Don't McMOOC My Mission!

High Touch in the Age of MOOC:
Encouraging Diversity in Access and Success in Retention and Completion

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Many thanks to Dr. Leonard Haynes and colleagues at the U.S. Department of Education for inviting me to share thoughts with you this morning on the rise of MOOCs --- massive, open online courses --- and the important values of personalized approaches in higher education.

One of the great glories and historic strengths of American higher education is our broad diversity of institutional types, missions, curricula and programs. Born of necessity in many cases, the nation's women's colleges, historically black colleges, Catholic colleges, Tribal and Hispanic-serving institutions all arose in response to enrollment barriers. At the same time, teachers colleges, art institutes, land grant colleges, small havens of the liberal arts, large research universities, pragmatic community colleges, tech giants and state systems arose in response to specific educational needs and geographical demands.

We have flourished as thousands of distinctive, valued and important institutions in our respective communities, and our alumnae and alumni have contributed generations of intellectual, economic and even spiritual power to the growth of the global village.

But now, just as public policy is urging us to open our doors even wider to new generations of diverse learners from populations previously left on the margins of the bounteous feast of American higher education, we are confronted by new demands for standardization, for less flavor and more homogenization, an end to local bistros of learning in favor of a giant multinational corporate chain of knowledge delivery systems.

"McMooc" has arrived. And I, for one, say: Don't McMooc my mission!

MOOCs (massive open online courses) may well have their place in the large menu of higher education options. As someone who leads a special mission institution and prizes the diversity of our higher education landscape, I can certainly say, sure, bring on the MOOCs! Some students may well learn a great deal through an online learning experience connecting tens of thousands of other students around the world. Good for them! In the right context, the MOOC is a perfectly fine concept, particularly for students who already know how to learn, self-directed learners who are on a quest for specific kinds of knowledge and intellectual engagement. I might even like it for my own continuing education!

But don't McMooc my mission!

"Disruption" seems to be the cliché of the year right now, and the lemming-like rush among elite institutions to embrace MOOCs as evidence of higher education's willingness to engage in self-inflicted disruption is almost amusing, were it not so disturbing at many levels. The method is certainly interesting, but largely not analyzed for any effectiveness on outcomes. We seem to have set aside any scientific methods of care, any thoughtful analysis of methods and purposes, in favor of market frenzy.

One of the great ironies of this movement is that while MOOCs are hailed as THE change we all are supposed to desire, in fact, the MOOC method is largely rooted in the most outmoded of all pedagogies, the lecture. Yes, some MOOCs also have student interaction via social networking, but the initial framework is still lecture. MOOCs assume that most learning is all about the sage on the stage --- or screen --- decanting the mysteries of knowledge to the passive vessels now unseen in cyberspace.

What's different about a lecture hall of 300 or an online course of 300,000? At least in the lecture hall the attentive lecturer might occasionally hear the snoring from the back row.

MOOCs enshrine the somewhat annoying idea that one professor from a highly elite university opining about Socrates or Shakespeare or system design is more compelling, indeed, more important as a teacher by virtue of the institutional pedigree than the thousands of faculty members who teach the same subjects quite effectively --- maybe even more effectively --- on a smaller scale, in blissful obscurity, famous only to the students who love them almost obsessively.

But true higher learning is about so much more than a rote knowledge transaction from teacher to student. Real collegiate teaching must engage the student deeply in quantitative analysis, critical reasoning, real time experimentation, sophisticated oral and written expression, progressive research and serious innovation. The best of higher learning often occurs well beyond the conventions of the classroom. The MOOC, for all of its apparent newness, is simply a classroom on a grand scale, and a very crowded classroom at that.

One of the more egregious problems of elite institutions of higher education is their obsession with competition among themselves. This obsession with who's beating whom today ranges from faculty talent raids, to fretting about Nobel Prize winners, to scandalous levels of

spending on amenities that are not central to learning, to incredibly stupid acts of self-sabotage on the *U.S. News* "best colleges" survey. The opaque hand of Moody's drives tuition prices and selectivity ever higher while putting great pressure on universities to develop new sources of revenue to offset perceived weaknesses in market demand trends. Getting the coveted call from edX is a surefire way to prove to Moody's that the university is ahead of the curve, on the cutting edge of innovation and thinking hard about changes in future enrollments.

Make no mistake about it, in spite of the overt egalitarianism of a course that enrolls hundreds of thousands of students, the actual impulse for MOOCs right now is classic institutional elitism among a few very wealthy, very prestigious institutions to win the favor of Silicon Valley's wealthy techpreneurs. And the revenue demand rolls right behind the competitive impulse – while MOOCs may be "free" right now, monetization of the concept is inevitable, the only question being how the money will flow and who will make the most.

Acknowledging the vitality of innovation and the inevitability of change in higher education's pedagogy, we must also insist that eyeball-to-eyeball teaching and learning still has an essential place in the age of MOOCs. Mission must come before method. Every institution cannot be Stanford, nor should we want to be --- though the money would be nice! The problem we face, however, is that the new paradigms put forth by a few elite institutions and philanthropists are fast becoming the accepted ideal for the future without much participation by those of us with different missions, different voices, dramatically different student bodies from those who inhabit the hillsides of Palo Alto.

The current conversation about education reform reminds me of the parable of the Tower of Babel that Toni Morrison used in her Nobel Prize lecture:

> *"The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life."*
> *(Toni Morrison, [Lecture upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature 1993](#))*

Among others, I wish that the Gates Foundation would contemplate that narrative.

I have heard folks from Gates opine on the theory that collegiate education for the poor of this land is so expensive, in terms of scholarship support and remediation and general education, that we might consider massive online learning as an economically efficient alternative to "live" instruction, especially for the gateway courses. Efficient for whom? So, marginal students get marginal products --- college "lite" --- because they are not worthy of the more expensive personalized instruction that wealthier students have had since pre-school?

Ironically, the proponents of MOOCs and other dubious disruptions (I won't mention the attack on the liberal arts right now, that's for another speech!) most likely enjoyed good old-fashioned inefficient education on campuses and in classrooms and residence halls and on quads, sang the silly fight songs and wore the school colors with great passion and pride --- and they want the exact same experiences for their sons and daughters. Harvard Crimson rules! What eating club did you join? Dare we say Skull and Bones? How about the Fighting Irish? And how are your brackets faring today? Imagine how much more productive the world would be in March if we did away with one of the most expensive parts of the college balance sheet that has little to do with academic learning, Division I men's sports. I don't hear anyone saying, "Let's get rid of the Final Four" amid the calls to relegate College Algebra to cyberspace.

Culture is as much part of college learning as classroom. Why are we now denying the cultural context of collegiate learning, just as the new populations are arriving to enjoy what the rest of us feasted on with abundance? Why are we leaving them the bones? Is "disruption" sufficient justification for a somewhat insidious form of discrimination, the McMoocing of mission because that's now a more efficient delivery system for the new populations at the gate?

The latest NCES Projections of Education Statistics to 2021 tells us that in the next ten years, the population of Hispanic students in higher education will increase by 42 percent, African American students by 25 percent, and Asian students by 20 percent, while White students will increase by only 4 percent. This burgeoning group of new populations is not only different by race, but also by academic preparation, socio-economic context, language and cultural experiences. But make no mistake about it, these students want exactly the same things that prior generations had the privilege of experiencing, the whole college package.

Let me tell you about Trinity and our students. Trinity's story of transformation has been told in many different places, so I won't dwell on that except to say that this once-historic Catholic women's college now educates a predominantly black and Hispanic student body, about half of whom are from the more impoverished sections of the District of Columbia. We educate more DC residents than any private university in the nation. (See: Trinity and DC: Partnership for Success)

Some of our more notable student characteristics include:

- 75% of entering first year students in Fall 2012 are Pell eligible
- $25,000 is the approximate median family income of the first years
- 25% of first years estimate their family income at $10,000 or less
- Majority are self-supporting
- Most work more than 20 hours per week, many work 40+ hours
- About 15% of first year young women have children already
- About 40% of first years have health issues that can impede academic progress

We are intensely focused on student success, and we well know the challenges of keeping students on track to completion who have virtually no experience with academic discipline,

good study habits, complex reading and analysis skills, collegiate vocabulary, statistical analysis, technology applications beyond facebooking on phones. Our students are intellectually capable but, quite often, socially constrained by conditions that distract them from academic responsibilities, whether family challenges or financial hardship or homelessness or health problems or simply a lack of social structure that is essential for collegiate study.

We have learned that there are no substitutes for direct and continuous engagement with students who have so many risk factors. Showing up for class is the first step toward college success --- attendance and alertness in class are essential, and our faculty have come to realize how important these non-academic cues are in the learning process. Showing students how to be successful in subjects that they never mastered previously is essential to build confidence. For many of our students, the first year math workshops might be the first time in their lives that they discovered that they can actually do equations, or an encounter at the Writing Center shows them how to tap into long dormant creative instincts. Because we're particularly about empowering women – there's that mission thing again! --- we build self-confident learners by helping students understand that they don't have to be afraid about showing their smarts.

Far from encouraging dependency, which is a question I have received, our student-centered methods help students learn to be independent thinkers by liberating them from their own self-defeating stereotypes about their abilities and potential. When you grow up being told time and again that you will never amount to anything, that college is too expensive, that your fate is to be "another statistic" of teen pregnancy or welfare or street violence, you need the leverage of great teachers and administrators to help break through all of the emotional, social and economic barriers to your success.

Some key elements of our curriculum, pedagogy and support services for students today include:

- First Year Experience: Success in the first year is crucial to the ultimate goal of timely completion. Trinity's first year experience program includes entrance assessment, learning communities, professional academic advising, health assessment, "intrusive advising" when a student starts to slide, triage for the most at-risk students, taking attendance and other activities designed to intervene when students exhibit signs of failing.

- Technology: Technology tools provide considerable assistance at the right places for all students. In the first year program, the use of Pearson's MyMathLab and similar packages, as part of the larger pedagogy, has proven effective. All courses at Trinity have websites on Moodle and many faculty have developed considerable expertise in combining classroom and online pedagogies to keep students engaged.

- Tutors and workshops: math, writing, critical reading. "Monday Mathematics" has proven to be an immensely popular method to engage reluctant students in additional informal instruction with faculty members. Additionally, tutors --- upper division students who have excelled --- provide important additional support for math, writing

and reading. The Writing Center provides significant support for information literacy, avoiding plagiarism, writing skills. Academic Services Center provides learning skills, disabilities and career services support.

- Co-curricular life is an integral part of building a successful educational program for at-risk students. Many of our athletes have never worn a uniform before – how's that for edgy in today's sports-obsessed collegiate dynamic? As a Catholic college --- again, the mission! --- we engage a broadly ecumenical group of students in service, prayer and worship, and the idea of spiritual journey and fulfillment, all as part of our overt commitment to social justice. Health Services may be the largest service center on campus --- for low income students living on the margins, Trinity's Health Center may be the first time they've had regular primary care.

How do we know if we're being successful?

We pay very close attention to analysis of retention and attrition patterns, and with the new first year program we put into place about five years ago ---- with a lot more personal attention to each student --- we have seen steady improvement in our first-to-second year retention, overall retention and completion rates. We do a particularly strong job with our D.C. students --- the majority of our D.C. students are part of the D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant program, and more than 60% of those students since 2001 have completed degrees or are still enrolled.

We know from all of our analysis that at-risk students progress through college in different ways from traditional students, and that stopping out does not mean dropping out entirely. We follow the "swirl" of students from full-time to stop-out to returning as part-time with credits from elsewhere ---- the issues are not about any deficiencies in school, but challenges in life, and we try to help them stay on track.

A recent survey of Trinity graduates from 2002 to 2012 (survey collection still in process) points to these results: of those who have answered…

95% are currently employed, in graduate school, retired or caring for families, and those employed have a median salary range of $50,000-$59,000

60% have pursued some graduate studies since graduation; 30% have completed graduate degrees; the graduate schools they have attended include universities such as Georgetown, the London School of Economics, American University, Howard University, the University of Pennsylvania, UMUC, Bowie, Towson, Phoenix and Trinity

The most important knowledge and skills the respondents said they received from their Trinity education include excellence in written and oral communication, critical thinking and a deep sense of ethics.

Final issues: I have received these questions:

- *Do we risk creating two-tiers of institutions (as well as learners)- creating/preserving institutions and people not linked to broadband information and new modalities of educational delivery? How do we respond to this risk?*

Being dubious about MOOCs does not mean being agnostic about technology. We have to stop equating the tools with the delivery systems. Technology actually provides a broad range of often quite-effective tools that our students need and desire. Even very low income students all have cell phones, and with pervasive Wi-Fi on campus, we can satisfy a great deal of their connectivity needs.

We are now looking at the issue of textbooks and online materials, laptops, tablets and whether we can wean faculty away from requiring very expensive texts when so much is now available for much less cost online. Instead of buying texts, students should be able to have their own readers, tablets or laptops with a clear program to make learning materials available at much less cost than regular textbooks.

- *Some "high touch" components can often be costly to implement with those students who have educational deficits that require intervention strategies to eliminate. How do you make the economics work?*

Funny thing about this question, has anybody asked how do colleges make the economics work for lacrosse programs, study abroad locations, glamorous residence halls and two-two loads for faculty? Why is it that the questions of cost are more likely to arise around services for low income students?

I don't see these as "extra" or "special," but rather, as core services that we have an obligation to provide as educators. In the same way, I don't use the word "remediation" but simply "education." We take the students as they come to us and we aim to make them successful.

We focus our budgeting on resources that help students to be successful, and that may mean in any given year, adding more math specialists or expanding Health Services or creating a peer advisor program to work with first year faculty. In reality, these are all the kinds of costs that responsible budgeting processes can accommodate.

- *Granted many first –year students, especially first generation/low-income may need more concentrated attention and support, how do you wean them off this need? What helps the transition into capable, self-sufficient learners, able to change employment, adapt to changing environments and sustain meaningful careers?*

Creating autonomous, self-confident and self-sufficient learners is our goal! I would not stereotype first generation/low income students as more dependent or needier than students from a higher social class. Even students from the most elite institutions often cannot adapt to changing circumstances --- perhaps even more so than low income students who have lots of moxie and have learned a long time ago to be self-sufficient. Let's not stereotype low income students --- let's focus on making them wildly successful!

Let me close with this story:

Earlier this morning, a Trinity student spoke to some of your colleagues as part of the Department of Education's Policy Briefing Series. Linda Moktoi was on a student panel, "ED Youth Voices: How ED's policies are impacting students." Linda is a bright young woman from Cameroon. She came to this country with her family and became a U.S. citizen. She told your colleagues that she chose Trinity because it's a place where the classes are small and there is a great deal of interaction with her professors.

She said, "I need an environment where I am able to study, focus, and get as many opportunities as possible. Trinity offered me all of that and so much more. At Trinity, I am not just a number. I am a successful woman and I have the confidence to become whatever and whoever I want to be. Being in an environment of all women has made me feel very empowered, and I am very happy that I made that choice…. I strongly believe that education is important, because everything can be taken away from you, but no one can ever take the knowledge that you have acquired."