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The Student Experience:

Engaging in Cultural and Economic Shifts in Higher Education

Danielle Palombi

Sheridan College

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Engaging in Cultural and Economic Shifts in Higher Education

We work in a VUCA world. VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous—are “the specific dynamics of the 21st century” and “are being driven by a marriage of six mega-trends: globalization, technology, digitization, individualization, demographic change and the environmental crisis” (Elkington, Steege, Glick-Smith, & Breen, 2017, “The Context of Leading,” para. 2). In *Managing in a VUCA World*, the authors write “the forces outlined in the VUCA model are beginning to wend their way into the rarefied environment of academe and are necessitating an existential reappraisal of higher education institutions” (Stewart, Anshuman, & Schatz, 2016, p. 242). The forces outlined in their model are Ecology, Economics, Culture and Politics (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 241). They indicate that two of these four realms will be challenges for higher education, stating “the main challenges to higher education institutions are in the cultural and economic domains” (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 244). In addition, they assert “the requirement for higher education institutions to...act as self-sustaining entities...is creating a fundamental shift in both the internal and external perspective of what higher education institutions are” (Stewart et. al, 2016, p. 246). VUCA is “becoming the normal context for leadership, and requires leaders to adopt appropriate perspectives and skill sets” (Elkington et al., 2017, “The Context of Leading,” para. 2). This essay explores culture and economics as dynamics of VUCA and their relationship to the invigoration of the student experience in higher education (HE). For HE institutions, critically engaging in the student experience may be essential for succeeding in the VUCA world because of its significance in the competing marketplace, the response it provides to changing student demographics, and the effort needed to retain and graduate students.

The Student Experience

What is the relationship between the student experience and the culture and economic forces of VUCA in higher education (HE)? New and active examples of signature student experience initiatives around well-being, employability and success can be found within many HE institutions. For example, McGill University, in Quebec, Canada offers SKILLS21, a highly-collaborative initiative led by their Teaching and Learning department; it is a “workshop-based skills development program for undergraduate students; it provides opportunities for developing 21st century skills, values and attitudes” (McGill University, SKILLS21, 2018). There are six streams in this program and if students complete five workshops within a stream they achieve co-curricular recognition; there are currently more than fifty workshops offered through the program (McGill University, SKILLS21 Streams, 2018). For first-year or beginning-year students, Centennial College in Ontario, Canada facilitates “Experience Centennial Orientation” for student transitions into college that includes learning goals related to self-awareness, relationships, and the exploration of finding resources and tools to support their success (Centennial, 2018). At Humber College in Ontario, Canada, students are offered “Strong Start”, a workshop series for the first six weeks of classes designed as an orientation to college life for first-year students (Humber College, 2018). Finally, at Mohawk College they offer “Start Smart”, an orientation for first-year students with a focus on academic skills (Mohawk College, n.d.). These student experience initiatives and ones like them in other HE institutions could be a response to the cultural and economic forces of VUCA described by Elkington et al., 2017 and Stewart et al., 2016 in the opening of this essay.

Before understanding why HE may be engaging in the student experience in response to VUCA forces, it is important to explore how institutions define the student experience. At Sheridan College in Ontario, Canada, its Academic Plan for 2017-2022 identifies the goal of enhancing the student experience through programs, services and space design, stating “the student experience at Sheridan transcends the classroom to include both curricular and co-curricular spheres. It is enhanced by interactions with peers, faculty and staff” (Sheridan College, 2017). In addition, the Academic Plan notes “student engagement is correlated with a broad array of success and development outcomes, including satisfaction, persistence, retention and GPA attainment” (Sheridan College, 2017). According to the website *Improving the Student Experience in Higher Education*, created by HE consultant Michelle Morgan from Bournemouth University in Poole, England, the student experience “encompasses all aspects of student life (i.e. academic, social, welfare and support) with the academic imperative at the heart of it” (Morgan, 2018, para. 1). It “occurs throughout the student lifecycle, from first contact through to becoming an alumni” and is “critical to the success in higher education today for both the student and the institution” (Morgan, 2018, para. 1). According to The Higher Education Academy’s research report on *Managing the student experience in a shifting higher education landscape*, the student experience is defined as “the totality of a student’s interaction with the institution” (Temple, Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2014, p. 3). The research report reviews “the student journey”, and divides it into four different experience categories including application, academic, campus and graduation (Temple et al., 2014, p. 3). Lastly, the student experience has also been described as being a concept that goes beyond just teaching and learning, with seven unique identifiers related to student expectations about university and student life, transition, peers, parents, culture, media, the program itself, extra-curricular activity and graduate employability

(Jones, 2010, pp. 1-3). In short, it appears that the student experience is a holistic, cultural concept that exceeds the classroom and begins the moment a potential student connects with an HE institution and continues to life as a graduate and alumni.

The Student Experience and The Need to Compete

While there is increased need for learning credentials in a VUCA world “the growth in the demand for education, continuous learning and professional development is expanding the size of the higher education market...” (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 247), HE institutions seem to be competing more aggressively, perhaps partially due to private or corporate competition. “Increased demand for learning credentials combined with the above average inflation increases in tuition is providing increasing incentives to for-profit organizations to enter the market place” (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 247). Citing an example from the University of Phoenix, a corporate institution, Stewart et al. explain that in 2012, the school enrolled over 300,000 students “which changes the catchment areas that institutions have taken as a given in their enrollment forecasting” (2016, p. 247). The examples to follow are from Canadian institutions, but research shows targeted student experience approaches from around the world. Attempts at developing technology-mediated advising (Jaggars & Karp, 2016), utilizing learning analytics as a counterpart to student experience surveys (Borden & Coates, 2017), enhancing the college student experience through leisure education (Jordan, Gagnon, Anderson, & Pilcher, 2018), and offering extra-curricular student experience activities to contribute to graduate outcomes (Milner, Cousins, & McGowan, 2016) all appear in student experience research and make the argument in one form or another to focus more on the student and their experience in HE. Coupled with the economic and cultural forces of VUCA on HE, a shift in an institution’s focus toward a signature student experience in and outside of the classroom is favourable to their arguments. While

service areas of an institution will likely have always advocated for more or enhanced student supports, the nature of these requests and recommendations may have transcended their service areas and are being heard by HE institutions on a greater level, as indicated in the following cases.

At Western University in Ontario, Canada, the institution advertises itself as offering “Canada’s best student experience” (Western University, 2016, Letter section, para. 5). The student experience is defined as a means to “support the whole learner’s growth through programs, services and experiences that foster well-being, build connections and develop skills” (Western University, 2016, Student Experience What section, para. 1). Western’s model highlights wellness initiatives, indigenous services, student success services, sports and recreation services, student development, entrepreneurship and their very own Office of the Associate Vice President of the Student Experience (Western University, 2016, Student Experience wheel section). At Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, the institution launched a Student Experience Initiative, a “multi-year collaboration among faculty, staff and students to help students have the best possible experience” (Simon Fraser University, n.d., para. 1). Their aim is to “develop high-impact opportunities for student engagement with the SFU community”, and their hope is for a cultural shift to “become increasingly more student-focused and holistically supportive...an accessible, healthy learning environment where students feel a sense of belonging” (Simon Fraser University, n.d., para. 2). And lastly, through Academic Impressions, a membership-based HE training and solution service, the University of Alberta, in Alberta, Canada, is cited for its “High-Performing Student Services Model” in the Office of the Registrar (Padfield, 2017). The university paired with the solutions service to establish a “one-stop shop” to reduce wait times for services and the number of in-person

inquiries, and to increase the rates of student satisfaction, student engagement, the ability to support faculty as well as to foster more regular communication between units (Padfield, 2017, Results section, para. 2).

Two of the three examples above chose the word “best” when referring to their student experience. These three examples in addition to those briefly noted in the introduction to this section all point to an investment in time and money to invigorate and brand the student experience. Focusing on the student experience allows these institutions to advertise its efforts toward students, to compete with one another, and to stand out as a leader. The bold declaration of offering “the very best” of anything demonstrates that that institutions have arrived to compete in the realm of the student experience with the hope of standing out among competitors. The pressure to focus on this differentiating factor of the student experience for HE leaders is steeped in the dynamics of VUCA. It speaks to the argument from Stewart et al. cited earlier that culture and economics are the biggest VUCA forces on HE (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 244); a student experience is cultural, and HE institutions are responding with cultural advances.

The Student Experience and Changing Student Populations

Changing student demographics in HE means meeting the variable needs of students and the growing numbers of first-year students, first-generation students, mature students, students with disabilities, part-time students, international students, dual-institution students and transfer students. When researching the student experience for the student groups outlined above, a robust amount of recent data and reports have become available. Institutions are paying attention to their student demographics and those students’ unique experiences in HE. The vigour being paid to the research around the student experience and the unique experiences of student groups

may speak to the cultural and economic pressures Stewart et. al write about in their chapter on HE in the VUCA world (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 244).

Some examples of effort put toward learning about the student experience of these student groups include the University of Guelph, in Ontario, Canada researching online courses for first-year students and attempting to recreate the benefits of an in-person first-year seminar in an online format using enquiry based-learning (Murray, Lachowsky, & Green, 2017). Another, on first-generation college students considers providing programs and professional development to help advisors address the complex issues facing first-generation students (Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). An interesting study on the learning experience of mature students (students who began their studies over the age of 40), suggests that confidence is of critical importance in underpinning their student experience, and that increased confidence leads to better time management, more integration into the wider student body, and a potential positive impact on their retention (Pearce, 2017). An additional mature student study is a 2016 collaborative study from the University of Guelph and Queen's University in Ontario, Canada where they explore the issues affecting the success of mature students as a growing and traditionally overlooked population; their study includes findings that mature students struggle with accessing needed resources, supports services and flexible study options (van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, & Fritz, 2016, p. 29). A call for changes to institutional policies and practices, the creation of social support networks for mature students and increased access to financial support is made (van Rhijn et al., 2016, p. 29).

For students with disabilities, another group “representing a growing population for higher education on college campuses” (Fleming, Oertle, & Plotner, 2017, p. 311), a study through three U.S. HE institutions ventures that while student supports for students with

disabilities have increased in response to this changing demographic, “campus-wide responsiveness to inclusion and actions that promote self-advocacy are needed to increase the rates of persistence and graduation among this underrepresented student group” (Fleming et al., 2017, p. 311). For part-time students, Nicole E. Lee from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada writes “Part-time learners have had a history of campus isolation, fewer opportunities to engage on campus, and much higher attrition rates than their full-time peers”; her study attempts to “uncover effective ways of enhancing the academic and social experiences of part-time learners and in turn, increase retention rates” (2018, p. 1). Additionally, a study on the international student experience and satisfaction shares that since many HE institutions have increased their international student body, to effectively serve this growing population is important, and also compares how support services for international students are structured at Spanish and U.S. institutions (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016).

And finally, for the student experience related to student enrolled in integrated collaborate college and university programs, researchers performed a study of South Central Ontario Universities and Colleges to find that “promoting opportunities for collaborative students to learn and socialize together...from early in their programs may be of benefit. Similarly, college and university policies and procedures should be examined in relation to any unintended stigmatizing effect on collaborative students” (Landeem et al., 2017, p. 148). The authors point to the “increasingly common” joint college/university programs as “governments attempt to address imbalances in student access to education as well as society-and industry-driven human resource requirements” and argues that while the “dual-identity was positive for some, the experiences of inadequate communication and stigma or discrimination were common across programs, underscoring the urgency of addressing these issues that impact the student

experience” (Landeem et al., 2017, p. 149). Lastly, a study on transfer students and what administration can do to improve their experience found that the quality of advisement, the issue of communication between students and their advisors, the college and the university, and within individual departments are all factors to consider when planning for the transfer student experience (Walker & Okpala, 2017). A recommendation for transformational leadership to help transfer students feel important on campus, and the ability to think about improving the success of the transfer student population on campus is the final recommendation (Walker & Okpala, 2017, pp. 42-43).

Almost all of the studies on these student groups explain that their particular student populations under study are growing (van Rhijn et al., 2016, Fleming et al., 2017, Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016, & Landeem et al., 2017). Non-traditional students and their student experiences are likely a growing tradition for HE as marketplace competition increases, as catchments change, and as globalization and technology allow students to enroll virtually from around the world. The more the student experience is considered and highlighted for the non-traditional student, the more choice and opportunities non-traditional students have at their disposal, which increases an institution’s potential recruitment, competitive edge and appeal. Investing in the student experience as a cultural differentiator for all students is a response to VUCA forces and may be critical for competing in today’s HE marketplace.

The Student Experience and The Cost of Retaining and Losing Students

The vigor of research and public positioning on the student experience in HE underscores engagement in this cultural differentiator, but also emphasizes the topic of retention. Retention speaks to the economic domain of VUCA pressures highlighted in the introduction of this essay from Stewart et al. (2016, p. 244). Institutional leaders are aware of and often deeply understand

that the costs related to losing a student are significant. Responding to retention through critically engaging in the student experience not only responds to the cultural pressures of VUCA, but also to retention, a long-standing concern for HE.

Retention is a regularly occurring topic in HE; “student retention has been one of the most widely studied areas in higher education in the last four decades” (Xu, 2017, p. 50); alongside retention comes the topic of student engagement:

Researchers have been studying student engagement—the intersection of student behaviours and institutional conditions—in order to understand how institutional environment and the academic and social norms therein influence students’ learning experiences, their interactions with peers and faculty, and persistence and success (Xu, 2017, p. 50).

Looking back to the definition of the student experience from earlier in this essay, it becomes clear that the student experience and student engagement are closely related. Sheridan follows its goal to enhance the student experience with the supporting statement “student engagement is correlated with a broad array of success and development outcomes, including satisfaction, persistence, retention and GPA attainment” (Sheridan College, 2017). Xu writes “the role of institutional conditions in student engagement has been gaining attention because it is unrealistic to hold only students responsible for engaging themselves; rather, faculty members and administrators should foster conditions that promote student engagement” (2017, p. 51). Xu adds “interventions to improve students’ social and academic engagement may help to improve their commitment to the institution and the retention rate” (Xu, 2017, p. 59). When reading with

the dynamics of VUCA in mind, the author's argument to create a supportive learning environment for students makes the impetus to focus on the student experience feel essential:

It may be an opportune time for institutional administrators to re-examine how retention efforts are organized and to develop strategic approaches to utilizing resources more effectively in order to translate institutional commitment to student success into an intentional creation of a supportive learning environment (Xu, 2017, p. 60).

Another example of the student experience and its relationship to the economic forces of VUCA comes from a 2017 article on the student journey. The author writes “a re-conceptualisation of transition and the student experience away from a definition with the institution at its centre to one where the student journey is prioritized” is at the heart of his recommendation (Farenga, 2017, p. 152). In his study, “focus groups allowed students to reimagine the support they could receive in light of their own unique journeys” (Farenga, 2017, p.153). He writes that placing the student experience at a success program's core provides it flexibility in meeting student needs (Farenga, 2017, p.153). He adds “by being reactive in its offerings, students can curate their own support, helping them to continue developing their own personal higher education journeys” (Farenga, 2017, p.153). And lastly, from Sarah Cox and Ryan Naylor at La Trobe University (LTU) in Melbourne, Australia, their case study on LTU's S@LT, “Succeed at La Trobe” transition and academic outreach model details the results of this program “as a pedagogical model of response to the changing HE environment” (2018, p.52). They write that the program “may be particularly important to those from non-traditional or first-in family backgrounds, or those facing educational, financial or mental wellbeing issues (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p. 52).

The authors write:

S@LT has been central to La Trobe's Success and Retention Strategy for three years, and remains aligned with LTU's new five-year Strategic Plan 2018-2022, with the aim of increasing student success, retention and overall satisfaction. The S@LT program, through its multiple activities and achievements, demonstrates a significant role in improving student success and retention and a positive satisfaction impact regarding student experience at La Trobe" (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p.52).

Their program is steeped in partnerships with academic disciplines to provide personalized, course-and subject-specific academic supports (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p.52). In their 2017 study, "S@LT placed nearly 12,600 calls to 14,700 flagged students identified as at-risk through its subject-based and early intervention campaigns" (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p.57). They contacted over 5,000 students and sent over 6,000 emails to check-in and provide key information to students (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p. 57). They found that "two-thirds (66.5%) of student referrals were to online resources or college teachings staff to assist with these issues, plus another 9.8%...were referred to Student Learning staff or peer learning advisors for academic literacy help" (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p. 57). They conclude by indicating that "the high proportion of these referrals made suggest that many 'traditional' students also had problems with these areas" (Cox & Naylor, 2018, p. 58).

Xu's argument for faculty and administration to engage in the student experience, Farenga's argument to prioritize the student journey with flexible programming, and Cox & Naylor's conclusion that their retention efforts serves both non-traditional and traditional students is significant; it means that student experience programming can be both an economic and cultural response to VUCA forces, both domains that Stewart et al. recognize as challenges

for HE (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 244). Engaging in the student experience thoughtfully, therefore, is an ideal response for HE and could be why so many institutions are focusing on this area as a cultural qualifier and as a response to the economics of losing a student.

Conclusion

Stewart et al. explain that HE's fiscal crisis in North America has "created an environment that is undermining the ability of institutions to resist change and to keep its hallowed traditions" (2016, p. 243). In addition, they write "while some industries benefit from economies of scale...in service sectors, where the service is provided by people (such as teaching) there are very real limits to the ability to scale without a significant diminution in quality" (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 246). The need for a fundamental shift in perspectives of what is an educational institution may point to the invigoration of the student experience in HE. HE faces very real economic challenges related to government funding and the incapacity to scale without severely impacting quality. The relationship between the student experience and the forces of VUCA is important because not only do HE institutions need to participate in a competitive marketplace, but the activation of the student experience as a key focus in HE also speaks to meeting the needs of changing student demographics and the fiscal imperative to see students persist to graduation. A signature student experience may be an essential institutional cultural differentiator for competing in the HE marketplace. Responding to the cultural and economic pressures of VUCA with a focus on the student experience is a vital opportunity that, based on the research, is one worth examining and likely investing in for educational leaders.

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