

20 Million Minds Evolve Conference

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The 20 Million Minds “Evolve” Conference took place in Los Angeles, California, on January the 17th, 2014. Housed in an unlikely location that is far away in style and tradition from most professional conferences, but ironically close to the audience and topic of the conference, The HUB LA served as an appropriate venue.

This conference consisted of a series of conversations that focused on evolving the ability of the California Higher Education systems to deliver online education in a way that can respond more appropriately and effectively to the needs of its students. Special emphasis was placed on the topic of ensuring access to traditionally underrepresented student populations in higher education. Throughout the day there were a variety of representatives at the table from the different higher education providers in California, including the California Community Colleges, the California State University system, the University of California system, and the for-profit company Phoenix University. At the other end of the table was a select panel of students representing a cross-section of students from the different higher education systems, including the Student Senate for California Community Colleges (SSCCC), the University of California Students Association (CSSA), the University of California Student Association (UCSA), as well as representatives from various local student governments and organizations. Together, the students and higher education representatives provided an interesting and hopefully more-balanced and truthful presentation of data than you might otherwise receive.

There were a handful of central themes present as the hub of the Evolve conference: student ownership of our higher education programs, boosting capacity of our higher education systems, and making sure that our faculty are actively engaged in providing input, guidance, and inspiration in the ongoing development of our higher education systems.

California State Senator Holly J Mitchell spoke about the need to boost underrepresented students participating in college, stating that California has the highest poverty level in the United States of America, with one in six people living in poverty, and one in four people living in “deep” poverty, defined as a family of four living on less than \$16,500.00 a year. She went on to say that the United States ranked 12th globally in the number of college graduates for 2012, and over 500,000 students were denied access to education due to limited capacity.

The issues of dealing with poverty and the high cost of higher education can result in many students stopping and starting their higher education careers multiple times. Each time a student experiences one of these gaps, there is a tremendous disruption in the educational process, and a significant cost to the higher education systems. It is reported that every student who shows up to take classes at a community college will incur \$3400.00 worth of services and support each time they start taking classes. If a student does not graduate, that \$3400 is a lost investment that will be incurred again should the student return to college. Clearly there is a financial motivation to address the capabilities and capacity of our higher education system, for both the citizens paying to go to college, and for the citizens who are paying the taxes which subsidize the public higher education systems in California.

The growing pressures from the modern workplace to be college educated are also difficult to ignore. With many jobs requiring a Bachelor’s degree as a minimum starting qualification, the days of a high

school dropout being able to buy a house and support their family in a comfortable style seem to be gone, and the prospects for students with just a high school diploma aren't much better. In terms of maintaining a healthy and productive society, the need for higher education is bigger and more serious than it has ever been before.

Student perspectives on the higher education online experience included the difficulties of trying to attend college while being the sole provider for a household, the challenges of navigating different learning management systems, of taking online courses with unclear or hidden requirements to meet face to face during the term, and of trying to succeed in higher education when you don't own a computer and your instructor assigns homework that will require a computer. Students told stories about only being able to use a computer lab on campus to complete their assignments, and having to work the majority of time that the computer lab was open. Other students talked about the skill sets they required and found themselves lacking when confronted by higher education online courses, while others talked about the need for greater maturity when taking online courses- some even proposed that freshman not be allowed to take online courses until they could be trained and assessed as having the maturity and skills required to succeed. There was general agreement that it is easier to deliver higher education experiences in a face to face format, and that in the absence of the immediacy of face to face contact, students need to have extreme motivation to succeed when faced with the wide range of content that makes up the higher education online education system.

Clearly there is an aspect of the conversation that shines a light on the unfortunate status of our higher education online offerings, and perhaps the very culture of our higher education systems. Fractured would be a kind adjective for the different collections and networks of providing higher education online in California, despite some impressive individual efforts and limited successes. Joe Moreau of the Online Education Initiative Grant shared impressive data about the California Community College. In 2012/13 The CCC system delivered the largest number of distinct courses and certificate/degree programs offered online, with over 46,000 distinct courses being offered. All of the other higher education system representatives were in awe and admitted they were nowhere near our numbers (even Phoenix). The CSU system representatives state they are working hard to improve their offerings, while the UC system has no plan to offer Master Degrees online, their representative stating that the UC faculty believe the way they have been doing things is the best way to continue doing things.

Student perspective on the issue of system capability and capacity is focused on the need for more support and tighter online learning communities, while expressing a lack of awareness of the availability of existing services, a lack of familiarity with the online environments of their college, and a general frustration at trying to discover information about the school or the processes. Our higher education systems do not typically operate in a manner that is similar to other businesses and online environments, and the clash of higher education with culture with the modern mainstream online culture results in our students being disenfranchised more easily than they would be in a face to face environment. Perhaps the two biggest requests from student representatives was to provide a common learning management system so they don't have to constantly be learning a new online environment, and to recognize that the number one reason most students take an online course is due to schedule constraints- so get to the point, avoid cluttering course shells with "extra" and non-critical content, don't schedule unnecessary (or surprise) face to face sessions, or even synchronous events at a distance. Most students expect an anytime, anywhere sort of experience. In short, it is time to remedy the

situation so the needs of modern online students can be recognized and responded to by our instructional designers and course facilitators, as well as the administrators of online education.

Beyond the design and administration aspects of online higher education, there is of course the issue of technology. In order to support the needs and requirements of our students, faculty, and administrators, we will need more flexible and powerful technologies to deliver the range of student services expected and needed by modern online students. We need to dispel the myth of a student who is a “technology native” and recognize the reality of a student who is a “technology dependent”, and better appreciate the difference in what needs to be taught as a fundamental skill vs. what might be a naturally-occurring ability of a person who grew up with technology. The depth and power of our technology infrastructure grows ever more complicated as it becomes more universally necessary and present, requiring a deliberate and serious ongoing evaluation and commitment to effective management. Technology for technology’s sake is not appropriate either, we need to maintain a clear focus on the need to consciously integrate and increase student engagement via our technology. We need to be able to have an intelligent infrastructure that can not only gather data about the students and the curriculum, but also respond to what can be learned from that data. Perhaps most critical is the ability for technology to provide the support and guidance mechanism to ensure that once a student commits to an educational goal they can then accomplish this goal in as effective and rapid a manner as possible. Promoting student success needs to be the central theme of all instructional technology, and this technology needs to be used and maintained by a group of people who are equally committed to promoting the success of our students. We need to be able to distinguish between useful data and the fallacies of micro-forecasts that result when a narrow or incomplete analysis is given to student data.

In essence, if we are going to reshape the way we deliver higher education online, we need to reevaluate the entire spectrum of what higher education means, through the lens of technology, The Internet, and the perspective of our modern society. Only then can we adequately recognize and understand how to most effectively interface with our students, and better understand what it means to be a student in today’s world. The entire academy must be engaged in order for this effort to be successful. Clearly there are silos to be busted within the California Community College system, the University of California system, and the California State University system, and there are gulfs to span between the collective higher education system and the rest of the modern world. Our students don’t understand or appreciate the different capabilities and uses of technology they find in academia when compared to the rest of their world, and maybe the clear separation of academia from the rest of the world in terms of technological proficiency is more telling when recognized in the context of the “Information Age”.

While the Evolve conference provided many potential paths to follow towards a better future, there were three basic areas stated as critical next steps:

- Building upon Senator Padilla’s SB 440 to start overlaying the online environment to these conversations, and engaging faculty to a much greater degree. We need faculty to share their opinions, best practices, and concerns if we are going to be successful in addressing the needs for online higher education, and transfer degree programs specifically.
- In the area of credit coordination/articulation, basic skills and required to transfer courses can create bottlenecks that slow down students’ progress in pursuing their degrees. We can utilize online education to address these bottlenecks and shorten the time to degree.

- In terms of the cost of higher education, utilizing the online education repositories, as well as adding more curriculum to these systems will boost the value of the courses while driving down the costs for students to participate. Finding other ways to share digital resources effectively and accessibly will help further promote the success of traditionally underrepresented student populations in higher education.

It is expected that in 2014 the 20 Million Minds Foundation will be partnering with FHDA to further explore student perspectives and needs regarding online higher education, and the ability to better support the traditionally underrepresented student populations of the California higher education system. If you have further questions about the 20 Million Minds foundation, please visit their website at <http://www.20mm.org/>.