

Designing History's Future

Mormons, Puritans and Innovation: Clayton Christensen's Take on Higher Education

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What can the business world teach us about the future of education? A great deal, argues Clayton Christensen, the Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School. As a scholar, author and corporate consultant, Christensen has spent much of his career trying to understand the disruptive and creative impact of innovation on technology, industry and, most recently, the American university.

In the article *Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave*, which he co-wrote with Joseph Bower, Christensen and his partner introduce two trends they perceive as having a particularly dynamic impact on business: **sustaining innovations**, technological improvements that make an already effective product better, and **disruptive innovations**, a pivot towards lower cost, and initially lower quality, products. The scholars argue that while sustaining innovations can be effective for some technologies—making planes that go further, for instance—the latter trend has a long history of upending successful, established industries.

In his 1997 book, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*, Christensen further elaborates the theme of disruptive innovation and traces its historical impact. The advent of Apple computers provides one such example. Christensen notes that the first class of computers was physically massive and financially unaffordable to most individuals. In response, Apple began to market smaller, “personal” computers that most consumers, and not simply large research institutions, could purchase. Although the new computer systems were far less advanced than the traditional models, their affordability found—indeed *created*—a completely new market. Over time, the buying power of this new “value network” incentivized further innovation, the gradual improvement of Apple computers’ quality and the erosion of traditional, large-scale computing technology. Christensen’s take away is clear: businesses—no matter how profitable or well established—must avoid complacency and consider how technological change can fundamentally re-orient markets.

In 2011, Christensen, along with Henry J. Eyring, published *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, a book that suggests “disruptive innovation” could soon fundamentally alter the “industry” of higher education. Christensen begins the narrative by observing that contemporary American universities seem to inhabit a strange limbo between prestige and crisis: although worldwide demand for an American college degree remains strong, questions about both their ever rising cost and possibly suspect quality are beginning to erode their market value.

Nonetheless, Christensen sees a decided lack of “disruptive competition” taking place among U.S. universities over the past century. In contrast to the technological innovations that have disrupted—and ultimately improved—the computer industry, American colleges very rarely go out of business and, as a consequence, generally maintain the same pedagogical and business assumptions as they did a century ago. Citing one 2006 report on the state of higher education, Christensen depicts America’s colleges as “self-satisfied” and increasingly risk averse, a complacency, he argues, that is no longer sustainable, especially as lower-cost alternatives, such as online education, continue to gain market share. The time for disruptive innovation is well overdue.

Yet just as Christensen chides U.S. universities for their reluctance to change he credits them for cultivating many positive assets: diverse student bodies, a strong demand among American families for college degrees and, most importantly, a cadre of motivated and highly educated faculty members. In many ways, Christensen is not so much proposing the wholesale destruction of higher education, but rather its *distillation* into essential components. In the search for greater institutional largess, he argues, America's colleges have forgotten their core mission of instilling good character into young men and women.

The Innovative University makes its case by contrasting the history of two American colleges: BYU-Idaho, a private, undergraduate-oriented university affiliated with the Church of Latter-Day Saints, and the iconic Harvard University. Christensen argues that following its 17th century founding, Harvard established many of the core principles that would come to define the American university: free inquiry outside the boundaries of religious dogma; lectures paired with direct professor to student interaction; specialized departments with deep knowledge of subject matter; and standardized grades to encourage better student performance.

Harvard's success was broadly emulated around the country, to both positive and negative effects. While the ethos of free inquiry and closer professor-student interaction undoubtedly benefitted higher education, Christensen notes that much of Harvard's institutional firepower is financed by its uniquely massive endowment, allowing departments to ceaselessly expand and faculty/student ratios to consistently fall. Yet other universities still try to implement the same ambitious growth model without the extraordinary financial means to support it—a misguided interpretation of Harvard's particular "DNA," as Christensen deems it.

For instance, many of America's universities have traditionally sought faculty members who are also high caliber researchers, enabling a strong undergraduate *and* graduate program. Christensen notes that faculty research and undergraduate education represent two highly different pursuits that demand very different resources. While schools with Harvard's resources can support both enterprises, more modest universities are effectively buying a teacher for the high price of a researcher—prices that schools in turn pass onto consumers in the form of higher tuition. Christensen believes that such schools ought to acknowledge that research often comes at the expense of undergraduate teaching and make the tough, but necessary, choice between the two.

One school that has successfully made such difficult choices is BYU-Idaho. Previously known as Rick's College, the school originally offered a two-year undergraduate degree, graduate-level research and an athletic department. However, in 2000, the administration announced a variety of changes intended to reorient the school towards efficient and focused undergraduate education. In addition to changing its name to BYU-Idaho, a variety of reforms took place: diminished funding for faculty research; a more limited catalog of classes determined by employment needs; the end of varsity athletics; greater incorporation of online learning into classes; and the expansion of the student body. Additionally, administrators encouraged coursework that would be most relevant to the demands of contemporary job markets, such as a program in which students take a course *and* complete an internship in a relevant field, facilitating an understanding of the topic on an academic and professional level.

Professors, now solely responsible for undergraduate education, were also asked to teach more classes in order to keep the number of faculty members employed by the university stable. Moreover, given the curtailed course selection, teachers would have to lead inter-disciplinary "modules" in which they taught their chosen specialty alongside other, possibly foreign, topics. Christensen concedes this involves sacrifice and hard work from teachers, but defends its outcome: more students receiving a marketable and inter-disciplinary education from a small, but dedicated, core of faculty.

Christensen argues this reorientation of financial resources and educational philosophy created a more focused and efficient undergraduate education model. By expanding the student body, reallocating crucial resources and consolidating departments, the school was able to provide more students a more efficient, focused and affordable, undergraduate education. Christensen does not suggest that BYU-Idaho's "DNA" offers a panacea to every university in America, but he does argue that its willingness to innovate ought to draw their attention. As similar institutions offer more flexible and reasonably priced degrees, schools that continue to replicate the expensive largess of Harvard will experience a more and more disruption to their market share. In order to more efficiently educate America's youth, Christensen argues, America's colleges ought to instead consider the pruning, consolidation and focus of BYU-Idaho's "DNA."

The Innovative University has received both plaudits and criticisms from its readers. Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard College, [responded positively to the book's argument](#), writing that it offers "fascinating new perspectives on very old questions." Leonard Schlesinger, president of Babson College in Massachusetts, was similarly effusive, calling the book a "must read for all who care about the future of colleges and universities." Given its critical perspective, however, the book is not without its critics. [One article on *The Innovative University* noted several studies questioning the value of online education](#), such as its tendency for higher drop out rates than in traditional, face-to-face courses. One researcher also argued that online education does not necessarily create the wider access Christensen envisions, notably because many lower income people still cannot consistently access the Internet. Other reviewers faulted the book for its narrow, two-university approach, arguing that it reduces the full breadth of American education.

But, to this reviewer, those responses fundamentally miss the point of Christensen's research. While the narrative certainly focuses on Harvard and BYU-Idaho to an extreme degree, his point is not to suggest their *uniform* applicability to higher education, but rather to promote the idea that every school's "DNA" ought to be distinct and well-tailored to its particular strengths. It is a case study of two different institutions that found success in very different ways—not a comprehensive template. In a sense, Christensen is exhorting schools to stop trying to be Harvard and just be themselves.

If there is any issue with *The Innovative University* it is that it never really resolves the issue of how these new universities will support its faculty members. Christensen tries to argue that more online classes will free professors to pursue more independent research and teach more. Yet in his discussion of BYU-Idaho, he credits the college with teaching *more* students with *fewer* faculty members. Florid descriptions of online education's innumerable possibilities aside, Christensen's math is fairly straightforward: BYU-Idaho hired fewer teachers. And without the institutional support of graduate-level research, faculty members will have a harder time supplementing their income, which has been stagnant for some time already. Perhaps the move towards more online education and consolidated departments would be a good outcome for students, but it would not appear to be the win-win for both educated *and* educator Christensen seems to imply.

That critique aside, *The Innovative University* offers a deeply compelling call that America's colleges ought to heed: adapt or die.

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