

SPECIAL FEATURE ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
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ILLUMINATING THE LIFELONG LEARNING MOVEMENT

The Evolution of the College Degree Toward Competency

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Undergraduate college degrees haven't changed much in more than a century. They are based on credit hours and seat time, and they consist of collections of courses that provide both curricular breadth and content knowledge. Connections between learning outcomes and course structures are only loosely coupled. In some majors, such as engineering, courses and outcomes are connected a bit more tightly; in other majors, such as those in the arts and sciences, the connections are looser. The general structure, however, is remarkably consistent across most institutions.

Graduate degrees have changed more than undergraduate degrees, but their primary structure remains similarly configured around structured courses loosely tied to learning outcomes. Professional masters are increasingly popular, and professional doctorates are beginning to become more common. Although graduate degrees tend to be more focused than undergraduate degrees, and rely more heavily on learning-by-doing (true both for professional degrees and the research PhD), credit hours and seat time define the bulk of the learning experience.

Until very recently, online modes of delivery haven't done much to change college degrees or their structure. Most online degrees are traditional degrees

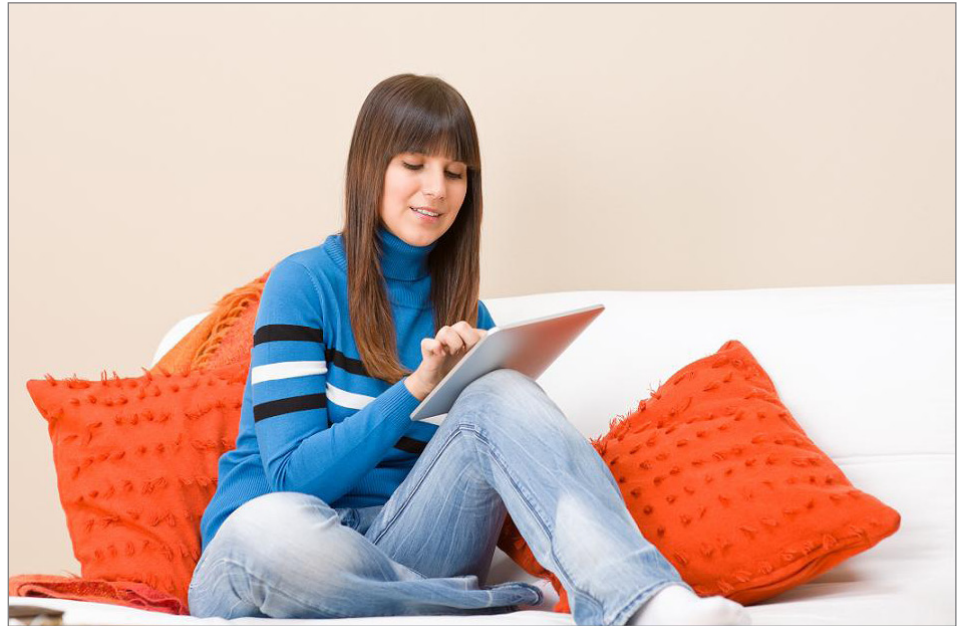


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The traditional, seat time-based higher education degree does not suit today's higher education marketplace or students. As higher education evolves, so too must its degrees, toward a focus on competency and skill mastery.

repackaged in online delivery modes. Curricular structures, credit counts and even individual course structures remain very similar to the face-to-face courses that have been offered on college campuses for decades.

However, there is a lot of pressure to change the traditional model. Higher education has become unaffordable for many; the relevancy and applicability of degrees to jobs is widely questioned; and standards of accountability and outcomes are increasingly used as lenses through which the value of college is judged. Despite the criticisms, however, higher education continues to be one key factor in determining individual economic prosperity and growth.[1] How, then, should higher education adapt, and what should the

degrees of the future be like?

In formulating an answer, it is important to notice how people really live today, rather than imagining what college life was like a hundred years ago and trying to apply that picture to a more modern time. A few elements that truly distinguish the present from the past include longevity, technology and globalization.

People live much longer today than they ever have in the past. As a result, the life experience is different. As the psychologist and social theorist Daniel Yankelovich noted,

"The old pattern of attending college

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from 18 to 22 and then going directly to a job, career, marriage, child rearing, and 'settling down' is evaporating before our eyes. Students are stretching out their higher education. Three-quarters of today's college students are nontraditional in some way — they delay enrollment after high school, attend college part time, or are considered financially independent. Many are already working, and more than a quarter are parents.”[2]

Although we still call them nontraditional, the adult student is now the mainstream student, and re-learning across the lifespan isn't just a luxury or avocation; is it a necessity for employment and economic prosperity.

Technology has blurred traditional lines dividing time and place. Social interaction, communication, information and commerce are immediate and ubiquitous, and we use technology to broadly extend our physical and mental capacities. The abundance of information, searchable in nuanced ways, means that a relevant education must rest on knowledge utilization rather than simple access. Technology must to be an integral part of the evolution of higher education.

Job competition is global. When workers compete for jobs today, they compete not only with their neighbors or workers in nearby neighborhoods; the field is extended to workers in other countries and with machines that can do the same work, but with more precision and at lower costs. A key facet of the value of higher education is the extent to which a degree improves one's competitive advantage and, given globalization, the competition is extremely high and continues to rise.

If higher education degrees are to continue to be socially and economically important and necessary, they must

reflect these and other current realities. The degrees of tomorrow (and that really means tomorrow, and not scores of years in the future) must be as ubiquitous as social media, as relevant as any job training program, as malleable as our fast-changing world and as accessible as any website anywhere in the world. Degrees must, in demonstrable and direct ways, help people be better, faster and smarter. College should help people be better people in the real and current world, and it should support what we value most: family, community, health, wellness and prosperity.

On March 19, 2013, the U.S. Department of Education issued a statement on competency-based education. The Department supports competency-based programs and is helping to create pathways for students and institutions to access federal financial aid funds for programs that are neither credit-based nor time-based. Competency-based programs, such as the University of Wisconsin Flexible Option program, are the next step in the evolution of college degrees. By focusing on knowledge mastery rather than seat time, competency-based programs reflect the current focus on outcomes. Competency-based programs also mesh well with the pervasive nature of information and knowledge acquisition, and they enable people of all ages to demonstrate what they know, identify what they need to learn and how to move toward mastery.

Competency-based programs are an important evolutionary step in higher education. Undoubtedly, higher education will evolve in other ways as well, and current time-based and credit-based programs will be around for the foreseeable future. However, the landscape is changing, and higher education must continue to change with it in ways that truly provide what students of all ages, in all locations, and of all abilities, need.

References

[1] See http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm for a summary from the US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics

[2] Yankelovich, D. (2005, November 25). Ferment and Change: Higher Education in 2015. *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 52, Issue 14, P. B6



DAVID SCHEJBAL

Current Position and Past Experience

Since 2007, David Schejbal has been the Dean of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Schejbal helped launch the new UW Flexible Option, the first system-wide competency-based, self-paced learning option in the nation. Prior to coming to Wisconsin, Schejbal spent eight years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There he was associate vice chancellor and director of Continuing Education. This followed seven years at Northwestern University, where Schejbal held positions as the Associate Dean of the University College and the Director of Summer Sessions and Special Programs.