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State Department U. ?

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DYLAN KISSANE, OCT 9 2014

Last week at *Inside Higher Education* Steven Mintz published a piece with the title: 'The Future of Higher Education'. I read it quickly, but returned to it again a few days later as it really was a nice summary of where higher education is currently innovating and what the future of the higher education model will be.

With regards to innovations in the sector, Mintz identified a list of ten that are being incorporated into higher education both in the United States and elsewhere. Among the ten that Mintz identified were three – competency-based education, curricular optimization, and flipped classrooms – that were particularly familiar to me and to my institution.

With regards to competency-based education, it's an area that my school has been investing significant time and energy into for the past few years. Our undergraduate program is now described in official documents as a program that develops particular competencies in students rather than just developing a deeper or wider knowledge base. In the graduate program I coordinate we've gone a step further than even this. In building our most recent graduate program – and in developing another graduate program to be launched in two years – we've first developed a list of necessary competencies in consultation with corporate partners, and then returned to the drawing board to build a program that delivers on these employer demands.

Curricular optimization is, sadly, something we've had to learn the hard way here. As competition for students in France has increased it has become difficult to maintain the breadth of courses that were once offered while still remaining a viable institution. We've engaged in optimization, closing one program and streamlining others, and the school continues to move forward. Sadly we've seen others in our market fail to make the same changes and pay the ultimate price. Private tertiary education providers closing their doors may not be a daily story in France, but it is something that happens at least monthly and, at times, more often still.

The flipped classroom, on the other hand, is a far more positive change and one we've embraced with passion here. Classrooms are more active places now and students enjoy the chance to engage with their professors in class instead of sitting through lectures and working on problems and exercises at home. I've always had a flipped classroom approach in my classes, at least to a certain extent, and a subject like international relations lends itself to the idea. This year more of my faculty here at CEFAM have experimented with the flipped classroom and are enjoying the experience. Happy students coupled with happy professors makes for a more positive learning environment all around.

The entire list is worth reading, particularly for those interested in the nexus between pedagogy and university management, as is the second part of his piece.

In the second part of his article Mintz laid out five different future models for higher education, being:

1. **New Pathways to a Bachelor's Degree**, with various means of accelerating the time spent earning an undergraduate diploma are embraced.
2. **The Bare-Bones University**, with less investment on recreational facilities and grounds and more money deployed on teaching, mentoring, online delivery of classes, and securing a path to employability.

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3. **Experimental Models**, wherein start-ups and online operators take advantage of technology to usurp the traditional model of face-to-face teaching, something even MOOC providers admit is important.
4. **Corporate Universities**, where corporations design degree programs that lead directly to employment opportunities within the firm – think a BS in Google from Google U leading to a job...at Google.
5. **All of the Above**, a model that combines all or some of each of the above.

I think Mintz was probably playing it safe with the final option, but the others bear thinking about in relation to degrees and programs in IR.

For example, accelerating the time in which an undergraduate degree in IR might be earned has immediate positives for the student seeking to jump on the job market, but it might have some real drawbacks for the student who wishes to continue on with research for a Masters or Doctorate. Finishing a BA in two years is wonderful, but can you really have read all the same material and absorbed all the same information as a motivated student who has three years to do the same?

A bare-bones approach might be a useful option, however, especially in the developing world. If degree programs in IR can be delivered at low cost – and many of them can – and if the degree programs are tailored to the needs of the international employers in the region (think NGOs, IGOs, and government institutions) then there could be some real value for schools and students alike in building a bare bones college and educating the next generation of IR practitioners.

The experimental models could be useful to IR, too, though I imagine that their first impact will be in fields where the embrace of new technology is *de rigour* and not in a field that continues to struggle with eBooks, online learning management platforms, and remains so firmly grounded in theoretical texts that don't lend themselves to easy online delivery.

The corporate university model, though, is potentially interesting for those interested in the practice of IR. The present model turns young graduates loose at the State Department, at the Foreign Office, or the Department of Foreign Affairs with a diploma in one hand and a thick orientation guide explaining the difference between university theory and diplomatic practice in the other. Imagine how rich it would be if the State Department offered a 'corporate university' program where, out of high school, students are recruited, taught, developed, and eventually employed after three years of IR in 'the State Department way'. It is something akin to an old fashioned apprenticeship and while it would surely suck some air out of the existing university system –not to mention significant funding that would dry up, too – the outcomes for the students would be ideal.

All in all, then, Mintz has provided plenty of food for thought. Whether you are left reflecting on the way in which the innovations he lists are impacting on your own university, or imagining just what the higher education model of the future might look like, there is plenty of meat in his post and it is worthy of being read in full.

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