Regional

Colleges need to prepare for Generation Alpha

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
Letters from Academia

The 19th century American theologian and author James Freeman Clarke is credited with coining the phrase, "A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman, of the next generation." Although higher education in this country is currently embattled on many fronts, that should not distract us from looking years ahead to figure out how we can prepare for new generations of students.

One of those upcoming generations has been labeled "Generation Alpha," a term crafted by Mark McCrindle, an Australian social researcher, demographer and futurist. Unlike "Generation Z," born in the mid 1990s and who are today's college students, generation alpha consists of those born after 2010 – and 2.5 million of them are born every week around the world. They may be toddlers and infants today, but this generation will be quite different from the traditional college students we are used to seeing.

What will make the generation alpha so different? To begin with, it will be a very diverse generation demographically, and one whose entire education leading to college will be largely driven by technology. Just to give you a hint of the things to come, this summer we saw the emergence of computer coding summer camps for kids as young as 6 at places like Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These students will be much more tech-savvy than their parents, the current millennials. Also, expect them to be more entrepreneurial, and more inclined to create their own jobs. Educating this generation will require an understanding of the world in which they will be raised.

Fortunately, a book has just been published that addresses this challenge. It is titled "Breakaway Learners" by Karen Gross. She was president of Southern Vermont College and is currently a Washington, D.C. based adviser and consultant to non-profit schools, organizations and governments. She focuses on strategies for vulnerable student success across the K-20 pipeline.

Gross argues that universities shouldn't just be reacting to the new students as they come in, but to actively plan for them. And that can be a tall order for many reasons. To begin with, despite the fact that academia is usually accused of being "too liberal," the fact of the matter is that faculty are largely very conservative when it comes to changes in the current structures and mindset of their institutions, and that includes pedagogical approaches As teachers, we tend to reflect ourselves on our students, believing that they think like we do, that they are some sort of a "Mini-Me" of ourselves and that they face the same challenges we faced.

We couldn't be more wrong.

Therefore, the challenge we are facing is changing the culture of our institutions of higher education. And if institutional culture is something very difficult to change, even in the corporate world, imagine how difficult that can be in colleges and universities where the professorate, which is the center of gravity for the institution's culture, feels exempt to change by principles of academic freedom and tenure.

And now is when the leadership of higher education needs to be proactive and show courage and vision to initiate the changes that are necessary to be prepared for the future. To begin with, we need to emphasize a more diverse group of faculty members, and not just for social justice, but because students need to reference more to people who look like them. When I interviewed for my current job as dean I asked a group of diverse students what they were expecting of the new dean and they all responded, "That you hire more people who look like us."

We also need to create spaces on our campuses where conventional wisdom is challenged, where we are able to tolerate experimentation, even if some of those experiments fail. As scientists know very well, we can learn more from failed experiments than from successful ones.

The other step higher education leadership needs to take is to encourage innovation in pedagogy across the board. Although I have seen some amazing work by the youngest faculty members using social media and other technological advances, we should be incentivizing new approaches to teaching, approaches that will work for students who are radically different from us in terms of culture, education and expectations.

To that end, we need to make an effort to understand that new generation of students, their background, needs and desires. Even today, students do not want to come to college to memorize a textbook or to listen to faculty standing next to a blackboard repeating what is in the textbook. What they want is engagement and hands-on experiences. They know that what they memorize they'll forget, but what they do and experience they will remember. Good students want to be challenged.

We also need to be better at opening their eyes to career paths different from ours. As I reported a few weeks ago in this column, there are a significant number of students who regret their choice of major in college. In the final analysis, it is up to us to mentor them in the right direction and to teach them those skills they need to succeed no matter what career path they choose: critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork and communication abilities.

We must start thinking about how to make our curriculums more flexible while keeping an eye on the culture of the newest generations. That means stop thinking about rankings or the latest fads in academia. Is it going to be hard? Of course it will. Is it going to unsettle many people in and out academia? For sure. But if we want to ensure that higher education will continue to be relevant in the years to come, we don't have any other choice. Otherwise, we will become dinosaurs, incapable to adapt to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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