Participants generally agreed that the meeting set the stage for future conversations. Others said that while there has historically been "little conversation between Hatfields and McCoys [i.e., traditional players and reformers], the crisis situation has finally whet their appetites." Participants said that subsequent meetings should be longer – perhaps a whole day – and include 5–10 more stakeholders, including employers and federal and state government representatives.

While many participants agreed that more discussion was necessary, several also urged an informed but action-oriented approach to reform, with a "spirit of innovation," including trials and pilot programs. Several participants expressed a desire to convene a much broader group to obtain a clearer picture of the entire landscape – challenges, efforts

(present and future), and experiments. Participants were hopeful that such clarity would provide the group an opportunity to collaborate, coordinate, and concentrate steps toward reform. One participant observed that foundations and institutions are funding many experiments, and that “there is a role to be played by laying out areas of agreement on big problems...someone to be the scorekeeper for big projects that address those problems.”

One participant said, “We need a rallying cry to make [the initiative] useful ... Focusing on [HEA] reauthorization would be interesting.” Another recommended “[using] reauthorization as a timetable and focus,” particularly as “you only get so many policy windows.” After all, said another thought leader, “Our higher education financing systems are not organized today around a set of policy goals.”

* * *

Higher education change initiatives have generally been met with, as one participant put it, “complacency or despair.” However, one leader said that the willingness of elite institutions to support MOOCs has “made online education intellectually respectable. All the [political] back and forth may be overtaken by economics and events ... I wouldn’t be as pessimistic as some would have you believe.”

Contact

Please contact us if you have feedback on this paper or if you would like to get involved in this important initiative. We look forward to speaking with you.

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Appendix: Participants

The following individuals participated in the meeting:

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About this document

This meeting summary is published by SkyBridge Associates to stimulate timely, substantive discussions about the choices confronting stakeholders in higher education. The ultimate value of this summary lies in its power to help all constituencies develop their own informed points of view on these important issues. Anyone who receives this meeting summary may share it with those in his or her own network. The more institutions, employers, accreditors, government agencies, and other thought leaders in higher education who become systematically engaged in this dialogue, the more value will be created for all.

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