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Effectiveness and Responsiveness Central to Survival for Colleges and Universities

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The following interview is with Sean-Michael Green, associate vice president for graduate enrollment and marketing at the University of New Haven. At the 2014 UPCEA West Regional Conference, Green gave a presentation on the importance of entrepreneurship in the modern higher education institution. In this interview, he expands on that topic, discusses the importance of market relevance and process effectiveness for the long-term viability of institutions, and shares his thoughts on what the future will hold for continuing education leaders.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why is entrepreneurialism so important for continuing education leaders?

Sean-Michael Green (SMG): The easy answer is increased competition. There are so many schools going after the dollars and there was a trend at the start of the millennium where people really looked to continuing education as a big revenue generator. Schools that had never been involved in continuing ed suddenly jumped in, making it harder for all institutions to get those dollars.



Long-term viability in the postsecondary marketplace requires institutions to focus on market responsiveness and practice effectiveness.

The more interesting reason to focus on entrepreneurship is that, as questions arise about value in higher education, the market is really going to demand more creative solutions. The status quo isn't going to work, so higher ed leaders are really going to need to put on their entrepreneurial hats to figure out what comes next.

Evo: It's an interesting point you raised about the demand for creativity and new solutions, especially as budgets are really shrinking but the demand for service from students is really

increasing, while at the same time there's very little taste for actually increasing the cost for students. Is there something about continuing education that's makes it a little more creative than anywhere else on campus?

SMG: I always think of continuing education as the entrepreneurial wing of traditional higher education. No matter how far back you look; continuing ed has always been at the forefront of responding to real market demand. When it comes to what working professionals need,

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continuing ed is the group that is really in touch with what those workers are looking for.

Evo: What can CE leaders do to become more entrepreneurial and promote entrepreneurialism across the rest of the institution?

SMG: I have two pieces of advice and they're related. The first is to question everything that you're doing right now. So many institutions do things and nobody knows why they're doing it in the first place. Is it to respond to an outdated regulation or is it just the way that the person before you did it? Entrepreneurship can really be born out of examining why we're doing things right now and always seeking more effective and efficient solutions.

The second piece is to think about actual people. When we're trying to sell something to somebody, I find a lot of times in continuing ed and in higher ed, we talk in terms of generalizations and numbers. We think that if we offer this very niche program, surely somebody out there wants it, but is there really an actual person who wants it?

I recently had a conversation involving a branch campus. Should we have a campus about 100 miles away from our main campus where people could take classes? They can't finish a degree, but they could take classes there and they could commute to the main campus to finish their degree. Surely this would be great for some people. But why

would they choose our school and make that commute? We have to think in terms of actual solutions that real people will accept.

Evo: There's a real tradition of ineffectiveness in higher education institutions characterized by outdated practices and processes. What are some of the most significant roadblocks to entrepreneurship in higher ed today to really overcoming those inefficiencies and ineffective practices?

SMG: The biggest roadblock in higher ed all together is just the status quo: the way we've always done things. Tenure does tend to reinforce that the old way of doing things will work for the next generation as well. It's not just the institutions, it's the unions that some [faculty] are in and accreditation bodies and state regulation. It makes it very challenging in this particular industry to innovate—to do something different.

Evo: To your mind, what is the outcome of not overcoming the roadblocks—what will happen to a university or college that decides that innovation and change isn't necessary or isn't a priority?

SMG: It depends. Part of what it depends on is what the institution is. Some institutions can afford to be slower at changing than others. If a school has a great brand—if it's an Ivy League institution—surely it can dig in and be part of the old guard and not change as quickly. For continuing education units, for more tuition-driven institutions,

for those that are really relying on the tuition dollars to stay operating based on their budgets, it's more important that they change.

Really the changes are about serving the market, addressing the people that are out there and what they're demanding. If you're not offering it, somebody else will and those students will go somewhere else. Ideals are great, but when ideals are not backed by paying customers, it creates issues.

Evo: How would you suggest leaders really work to overcome some of these status quo related roadblocks?

SMG: The best thing they can do is to recognize it. Understand the obstacles and then strategize how to get around those. It would be difficult to be part of the old guard and the new guard at the same time. An institution has to be all in with a new idea and leave the old ideas behind.

Evo: What are some of the ways that a leader could really react to those changes, even bearing in mind the risk of making a change like this?

SMG: The first one, and there are institutions doing this right now, is mobile learning. At the UPCEA West conference where I did a keynote, I was surprised that no one in the whole conference mentioned eLearning. No one at any point said anything meaningful about online. There were no innovations in online

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and the reason why is because online is a thing of the past.

People are talking about mLearning. So many people are on mobile devices right now. Institutions that are able to teach through a mobile device are going to be successful.

The second thing is modularization. This is about delivering to the market. Millennials want what they want when they want it and they only want what they want. In higher education the status quo is a 15-week course. That is not responsive to what millennials are demanding. Picture this module broken up into five three-week modules, with eight modules developed so there can be some choice. If you want a great disruption, picture an undergraduate degree of 120 credits delivered over four years and eight terms. Now put that modularization concept there and that student acquires key learning objectives over 600 three-week sessions, they're able to move in and out in three weeks and gather those skills and move on to the next thing. That's entrepreneurship.

Evo: It's interesting that you mention that modularization because of the demand and desire of just-in-time learning. It's not just millennials that want that but today's working adults would really benefit from higher education that's structured around that just-in-time approach to education.

SMG: Absolutely. Does an employer really want to fund the cost of a 15-

week course both financially and time-wise or would they rather just put their employee into a three-week module, get exactly what they need and maybe even follow that up with another investment of another four modules?

It's a great way of drawing people in.

Evo: We've talked a lot about trends, ideas and strategies. Looking to the next 20 years, what trends will emerge to continue to define the continuing education space?

SMG: We're going to see more of a blend between continuing ed and traditional ed. So many institutions have become dependent on continuing education to meet their budget. I do think that the entrepreneurship of continuing education in a lot of cases is going to bleed into the traditional sector. That may be optimistic but that's what I hope. I hope that they manage to move the dial a little bit on all of higher education.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the changing marketplace of continuing education and the role that entrepreneurship plays in really ensuring that higher ed is going to remain viable in the future?

SMG: The biggest takeaway is that innovation is not optional for most institutions. For most institutions, if they stay still and they keep doing what they have been doing, they keep their heads in the sand, they're going to be run over, they're going

to lose their students, and they're going to lose their budgets. They need to innovate to stay alive.

Those that do it great and those that do it now are going to be the most successful, but those that do it at all are the ones who are still going to be open in 20 years.

This interview has been edited for length.

Key Takeaways

- The most important areas institutions need to focus on for long-term viability are responding to market demand and improving internal effectiveness.
- The biggest roadblock to these changes is the industry-wide commitment to maintaining the status quo, which is no longer acceptable in the modern marketplace.
- Institutional leaders should look to their continuing education units as their campus innovation and entrepreneurialism leaders.

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