Disruption, Innovation, Technology, and the Liberal Arts College
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By John A. Roush, Centre College President

I am not alone among college presidents who take seriously the work of Clayton Christensen and acknowledge his profound impact on conversations about the nature of enterprise in our nation, both outside and inside American higher education. This sentiment was unanimous among our Board of Trustees as well after Professor Christensen spoke to them and a number of our faculty at a recent meeting. These conversations were interesting, unsettling, and inspiring all at once.

Though some may not be persuaded that "disruptive innovation," particularly the kind brought on by numbing technological advances, will redefine how education is delivered, and conceivably how it is priced, my take is different. Much of Christensen's thinking has caused me to rethink the ways in which students are learning and will learn. Specifically, I am working through the implications of his ideas for colleges focused on the liberal arts and sciences.

This is not to say that I believe technological innovation will make the highly personal, transformative power of the residential liberal arts college a "dinosaur." Rather, Christensen's thinking and writing have prompted me to add urgency to our conversations at Centre College about how we can blend the best of what technology and technological partnerships have to offer the highly residential, personal, and engaging educational experience we offer students.

At the same time, we do not wish to become something that we are not. Embracing technology should not affect the primary way we fulfill our mission. We will always value excellent faculty who teach bright and talented young men and women in classes of between 15 and 20 students. Instead, embracing technology should mean that we imagine how some elements of what we do in the classroom, the laboratory, the practice space, and the administrative office can be enhanced, be enriched, be made more effective by including technology in the experience. In some cases, this might also include allowing technology to provide opportunity for our students we cannot provide on our own, and I recognize that this outlook may make some folks want to run for cover.

We need to move beyond the notion that the highest quality education can occur only in our classrooms, our laboratories, our practice spaces, and our overseas study locations. Partnerships with other colleges and universities, and even with technology firms, have the potential to make us a much stronger undergraduate college.

I am convinced that grabbing up, if you will, those elements of high-tech educational opportunities will afford our students the chance to encounter even richer intellectual opportunities for learning from people and places heretofore not accessible. Even more, I believe that this can be done in important educational ways in the highly residential college experience enjoyed at places like Centre College, but only by staying grounded in
the liberal arts and sciences, where high-performing professors inspire students in personal and engaging ways.

The more vexing question is how exactly this gets accomplished, particularly at those private liberal arts colleges like Centre that, while deep in tradition and history, lack the kind of resources that fuel the embrace of technology at places like Stanford, Harvard, and MIT.

But let me return to my first paragraph and ask the question, "Why does Professor Christensen seem to be commanding the general conversation about American enterprise and higher education?"

Clay Christensen has experienced and believes the story he pens. He is a teacher and scholar who is not trying to "build an audience." He is exceedingly comfortable with playing the role of prophet in this intellectual space, defining successful business practice for the future in all aspects of enterprise. In the process, he demonstrates important leadership principles at work.

All that said, am I prepared to identify myself a disciple of "disruptive innovation" in the American Academy?

Not quite. However, I am in agreement with him that change must occur in the American academy, that the financial model for our nation's colleges and universities must be fixed, and that we must take action to be sure the learning experience students receive during their time on our campus is of the highest quality.

A great many folks contend that Professor Christensen has effectively gored our higher education ox, and they don't like it. At Centre College, our trustees, faculty, and staff are in serious conversation about these matters and others. We know that high achievement and access and quality -- foundation pieces for us at Centre -- will be a part of our future not only if we hold fast to our core values but also if we reimagine some elements of our educational experience.

And I am all for continuing the conversation, since I take heart and great pleasure in acknowledging that I don't have it all figured out.

But of this I am sure. The folks who will finish first in the variety of "races to the top" out there in a wide variety of fields -- including higher education -- are the ones who remain open to change and new ideas and fresh ways of doing. The best leaders will be the ones who hold fast to the core values of high quality education in all its different forms while looking for ways to improve the quality of their enterprise. They will be unafraid to challenge and be challenged, quick to affirm that new ways of doing and learning should not be adopted or set aside without careful review, and excited about a future where fortune -- as has always been true -- will favor the well-prepared.