



Future Proofing Your Department
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Introduction

There has been much discussion around the disruption of higher education. Clay Christenson, a professor of the Harvard Business School and an innovation thought leader, predicts that by 2028, 50% of all American colleges and universities will be out of business (Christenson & Eyring, 2011). His basic premise is that technology drives disruption across all industries, including higher education. There are obviously other forces impacting the academic landscape such as the increasing competition among colleges and universities, the inability and willingness of American families to pay for college, and the growth of for-profit universities, to name a few (Castengnero, 2018). Accountability to external stakeholders also remains at the forefront of this discourse.

Textile and apparel programs are not immune to these concerns, particularly for programs experiencing modest growth or even declining enrollments. In recent years, administrators are applying significant pressure at the departmental level, examining each and every budgetary allocation. With each new hire, department chairs are asked to demonstrate how this faculty member will generate semester credit hours, bring in external funding, or add value to your institutions' reputation. These are relevant concerns as universities seek to appease state legislators and governing boards. Through the lens of upper administration, this position paper will present an overview of the changing industry and its impact on education, present demographic shifts in higher education, highlight the challenges of inertia of change, and provide a checklist for textile and apparel departments to future proof their discipline at their respective institutions.

A Changing Industry and its Impact on Textile and Apparel Programs

As industry evolves to meet the changing interests of consumers, textile and apparel programs also must evolve to keep curriculum future-focused and students prepared for jobs in the new economy. In the past ten years, the textile and apparel industry has evolved from a linear, retail-focused model to today's iterative digital-centric model of consumer behavior. Furthermore, many consumers seek experiences rather than 'things'. The customer now holds the power in decision making. These changes require that we discard much of our old curriculum and develop a new approach that prepares students for the new economy.

Understanding Demographic Trends

Demographic shifts will undoubtedly reshape the future of higher education. One key trend is the significant dip in the nation's fertility rate, down more than 12% since 2007 (Grawe, 2018). By 2026, the number of native-born children who are reaching college age will begin a rapid decline.

Depending on one's geographic location, some programs may be more at risk if the predictions hold true. There is a tilt in the country's population toward the Southwest, which will have a significant impact on the demand for higher education in certain states. This shift has occurred with changes in immigration patterns, interstate migrations and fertility rates across these groups (Grawe, 2018). Departments should carefully plan for the demographic shift as they adjust to the new normal whether that is developing a collaborative partnership with another university to offer a joint degree or transitioning a traditional face-to-face program into an online delivery format.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

As the new normal plays out, faculty members will assume the role of willing supporters, reluctant adopters, or adamant resisters. Listen into any faculty meeting, in any department, at any university across the nation and you will most likely hear some of these familiar phrases, "Sure we can do that," or "We can try, but it didn't work 10 years ago," or even worse, "That will never work." Most faculty feel threatened not by the change but the perceived loss they may experience as a result of the change (Spiro, 2010). Skilled leaders understand the delicate balance of securing support while tolerating some level of resistance. In fact, there is much to be learned from the lived experiences of faculty who are effective teachers and productive scholars.

We posit that it is only through the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of faculty that programs will adapt and survive. Quality faculty are the hallmarks of a great department. Rather than protecting faculty from these difficult conversations, leaders must include them at every step along the change journey.

Seizing Opportunities

From an institutional view, there is much to be said for departments who are great team players. Opportunities to offer programs at satellite campuses, develop 2+2+2 partnerships with local high schools and community colleges, create online general education courses, or develop applied degrees to meet the needs of a growing adult learner population, are just a few examples of how institutions are relying on departments to cooperate. While such initiatives involve faculty time and departmental resources, the benefits are two fold. There is a direct benefit to the department through increased enrollment and the intangible benefit of contributing to the greater good (i.e., community partner, university). It would be naïve to suggest that a department could always say yes given the limited resource pool. However,

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departments who consistently push back and resist eventually create a negative stereotype that is often difficult to overcome and may impact future opportunities.

Developing a Leadership Pipeline

Transforming programs to be mission-driven, innovative, and nimble requires a savvy leader who understands the playing field and is willing to play. Few department chairs receive any training to hone their skills. In a national study of department chairs, Gmelch (2013) found that only 3% of institutions offer any sort of formal training. Inexperienced leaders often find it challenging to address the daily responsibilities much less engage in strategic planning, enrollment management, and leading change. It is imperative for departments to not only support faculty in their teaching and research efforts, but to also invest in the leadership of their unit. Skipping on this important endeavor can put the most productive department in jeopardy.

Despite demographic shifts and increasing competition, textile and apparel programs will thrive if faculty and their leaders are paying mindful attention to the storm that is brewing. To weather the storm faculty must have opportunity to retool so that their knowledge stays aligned with what is happening in industry. They must also adopt a mindset that embraces change. Finally, administrators must find ways to reward faculty who embrace change so that departments are proofed for the future.

References

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