

6-10-2013

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Recommended Citation

Orians, Erica Lee (2013) "Book Review: The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out," *Journal of Student Financial Aid*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/jsfa/vol43/iss1/6>

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Book Review: *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*

By Erica Lee Orians

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The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out was published in 2011 by Clayton M. Christensen, Professor at the Harvard Business School, and Henry J. Eyring, administrator at Brigham Young University (BYU)-Idaho. Christensen has published numerous books and articles, specifically addressing the theory of disruptive innovation, starting with his 1997 publication entitled *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Christensen and Eyring apply this theory of disruptive innovation to the higher education industry.

The audience for *The Innovative University* is, in the words of the authors, “everyone: students, parents, alumni, employers, taxpayers, legislators, and other policymakers” (p. xxvii). They assert that a particularly important audience is the current and future leaders of America’s colleges and universities. University staff and administrators who are familiar with the myriad issues in higher education are well-positioned to digest the complex issues addressed in *The Innovative University*. While the authors do not specifically address the powerful tool of increased or targeted financial aid, the innovations discussed could certainly be applied to financial aid awarding and processing, or nearly any other area of student services.

The authors suggest that American higher education is in crisis. Pressures both from within universities and from outside the traditional campus environment are compelling institutions to change the ways in which they conduct business. Christensen and Eyring suggest that these conditions are ideal for the use of disruptive innovation; a theory which suggests change through the introduction of a new product or service, one which is not bigger or better than an existing service, but is more affordable or easier to use. *The Innovator's Dilemma* offers a useful example in Xerox, a company who long dominated the large-scale photocopying industry but failed to innovate and offer a desktop photocopier accessible to a new set of consumers, resulting in a missed opportunity in implementing a disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997). For institutions of higher education, Christensen and Eyring assert that online education has the most potential for disruptive innovation.

The authors devote fully one-half of *The Innovative University* to the history of American higher education, specifically through the lens of Harvard University and BYU-Idaho. Christensen and Eyring offer an extensive history of Harvard University. For those of us unfamiliar with the evolution of American higher education, especially the dominant themes consistent with America’s great universities, it is a significant strength of the publication. In order to situate the current affairs and issues of American higher education, it is wise to look to the past to

understand just how much higher education has changed from these centuries-old institutions as well as the “institutional DNA” that has been retained.

By examining the establishment of higher education in the U.S., this history is distilled into the context of significant changes to the institutional DNA of each campus - from the development of professional schools like medicine and law at Harvard University, to the elimination of intercollegiate athletics at BYU-Idaho. The book transitions to an analysis of what higher education looks like today, what universities can expect in the future, and how institutions of all kinds will need to alter their institutional DNA in order to survive.

The authors’ central theme focuses on how disruptive innovation could apply to teaching and learning, with less emphasis on its potential utility for changing administrative practices. They argue the traditional concepts of teaching and learning within American higher education (i.e., offering courses in a standard semester-long format, taught in a classroom by full-time tenured faculty) must innovate to survive. Institutions that offer “no frills” degrees at a fraction of the price of a traditional institution could replace institutions that offer traditional degree programs requiring the accumulation of credit hours and specific course requirements in order to graduate. Institutions unable to offer an affordable education may be left behind, and as *The Innovative University* suggests, will also need to innovate to find a position in the new marketplace.

While it may be difficult for staff and administrators at many of American universities to relate to the experiences of Harvard University given its unique position in U.S. higher education, the history and evolution of BYU-Idaho seems more similarly situated to other private institutions across America. BYU-Idaho, located in the remote town of Rexburg, Idaho, is clearly a place well suited for innovation and change. Its relationship to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and its highly organized Church Education System make it an ideal environment to test and implement innovation. Indeed, some of the innovative changes implemented at BYU-Idaho, such as a new academic calendar that leverages the use of the summer term; a commitment to internships and practical experiences; the adoption of a college-wide learning model; and, leveraging the physical capital of the LDS church to offer educational opportunities to students outside of Rexburg, could be applied at institutions across the country.

According to the authors, public and private colleges across the country are trying to implement operational and programmatic changes through the use of assessments and evaluations to identify possible opportunities for improvement. Institutions are evaluating campus areas such as curriculum, graduation requirements, space usage of physical facilities, financial aid policies, and faculty and staff allocations. *The Innovative University* offers an interesting lens through which to view American higher education, which campus leaders can encourage innovation.

That said, *The Innovative University* could have been improved in a few significant ways. Christensen and Eyring focused too heavily on the two case studies of Harvard University and BYU-Idaho. While they offer short vignettes of many other colleges and universities engaging in innovative practices, they are brief and offer too little detail. For example, Rio Salado College's block calendar offers 48 start dates a year and an incredible amount of flexibility for its community college students. The University of Michigan, a prestigious public institution, receives just 10 percent of its funding from the state, yet offers accessible tuition rates to in-state students. Western Governors University, a private non-profit institution created in 1996 based in Salt Lake City, Utah, offers online education and embraces the use of a competency-based approach whereby students do not enroll in traditional credit-hour based courses or earn grades, but demonstrate learning through competency tests. *The Innovative University* could be significantly enhanced by elaborating on the innovative initiatives and approaches at these and other institutions.

Indeed, private institutions with considerable financial resources like Harvard University and Brigham Young University-Idaho can hardly be considered typical of the more than 7,000 public, private, and proprietary institutions of higher education in the United States. Not only does Harvard maintain the largest endowment of all colleges and universities in America, it is one of the most academically selective institutions in the country. And while BYU-Idaho might be more like a typical private college (at least when compared to Harvard), its relationship with the LDS and the LDS Church Education System make it a rather atypical example of the issues that affect many private non-profit institutions. To be sure, the authors readily acknowledge this, yet an increased diversity of institutional representation would have enhanced the general framework of the publication.

Furthermore, the authors do not directly address the goal of this innovation. Corporations like Xerox are presumably interested in maximizing profits, yet that motivation is not typically applicable to most of the non-profit higher education institutions. Non-profit higher education institutions, public or private, have diverse missions, but all are not in the business to profit. Some non-profit institutions may be interested in reducing the cost of higher education or reducing tuition charged to students and families. Some others are more interested in improving access to students historically underrepresented in higher education while others may be interested in innovating in order to advance prestige. Overall, Christensen and Eyring's framework of disruptive innovation regarding this point is not well defined and is without a clear goal for the diverse U.S. higher education system.

Readers interested in the notion of disruptive innovation and how it can be applied to higher education will find that *The Innovative University* offers a strong historical account of disruptive innovations in the history of Harvard University and BYU-Idaho. There are, however, fewer opportunities for readers to understand how this theory can be applied to institutions of higher education today.

References

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