IMS Global Learning Consortium

Series on Learning Impact

Subscribe to IMS articles and interviews at http://www.imsglobal.org/articles/

Perspectives on the Progression of Learning in Higher Education:

An Interview with John Lombardi

John V. Lombardi is a recognized name in higher education. He currently serves as president of the Louisiana State University System, overseeing 10 campuses in five cities as well as 10 public hospitals located throughout the state. A noted Latin American historian, he also serves as a professor of history at Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College. Prior to his current position, Dr. Lombardi was chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, president of the University of Florida, and provost of Johns Hopkins University. A member of IMS Global's Executive Strategic Council, Dr. Lombardi will serve as keynote speaker at the organization's global Learning Impact Conference in Austin, Texas, 12 May 2008. IMS Global recently talked with Dr. Lombardi about his perspectives on the future of higher education teaching and learning.

Published 25 January 2008

IMS Global: You've served at nearly every administrative level during your career in higher education while maintaining a foothold in the classroom. During that time, what would you say have been some of the most significant changes by which learning occurs?

JVL: The process of education (learning, teaching, whatever we call it) is probably unchanged from the beginning of time. We get someone who knows something, put them together with someone else who wants to know something, and ask them to work together. The result is always the same: the teacher learns something from teaching the student, and the student learns something from working with the teacher.

The important part of this equation is that teaching and learning is always an individualized process, no matter how many students or teachers are involved or how automated the process appears to be. Students only learn what they want to learn, and while we can do many things to improve the student's ability to learn what they want to learn, we can rarely force the student to learn something they don't want to learn. Equally, even when students want to learn the same things, have the same commitment, and work equally hard, they will come away with a different amount or type or quality of learning because they are different people with different backgrounds, expectations about their lives, and preparation for the learning experience.

This truth was well understood when higher education was primarily an elite process for preparing a small fraction of the population, but as we became more and more persuaded that education and especially higher education was at least an opportunity that everyone deserved (if not a right), we shifted to thinking that by increasing the scale we could homogenize the process to produce standardized outcomes from non-standard inputs. It is this shift that has driven much of the conversation about higher education in recent times.

We now want to think that everyone who enters the higher education system can be processed, reminiscent of an industrial model, in a standardized way to produce graduates who have common levels of quality performance. This reflects how we produce movies, cars, computers, and other consumer products, where we have learned how to use statistical quality control to produce uniform high quality. When we search for similar outcomes in higher education we end up attempting the impossible because it is hard to produce standardized human output. At the same time, when we went from elite higher education to mass higher education, we assumed a responsibility to deal with the wide variations in human talent and interest and ability that came to us, and so we have struggled to identify methods of measuring our success, improving our performance, and understanding the failures.

The higher education community and its many constituencies have found this process difficult, in large part because we have been reluctant to recognize that higher education is a name without common meaning and covers a very wide range of institutions, programs, student populations, and the like. Learning within these environments has become highly differentiated in many process ways, even if standardized in its formal structure. So we have distance education, computer based education, adult education, part time learners, residential colleges, vocational education, pre-professional education, and an almost endless continuum of

institutional types and delivery mechanisms to produce what goes under the deceptively uniform label of higher education.

IMS Global: Has technology during the past 25 years changed the way in which we learn? And if so, how?

JVL: Technology changes the way we approach the content of education, but whether it changes in some fundamental fashion the way we learn is not clear. For example, when we went from lectures to books, those people who learned best from listening had to adapt to learn from reading. Now that we are moving from books to online, video content, and similar electronic methods, those who learned from text have to adapt themselves to learn (and teach) in different formats.

We old people are sure that the new ways are less effective, because we learned with the old. But the new generation thinks that our focus on linear text misses key elements of the world in which they live and will live. The constant adjustment of education to technologically mediated tools is not new, even if the advent of ever more sophisticated tools challenges our ability to effectively adapt them to standardized long-standing curricular learning goals. Technology changes the way we learn in that it forces us to use the new tools, even if we use them to do what we've always done in teaching and learning.

IMS Global: This being a campaign year, if you could sit down and have a meaningful discussion with the next president of the United States, what would you suggest should be his or her priorities with regard to improving higher education in the U.S.?

JVL: Improving higher education is very simple: generate more money. While it is surely true that we should be efficient, effective, and accountable, it's a fiction that better management can substitute for highly inadequate funding. It is possible to do badly even if well funded, but it is exceptionally difficult to do well with poor funding.

Obviously the higher education community needs to find ways to demonstrate its effectiveness, but at the same time, colleges and universities need to insist that different institutions with different populations and different missions have different metrics. If an elite residential college with a huge endowment does not graduate almost everyone, it's probably not doing a good job. If an urban college with a high proportion of under prepared, part-time, and working students, graduates 30 percent of these students after six years, it is probably doing an exceptional job. What students know when they graduate is also something that requires our attention, and the responsibility for defining what they know and determining whether they know it is a faculty and institutional responsibility that should not be delegated to centralized agencies who always create inappropriate measures.

So I'd tell the president, invest money, require accountability, but try to stay out of control or regulation.

IMS Global: Your scholarly discipline is Latin American History. Based on your experience, how would you say American higher education compares with those of other nations? What best practices should we be emulating? Is there opportunity for greater collaboration between countries?

JVL: The biggest change in international higher education has been the recogni-

tion around the world that high powered academic institutions produce major economic and social benefits for the countries that sustain them. The U.S. Land Grant movement, the success of public and private research universities, and the widespread commitment to access to higher education opportunity in the U.S. has demonstrated the power of this combination of commitments. We now see countries throughout the world becoming increasingly competitive in recruiting scholars, students, and support, recognizing that there is no substitute for high quality international academic performance. The result has been a proliferation of investments in institutions around the world, many of which now have internationally competitive programs in many fields of science, engineering, the professions, and the social sciences and humanities. This is good for the world, but it challenges the American higher education industry to be even more competitive.

IMS Global: Online enrollment is increasing at a rapid pace as residential enrollment on today's campuses has largely plateaued. How do you think these changes will impact our society? And what form will future learning take?

JVL: While the higher education marketplace continues to diversify in terms of institutional and delivery structures, this development simply expands the populations that have access to much of the content of higher education. These changes make content more easily and readily available to many people, especially those who work in careers or who do not have the financial or other opportunities to participate in traditional higher education. One of the consequences of this is that many traditional institutions will become more complex, offering not only traditional residential programs but also extensive online programs to expand their scale beyond what's possible on a physical campus.

As online delivery continues to expand, it's likely that we will see an increasing specialization in the educational content available to consumers. The generic liberal arts education or the ordinary business or engineering degree, built on the assumption of full-time residential attendance at institutions where content is only one part of the service provided, will not necessarily serve many new consumers of higher education content. These newer consumers will want specific content, for specific purposes, and will seek out programs that deliver content with minimal extraneous enhancement.

One impact of the separation of content from the context of delivery is that the continuing fragmentation of the higher education marketplace will accelerate. The prestige institutions will maintain and probably increase their exclusivity, the alternative delivery mechanisms will gain market share, and the less prestigious traditional institutions will struggle to maintain a place in this highly differentiated market.

The separation of content from context will also change our understanding of the result of post secondary education. The simple notion of a baccalaureate degree being the token of having done something significant (college) will probably give way to a wide variety of outcome degrees or certificates of competency or other tokens of achievement that for many will be more than sufficient, or may be the additional value added onto a traditional degree to give an edge in the employment market. How that works out is not

easy to predict. We could see a retail marketplace for higher education with elite stores that charge high prices for high touch services and the presumption of high quality, generic stores, or supermarkets of higher education that provide content of high quality at low prices with low touch and little attention to prestige, and similar manifestations of highly differentiated consumer product or consumer service marketplaces.

The challenges to regulators will be significant, and we'll see lots of specific outcome testing to ensure that the business graduates who profess a certain level of accounting knowledge actually have it. The current exams for nurses and other professionals, CPA's for example, are models for this, and as society seeks specific competence for specific purposes, colleges will find themselves more and more focused on producing people who can pass those competence, content-based exams. While we'll pass through a critical thinking kind of testing phase, this will likely give way to much more specific knowledge-based testing that will give employers guidance on the skill sets of the people who they want to hire, and as those skill sets change, the tests will change, forcing people to return to the educational services sector to acquire the content to pass the next round of competency test.

Equally significant will be what we do with the production of knowledge, the research engine that has been the primary force for American global success for many generations. This research engine, constructed primarily on the base of the traditional college/university model, may become much less integrated into the educational process and migrate into more focused, research intensive enterprises affiliated with or part of universities, but not necessarily part of the educational enterprise. This will respond to the tremendous cost of supporting research and the inability of institutions to offer lifetime tenure to researchers whose output is unpredictable over long periods. Instead, we'll see research organizations with faculty who have 5-year rolling tenure, based on their performance in the competitive world of research. If they continue to succeed, they will continue to be supported, but if they fall out of the competition, they will be asked to find alternative employment. This is also a reflection of the specialization that is characteristic of highly diversified and highly competitive industries.

Similarly, the role of faculty will continue to change, with the proportion of fully tenured full-time faculty, outside of elite institutions, continuing to decline in favor of contract or contingent faculty who teach and have the skills to teach within the multiple delivery mechanisms and institutions that have appeared and will continue to proliferate. These faculty will find ways to enhance their value by focusing on high productivity in content delivery, on the maintenance of expertise, and on skills related to the creation of content for the various delivery institutions. These individuals may well end up well paid, although at present, they have not found a way to translate the high lifetime value of the traditional tenured faculty career into an equally high value proposition for a contingent faculty career. The competitive context for faculty, in any case, will clearly become more intense as it has for employees of other high value consumer service industries.

About IMS

In service to the community of organizations and individuals enhancing learning worldwide, IMS GLC is a global, nonprofit, member organization that provides leadership in shaping and growing the learning industry through community development of standards, promotion of innovation, and research into best practices.

Citation

To reference this article please cite:
Humes, L. R. (2008). An Interview with John Lombardi. IMS Global Learning Consortium Series on Learning Impact. 25 January 2008. from http://www.imsglobal.org/articles/25Jan2008Lombardi1.cfm

tel: +1 407.362.7783
fax: +1 407.333.1365
http://www.imsglobal.org/articles/