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The Next Big Thing: Crisis and Transformation in American Higher Education

By John V. Lombardi August 3, 2009
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The serial crises that affect higher education in America carry with them an accompanying enthusiasm for big thinking. Big thinking involves the expansion of good ideas into major movements, transformations, inflection points, and other moments of significance. Big ideas serve many purposes. They offer hooks for conferences, papers, and symposia sponsored by associations and foundations, each seeking a position on the leading edge of revolutionary change. For another, big ideas highlight the innovative impact of specific exemplary programs, expanding a good idea within the context of a specific institution into a major next big thing. Underneath all of this lies our natural tendency to identify our lives and our current circumstances with major transformations, giving our struggles significance beyond the momentary angst of coping with whatever bad news arrived yesterday.

Historians and old people recognize that it is difficult to know whether what we experience today will mark an actual major reconfiguration in our world. We have been through multiple change moments in the last 40 years in higher education, many of them presented to those of us living the life of the academy as transformative. While what we do today is not exactly what we did 40 years ago, and while higher education as an industry is in many ways different from what it was in the late 1960s, it is also very much the same.

The four-year paradigm, challenged by many alternative modes of instruction, nonetheless remains the gold standard of “college” experience. The balance between the core curriculum and the major, under constant revision in content over these years, remains the standard paradigm for the college degree. The structure of our industry, with its two-year, four-year, research university institutions, and its public and private not-for-profit sectors remains much the same, although we watch the growth of a parallel industry of for-profit enterprises with interest. The balance among our revenue streams has shifted some, although we still rely on tuition and fees, state and federal subsidies, philanthropic donations, and earned income. We spend our money as we have always spent it, primarily on the people who provide the services our students and other constituents demand, although the exact distribution to direct instruction and other academic support, regulatory, student amenity, technology, sports, and research have changed over time and vary markedly by institutional type and sector.

Of course, many things are different today than they were in the late 1960s. Our students have different worldviews, different technological requirements, and different social modalities. Our parents are more engaged and involved, our

society is more concerned about the universal availability of college education, and the faith of consumers in the quality of our product is somewhat reduced. The composition of our faculty has changed to include more contingent instructors and the composition of our students has changed to include more first-generation, minority, and female students. As our industry has become larger and larger, we have spawned more complex educational structures and alternative modes of teaching and validating student achievement.

Yet, the changes we see today, enhanced by transformations in the world economy around us, are much more evolutionary than revolutionary. Looking back on previous crisis moments and the clarion calls for transformation or the dramatic declarations of turning points in our industry, we find some solace for our current sense of catastrophic angst. Change comes to higher education slowly, it comes incrementally, it comes differentially by institutional type and character, it happens fast in some parts of our world and much slower in others, and some of the rapid change we feel turns out to be transitory, a momentary spike in behavior that over time drifts back towards the longer-term norm.

Yes, these terrible economic times are indeed challenging and they will require significant action by institutions to weather the momentary storm. The sense of industry-wide crisis, nonetheless, is perhaps exaggerated. The real damage and transformation of these moments takes place in the micro realm. Moments like these change the lives of individual faculty, staff, and students. Individual careers fall off course, individual student opportunities decline, and individual employees lose their jobs and must find others. Buildings decay, programs stagnate and some die, a few marginal colleges disappear from the list of institutions, and a few institutions, making better choices than others do, improve their performance. When it is over, ten years from now, and we re-read discussions of the big ideas of the 2008-2012 moment, we'll find traces of them on the surface of this geological industry that is higher education.

What then is the optimal behavior of institutions suffering through the peaks and valleys of these serial crises? Some common sense guidelines may be helpful. The primary imperative surprises none of us: Pay attention to the fundamentals, all of which speak to the competitive performance of institutions within their sector and subsector of the higher education industry.

- a. Enroll students.
- b. Graduate students.
- c. Focus on revenue.
- d. Track expenses precisely.
- e. Measure faculty, staff, and student performance.
- f. Understand the difference between core activity and enhancements.
- g. Do the core activities first and do them well.
- h. Innovate to improve the fundamentals.
- i. Save speculative academic enterprises for the good times.
- j. Carefully define the institutional mission.
- k. Compete within the mission on quality and productivity against the best.

It is good to attend crisis conferences, seminars, and meetings on the next big thing. We all need to worry about the global transformation of higher education, but it is even more important for each institution to stay closely focused on the performance that produces high quality and high productivity measured against a clear and precise understanding of the marketplace for its mission.

Big, industry-wide ideas are great. They make headlines; they provide the illusion of being involved in transformational times. When the moment passes, the publicity dies down, and the pundits turn to other crises, the college and university winners will be those who paid attention to the fundamentals all along.