

THE INNOVATIVE UNIVERSITY: CHANGING THE DNA OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of higher education from the Inside Out  
Book Review  
Madeline Brown  
Andrews University

*The Innovative University* by Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring outlines the history and foundation of many current practices in higher education that have both benefitted and plagued education as we know it. Eyring and Christensen are distinguished educators, both with diverse backgrounds in education and business. Eyring, VP of Advancement at Brigham-Young University-Idaho is the author of two additional books- *Mormon Scientist*, *The Life and Faith of Henry Eyring* and *Major Decisions: Taking Charge of Your College Education*. Among his diversified work experience and education, Christensen is the Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, and author of eight additional books, focusing mostly on how innovation disrupts learning and the advantages of such. The title of the book alludes to the current university implementing changes to affect higher education positively and propel it into a promising future.

*The Innovative University* presents the history of Harvard University from its inception, and what the authors describe as numerous contributions it has made to discovery, scholarship, academic administration and learning. The book's theoretical framework is based on the current challenges in higher education, and how these have fostered a sense of urgency in formulating solutions to address rising costs, time to degree completion, and subpar student learning outcomes in terms of critical thinking and scholarship. The authors present a type of university that has barely been scathed by social climate and financial hardship, operating successfully in what they described as a disruption-free era. This uninterrupted model of operation has been challenged by the emergence of technology and the impact it has had on the evolving of online learning. Traditional universities are now competing with less known colleges who have taken advantage of these disruptions and converted them into critical tools for the success of under-represented students who do not fit the mold of what once was a typical college student. The

traditional student has been redefined as a result, and only those institutions at the forefront of these disruptive innovations are reaping the benefits of increased enrollment, increased credibility, lower operating costs, and affordability.

The case study presented on Harvard University aims to explore the benefits as well as disadvantages of imitating the institution's higher education model, and how other institutions can ultimately fail at this attempt. However, emulating Harvard is not the aspiration of every college or university and many have succeeded in blazing their own paths. Their success can be attributed to the identification of their institution's strengths, and capitalizing on the unique characteristics that sets them apart. To this regard, the authors illustrate the birth of Brigham Young University- Idaho, an institution which has thrived on the concept of the students they serve, the subjects they focus on, and the type scholarship they pursue.

The authors point to three types of students that are now being served by lower-cost institutions that have taken advantage of the newly defined college student. These students are generally underserved by elite universities, but new innovative institutions are proud to fill in the gaps. The authors describe these students as ones who are paying more than what they'd like to for college education, students who cannot afford college but would welcome a lower cost of education, and an underprepared students who can succeed with additional help.

This type of approach is further exemplified by the case study of Brigham Young University-Idaho, particularly as it relates to its transformation from a two-year college to a four year institution. The institution would shift to not only offering courses year round, but also taking advantage of technology to serve more students by way of online education and hybrid courses, offsetting the cost of traditionally offered brick and mortar courses. The institution also decided against keeping its winning intercollegiate athletics program, opting instead for a

reallocation of these funds to resources that would aim to benefit a broader spectrum of students. BYUUI thrived on the implementation of modular majors, for example, which afforded students the opportunity to change majors without incurring significant costs as a result.

The examination of these institutions' histories and innovation's impact on both provided the framework from which the authors derived new models for the innovative university they envision. The authors detail some of the advantages of different options to serve the needs of an ever-changing, diverse student body. New models will offer students increased flexibility like never before, allowing them to customize their education to fit their interests and needs in ways many institutions have already begun to adapt. The authors point to the expansion of online courses and programs, emphasizing that the most effective tool in cost reduction is online education.

The authors based their conclusions on their study of Harvard University and Brigham Young University-Idaho as two institutions offering different models, but exemplifying how an elite university can maintain its status and thrive, and also outlining the role of an innovative university that can care for those students who fall short of the Harvard mold, or do not care to join its ranks for reasons outlined previously.

Upon personally reflecting on the book, I was initially impressed with the authors' in-depth exploration of the history of some of the practices we hold true in higher education today, grounded in Harvard. To my surprise, these practices include the academic curve, academic honors, the idea of the first year experience, the creation of majors, and general education. I was equally impressed with its nonacademic contributions to practices still in place today such as the creation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the impact of sports on recruitment and funding. The authors were successful in clearly depicting what they believe to be

Harvard's influence on higher education, as well as BYU's adaptation of innovation and the example they believe the institution has set for the changing face of less elite universities serving the new college student.

The further I delved into the book, the more my curiosity sparked as I looked forward to learning about some of the solutions proposed by the authors to increase the quality of higher education in the face of technological innovations. To my disappointment, however, the text's primary focus seemed to be on the exaltation of Harvard University as the trend-setter and building block of higher education in the U.S., outlining the failure of many institutions that try to emulate it. It appears the authors' deep-rooted connections with the elite university interfere with the objectivity necessary to gain the respect of readers, as there is a clear bias expressed in the overall message of the book towards Harvard University's model.

In contrast, the authors did make an effort to exemplify a successful university in defying Harvard's model- BYU. However, the authors did very little to the effect of detailing the innovative practices that can be applicable to various types of institutions. The authors focused on presenting what could be interpreted as a business model- feeding into the 'customer is always right' approach and providing students with more of what they want. Although there was an in-depth exploration of how Harvard came to be the elite institution it is today, and high operational costs afforded by endowments in the billions, aspiring institutions will continue to fall short of emulating such a unique model.

With regard to innovation, the authors made valuable recommendations on assessment and decision making. Of most importance was the recommendation to assess faculty and the physical campus, asking how well the institution serves its students and exploring the necessary tradeoffs to successfully accomplish this. As explored throughout the text, this can include a

reduction in programs offered, introduction of online courses, and hiring of adjunct professors versus tenure-track professors to alleviate some of the institution's financial burden. However, this may not be the definition of success for all. It is critical for the university, in its self-assessment to recognize what sets it apart, and create a realistic approach further supported by measured outcomes. Not every university aims to emulate the practices of the elite as the authors imply, nor is this good practice. Rather, the up-and-coming universities have seen the needs that have risen and have developed strategies that directly address the needs of students, making them thrive in a time of such turmoil in the education arena.

Upon further reflection, the Innovative University informed my professional practice by allowing me to understand the importance of the less elite colleges and their contributions to the higher education trends emerging today. Just as Harvard experienced some difficulties early on, over time, and despite its less desirable reputation during its formative years, many of these less-reputable schools can still serve an invaluable purpose and may become the trend-setters of tomorrow.

As a higher education professional working for a for-profit school, I have gained a better understanding on the reasons my particular institution shies away from practices such as offering extensive graduate programs, why it chooses operate year round, and its focus on internships as part of the graduation requirement for every student. I also gained a better understanding as to why creating more stringent admissions standards would not benefit the institution nor the disadvantaged student population it proudly serves. Reasons for strict measurement of learning outcomes, employment outcomes, and time to completion are more apparent and I have a better understanding of the importance of this type of accountability for the sustainability of the institution altogether.

In retrospect, I could have benefitted more from this text had the authors focused less on the history of education through their lens, and more on their practical solutions to effect needed change as it relates to innovation in the 'other' type of university. There were several topics that were merely touched upon and others that were disregarded completely- all critical to the survival of the 'other university'. Using BYU as the leading example on how to transform a modern-day university is a great start, but also sells the reader short of the exploration of other universities that can offer solutions to a broader range of institutions serving our diverse, and global student body. It seemed as though their idea of innovation is already becoming outdated as many colleges and universities have already adapted the online learning model and have created programs entirely online.

Overall, the book serves the purpose of striking necessary conversations amongst educators in anticipation of the changes the authors describe. However, upon reading the text, I realized why the process of decision-making in higher education is such a lengthy one- not every decision can be classified as one that is clearly defined. There are plenty of gray areas that need to be further explored, and while an institution should practice self-assessment, there is value in reviewing effective strategies of similar institutions and improving on such. That does not necessarily make an institution an imitator, but rather an intelligent competitor. Innovation, therefore, will not always present itself in the form of a new idea, but rather an improvement on practices already in existence. Changes can take several years, and administrators will often times not see their ideas come to fruition for years to come. The key is to look at the history (foundation) of the institution, take into consideration the changes in social climate and the economy, their impact on the changing student body, and build from there- this constitutes the

change in DNA the authors promote to propel us into a better education system designed for the success of our students.



## References

Christensen, C. M., & Eyring, H. J. (2011). *The innovative university: Changing the DNA of higher education from the inside out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.