“Shift Happens”
Trends Shaping Community College Education

Predicting the Future
There’s an old joke among futurists, philosophers and egghead comedians that goes:

“What did one paradigm say to the other paradigm?”

“Shift happens.”

Indeed.

“Shift” is happening all around us all the time, though lately the pace of change may feel like it is accelerating. And just how do you accurately plan for the future when it keeps arriving more and more quickly? It’s not always easy.

The famous professor, author, and management guru Peter Drucker was a gifted seer himself, predicting the rise of the “knowledge economy” during the 1950s and the threat to traditional colleges and universities from satellites and the Internet way back in the 1970s. Yet even Drucker proclaimed that, “Trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window.”

It’s true. The road is littered with would-be Nostradamuses with cracked crystal balls; like the Decca Records executive back in 1962 who rejected a gangly, shaggy-haired rock band from Liverpool called the Beatles saying, “We don’t like their sound. Groups of guitars are on the way out.” If that executive is lucky, he eventually picked up work managing lounge acts in the Florida Keys.

Still, if you’re going to make plans for tomorrow and the days that follow it helps to know what you might be planning for. So at the risk of driving off the road or stepping in “shift,” here are some important trends shaping community college education that we should be mindful of as we pursue NECC’s Strategic Plan, Academic Master Plan, and other important initiatives at the college this year.

TREND 1: Swirling and Double-Dipping
What is it?
The notion that most students graduate from high school and proceed directly to a college where they remain for two, four or more years until completion of a degree is at best a quaint relic of the past. Our students are on the move—constantly transferring, “swirling”, and “double-dipping,” in ways that have significant implications for curriculum planning, program management, student services, and community college-university relations.

At community colleges, we’re very familiar with students who transfer. One of our traditional purposes is to provide an educational foundation for students seeking bachelor’s degrees at four-year colleges and universities. Although complicated at times by transfer and articulation agreements (or the lack of them), the transfer is a fairly direct affair: the student begins at Point A, the community college, takes two years of coursework (perhaps more, or perhaps only a semester) then transfers those credits to Point B, a four-year school, to complete an undergraduate degree.

Increasingly, though, students are following more complicated attendance patterns such as “swirling” (moving back and forth between two or more institutions) or “double-dipping” (simultaneously taking courses at more than one college). There are a number of possible reasons for this trend:
The climbing costs of college attendance are forcing students to find their own efficiencies—matriculating at universities while taking courses at nearby community colleges to save money.

Strategic students, fearful of earning a lower grade in a particular university setting, may take a course from another university, online, or from a community college with the expectation of passing or earning a higher grade.

Rebounding students, on probation from a university or seeking to improve low GPAs, may enroll in online or on-campus courses at community colleges.

Students sometimes seek to accelerate their programs of study by taking courses from community colleges in the summertime near home.

Scheduling convenience. Most students, even at four-year universities, hold jobs for twenty or more hours a week in addition to attending classes. Online courses from multiple institutions and community college courses provide additional scheduling options.

Special programs, such as semesters abroad or coursework not required by a degree program (e.g., a Business major seeking simultaneous computer networking certification).

Nationally
In 2005 the Society for College and University Planning reported that the majority of undergraduate students (59 percent) attended more than one college either through transfer or simultaneous enrollment. 60 percent of students who started in community colleges transferred at least once, taking an average of eight years to finish their bachelor’s degrees. 28 percent of all students who started in four-year institutions, whether public or private, transferred or enrolled simultaneously in two colleges.

Locally
In a typical semester, approximately 27% of NECC’s students have attended another college at some point in their academic careers. They may have attended another community college. They may be returning from or simultaneously enrolled in a university, or they may have actually completed a degree already.

Implications
There are many important implications of these changing attendance patterns. If we are to successfully reach and teach our “episodic students” we need:
- Better systems of tracking students, documenting their educational experiences, and advising them as their educational portfolio changes.
- More and better communication and systems of transfer among community colleges and four-year colleges and universities.
- Better methods of predicting and meeting student course scheduling needs.
- New strategies for creating a sense of community among learners in the classroom who are more likely to be strangers to one another.
- New strategies for engaging students in learning outside the classroom.

Resources


TREND 2: Generations at Work…and in the Classroom

What is it?
Ever encounter someone younger (or older) than you who just didn’t “get it?” Someone so out of step with the times or with “the way things are done around here” that you were at a loss for what to do with them? You’re not alone: For the first time in the history of American labor, we have four generations jostling together in the workplace—Traditionalists (1900-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation Xers (1965-1980), and Millennials (1981-1999)—each with their own life experiences, popular culture heroes, perspectives, approach to work and careers, and ability to turn on a computer and program a VCR.

"Television] won't be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."  
-Darryl F. Zanuck, Head of 20th Century-Fox; in 1946
This same population potpourri is beginning to redefine (or perhaps eliminate) the notion of the “traditional” college student.

We frequently hear that community colleges serve more “non-traditional” students whose average age is somewhere between 28-30. While true, this casual statistic is somewhat misleading. The average (or median) age may indeed be 28 or thereabouts, when you add all the ages of your students from 16 to 80 and divide by your student population; however the modal age (the most commonly occurring) is still typically 19-20, and for the last few years the number of students on most campuses in that age group has been steadily climbing.

The U.S. is poised to graduate its largest senior high school class ever in 2008, the effect of the “baby boomlet” that occurred when the Baby Boomers started raising families and producing Gen Xers and Millennials. After that, however, hold on for a very different ride.

The original Baby Boomers (you know who you are) are aging and retiring. There are a lot of them. And don’t forget this: life expectancy in the U.S. in 1900 was about 47 years—barely long enough to see your own children off to work or college, and forget about paying off that 30-year mortgage!

In the 21st century, though, 50 is the new 40 (or 30) and we’re expected to live to be almost 90—nearly doubling our time. Every part of society is affected by this seismic demographic shift, and higher education will be no different.

At community colleges, we’ve been seeing some of the changes wrought by shifting life patterns for quite some time—and they are only going to continue. Already, the old pattern of attending college directly out of high school, finishing by age 22 and going directly to work and raising a family has all but disappeared for us.

Just as 50 is the new 40, “non-traditional” is the new “traditional” when three-quarters of today’s college students don’t fit the old mold. They delay college enrollment after high school, they attend part-time, they are financially independent, they are already working, and many are already parents themselves.

Higher education used to occupy a more-or-less compact period of time (two to four years) as part of a larger sequence of events in the early stages of adulthood. Now, it commonly unfolds over about twelve years and is more integrated with work, family, and personal exploration disconnected from formal education.

And that’s only the young adults.

At the other end of the spectrum are opportunities for higher education: people between 55 and 75 looking for personal fulfillment, and perhaps the chance to contribute in a different way. This twenty-year span was once split among work, retirement and healthcare. Increasingly though, Americans are leaving primary careers earlier or simply living longer after normal retirement age and looking for new experiences, whether that means more education, second or third careers, or the chance to “give back” through volunteerism or lower paying employment.

Perhaps you spent your middle years as an investment banker or civil engineer, and now want to pursue one of your other passions: environmental activism, early childhood education, or arts management. Be prepared for the “graying” of many campuses.

Nationally

• Between 1985-86 and 2005-06 the number of adults aged 45-54 almost doubled, reflecting the aging of the Baby Boom generation.

• The number of people aged 75 and up also increased by more than half over the 20-year period. The only groups showing a decline were young adults, aged 20-29.

Locally

• We have had several years of steady increases in the population under the age of 30 in Essex County, which has contributed to our expanding enrollments. Our “traditional” college age student population (20-24) will continue to grow by nearly 20% for the next five years, then begin declining. At the same time, the population between the age of 55-70 is going to soar by more than 40% over the next ten years.

• Gerard Badler is the founder of Campus Continuum, a real estate development company based in Newton, Massachusetts that creates 55+ living communities on or near college campuses across the country. He aims to provide older Americans the chance to live in vibrant communities of lifelong learners where they can return to school, take enrichment courses, and participate in the creative life of a university town. Badler is planning one of his first developments at UMass-Dartmouth.

Implications

• We cannot rely on population increases among “traditional” college-aged students to continue to fuel enrollment growth.

• We need to consider how we appeal to a potentially older student base a few years from now—with marketing materials, classes, programs, and community connections.

• We must continue to create experiences for all of our students that meet an increasingly wide range of learning styles. Traditionalists are part of the “silent generation” and may prefer introspection, individual
Millennials expect diversity and advanced technology—they have always lived with them—and may demand collaboration.

- We should be prepared for a greater focus on non-credit continuing education, both for work-related and personal enrichment purposes.

TREND 3: Going...Going...Green!

What is it?

Forty-five years after the publication of Silent Spring, thirty-seven years after the first Earth Day, and thirty-four years after the first curbside recycling program began in Berkeley, California, environmentalism has finally gone mainstream. It’s a movement that has brought together some unlikely allies, including politicians from the left and from the right, corporate CEOs and environmental activists, Hollywood producers and evangelical churches.


There is no doubt that the language of environmental stewardship—"global warming", "sustainability", "social justice"—has found common ground in America.

Why? Decades of lobbying, legislation, and demonstrations have certainly helped pave the way. Today’s students are the third generation to celebrate Earth Day, and the first to hear the topic of global warming emerge as a key issue in a presidential primary race.

Perhaps an even bigger tipping point goes straight to the bottom line: Going green is finally beginning to equal green. Business, industry, and the public sector have all discovered that by reducing their consumption of energy and materials, they can save money, help the planet, and create a positive community image.

In addition, there are new ways to make money from products with useful “cradle to cradle” lifecycles, and from reversing the growth of greenhouse-gas emissions.

Nationally

America’s colleges and universities are beginning to respond:

- University Business magazine reported that in a June 2006 survey they conducted of member institutions, “Eighty-four percent of respondents indicated that their schools take sustainability issues into consideration when deciding on facility construction/renovation, as well as on purchases of new products, equipment, systems, and services ranging from janitorial to office products and furnishings.” Additionally, one out of three reported that they already had or were planning an Office of Sustainability.

- A number of organizations have emerged in the last few years to support this growing trend, including the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the Higher Education Sustainability Consortium (HEASC) and the Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability (DANS), an informal network of professional associations like the American Psychological Association, Computing Research Association and American Institute of Biological Sciences.

- The United Nations declared a “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development” from 2005 through 2015, and the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges immediately responded with a resolution to support education for sustainable development in its more than 1,200 member institutions and affiliated councils.

Locally

- All of the community colleges in Massachusetts, including NECC, have signed onto the “American College and University...
Presidents Climate Commitment,” a pledge to formalize structures for sustainability practices at each college, integrate sustainability into the curriculum, and create a plan to become climate neutral. The commitment can be found at www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org.

- On April 18, 2007, Governor Deval Patrick signed Executive Order 482, “Leading by Example - Clean Energy and Efficient Buildings.” The order instructed all state agencies (including all Massachusetts community colleges and state colleges) involved in construction and major renovation projects to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification as well as energy performance 20% better than the Massachusetts Energy Code.

**Implications**

The implications for this trend cut across every organization in the private and public sectors, and everything is being influenced: architecture, construction, manufacturing, marketing, transportation, and the list goes on.

As with any other significant societal shift, as educators we must consider the important roles we will play, including:

- Incorporating lessons and projects on sustainability into existing classes.
- Expanding Service Learning programs, with opportunities for students to get engaged in community environmental and sustainability issues.
- Planning our new buildings and renovation projects to not only be energy efficient and environmentally friendly, but to actually produce energy or products that contribute to the environment, and to turn them into teaching environments.

**Resources**


Read what other colleges are doing to develop sustainable practices and take an interactive quiz to see how sustainable our campus is at the Chronicle for Higher Education at http://chronicle.com/indepth/sustainable/.

The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education web site at www.aashe.org offers many resources, including newsletters, listservs, promotional materials and strategies for incorporating sustainability into the curriculum.

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**TREND 4: The Flat Earth**

**What is it?**

In his 2005 bestseller *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman described ten “flattening” forces that are completely reshaping education, communication, economies and politics around the world.

From the fall of the Berlin Wall and the day Netscape went public, to Y2K, outsourcing, offshoring, supply chaining and the convergence of wireless, mobile, digital communication tools, Friedman’s list inspires wonder at what we are able to create, even as it raises anxieties about America’s declining role in the global economy.

And Friedman’s list of worries can be unsettling. As he describes the world, three billion more people are “in the game” now as Russia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Central America, India and China opened their political and economic systems during the 1990s. Competition is everywhere, and the balance is shifting. More than 3 million U.S. manufacturing jobs have disappeared since 1998, and the Economic Policy Institute estimates 59% of these jobs have moved to other countries.

And it’s not just blue collar labor that is suffering: white collar jobs in information technology, financial services, and other sectors are also disappearing.

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This employment churning has far-reaching implications, including changing prospects for today’s college students. The most recent U.S. Department of Labor estimates are that today’s learner will have 10-14 jobs by age 38. How can students prepare for such a world?

Friedman suggests that in order to succeed in the “Flat Earth” economy, workers will have to become “untouchable,” that is, someone whose job cannot be outsourced, digitized, or automated. He describes three niches that may provide this kind of security:
- Gain a skill or knowledge base that makes you special or specialized. Examples include professional athletes, musicians, and surgeons.

- Become geographically localized or anchored. To do this, your job must be accomplished in a specific location because it must be done face-to-face or involves some local knowledge. Barbers, chefs, plumbers, and a range of jobs in service and knowledge professions from custodians and restaurant workers to lawyers and teachers (most of whom, so far, still appear in local courtrooms and classrooms) offer career “anchors.”

- Finally, those who pursue jobs in areas that are already “touchable” because they can become digitized or do not depend on local conditions or unique skills (bookkeeping, software development, industrial design) will need to become expert learners and be prepared to continually pursue “reskilling” themselves.

Importantly, Friedman offers four themes to guide education across the landscape of the emerging “flat earth.” He suggests we will best fulfill our mission in the future by:

1. Helping students learn how to learn. To stay ahead of digitization and remain as individually competitive as possible, students (and the rest of us) need to constantly absorb and learn new ways of doing old things and new ways of doing new things. In a world where information is doubling every two years, learning how to learn is absolutely essential for students. This means both faculty and students need to understand individual learning styles and how to best employ them; develop critical thinking skills to analyze abundant information (and sources), and learn to work collaboratively in groups to harness the power of diverse experiences and perspectives when problem-solving.

2. Cultivating passion and curiosity. In a flat world, information is everywhere. Your IQ may not be as important as it used to be. Curiosity, though, will be an edge. We all know that curious, passionate students tend to be self-motivated and skilled at learning in almost any situation. We will serve all of our students well by helping them connect to their personal passion and inspiring in them a curiosity for discovery.

3. Teaching them to play well with others. The new middle-class jobs of the flat earth economy are going to require personalization and high-touch interactions. As computer skills increasingly become entry level requirements for any type of job, people skills will only become more valuable.

4. Nurturing creativity. The left side of the brain has historically dominated the American educational system. Rigid structure, order and analysis have long been the keys to success in school and in the workplace. While analytical problem-solving skills will remain necessary, on a flat earth where data and information is everywhere, along with the technology to manage it, the skills that will be increasingly important are the right brain traits of artistry, empathy, and seeing the big picture.

Nationally

Both nationally and locally, the effects of the “Flat Earth” phenomenon are a far-reaching mixture of good and bad news.

- More than 3 million U.S. manufacturing jobs have disappeared since 1998, and the Economic Policy Institute estimates 59% of these jobs have moved to other countries.

- Carol A. Twigg, president and CEO of the National Center for Academic Transformation, was presented with the Virginia B. Smith Innovative Leadership Award for 2007. She received the honor largely for her efforts developing the Program in Course Redesign (PCR), a project that has proven that colleges can use technology to reduce costs while improving the quality of instruction. All of the 30 institutions that participated in the PCR reduced their costs by an average of 37%, and produced a total annual savings of about $3 million. Twenty-five of the projects measured significant increases in student learning.

- Over the last 30 years, only about 30% of the college degrees awarded in the U.S. have been in Science and Engineering. In China that figure is 59%. In Japan it is 66%.

"Nothing of importance happened today."

-Written by King George III of England, on July 4, 1776
Locally

- The Merrimack Valley has traditionally had one of the highest unemployment rates in the state. Within the Valley, the cities of Lawrence, Haverhill and Methuen all struggle with particularly large numbers of unemployed. The region’s economy has relied more heavily on manufacturing than other parts of the state, we tend to slightly trail the Commonwealth in educational attainment, and there is a significant population of non-native English speakers.

- According to the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board’s 2007 “Labor Force Blueprint Update,” since 2001, the Valley has lost nearly 10,000 manufacturing jobs, nearly 6 percent of all the jobs in the region.

- In the next seven years about 30% of all the new jobs in Massachusetts—some 79,000 of them—will be in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) occupations. That’s an increase of nearly 20% over the projections for these jobs just a few years ago. Still, Massachusetts colleges, like the rest of the country, lag seriously behind the demand for graduates in these fields, and in recent years have only increased the number of STEM degrees awarded by 2.5%.

- NECC is offering its first fully online program in Fall 2007. A partnership with three other

Massachusetts community colleges, brokered by Mass Colleges Online, will enable students to take all of their coursework for an associate degree in Criminal Justice via the Internet. Other programs are considering similar collaborations, in areas like Hospitality, Early Childhood Education, and Computer Information Systems.

Implications

For educators, there is a shimmering silver lining to the gathering clouds of earth flattening. As a larger percentage of the world’s population needs higher education just to enter the workforce, college should become even less of an elite enterprise than it is today. This will, of course, require more effective education for disadvantaged and underperforming groups, and social policies that cover the costs of higher education. Additionally:

- To put it in Friedman’s terms, the “means of production” in higher education and those of us who provide that education will continue to become more diverse. As competition increases, we’ll continue to use technology not only to reduce costs but also to improve effectiveness (like Carol Twigg and the PCR).

- Still, the cost of that new technology continues to climb. Even as our resources from public sources (federal, state and local tax dollars) decline, we will be severely challenged by the cost of new and replacement computers, projectors, servers, software, and a myriad of other products that did not exist a few short years ago. To put it another way, every time a new Window opens, several other doors may close.

- As our own population becomes more racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse and business becomes increasingly global, we will be challenged to move our students and ourselves beyond the relatively simple acceptance of “diversity” and into the more active and responsible realm of “cultural competency.”

- We will need to find more ways to interest and engage students in the study of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. Watch out for ever larger NSF grants, and even smaller NEH budgets...

Other Trends to Watch

These four trends certainly don’t represent everything important that is on the horizon or all that we should be mindful of while we look to our collective future as a college. A few more to watch include:

- The Underprepared Student: Not long ago, student development scholar Alexander Astin declared that, “The education of the remedial student is the most important educational problem in America today, more important than educational funding, affirmative action, vouchers, merit pay, teacher education, financial aid, curriculum reform and the rest.” And as the number of students in our colleges continues to climb, the number of students requiring developmental education continues to soar...

- Accountability: Last September, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education issued its final
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Report, calling for significant changes at America’s colleges and universities. In what many believe is evolving into a “No Child Left Behind Act” for higher education, the Commission called for expanding student access and improving persistence and success, restructuring financial aid to reward institutions that are cost-effective and productive, creating more accountability and transparency for student outcomes, and maximizing federal investments in higher education through more targeted budget allocations.

• **Faces in the Classroom:** Over the last decade, college enrollments have grown by 15 percent, from 14.4 million to 16.6 million, with minority students now making up nearly 30 percent of the total undergraduate population. Hispanic students increased from 4 percent to 10 percent of the population, and black students from 10 percent to 13 percent, while the population of male students overall has declined. The National Center for Educational Statistics predicts that by 2010 only 41 percent of undergraduates will be men. Among EdLink partner colleges in the Merrimack Valley, NECC has the highest percentage of minority students (27%) and the second lowest percentage of male students (35%).

**Even More Resources**

Shift does, indeed, happen. It’s going on around us all the time, making it increasingly important that we’re aware of these changes as we continue to plan for the success of our students and the college. If you would like to do a little “trendspotting” of your own, here are a few great places to start:

- [The American Association of Community Colleges](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/) contains abundant information about community colleges, including a new “CC Stats” page with information about enrollment, college costs, demographics, “hot” program offerings and more.
- [The Society for College and University Planning](http://www.scup.org) provides periodic “Trends to Watch in Higher Education” bulletins and other resources for college planning.
- [The U.S. Census Bureau](http://www.census.gov) contains charts and reports on a tremendous variety of demographic information.

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**Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs**

*Our vision at Northern Essex Community College is to create a supportive learning environment that embraces diversity and inspires initiative and educational excellence.*

The faculty and staff of Academic Affairs are committed to engaging students as active learners, striving to be the first and best resource for the communities we serve, supporting leadership at every level, and expecting outstanding performance from our students and from ourselves.

The office of Academic Affairs encourages your questions, concerns, ideas and feedback via email or telephone at the numbers listed here.

- Lane Glenn

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