

MSCHE Conference Provides a Bridge between Today and Tomorrow

By Don Sutherland

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (MSCHE) 2014 Annual Conference served as sort of a bridge between today's Higher Education landscape and tomorrow's still evolving one. To be sure, there were the typical informative sessions concerning direct assessment of student learning outcomes, the use of portfolios to assess student learning, the SUNY Council on Assessment's outstanding [Institutional Effectiveness Self-Assessment Rubric](#), and even what to do when a request for a follow-up report is made. Assessment and reporting are timeless issues, so such sessions remain in demand and continue to be offered.

However, if one looks more closely at the conference, one finds an opening plenary session that was devoted to global trends in Higher Education, many of which have implications for the nation's colleges and universities. One finds another plenary session devoted to new MSCHE standards that are mission-centric, tied to ethics and integrity, student-focused, and driven and shaped by a convergence of strategic planning, resource allocation, and assessment. Furthermore, there were five concurrent sessions devoted to planning. That's almost one-in-every-five concurrent sessions. Moreover, as perhaps a reminder of technology's relentless advance, a concurrent session deployed clickers for the very first time.

In coming weeks, MSCHE will post the slides from many of the concurrent sessions on its website. This blog will cover some of the particularly noteworthy presentations and provide links to that content. But in the immediate wake of the 2014 Annual Conference, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the bigger picture.

From the increasing weight on strategic planning, not to mention emphasis on linkages with resource allocation, it is clear that MSCHE anticipates a world in which strategic planning and resource allocation driven by that planning (not the other way around, even if finance-driven planning is the easier path) will be of even greater importance than it is today. The successful college or university will need to define its own clear purpose, compelling vision, inspirational values, and then chart its own deliberative course into the future. It will almost certainly be defined by continual innovation and/or improvement.

At the same time, technology is pervasive and it is continuing to advance. Assuming a continuation of technological advance coupled with learning and experience benefits among its users, one can envision the possible rise of learning [clusters](#) that will expand beyond campus boundaries. Those learning clusters may embrace prospective students and alumni, in addition to current students. They will include academic faculty, student support services, the Library (maybe many libraries), offices that facilitate the use of technology, among others. They may include stakeholders such as other colleges or universities, graduate schools, businesses, government(s), accreditors, and a variety of other partners. The clusters in which relevant quality information flows to the relevant stakeholders on a timely basis, could well be those that offer the most fertile environment for producing qualitative innovations and improvements.

Academic content might well be broken into small units, student learning and measures of progress mapped along those units based on empirical evidence, and those units linked in many different ways beyond the familiar contours of a course or a lecture (the [report](#) of the Institute-wide Task Force on the future of MIT Education, Appendix 5, pp.59-65, provided a rich discussion on the modularity of course content). Student services and other support programs may be broken into myriad activities and then those activities linked with various units of academic content in creative, self-reinforcing ways. Hybrid courses could grow more commonplace with certain learning activities shifted online and others the focus of active classroom problem-solving.

One outcome might be a more personalized and powerful student learning experience, much as is in the early stages of occurring in medicine with advancing understanding of the human genome. Another outcome might be increased access to Higher Education for a broader slice of the population, perhaps significantly reducing current barriers created by socioeconomic differences, among other factors. In turn, those developments could lead to a renewed rise in tertiary educational attainment in the United States.

What this means is that assessment itself will almost certainly have to change with perhaps the only real question concerning the magnitude of change. Student learning assessment will remain of paramount importance. However, the scope of institutional assessment will likely broaden dramatically. Assessment plans and activities could well extend beyond the college campus, as relationships between the college and its stakeholders become more important and more closely integrated.

Research questions may address how the college or university functions within a much broader and ever-changing ecosystem. Who are its key partners, how are they linked, and what synergies result? How does it capture and use real-time information to measure and adjust its overall performance, reassess the assumptions on which its strategic plan is based, etc.? How does it identify or nurture core competencies that enable its continual innovation and/or improvement? How does it identify and address barriers that impede its performance or contingencies that could undermine it? What collaborative relationships deliver high value and for which stakeholders? Does it facilitate lifetime learning for its graduates? Does it facilitate the early accumulation of knowledge (maybe even credits) for prospective students well before they arrive on campus or matriculate online? Can it augment the learning that takes place in the secondary and perhaps even primary education system? Does it create new knowledge and new teaching techniques?

MSCHE's new standards provide the kind of flexible but robust accreditation framework that can allow for such a future. The increased focus on strategic planning provides a down payment in creating a road that could lead to such a future. Of course, alternative futures are plausible, as well.

What's clear is that change is most definitely in the air. The just-concluded Middle States Annual Conference reflects a changing Higher Education context.