Data-Driven Education:

How Colleges Should be Selecting Degree Programs

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The world is facing a pandemic, and Covid-19 is wreaking havoc on society. Several universities transitioned to online-only instruction delivery for 2020, some to hybrid classes with less face to face time with the instructor. With the weakened economy, some students can no longer afford to attend college, at least until the economy recovers. Now would be the perfect time to evaluate and restructure institutions of higher education.

In March of 2020, the world came to a screeching halt. We were asked to practice social distancing, which included closing schools. Changes to the way instruction was delivered, happened in a matter of days. Both teachers and students were forced to reassess their educational methods and adapt accordingly. Schools scrambled to meet the needs of their students and professors and were forced to rapidly redesign the curriculum to accommodate those needs. The quickness with which these changes occurred, shows that rapid change can happen when necessary. Institutions thought the changes were temporary, but as the fall semester approaches, the likelihood of traditional in-person, face to face education being the norm is quickly declining.

Formal higher education, the way it functioned prior to 2020, is in jeopardy of extinction. Between the increased price of education and the rate people are changing jobs and careers, college is not looking like a wise investment to many. Higher education is not adequately preparing students for the job market.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, a study by LinkedIn (2016), the younger generations are changing jobs twice as frequently as the previous generation, and often not even to jobs that relate to their education. Abel and Deitz (2014) found that only 27 percent

of college graduates are working in jobs that relate to their field of study. In February 2020, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York released a study indicating that two out of every five college graduates work in a job that does not require a degree. With the same ratio, Finder.com published the article, "Why 2 in 5 Americans do not see the value in their college degree," which purported nearly 30 percent of college graduated were unable to find a job in their field of study.

Now is the time for institutions to take stock of the programs they offer and consider eliminating or diminishing degree programs in fields where the job market is either rapidly declining or saturated and build up programs where there is growth. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles data on jobs that are declining and gaining momentum. They use this data to make projections that are available to the public. College leaders can and should use this data to direct choices in programs of study.

Data suggests that most of the declining jobs are those that have been automated and do not require much training or education, which means that jobs requiting education are on the rise. Jobs are grouped into categories to grasp the data better. There are just under 100 categories in the certification and associate degree group, over 170 in the bachelor's degree group, and around 40 in the master's degree group. There are almost 450 categories of jobs that require little to no education, but the jobs that pay over $40,000 a year either have little to no growth or the projected available jobs are negligible or both. Over 160 of those jobs have negative growth, and half of them have under a 5% growth. The jobs in this group with high projected growth pay meager wages. Conversely, there are no jobs in the master's degree category that have a negative job growth prediction, and most have more than 10% growth.

Projected available jobs for certificate or associate degree holders, number about half that of bachelor's degrees holders, but the number of job categories in both groups that make between

$50,000 and $75,000 a year is around 42%. Eighty percent of the jobs in the certificate and associate degree group make over $40,000. While it can be said that over half of the jobs not needing any education or certificate also make over $40,000, only 10% of those jobs have a viable growth prediction, and all the jobs that show growth are in sales or construction trades.

The job projection data (2019) supports offering certificate programs with job-specific training that provides a substantial portion of hands-on experience. Showing students that they can earn a living wage with under two years of study would be more successful and useful to the public and the economy. Colleges, especially community colleges, should be taking community needs in advisement to decide what skill sets are needed in those communities and balance programs based on community information gathered and the most recent statistical data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. We have the tools to build a better future; we just need to use them.

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