

Back to the Future: Transforming Facilities to Achieve Student Success

By E. Lander Medlin

If I had a time machine (like the DeLorean in the movie *Back to the Future*), I could jump in, set the date forward to 2037, fire up the after-burners, and actually see what the University of the Future might look like 20 years from now. Otherwise, predicting the future of the university is beyond bewildering, and illustrates physicist Niels Bohr's point that "prediction is very difficult, especially if it is about the future."

Nonetheless, we find ourselves at that moment in time when we should be asking, "What should the ideal university of the future look like?" Some possible answers could be: One that you would want to send your child to...one that is more inviting and stimulating for students and faculty...one that captures and piques student interest...one that uses technology to create fully immersive learning environments...one that uses artificial intelligence (AI)-based platforms for all students...one that provides coaching and intervention...one that results in better learning, and fosters life-long learning as a way of life.

THE DRIVING FORCES OF CHANGE

I would suggest that we are constrained by traditional approaches and need to challenge ourselves in innovative ways to imagine and create new learning models and facilities that match these goals. Sitting Bull had it right when he said, "Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children." This may not sound like the facilities professional's role, but indeed we are at the crossroads, where it is everyone's task to envision a better future

for our college and university environments, intellectually and socially, virtually and physically. John Cavanaugh, President and CEO of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area, wrote about this very topic in the *EDUCAUSE Review*, in an article entitled "Alchemy, Innovation, and Learning, in 2025." He stated, "We are either on the verge of true transformation (if you are a believer) or on the edge of the abyss (if you are not)." Where are you? I believe we can do much better and contribute greatly to our students' success!

Suffice it to say that the landscape of higher education remains eerily similar to that of 30 to 40 years ago—resource constraints! Similar yes, but nonetheless the pressures and challenges of today are occurring amidst the rapid rate of change of three driving forces: Technology, Globalization, and the Environment. And all three of these forces are accelerating simultaneously, interdependently, and exponentially!

This phenomenon is described in detail in Thomas Friedman's book, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*. Certainly this age of accelerations has resulted in the disconcerting feeling of dislocation; and it is outstripping the speed at which human beings, institutions, and societies can normally adapt. Higher education must help people understand what kind of world we are living in and help them adapt to that world. As an industry, colleges and universities are again being asked to step up and adapt, and the shift is from student "access" to student "success."

Certainly if traditional postsecondary institutions are going to remain relevant in a world where every-

one will need lifelong learning, we need to provide those opportunities at a viable speed, price point, and level of on-demand mobility.

APPA'S THOUGHT LEADERS SERIES 2017

Herein lies our topic for the Thought Leaders symposium this year: *Transforming Facilities to Achieve Student Success*. Why this topic and why now? Simply because the quality of facilities is directly related to the quality of education and the student experience! That's where the simplicity ends. There is pressure to demonstrate value given the state of facilities and the need for facilities modernization and revitalization. In addition, and not coincidentally, student success has emerged as one of the most important goals for higher education institutions as well as our sister associations encompassing academic affairs (presidents and provosts), administrative affairs (chief business officers and chief information officers), and student affairs (vice presidents and deans of students) alike. Colleges and universities are investing in programs to help identify at-risk students, improve academic support, and expand student services. It's time facilities professionals focused on aligning facilities with student success outcomes as well.

This does beg the question, "How is student success defined?" Across TLS participants alone, we found a broad range of views and perspectives from "practical and measurable" to "abstract and subjective." Ultimately, each institution must define student success on its own terms. Here are some factors that contribute:

- Student retention
- Graduation rates
- Education attainment
- Occupational achievement
- Personal achievement (intellectual, social, ethical)

Friedman tells us that, "at a minimum, our educational systems must be retooled to maximize these needed skills and attributes: strong fundamentals in writing, reading, coding, and math; creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration; grit, self-motivation, and lifelong learning habits; and entrepreneurship and improvisation—at every level." Because, you see, vastly improved student learning is at stake. Facilities professionals must understand their institution's definition of student success and

ensure that its facilities modernization and revitalization plans are aligned accordingly. The TLS monograph provides greater detail.

How can the facilities organization assist? We have an important role to play in fostering student success by:

- Providing safe, accessible, clean, and functional spaces
- Ensuring appropriate pedagogy
- Offering technology connectivity everywhere
- Creating "makerspaces" or learning neighborhoods
- Demonstrating sustainable living, learning labs
- Offering internship programs

Yet the average age of facilities professionals across the United States and Canada is cresting 50 years old—followed by a concomitant high cost of repair and upkeep of educational facilities. In addition, we have an "overbuilt" space portfolio in targeted geographic sectors where high school graduate enrollments are declining (Northeast and Midwest, in particular).

COLLABORATION: THE KEY TO SUCCESS

So where do we start? Strategic investments in capital renewal to modernize and revitalize facilities that specifically focus on student success outcomes will have the greatest impact. However, real collaboration across the entire campus community of stakeholders is key to achieving our collective success. Therefore, facilities modernization and revitalization through effective collaboration are considered the two filters or tools most crucial to attaining student success for facilities and ensuring further alignment with institutional strategies and goals.

So maybe the daily question isn't "What problems are you solving today?" but "What problems are you causing today?" That question forces us to focus differently on what we are (or are not) doing to support our students. The TLS monograph will provide a series of questions you can use at your institution to refine your thinking and programs and set you on a path to success—hopefully student success!

With all this in mind, Doc (from *Back to the Future*) might crank up that DeLorean and say, "Great Scott—the future is in our hands!" ☺

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