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USC in Davos

President Nikias contributed the following piece to Agenda, the online publication for the World Economic Forum.

What will the future of education look like?

By C. L. Max Nikias

One of the most hotly discussed topics in higher education is the role and future of online education. For the traditional university, does the emergence of online education represent a threat or an opportunity?

Like any new technology, the prospects for online education depend on where it can add value or, better yet, create it. By this measure, its greatest promise lies in continuing and executive education, as well as in master’s degree programs for professionals who have long been applying their undergraduate degrees in the working world and seek to continually augment their skills through specialized non-degree coursework.

Professionals today are confronting challenges in every facet of their work, which makes such lifelong learning more critical than ever. In addition, the contemporary workplace is increasingly complex, with companies more competitive and the landscape more global. As a result, professionals need to be both specialized and flexible. Businesses are under increasing internal and external financial pressure. New technologies appear in the blink of an eye, forcing out older ones. “Innovate or die,” the popular mantra once reserved for enterprises in the fast-moving world of technology, now echoes in all industries on both company and employee levels.

From one career to continuous education

Further overshadowing workers are the demanding choices they will make over the course of their careers. Two generations ago, their grandparents could look forward to one career at one company. Their parents could expect to have one career at several different companies. But today’s professionals must prepare themselves to work in multiple fields for multiple companies.

Continuing education has long been one of the best ways to enhance one’s professional abilities or open up wholly different career paths. Thanks to rapid advances in online education applications, established professionals no longer need to consider taking time off from a job or spend less time with their families to take courses. Online education offers the latitude to learn without making painful professional or personal sacrifices, and the best programs do so with the same rigorous academic standards of top conventional universities. In fact, many of the most admired research universities in the world now offer such options to professionals from a broad spectrum of industries and job functions.

Online learning for doctors and accountants

As the president of the University of Southern California, I have seen firsthand the breadth and depth of curriculum now available to our professional online students. From their home computers, a practicing accountant can study the intricacies of corporate taxation; an occupational therapist can learn about home modification to help patients become more functional in their own houses; and a high school teacher can study the tenets of differentiated curriculum to help gifted and
high-ability students reach their full potentials. Even doctors can improve their clinical research skills by taking specialized statistics courses. The variety and sophistication of such classes continue to expand every day, offering greater opportunities for professional enrichment.

Collectively, companies and associations are also taking advantage of continuing education through the internet. These entities are now able to participate in collaborative learning online with employees based throughout the world. Workers at a multinational corporation, for instance, can study supply chain management together and become more efficient at coordinating all elements of their production and distribution. As well as allowing workers to acquire industry-specific skills, these efforts promote company cohesion and loyalty.

But what does the online education boom mean for brick-and-mortar institutions? Contrary to the cries of many naysayers, the death of the traditional university is by no means imminent. Indeed, the traditional university is one of our most enduring social institutions. It is a uniquely dynamic home for intellectual capital and physical infrastructure, providing platforms for discoveries and innovations that fuel human progress.

Formative years

In addition, the years between 17 and 22, which coincide with the typical undergraduate experience, represent a vital watershed of development between youth and adulthood. During this time, scholarly pursuits ignite, and flames of early inquiry burn brightest in an immersive environment of meaningful encounters inside and outside the classroom. Undergraduate students flourish most in an environment that supports the growth of interpersonal skills and personal networks by experiencing student life on a residential campus. In this regard, the virtual campus simply cannot replace the immediacy of a traditional university experience.

For these reasons, graduate-level online education, both degree and non-degree, will generate the greatest value. It is the growing ranks of working professionals who employ continuing education online to hone their skills and assets that will continue to fuel this technological revolution.

Leonardo da Vinci, who left behind several notable uncompleted works, famously said: “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” The same can similarly be said about learning, but technology makes it easier to consign such academic dereliction to the past. Continuing online education not only ensures today’s busy professionals will never abandon lifelong learning, but can also help make certain their jobs will never abandon them.