Smart Leadership for Higher Education in Difficult Times

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THE CONTEXT FOR PLANNING

One decade into the twenty first century, higher education is facing an abundance of challenges. Many concern our own house but more profoundly, the tremors in the greater society continue to shake that house, right to the foundations in many cases. Planning, particularly long-range planning, and our decision-making have become increasingly difficult given the deep changes that continue to occur on so many fronts.

With the economy impinging on every element of society today, the notion of organizational effectiveness looms large for higher education. While the federal government has opened its coffers to assist all levels of education, rigorous performance standards to justify the expense are common practice, as well they should be. And states across the nation, while struggling to adequately support the various tiers of education, have nonetheless demanded an increasing level of accountability.

But before we make across the board cuts, delete entire programs or initiate any other major cost saving plans, the context for decision-making and planning needs to be reconsidered. We sit at the helm of mission-driven institutions, dedicated to student learning, research for the good of society, a ready workforce and strong communities. Revenue and expense may constantly occupy our minds but nevertheless, our eyes must scan the horizon. Never before have we been confronted with the promise, or rather the certainty, of such volatile change that is sure to challenge our understanding and affect the learning environment.

Who enters and who does not enter that learning environment is a critical question that should concern every institution in the country. It should concern us to the point of redefining our notion of effectiveness well beyond our financial ledger. Higher education is a necessary pathway to prosperity and the re-emergence of a strong middle class, and as such, it is incumbent upon higher education's leadership to view planning and priority-setting consistent with the challenges facing the nation.

It concerns President Obama enough that he has proposed to double the education budget, offering unprecedented funding for both K-12 and higher education. He challenged the nation to regain world leadership in the percentage of people gaining a bachelor's degree, which translates to approximately doubling the numbers of 25–34 year olds earning degrees. Today, the United States ranks 10th in the world for the percentage of 18–34 year olds earning an associates degree or higher. Our younger students rank 24th in math literacy and 17th in science as per a 2006 study of 30 of the world's most advanced nations. The President pointed out that Singapore's middle schoolers outperform ours three to one. Two-thirds of our thirteen- and fourteen-year olds cannot read at grade level. And our high school graduation rate has fallen to 10th among advanced nations.[1]

Effectiveness should be considered in this context, and the definition is simple and direct: How successful are we in expanding the existing base of college-going students, and how well do we integrate, support and graduate this new generation that will staff our workforce for years to come?

CHALLENGES IN ABUNDANCE

As noted earlier, the challenges for higher education are utterly tangled with the larger societal quandaries. Today, we live in a two-tiered society with a rapidly dwindling middle class. This is the overriding economic context, certainly, for every urban institution and community college in the nation. It also needs to turn heads in the flagship public and elite private colleges and universities. The gap between rich and poor has not been this wide since the 1920s,[2] with an enclave of the wealthy perched atop a growing population of low-income residents in every metro region of the country.

The future of metropolitan America hangs in the balance today, and that should be a critical factor in defining the effectiveness of our institutions. How will the gap between rich and poor be bridged without a broader avenue of access to the nation's colleges and universities? What remedy exists beyond education, beyond a practical set of tools to navigate the changing workforce?

Because of the staggering advances in technology and the advantages to be gleaned by the users, the prospect we face is a class system like none we have ever witnessed. The fortunate few will become world citizens, connected as never before to economic, social and cultural opportunities, while those for whom the door to education closes will be excluded as never before. These are the realities that are staring us in the face.

Higher education is the fulcrum. The choices we make will determine the

severity of the chasm between a new generation of haves and have-nots. We cannot bridge the divide on our own but we can ensure that the other players – government, private industry, the new media, philanthropy and more – know full well the consequences of ignoring the present context.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC

The impact of technology is just one of several powerful change agents affecting higher education and the greater society. The United States is not the same country demographically as it was 25 years ago, and even more striking, just ten years ago. The country's current Hispanic population reflects an historic growth surge that promises even greater changes to the overall American social fabric. Our melting pot is very warm once again. The numbers and the accompanying economic and education data have dramatic implications for American education.

In 1970, the United States' Hispanic population was shy of 10 million, or just 4.7 percent of the total population. By 2000, 35.3 million Hispanics called the United States home, amounting to 12.5 percent of the population. The influx has continued and the Census projection for 2010 is 47.8 million Hispanics, up to 15.5 percent of the total United States population. Only Mexico has a larger Hispanic population than the United States. By 2050, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the national population will include 102 million Hispanics, or about one-quarter of the United States population.[3]

The numbers are greatest in the expected states of California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois. But the highest growth rates are in the South, particularly in Arkansas, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Tennessee. Each of these states hosts more than 100,000 Hispanics and experienced a growth rate of between 50 and 60 percent between 2000 and 2006. While not as dramatic, very significant increases have occurred in every region of the nation.[4]

Higher education's planning and the nation's education and immigration policies need to seriously heed these numbers. The Hispanic population is much younger than the overall population, but also significantly less educated. The median age of Hispanics is about nine years younger than the overall population, and new traditions of college going are evolving in recent years. However, statistics suggest a steep curve to bring Hispanics in line with the achievement of other ethnic groups in the country, and perhaps most daunting, 25 percent of children younger than five were Hispanic in 2008. All in all, Hispanics comprised 22 percent of children younger than 18.[4]

Approximately 12 percent of Hispanics hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 27 percent of the entire population. Not surprisingly, individual median income lags behind the overall population by a full third, and 21.5 percent of Hispanics live beneath the federal poverty threshold compared to 12.5 percent of the all Americans as of 2007 and 8.2 percent of whites. These numbers, however, were calculated before the recent economic crisis, suggesting that all percentages have risen.[4]

While the African-American population is no longer the largest American minority, many of the same economic and educational challenges are present. In fact, the poverty rate for African-Americans surpasses Hispanics at 24.5 percent. While a significantly higher percentage had earned bachelor's degrees (20 percent), the need to meet a new generation's needs is also evident, with 30 percent of African-Americans aged 18 years or younger.[4]

WORKING WITH THE NATION'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The struggles of America's minority and low-income populations are evident in the performance of the nation's public school systems. The graduation rate from the nation's high schools has fallen beneath 70 percent, but much more dire is the state of education in the nation's cities. A report by Editorial Projects in Education in 2009 indicated a high school graduation rate of just 52.8 percent from the school districts serving the nation's 50 largest cities.[5] Couple that statistic with a United Nations' report in 2008 indicating that 81 percent of the American population resided in cities and their suburbs,[6] and you know that the Obama administration's efforts will only begin the remediation.

As president of an open access institution that is the backbone of higher education opportunity in South Florida, I witness – and welcome – a constant flow of underprepared students entering Miami Dade College (MDC). Seventy-four percent require at least one developmental course in basic skills,[7] but MDC's students are not alone in their remedial needs. At colleges and universities across the country, 53 percent of entering students arrive underprepared.[8]

It's foolish to write this circumstance off as K-12's problem, if for no other reason than the obvious – that higher education is enduring the effects of K-12's struggles. But the larger reason is that higher education has something invaluable to share with colleagues and students in the nation's public school systems. First and foremost, the presence of a college or university in partnership with the public schools sends an essential message: Going to college is essential. As important, the attitudes

that limit young students' expectations are confronted alongside a realistic introduction to the world of higher education and its expectations.

Such a notion might manifest in a dismissive or "what's the point" attitude, usually masking a fear of not measuring up. Once enrolled, the reality of life in a low-income family kicks in, and leaving college studies to support a family is a decision too often made. At MDC, our effort has been to craft an environment that is intentionally intrusive regarding academic progress, and supportive in engaging students in the life of the campus, with peers, faculty, staff and events. Study after study demonstrates that such an environment pays off in overcoming first year challenges and ultimately, in college success.

But we also need to rethink and re-shape developmental education. That implies more effective entry assessment that better defines a student's deficits in basic skills, beyond "college-ready" or "college-prep." Assessing non-cognitive attitudes that are crucial for college success can help greatly, as well. With developmental needs better defined, the next step is modular learning that targets specific needs. Rather than spending an entire semester in a broad college prep math course, students can focus on a specific deficit such as general math or algebra. All of this, of course, asks us to reconsider the credit hour and reorganize our academic offerings, no small challenge for higher education.

In addition to confronting limiting attitudes, colleges and universities can export the experience and learning gained in addressing the needs of low-income minority students who are often underprepared. These are the graduates of public high schools who were, in many cases, struggling through high school but have succeeded in a new environment.

Early college high schools and the many variations that have demonstrated success are serious avenues to exert an impact on college readiness. In much the same fashion that community colleges partner with universities to develop clear articulation for graduates, an effort to reach back and accomplish the same end result with the nation's public schools is essential. Such an effort is essential to promote the expansion of the college-going base and support successful college careers.

But before that can happen, a nation concerned with college success needs to recognize that we are functioning in a remedial era. The statistics and performance of our young students are not fabrications, and the success of the country in an international marketplace depends on recognizing the work that needs to be accomplished. And that means recognition of the financial costs by both the state and federal governments. The personnel – teachers, advisors, tutors – and technology to support a generation of students whose skills trail their grade level will be expensive.

If effectiveness and efficiency are our focus, consider the implications of short selling developmental needs. In truth, the fallout is nearly impossible to calculate on individuals, families, the workforce and the larger community. The calculation of lost opportunity is unscientific but nonetheless, devastating. But a hint can be gauged from a previous economic impact study of Miami Dade College that measured money saved in public services when education takes the place of so many societal ills. The study calculated aggregate dollar savings of $57.9 million per year for taxpayers in avoided costs for state-supported health care, reduced welfare and unemployment benefits and fewer incarcerations. Educated people simply live healthier and more productive lives. With regard to taxpayer return on investment, the study demonstrated that MDC provided a benefit/cost ratio to the state of 16.5, meaning that for every dollar of tax money invested in MDC at the time of the study returns a cumulative $16.50 over a 30 year period. When viewed in the short term, each dollar invested returned $2.74 over a period of just 7.4 years.[9]

These are the numerical counterpoints to arguments that claim we cannot afford to expand higher education's reach. What we can't afford is the lost human resource and the costs of inaction. These numbers simply verify that spending on education qualifies in every regard as astute investment.

UNDERSTANDING TECHNOLOGY'S IMPACT

The Explosion of Information

Technology qualifies as the most obvious element in crafting higher education's future, and the most difficult to foresee and commit to a plan. The changes in information technology, social networking and a host of technology-based fields are creating entire new careers – and disposing of them – as new innovations shake the marketplace.

Our students are growing up in a social network that has no precedent in our lives. And calling it a social network is tame; it is more like a haze of constantly evolving and very compelling media. Students are adept with the tools of their time but they are extremely vulnerable to the onslaught of information. Clearly, our planning should consider the integration of new technologies and the expansion of the learning environment. Equally important, however, is the foundation in learning that equips students to engage productively with not only a volatile workforce but also a raucous world of information and opinions.

The pure volume of information we are generating is occurring at a rate

that is difficult to comprehend. Researchers have observed that information is expanding at a rate faster than anything else we create or measure on the planet. Our feeble efforts at "junk e-mail" receptacles are hardly a match for the onslaught, and our search for faster and faster avenues of transmission is a constant element of technological growth. As one blogger pointed out, the rate of growth in information may even be faster than any biological growth in our current purview.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, in their report "How Much Information?" measured the total production of all information channels in the world for two different years, 2000 and 2003. That we don't have a standard fashion of even measuring the growth of information in this digital age is a statement itself, but their efforts demonstrate a beginning foray into understanding what all of us are confronting.

Their calculations included information found on all analog media such as paper, film, and tape, as well as in all digital media including hard disks and chips, and through bandwidth via TV, radio and telecommunications. The tally focused on unique information, avoiding duplicates of any type. The tally was 1.5 exabytes in 2000. By explanation, that's equivalent to about 37,000 times the holdings in the Library of Congress. Three years later, the annual total had reached 3.5 exabytes, a 66 percent growth rate in information per year.

How does this occur? The authors offer a period-relevant example. Consider the 600 percent increase in iPods shipped last year. While that type of product sales growth is not sustainable, think of all the playlists developed, new methods of sharing, cataloging, indexing and developing the information about playlists. This is what Hal Varian, one of the UC Berkeley researchers calls the "democratization of data."[10] And this is the tip of the iceberg, perhaps not earth shaking information but a small lesson in how we are exploding the information pathways. Technorati, a news site that rates the blogs, estimates the existence of 133 million blogs since 2002.[11] Back in 2008, Google announced that the number of unique URLs in their index had reached one trillion. It's also estimated that two billion Google searches occur each day, up from 10,000 per day in 1998. And Google recently made public that the company is introducing an internet connection that acts 100 times faster than the best fiber optic network we now have.[12]

Economists estimate that physical production grows at about three percent a year in advanced countries, and as high as seven percent a year in a dramatically expanding market like China. Information is growing at 66 percent per year, almost ten times as rapidly as physical production. Can there be any doubt that we have moved into a new era, one that has untold implications for our institutions and students?[13]

Growing the Institution's Capacity to Engage with Technology

Effective planning for technology must be consolidated into the overall planning process for the institution. To allow technology operations to be planned in any significant degree of isolation is inviting unnecessary costs and waylaying the growth of the core mission. This is not to say, by any means, that the technology sector of an institution does not need its own strategic plan for growth. Everything about technology suggests volatility and rapid change, so the need for strategic long-term planning is crucial, including both internal and external environmental scanning. More than any other aspect of planning, technology poses the challenge of uncertainty and the need for diverse input and a fundamentally sound, if not a conservative approach, to decision-making.

With nearly every higher education institution experiencing the crunch of lean economic times, difficult decisions based on priority-setting conversations are a necessary aspect of planning. Decisions on infrastructure, the backbone of further development, hardware purchases, storage strategies, telecommunications, software purchase and development, and desktop and other upgrades are all part of an increasingly daunting and complex process of seeing as far around the bend in the road ahead as possible. Virtual learning, of course, is an additional aspect, replete with social media and networking innovations, that will require increasing attention in the years ahead. Overall, this reflects an immense menu of growth options and very few institutions can move on all fronts at the same time. In most cases, such growth would be impractical and unwise for reasons beyond economics.

Central to planning, of course, are curriculum and teaching and learning, and critical questions need to be asked to ensure a supportive partnership. The introduction of new technologies in the classroom has influence on textbook selection, assessment practices, state requirements and accountability policies. And beyond these issues is the basic concern with the effectiveness of various tools on learning, faculty facility with the tools and the conduct of the classroom.

Two currently relevant examples of new tools with the potential to greatly influence the learning environment are smart phones and e-books. Both appear to hold immense possibilities for students but major investments should be subjected to a costs/results/durability assessment. The use of these innovations in higher education should be studied internally to ascertain if a particular strategy is effective and warrants consideration of institutional investment. At an institution like Miami Dade College, with a student population that is mostly low-income and poor, such investments, if justified in their durability and effect on the learning

environment, can provide students with tools they would not otherwise obtain.

Faculty lead in identifying useful tools but it can be assumed with the proliferation of software approaches that whatever grows to be the dominant platform for a given activity will be challenged by faculty members who uncover a different tool that works better for them. This is inevitable and while innovation and new approaches using technology are absolutely necessary to deliver the best possible classroom experience, the range of tools poses a problem in providing institutional support. This may seem like a small point in overall technology planning but in truth, it is a delicate issue that affects faculty innovation and engagement with students, and just as important, available support for virtual learning. The latter is crucial, particularly with students who may not be adept as independent learners. Overall, ensuring that a community of learners is maintained in education's virtual outpost is imperative.

MDC's Virtual College is now larger than five of our eight campuses, with enrollment exceeding 11,000 students. The ANGEL course management system is the operational backbone of the Virtual College and provides students a full tutorial online that includes a course tour and student user guide. In the ANGEL environment, students can access course content, take quizzes and tests, contribute to discussion forums and chats, send and receive messages, upload assignments and obtain grades and progress reports. Additional support elements include a trouble shooter step-by-step process, information knowledge base of accumulated wisdom from users, and a live chat function.

Support for students, however, is not the only required assist. Technology planning is hardly complete without attention to professional development and support for faculty. Today, MDC offers nearly 400 courses involving 275 faculty. Common sense dictates that training faculty and providing ongoing support to them must be a hand-in-hand development with increased enrollment and extended class offerings. As well, the key element of assessment always looms large with the introduction of new curriculum and teaching methods, and that is certainly the case with all efforts in virtual learning. Support from curriculum strategists and institutional research is essential in moving forward.

Education policy discussions now must include a new area of technology, and to be sure it adds a new dimension to planning. As faculty continue to develop new classes, software applications and teaching methods, intellectual property rights demands clarification. Cyber security policies are an essential conversation and one that needs constant review, similar to the need for technology planning. Right alongside, given the free access that students and staff have to the Internet in the course of college

activities, identity theft is an additional issue for consideration. And the larger issue of privacy concerns must be addressed as social media and networks become regular tools within higher education. Last but hardly least, we now have a new arena to track with regard to federal and state policy that will, undoubtedly, exert a major impact on our institutions.

The last concern with regard to policy and planning is the subject of equity. MDC is an open access institution that welcomes high percentages of low-income and underprepared students. It is essential to ensure that technological advances are inclusive and that facilities are available that provide access to the tools and learning environments that are otherwise available via the range of personal computers and mobile devices. To this point in time, computer courtyards on campus have served effectively in providing this access but in some cases, "low-tech/high touch" options need to remain available, consistent with a philosophy that always affords personal contact as a source of support or alternative approach to cyber communication.

TRANSPARENCY, ENGAGEMENT AND OWNERSHIP VIA THE PLANNING PROCESS

In uncertain times, clear information that makes its way to all corners of the institution is invaluable. With the external environment in flux, maintaining transparency and engagement on the inside is necessary for both productivity and morale. It follows that the processes through which we communicate and plan are equally valuable next to the tangible goals and objectives for the institution.

Periods of fiscal scarcity pose challenges to colleges and universities that are not readily apparent, lurking beneath the evidence on a financial ledger. State supported community colleges and universities are no strangers to these periods and it's likely that most have felt the slump in morale hastened by constant belt tightening. Beyond the basic anxiety about job stability, hiring and travel freezes and the reluctance to invest in new programs can sap creativity and generate a malaise that is anathema to a learning environment.

If we cannot control many of the forces that precipitate financial shortages, we can, indeed, manage our response and the impact on our work and learning environments. The planning process should be a source of clarity regarding the direction of the institution, and just as importantly, an opportunity to engage members of the college or university community in setting that direction. This is, of course, true in both tight and well-heeled financial times.

But it's no easy assignment in a large organization. MDC has nearly 6,100 employees, 170,000 students and an eight campus complex to navigate. Engendering engagement in planning must be a systematic and carefully engineered process. And it should include both long-term strategic planning as well as opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of the action plans on a regular basis.

Planning isn't glamorous but neither is it boring. More importantly, it is an essential practice that lends stability to the organizational community, particularly as noted, during times of economic strife. But above all, participation in the planning process invites ownership at every level of the institution. From a skilled core team representing diverse perspectives to the broad expanse of the entire college community, the experience can be downright exciting.

Planning is, first and foremost, the articulation of an ideal, a clarification of the institution's mission, which should be a grand statement of what is possible. And once again, this is ever more crucial as the balance sheet appears to deny possibility. The simple statement of purpose reminds and rekindles the sense of potential, which implies that the mission and vision of the institution cannot be stated once, and then relegated to an archive until the next strategic plan is formulated five years later.

If the process begins with an ideal, it is then one of translating it into a plan that is both practical and accessible. School and department personnel throughout the institution should gain the benefit of the umbrella of guidance provided by the overall strategic plan. Miami Dade College engages in a systematic, broad based and interrelated planning and evaluation process. Based on a clearly defined mission and vision statement, long-term strategic and annual educational, administrative and student support goals are developed and evaluated as to how effectively the goals are being met, with results suggesting the direction toward improvement.

The Strategic Plan defines the broad, College-wide, long-term goals with measurable objectives. We also evaluate effectiveness on an annual basis through the institutional effectiveness process, which has three levels of reporting and accountability: (1) College-wide effectiveness based on core indicators with annual reporting to the College-wide Academic and Support Staff Council and the College's executive leadership; (2) campus/area effectiveness, via annual goals and priorities developed at annual meetings and planning sessions; and (3) unit effectiveness (academic, student support and administrative areas) measured by area goals and annual reports to deans and vice provosts.

As an example of how we connect the mission and vision to action and evaluation, we ask key effectiveness questions at the college-wide level:

- How accessible are MDC programs and services?
- How affordable are MDC programs and services?
- How well does MDC help students progress through the curriculum to acquire needed knowledge and skills?
- How successful are MDC students in their academic and career pursuits after leaving MDC?
- How satisfied are MDC students with the education and services provided by the College?
- How well does MDC encourage creativity, risk-taking and accountability in employees?
- How well does MDC work in partnership with the community?
- How effectively does MDC use its resources?

Core Effectiveness Indicators have been identified for each of these questions and provide a college-wide focus. Institutional Research (IR) compiles the data for most of these indicators and works with other departments at the College to obtain additional information. These inputs form the basis of the college-wide Institutional Effectiveness Annual Report. Planning and effectiveness efforts also inform and support budget decisions at the College.

MDC is presently formulating its 2010–15 Strategic Plan, and the process relies on collaboration each step on the path to an approved plan. The revised mission and vision statements reflect the College's response to changing times, and have been submitted to college-wide scrutiny and recommendations from the entire College community. Armed with results from internal and external scans, the College has engaged in four planning streams to identify goals that support specific vision statements. Planning streams include facilitated meetings for campus presidents and vice presidents, deans and school heads, and web and in-person town hall meetings for employees and students. Input is analyzed by the college-wide Strategic Plan Coordinating Committee (SPCC) that orchestrates the development of the plan. The completed plan is submitted to the College's executive leadership and Board of Trustees for final approval.

Every organization relies on hierarchical relationships for decision-making and accountability. But effective planning also demonstrates that an organization is a collaboration of perspectives, and each has a vital contribution to make to the overall direction of the organization. Clearly, those with broad and visionary responsibility have no effective means of appreciating the granular needs of the organization on a day-to-day basis, and likewise, those charged with meeting students face-to-face each day will have little chance of forming broad conclusions for the institution's future direction. Valuing and combining these diverse perspectives is a

recipe for comprehensive awareness throughout the institution and the essential sense of ownership that powers it forward.

THE REASON WE PLAN

Long ago Plato put forth a radical approach to governance that amounted, in effect, to serious skepticism regarding the practice of citizen democracy. Plato doubted the body politic's grasp – or interest – in the intricacies of economics, military strategy, domestic policy and the like. He felt people were vulnerable to the guile and nebulous talk of politicians, whose commitment to the common good Plato seriously doubted, as well. His remedy was the philosopher kings, those gifted individuals who combined a love of wisdom with a depth of understanding on matters of the day. His utopian ideal never came to pass but he has left us with much to consider.

The Harris research group will never be accused of espousing the teachings of Plato, but their recent study for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) marks them, indeed, as an odd bedfellow. Having asked business leaders what they were looking for in today's college graduates, their report summarized the need with the term "three hundred sixty degree people." It doesn't have the same ring as "philosopher kings" but it's closer than you think. Specific skills in a given field, and yes, technological acumen was in demand, but more than anything, they wanted people who could think critically and solve problems, and work effectively as members of a team. And more – they wanted people who were conscious of cultural diversity and trends in sustainability that might benefit their enterprises. Perhaps anointing our students as philosopher kings is a stretch, but the study, in essence, was offering up a definition of a new world citizen.

Regardless of financial constraints, we can and should plan for this outcome. It would be expensive to do otherwise – for our institutions, our students, the communities in which they will live, and the economies that very much need their contributions.

Redefining Traditional Liberal Learning

We have an opportunity to redefine traditional liberal learning for a new age, making it more relevant to the development of the nation's workforce than ever before. To be successful, such an endeavor should be central to our planning, the core of our efforts around which a constellation of support projects adhere.

MDC has embarked on a comprehensive initiative, now four years in

progress, to establish liberal learning outcomes across the curriculum, along with a newly authentic approach to assessment. Like the planning process, it has served to galvanize accountability and ownership among both faculty and staff, this time around the very teaching and learning elements that define the institution.

We have agreed on ten learning outcomes that every student should master and that clearly articulate what it means to gain an MDC education. The outcomes reflect the "360 people" that business leaders are seeking, and include effective communication; quantitative analytical skill; problem solving, critical and creative thinking and scientific reasoning; dexterity with new volumes of information; cultural awareness; civic and social responsibility; the application of ethical thinking; technological acumen; environmental awareness; and an appreciation for aesthetics.

Faculty have developed real-world, performance-based assessment tasks with accompanying rubrics at four levels of achievement. These have served as global indicators of how well our students are performing collegewide on the outcomes, and guide the faculty in attending to weaknesses in achievement. Discipline-specific assessments are also in progress utilizing many of the approaches developed for the learning outcomes.

In addition, faculty have engaged in an in-depth curriculum mapping project, identifying how effectively each of MDC's 2,000 courses addresses the ten learning outcomes. Campus dialogues also identify gaps in courses and degree offerings, and institutional research plays an ongoing and crucial role in analyzing and validating the assessments, while conducting student focus groups and studying the effects of student motivation and effort as factors that influence assessment results.

CONCLUSION

Whether the coffers of higher education are full and programs are flourishing – or not – the value of what our institutions achieve across the country looms large. Given what has clearly defined itself as an inverse cycle that swells enrollment as the economy struggles, it might be concluded that higher education holds an acute potential during recession. The Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, said as much in stating repeatedly that the nation needed to "educate its way out of the economic crisis." Certainly, the President intoned as much when he projected the United States to once again lead the world in the percentage of people earning baccalaureate degrees by 2020.

These are the grand aspirations of those with an unbridled perspective, but it is those of us in the everyday trenches who move the needle.

As the economy and even the greater society are transformed, it's clear that higher education has become more essential than ever to navigate an altered workforce terrain.

We are, then, faced with the contradiction of leading a resurgence in the face of limited resources that would have us stand pat and retrench. But this is why we plan, because far from being a tedious and narrow exercise, it is, in fact, the arena of vision and creation, the intersection of big ideas and heroic undertakings. Planning is about facing reality without being mesmerized by its apparent limits. Ultimately, it is an exercise of renewal and reaffirmation of purpose. It is an opportunity to recognize resources that may very well be more important than those that appear or not on a financial ledger.

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