Reviews / Comptes rendus

Accelerated Opportunity Education Models and Practices

Edited by Rene Cintron, Jeanne C. Samuel, and Janice M. Hinson
(IGI Global, 2017, 255 pages)

Accelerated Opportunity Education Models and Practices is a collection of papers published as part of the Advances in Higher Education and Professional Development Series by IGI Global, an international academic publishing company specializing in research publications. The papers are organized into 10 chapters, each of which presents an "accelerated opportunity" model or practice in higher education. Accelerated opportunities, as defined in the preface, "attempt to shorten the timeframe by which a higher education degree is completed."

The good practices and models presented come from a variety of studies and explorations in different countries: four from the US, two from Australia, two from India, and one each from Thailand and Czech Republic. The practices and models presented are mostly related to under-graduate programs of study. In an age where both time and money are highly valued commodities, the concern with cost and time investment in education is not only valid but also very timely. The preface sets this context, citing data for average costs, completion times and success rates for undergraduate programs of study. It also situates education in the broader socio-economic and political environment. The overall content of the book seems to suggest the following prescription for accelerated learning:

- Design the curriculum, assessment, and learning outcomes wisely, using feedback from students (students will value such courses, as these will be optimally designed to avoid overlaps in content and will be more relevant to their needs) (Ch. 1),

- Ensure students get recognition for the prior learning they bring with them (Ch. 10),

- Support student transition and progression through academic advising, success coaching, and mentoring (Ch. 2 & 3),

- Ensure the courses are scheduled and sequenced purposefully and creatively (Ch. 5),

- Provide professional development opportunities to the teaching faculty, so they can improve teaching and learning (Ch. 8),

- Incorporate latest technology in pedagogy (Ch. 7), and

- Leverage social media to promote learning (Ch. 9).

Many of these practices are of course not new, and go beyond the theme of accelerated opportunities. For example, sound curriculum and assessment design, and use of student feedback to improve content and delivery are essential features of any good quality, learner-centred program. Similarly, a set of supportive academic and non-academic processes has long been considered integral to institutional effectiveness and program quality. Read in this way, the book's message is fundamentally basic—a high quality learner-centred curriculum and administrative support is critical for students to achieve the most timely and cost effective progression in their studies.

The most important and relevant good practice comes, surprisingly, at the end. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and/or Recognition (PLR) has been around for some time, and any accelerated model of learning needs it as a foundation and essential building block. References to studies and research provided in this chapter support a strong case for a strategic and comprehensive approach to PLA and PLR, which deserves serious commitment from educators.

A few of the topics seem to be rather narrowly and loosely related to the theme, and raise more questions than they answer. The research study on the relationship between cultural intelligence, or cultural quotient (CQ), defined as the ability to "function effectively in situations characterised by cultural diversity," and student satisfaction, for example, concludes that CQ affects student satisfaction. CQ is obviously an extremely desirable trait. One wonders, however, how these conclusions contribute to our understanding of accelerated opportunity! High CQ was found to be correlated to high satisfaction. Does a high CQ, implicitly, lead to faster completion times? Is this relationship explicitly built into the instrument? What about the CQ of faculty and administrators? Perhaps, the real questions we need to answer are

- How can teaching and learning practices deal with issues of cultural diversity, inclusion, and learning styles of a diverse population of students?

- How can these practices contribute to how well, and more importantly, how fast students learn?

Similarly, the model on language skills training through mobile apps (Ch. 6) is very interesting and useful. It discusses issues of technology, cognition, and pedagogy in the mobile era.

However, its conclusion is too narrowly focused on use of mobile apps for learning language skills. There is no doubt that technology improves access to learning and adds flexibility. One has to dig deeper into the research cited to answer a more fundamental question: How exactly can use of technology using online and hybrid learning across programs speed up progression?

On the positive side, the book provides a wealth of empirical data and references (Ch. 1, alone, has more than 100 citations and references). For those looking for ideas in accelerating learning in this context, the book could also serve as a very useful source for developing continuous quality improvement policies and procedures, and as a basis for further research.

What is missing from the book is a unifying thread that ties the practices together in a coherent strategic vision, or "institutional effectiveness" framework. In the absence of such a strategy, many of these practices are unlikely to develop or be sustained. For example, few would deny the power of interventions such as academic advising, coaching, and mentoring to induce positive outcomes in this context. However, we also know that such interventions are resource intensive, and are often the first casualties of a "managerial'"approach to educational administration in an age of balanced budgets and cost reduction drives, particularly in publicly and/or poorly funded institutions, where these are needed most.

Reviewed by
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