
Non Traditional Education: A View From The Market

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Abstract

For many decades America enjoyed a well-deserved reputation as a leader in technological innovation and creativity and most countries of the world looked toward the United States for indications of what was likely to become the next global trend. Clearly, America's pre-eminence in many areas of technology has been challenged by such countries as Japan, Germany and more recently China. However, many innovations and developments of a socio-economic nature also tend to have their origins in the U.S. and are frequently a harbinger of what is likely to occur in three, five or even ten years hence in other parts of the world.

During the past two to three decades there has been a steadily increasing number of educational institutions that provide students with the opportunity to earn degrees without having to conform to the elaborate set of policies, procedures and regulations long associated with so called traditional institutions of higher learning.

The impetus for this phenomenon has been generated by a changing market and educators, regardless of their philosophical persuasion, should be cognizant of these changes in consumer demand. From an economist's perspective it could be argued that higher education is one of a very small number of service industries with suppliers in both the public and private sectors. One critical difference exists, however, between the suppliers of higher education and the suppliers of most other services. Whereas suppliers of most other services are usually quick to respond to changes in demand, the "executives" who control the education industry have, until quite recently, been able to totally disregard market forces. They have displayed a great reluctance to alter the nature of the product and the method of distribution. In economic terms they have enjoyed a virtual monopoly on supply. In the vernacular, they have been "the only game in town."

The demands of the market have changed, however, and the significant increase in the number of non-traditional schools is a direct result of the failure of traditional schools to respond and adjust to a changing market. Describing it as a major revolution in higher learning may be overstating the case but clearly there is significant change occurring in the method by which many people are achieving academic recognition.

Traditional institutions of higher learning have long resisted recognition of non-traditional education and their faculty and administrators have generally taken the position that any institution not conforming to traditional methods and values was just another "degree mill." There is no denying that degree mills do exist and will continue to do so as long as there are

individuals who are naïve or intellectually dishonest enough to provide a market. To simply label all non-traditional schools as degree mills is, however, to ignore a force that is beginning to have a significant impact on the established system of post-secondary education in North America.

What then has created this expanding market for non-traditional approaches to higher education? Simply stated, the market consists of the multitude of people who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to follow the traditional path toward the acquisition of a degree. The specific reasons are obviously legion but the majority of cases would probably fall within two or three broad categories.

The process probably began during the protracted involvement of the U. S. in the Vietnam conflict when thousands of young men had their education interrupted by military duty. Many were drafted as 18 year old boys who returned three or four years later as hardened men. For many, furthering their education was extremely important but returning to a traditional classroom environment held little appeal. Clearly, there was pent up demand for an alternative approach.

Many others are denied access to higher education because of economic restraints. Later in life they may develop a desire to further their education but frequently find themselves married with dependent children, a mortgage and other financial commitments and returning to a traditional institution is simply not feasible. Their motivation may stem from a desire for career advancement or for self-fulfillment. The undeniable fact, however, is that an individual's circumstances can change markedly over the course of a few short years and what may have been a reasonable and practical approach to academic recognition five or ten years ago may no longer be so due to altered circumstances. To these individuals are we to say; "too bad, but you had the opportunity and you failed to take advantage of it," or should educators make an effort to accommodate those individuals who have the desire and ability but whose circumstances preclude them from pursuing the traditional path?

Non-traditional institutions are far less rigid and their administrators far more willing to accommodate the specific needs of the individual student. Examples of this greater flexibility are that students are usually able to begin a program at the time of their choice and to proceed at their own pace. Commonly, examinations may be taken or projects submitted when the student feels he/she is ready, rather than having to conform to specific schedules and deadlines.

A salient question centers on why traditional colleges and universities have so vigorously opposed recognition of their non-traditional counterparts. One of the ironies of the academic world is that our traditional universities are institutions from which innovative thinking and ultimately social change are expected to emanate. Yet, universities are more rigid and resistant to change within their own structure than perhaps any institution in modern society.

Part of the answer probably has to do with the attitude: this is the way I did it so everyone else should do it the same way. The two most significant developments that have allowed for and have promoted the surge in non-traditional education have been the internet and the personal computer. In the span of a few short years millions of households acquired PC's and access to the internet which ushered in the era of distance learning. The correspondence course quickly became obsolete. A student could now enroll in a university level course in the comfort of his/her own home. Not only was a wide range of goods and services available via E commerce but so was a post-secondary education. The marketers of non-traditional education were also quick to seize the opportunity.

In discussions I have had with traditional academicians, the most common bone of contention seems to be the granting of academic credit for what is usually referred to as "life experience;" a practice common with most non-traditional schools. Simply stated, the issue centers on whether or not one can acquire academic-type knowledge, skills and wisdom without necessarily attending lectures, writing term papers and following a rigid set of rules and procedures. In other words; can such things as reading, job experience, travel and general life experiences contribute toward one's education? Most objective people would, I think, answer in the affirmative. In defence of the traditionalist view, however, the expression "life experience" does contain an element of vagueness. Should all experiences one has in life be granted academic recognition or only specific types of experiences? If only specific types; then what types?

The problem becomes more manageable if the expression "life experience" is replaced with "life accomplishments." To simply visit a foreign country may be an interesting experience but, on its own, is hardly worthy of academic credit. If, however, a visit to a foreign country resulted in an article being published, then the experience has resulted in a tangible accomplishment and the granting of some academic credit would be reasonable and defensible. If a visit to a third world country was to participate in an aid program, such as the Peace Corps, then I would support the granting of some academic credit for this endeavor. Similarly, it would be reasonable to grant some credit to an individual who has spent many years as a Boy Scout or Girl Guide leader. It is hard to imagine someone successfully undertaking this responsibility without acquiring some skills in teaching, counselling and organizing along the way. I find it somewhat ironic that traditional universities bestow honorary doctorates on people who may have no academic qualifications but who have achieved something significant, yet refuse to award academic recognition to others who have accomplished something meaningful and wish to enroll in a degree program.

If one accepts the premise that certain accomplishments are indeed worthy of academic credit, the next logical question involves the extent to which these accomplishments should be equated with academic credit. In other words, how can this be quantified? To the best of my knowledge, unanimity on this issue remains elusive but dialogue should be encouraged not only between administrators of traditional and non-traditional institutions, but also within the non-traditionalist community.

Throughout recorded history there have been hundreds of gifted individuals; composers, writers, inventors, historians, musicians, explorers, etc. who have made outstanding contributions to human knowledge without benefit of attending, let alone graduating from, a university. If George Gershwin had attempted to enroll in a degree program in musicology after he had composed "The Rhapsody in Blue," would it not have been reasonable to grant him some credit toward a degree based upon his obvious talent and accomplishments? The same argument could be put forward in support of a Shakespeare or Hemingway if they had attempted to enroll in a university's English Dept. or if Henry Ford, Alexander Graham Bell or Thomas Edison had decided to pursue a degree in engineering.

It is interesting to note, however, that many traditional schools have taken a cautious step or two down the non-traditional path. Many universities now offer "executive" MBA programs where classes are held in the evenings and on weekends. Designed to meet the specific needs of working people, these programs can usually be completed in two or three years of part time study without the candidate necessarily having had any previous academic training. By contrast, the traditional approach requires two years of full time study plus an undergraduate degree or about six years of full time university attendance.

The justification for the shorter time frame is that those accepted into the program have had considerable experience in the business world and have presumably learned a considerable amount about the world of business and industry.

Apparently life experience does have academic value, at least in the business world. The concept of awarding academic credit for employment and life experience was given additional credence by Robert Luke, Assistant Vice President, Research and Innovation at George Brown College in an Op-Ed piece in the October 11, 2012 issue of The Toronto Globe and Mail. Mr. Luke stated, "students should be able to move freely between institutions and get credit for work and experiences in the real world."

Another example can be found in the health care field. Traditionally, nurses acquired their skills during a three year practically oriented program at a school of nursing. Upon completion of the program they became Registered Nurses. More recently, however, nursing schools have largely disappeared and now the more common approach is to complete a four year university program culminating in a BS degree in nursing. Virtually all universities today will grant academic credit to a Registered Nurse who enters the BS in nursing program. Once again, job experience is accorded academic recognition.

There are other indications of a crack developing in the traditional armor. Taxing authorities, in most cases, allow students to deduct tuition and other expenses incurred in pursuit of non-traditional education.

Major corporations, most of which encourage their employees to pursue additional academic training, now provide subsidies for courses taken at non-traditional Institutions. Public sector employees frequently receive the same benefit.

So called "mature student" programs have also become more common in recent years. Many of these programs allow students to challenge courses by writing a comprehensive examination without having taken the course. This concept has been formalized in the U.S through the establishment of the College Level Examination Program which claims that 2800 colleges and universities award credit to students who pass their examination program. This program consists of 34 exams in two categories (general and specific subject).

In an Op-ed piece in the January 30, 2012 issue of the Victoria Times Colonist, Steve Grundy, a V.P. and Provost at Royal Roads University, a partly non-traditional institution in Victoria, B. C., states that "the digital revolution offers challenges to the traditional Campus experience." He goes on to say that MOOC's (massive open online courses), whose origin can be traced to Athabasca University and the University of Manitoba circa 2008, "are posing a threat to traditional institutions of higher learning." My view is that this may be a bit of an over reaction but I certainly concur with Mr. Grundy's general thesis that a non-traditional revolution in post-secondary education is definitely underway."

With thousands of students enrolled in a particular online course, assessing a student's progress and ensuring assignments are actually completed by that student are two of many issues that could contribute to a "administrative nightmare." The value of MOOC's, however, is that they provide an opportunity to explore the nature of any number of disciplines and make an informed decision concerning whether there is an area the student may wish to pursue.

What then is the probable future of non-traditional education in North America? It is highly unlikely these schools will disappear. To the contrary, it is more likely they will continue to proliferate as they have over the past quarter century because of changing market demand. Many traditional educators will likely continue to ignore the issue for as long as possible and will no doubt take every opportunity to discredit these "upstart" institutions. Non-traditional schools are often looked upon with skepticism by some traditional academicians, whereas many advocates of the non-traditional approach view their detractors as narrow minded reactionaries who have closed their minds to what is an innovative and potentially revolutionary approach to higher learning.

One final issue that needs to be addressed is the question of accreditation. It is actually a two part question.

Is the institution accredited?

If yes, then accredited by whom?

Some observers have even suggested a third question; who accredits the accreditors?

The answer to that question is often that they are self appointed.

There are a number of accreditation agencies that deal primarily with non-traditional, distance learning institutions and many of these are approved by state (U.S.) or provincial (Canada) authorities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to evaluate the credibility of the various accreditation agencies in North America but for those who wish to pursue this issue, the following are examples of accreditation agencies.

- The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
- National Association for Private Non-Traditional Schools and Colleges
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission

I see no reason to believe that accreditors assessing the merits of non-traditional institutions would be any less rigorous or competent than their counterparts assessing traditional colleges and universities.

It will be clear to anyone reading this piece that I am, with some reservations, an advocate of non-traditional approaches to post secondary education. I am, however, opposed to the granting of post graduate degrees to those who have not earned a traditional bachelor's degree. In my judgement an important component of a university education is the direct contact and camaraderie one develops with other students and faculty members. Unfortunately, this personalized exchange of ideas is often absent from the non traditional model.

I am also familiar with some universities that consider themselves traditional that offer Masters degrees in what are not generally regarded as academic disciplines and where the student has not completed a traditional undergraduate degree. Some examples are; leadership, international peacekeeping and conflict resolution. I am not disputing the importance or significance of these areas but they are not academic disciplines. I could certainly support a course, for example, on leadership in which the achievements of such outstanding leaders as Winston Churchill, Franklin

Roosevelt, Lee Iacocca and Alfred P. Sloane were reviewed and analysed. I might even be convinced of the validity of an undergraduate "major" in leadership but a Masters degree?; I'm afraid not. The "market" for these types of Masters degrees is largely made up of public sector employees whose employment contracts provide for automatic pay raises upon completion of any post graduate degree.

During 2013, two of the most aggressive non- traditional institutions have been the University of Phoenix which was founded in 1976 but did not launch its distance learning program until 1989. The other is Capella University. In addition to magazine advertising, the University of Phoenix has run a series of television commercials featuring recent graduates who "gush" about how their careers have been accelerated since they graduated. Each commercial ends with the graduate stating, "my name is _____ and I'm a Phoenix." One might wonder if they have recently risen from the ashes.

Many consumers of higher education are demanding change and has been proven so often in the past; when conflict exists between supplier and consumer, it is usually the consumer who ultimately prevails.

References

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