**Are Accreditors Chained to the Old Model?**

You probably read about this: Amazon, the giant online retailer that can sell anything to anyone anywhere at any time, and that sends spasms of anxiety to traditional retailers, may soon be sending similar spasms to institutions of higher education. Amazon announced in July that it has committed $700 million over the next few years to educate/train/reskill/update/adapt/job-link and otherwise more suitably prepare some 100,000 of its employees for work in the company and beyond.

Implicit in this announcement is the notion that traditional institutions of higher learning have not in the past, are not now, and may never in the future meet this need. Amazon’s is one manifestation of a vast, loosely-connected movement that bears several titles: alternative pathways, micro-credentials, adaptive skill development, employer/school partnerships, non-institutional providers, transformational learning, free-range learning\(^1\), and contract learning. Perhaps the single term that best summarizes them all is “disruptive.”

This broad movement represents the convergence of several trends. Advocates note that workplace skill demands are so specific, and so rapidly changing, that traditional schools are unable to respond with sufficient speed and learning outcome alignment to be reliable. Both students and employers are turning to this diverse sector because they have found traditional education to be too costly, too slow to change, too complicated to navigate, too locked into the traditional student paradigm, and not relevant to the digital world we now inhabit.

While initiatives in this arena have at times been small, fragile, or unproven, the sheer magnitude of Amazon’s entry holds the potential to reshape the nation’s learning experience. And this may bring accreditors, such as ACCJC, to an inflection point in our core functions.

In service of assuring and improving educational quality, we accredit academic institutions, not businesses. We insist on academic programs being thoroughly developed and reviewed by qualified faculty, not cranked out in a few days by young techies hunched over their computers. We measure the learning experience within the metrics of a traditional academic degree, not by an individual’s digital portfolio developed at the end of a coding boot camp, demonstrating alacrity with some exotic new software. Though we often protest otherwise, we still imagine education as the imparting of knowledge from a learned faculty member, to be memorized and played back on an exam by a receptive student. We seldom know how to factor in prior learning, game-based adaptive learning, team-based and project-based learning, military or on-the-job learning, or (that most elusive nugget) lifelong learning as actually experienced.

What if Jeff Bezos were to step into my office and say, “I want ACCJC to accredit Amazon Technical Academy.” Not that he would need federal Title IV financial aid; he’s got that covered. But because he wants the benefits of a quality review process and he hopes his employees might use the resulting accredited credential to further their educational attainments. Right now, (once getting up from the floor) I would have to say, “Thanks, but you are outside our chartered scope.”

---

\(^1\) Peter Smith, *Free-Range Learning in the Digital Age*, New York: Select Books, 2018
As accreditors, we face the very real risk of validating the learning of a diminishing segment of the population. And it’s not just the numbers of students at risk here; it’s increasingly those who are drivers of the future economy – the innovators and artists and entrepreneurs who will have found it necessary to obtain their preparation from non-traditional providers. What if Amazon’s learning system is so effective that it markets its approach to other major corporations, as some pundits speculate? If Uber, Cisco, and Apple all get on board, the question about who needs a traditional college degree will become urgently real.

Implicit in Amazon’s announcement is a signal for ACCJC’s member institutions to continue their commitments to innovation and responsive change. The flip side of that signal, of course, is for them to sense support for such changes from their accreditor. Concurrently, there are unconventional not-yet-members tapping on ACCJC’s windows to see whether they might find a welcome.

Sometimes accreditors drive change. Sometimes we cautiously watch while innovation emanates from our members, then we codify the change. Because this Commission cares deeply about the quality of the educational experiences available to all the constituencies we serve, we may not enjoy the luxury of cautiously watching.