

INNOVATING TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

USING TECHNOLOGY TO
REVITALIZE AN AGING FORMULA
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Innovating traditional education

Using technology to revitalize an aging formula for higher education

My son is a junior in high school, and his mother and I are starting to take him on college campus visits. The experience is somewhat similar: we check in, watch a video, meet an admissions counselor and a student tour guide. The tour guide walks us around campus, showing points of interest and sharing their own personal experiences. Parents ask questions while the students are mostly silent, embarrassed to say too much. We usually attend a chapel service, see the athletic fields, eat in the dining hall, and visit student services. We walk past the academic buildings, sometimes visiting a residence hall, and occasionally stopping at the campus bookstore.

This is what the majority of campus visits look like. This is what they've looked like for a long time.

In a side-by-side comparison, the traditional student experience hasn't changed much in a decade. Campus tours, the admissions process, registration, class schedules, the learning format – for many colleges, these are fundamental elements, the key identifiers of a traditional, residential learner's experience. Think back to what your institution looked like in 2010. Maybe you have new activities or you've launched a new major. You might have a new building (or said goodbye to another). But for many institutions, the model itself hasn't changed much in 10 or even 20 years.

What *has* changed is the prospective student.

The vast majority of current and prospective traditional students are a part of Generation Z. This is the generation raised on YouTube, the young adults and teens who never knew Netflix as a snail mail DVD rental service. Gen Z students have primarily been connected to the web via mobile devices and WiFi, essentially never knowing entertainment that wasn't on demand.¹

From 2014 to 2018, the number of teens who had access to a smartphone increased from 73% to 95%.² Today, their purchases and decisions are informed by previews and arrive in 48 hours or less with free shipping. And they spend a lot of time on video-based apps like Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram. These are the consumers visiting our college campuses, trying to envision themselves in our classrooms and residence halls. These are the students navigating our systems, enrolling in our classes, trying to get the most out of their tuition dollars.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

Taking the temperature of traditional education

In February 2020, Concordia University-Portland announced it would close at the end of spring semester, leaving its community and peers scratching their heads. Its abrupt end comes “after years of mounting financial challenges” and a “changing educational landscape,” according to Concordia’s press release.³ This changing landscape has been the impetus for evolution in many private Christian institutions over the last decade, giving presidents and provosts and boards the complex task of securing a stable future for their faculty, staff and students.

Two years ago, Joshua Kim wrote in the Inside Higher Ed blog that 2018 was “the year that online education changed how students discover, apply, are admitted to, and ultimately decide to attend college.”⁴ One year later, Forbes published a similar story.⁵ “Transform or perish,” they said. Innovate or die.

Higher education is facing another turning point. Voices in higher ed have started to echo each other, calling for the disruption of the current business model (the current academic model) and adoption of new technology.

Many institutions and businesses today have recognized the need for innovation, even dedicating full-time staff to the task of organizational change. But what does this mean for the traditional learning model, and how do you disrupt traditional education without rendering it unrecognizable?

When you are considering disruption and innovation, you may be asking a few questions like:

- How can we adapt to meet the needs and preferences of our students today?
- How can we employ what’s currently working to revitalize the traditional student experience and build on an existing foundation?
- How can we innovate without sacrificing the rigor and quality of our academic programs?
- Where do innovation and disruption belong in traditional education experiences?

The traditional model has long been perceived as the most rigorous, high-quality learning format available. It is the oldest model, and while online education has been available for over 20 years, it’s often not perceived as the superior method for earning a degree, even today. This perception of quality is key to the success of the traditional model, so how can an institution innovate traditional learning without sacrificing quality, or even the perception of quality?

We believe institutions have an opportunity to innovate three fundamental aspects of the traditional student experience:

³ <https://www.cu-portland.edu/closure>

⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/technology-and-learning/online-learning-and-residential-colleges>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2019/01/08/transform-or-perish-innovative-tech-key-to-higher-education-survival/#16aa4fb31854>



1. The campus visit (the sales/admissions process),
2. The learning format for traditional residential students, and
3. The interface and platform that connects students to various resources (the degree audit).

The problems (and the opportunities) of a classic, age-old model

Our prospective students are missing from the academic narrative

My son's campus visit experiences were exactly what we have come to expect. While some institutions are working to innovate in this area, what we discovered was that the campus tour was missing a fundamental piece of the college puzzle: we were rarely given a taste of the academic experience offered by the institution.

The focus is on everything *but* the classroom experience. While football stadiums, state-of-the-art residence halls, and student center coffee shops are always great selling points, we missed an opportunity for my son to envision himself in the classroom, in his major, building key relationships with professors and peers. We typically had little time to sit in on a class or meet with a faculty member. If the institution has nice dorms and perhaps a Chick-Fil-A, we are supposed to assume the academic programs are probably really good, too!

Because there are limited opportunities to explore the academic experience of the college, the decision to attend one institution over another is determined by how nice the buildings are, the geographic location of the campus and, most importantly, how much it costs.

Shouldn't we consider the question, "**How much is this education worth?**" How is that question being answered or even asked?

Why can't a prospective student explore an institution's academic programs, faculty and courses on their own time? Why can't they read reviews, watch previews and sample courses before they even enroll? And why do they have to visit a campus to do this? This is, after all, the purchasing experience many consumers have come to expect today.

This generation has made every content buying decision (movies, video games, music, and books) within a graphical user interface where they see reviews and previews of the content before they make their purchase. Right now, you can preview a \$0.99 song or a \$2.99 movie rental, but when you are deciding on a course that costs well over \$1,000, you get the following: "MWF, 9:00-9:50 am."

Further, in a try-before-you-buy market, how can a traditional model keep up with low-cost massive open online courses (MOOCs), learning platforms like Masterclass and Skillshare, and other flexible, low-cost options that offer open access to a wide range of subjects?

This is a real opportunity begging to be seen.

An academic model for the next generation is missing

It is only a matter of time before traditional students demand to take courses in both online and onsite formats at the same time and traditional and online learning collide, but students who have been raised on YouTube will not accept the current online offerings.

Fueled by questions about value, concerns over debt, availability of free learning options, and their identity as perhaps the most entrepreneurial generation,⁶ Gen Z is keeping its options open and pursuing a wider variety of postsecondary options, resulting in steadily dropping enrollment over the last eight years.⁷

Online education has been around for over 20 years, but it has only recently seen widespread acceptance and adoption from the academy. In the past, institutions that wanted to offer online education essentially created separate academic divisions or even separate operating units to offer fully accredited online degrees.

Most of these online courses are targeted and offered to working adults, who essentially take night classes as they attempt to juggle career, family and education. These courses are passive classrooms often facilitated by adjunct faculty, rarely offering any faculty instruction. Most utilize text-based learning materials with very little video and few active learning strategies—the strategies that develop curious, creative, innovative thinkers who contribute meaningfully to a globally diverse economy.

For Gen Z, visuals are more important than text, and they are particularly skilled and passionate about storytelling with images. This aspect of their generation reflects a core human value that we have seen in hieroglyphics and early art: representing beauty or information with images rather than text.

In any learning experience we create, we can evaluate the quality of that design by three criteria:

1. Efficiency
2. Effectiveness
3. Appeal

Most online learning is both effective and efficient, but it continues to lack *appeal* even though research suggests that motivation is central to effective learning experiences. Many online courses are slow, boring and uninteresting, and learners are quickly frustrated by the repetition or lack of human interaction. Students persevere, but they

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annapowers/2018/07/31/why-gen-z-talent-is-more-likely-to-pursue-entrepreneurship/#674e047d7822>

⁷ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/currenttermenrollmentestimate-spring2019/>

don't enjoy the experience. While online learning may be accessible, it may not be attractive.

The pathways to success are dimly lit

The process of understanding a degree path can be a daunting task for some students. The technology may not be user-friendly or up-to-date, not to mention the impact a declining enrollment has had on course and major offerings. As they try to plan ahead for registration, students find themselves asking their friends and classmates what courses would be the best use of their time and which professors most students prefer.

In focus groups conducted by Campus, college students expressed dissatisfaction with current processes at their universities in multiple instances.

"Every single semester when I sign up for classes, I get five or six error messages," one student said. "I have to email a professor and ask for help."

Additionally, the academic offering has experienced limited growth for some colleges. Many institutions can no longer afford to offer the breadth of majors as they did in the past, and they are eliminating majors in an attempt to shore up their financial position. In the New York Times, Dr. Greg Summers, Provost of the University of Wisconsin, said his university is acting now to preserve its future, including "doing fewer things better" in hopes of finding future stability.⁸ Not unlike others facing the same uncertain future, they are trying to reinvent themselves and are facing criticism that they may lose their identity completely.

In the midst of this rugged terrain, how can students light their own paths and visualize a clear route to their goals? Even more, how can universities continue to offer a rich and diverse academic experience while facing falling enrollment numbers and unstable financial futures?

Putting students back in the narrative

I have dreamed of the idea of Campus for over seven years. While serving several institutions through Tree of Life Bookstores, my team and I noticed a need for colleges to share services and started creating collaborative partnerships between them. But in order to create the kind of savings needed to make an institution sustainable, sharing bookstore, mail and print shop operations wouldn't be enough. They would need to share faculty as well.

Sharing resources like faculty would be no simple feat. Practices, platforms, and philosophies would have to align. One university president suggested that we build a platform around the degree audit—the one component that has to transfer from one

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/12/us/rural-colleges-money-students-leaving.html>



university to another. Currently, it's a mostly manual process, but we saw an opportunity to automate and collaborate while protecting each institution's independence.

Last summer at the CCCU New Presidents Institute, I shared my ideas with a room of presidents. It was met with tremendous support. From there, we began to form a coalition of interested universities and we formally started Campus in January 2020.

Campus is building a platform that helps students 1) envision themselves in the academic narrative, 2) better afford a traditional learning format, and 3) benefit from the resources that a collaborative platform has to offer. This platform is made up of three components:

- the Campus Discovery Tool,
- the Campus Traditional Online Course, and
- the Campus Degree Audit.

The Discovery Tool will be built before the end of 2020, the Traditional Online Course will be ready for testing in fall 2020, and the degree audit platform will go live in August of 2021. Campus's long-term goal is to have one million students on the platform by 2030.

Campus Discovery Tool

What if every institution had a branded Netflix-like discovery tool where prospective students, current students and even alumni could browse and preview courses that are offered for that institution? What if they could see previews of specific majors and every course within that major?

Prospective students could use this discovery tool to explore courses, while existing students could use the tool in the registration process. On this platform, faculty could make their own preview videos, the institution could produce high quality videos in-house, or it could contract with an outside media company.

Shopping and marketing preferences for Gen Z involve reality and tactile experiences.⁹ Brand discovery happens online, but after that, Gen Z wants a real experience with real people, not a filtered, staged image (and they're great at spotting what's artificial). A video-based discovery tool gives the institution a strong advantage in a competitive market by:

- Offering an immersive experience even before an in-person campus tour,
- Creating an opportunity for the student to envision him or herself within the institutional narrative,
- Securing a valuable marketing tool for enrollment teams, and
- Meeting the preferred consumer experience of Gen Z prospective students.

⁹ <https://weremagnetic.com/magnetic-north/article/the-gen-z-forecast-featured-in-vogue-business-and-event-marketer/>



The Campus Discovery Tool is designed to give those curious a taste of the college experience while reaching other audiences for the institution, like alumni seeking continuing education opportunities or organizations interested in corporate partnerships with the institution.

Campus Traditional Online Course

At Campus, we believe the market is looking for the quality of a traditional course taught by traditional faculty with the flexibility and price of an online course. But how can colleges deliver this model to students without sacrificing the quality of a traditional learning format?

We intend to design and build a course capable of integrating the best components of traditional learning into online learning by utilizing active learning strategies on a platform designed to deliver rich media. We are calling it a Traditional Online Course (TOC).

TOCs are authored by traditional faculty. Students engage with rich content in an asynchronous format that uses a traditional syllabus. They also join their peers in synchronous meet-ups that we call “circles.”

TOCs give traditional students options that are only typically available to the online adult learner. In this model, students have the option of:

1. enrolling in a fully traditional program, or
2. taking a portion of their courses in the online TOC format from traditional faculty at a reduced rate.

We envision students having the option of taking 70 percent of their courses in the traditional format while taking 30 percent of their courses in an online format, reducing the cost of their tuition by 20 to 30 percent. This improves access to a college education for many students by allowing more of them to afford a private education at a cost potentially comparable to a public education.

In the Campus TOC model, all three sides of the triangle are balanced: efficiency, effectiveness *and* appeal. We visualize an online course that students enjoy and share with their peers. We do not accept that online courses are by default boring and uninteresting.

As an added benefit to the institution, faculty members who create these courses will receive a royalty on every course registration sold, providing them with a second revenue stream and incentivizing them to create high quality online courses.

We also intend to create a virtual online academy where high school and homeschool students can take TOCs that will qualify for both high school and college credit. These dual-credit courses will be offered at an affordable price: a fraction of the typical private college cost. Institutions could later incentivize those students to enroll full-time after



high school by offering scholarships for academy graduates, essentially reimbursing the student and creating a pipeline for new enrollments.

Campus Degree Audit

We intend to design a degree audit platform that will plug into our discovery tool that will allow students to manage their degree progression through the platform. They will be able to

- discover courses available,
- enroll online in courses that are offered locally, and
- enroll in courses that are offered from partner institutions.

The degree audit platform will manage the billing and transfer of these earned credits between institutions. Students will not have to wonder if a course will transfer into their particular major—the platform will predetermine its eligibility before a student will even discover it on the site.

Additionally, what if institutions could share some of the best faculty and courses, allowing students to choose classes offered online from traditional faculty at other institutions at a reduced price? This would allow institutions to reduce the faculty spend locally without eliminating majors.

Right now, students can take classes onsite from that institution's best faculty. But what if they could take select courses online from the same faculty members, expertly teaching their best subjects, from across the country or even around the world? What if our student-consumers could find the perfect course without ever needing to visit another university to do it?

Campus's platform will streamline the registration process, give students access to a visual discovery tool and then link institutions together to share courses and faculty in an innovative traditional online format. We want to lower the cost of a traditional education by substituting online courses shared by multiple institutions, maximizing every faculty member, allowing them to offer their courses to students around the world and receive royalties on every course registration sold on the platform.

One unique feature of the Campus platform is that it will be entirely searchable, meaning a student could search for courses, specific course content and even archived courses. And students will have lifelong access to the platform. As graduating students move into the workforce, Campus will continue to support their development with lifelong learning opportunities. Imagine a college graduate who majored in marketing receiving an email about a new marketing class being offered by his or her alma mater on the Campus platform. Not only does this encourage lifelong learning, it builds a lifelong connection between the institution and the graduate.



Conclusion

With the technology available to us today, we have the power to disrupt the status quo in higher education. Revitalizing traditional learning is not just an exercise in innovation – the current generation of college students will come to expect a new model. My son and his friends are changing the way we shop, the way we watch television, even the way we buy groceries. They will lead a new variety of student-consumers who are willing to engage new technologies, leave behind old systems, and courageously tell us how they prefer to spend their tuition dollars. If we are willing to receive it, they will lead higher education into an entirely new era.