

St. Cloud Times
To a Higher Degree
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We live in a culture of choices. The marketplace has given us ample evidence that store shelves are lined with 21 varieties of a single brand of toothpaste because that's what we have come to require. Variety accommodates the diverse needs of human beings as consumers of everything from food to education. Science supports this concept. Much has been written recently about the value of biological diversity and how it protects living systems from radical environmental change. It's not just that heirloom tomatoes taste better than the factory-farm grown red tennis balls grocery stores offer in January. Diversity actually ensures a healthy future for our ecosystems.

In business we see the value of diversity at the edge of innovation. The sometimes chaotic progress of our economy triumphed over centrally managed state enterprises in large part because diversity brings flexibility. It's that nimbleness and room for creativity that has enabled adaptation in product design and market strategies that no managed economy can ever achieve.

The same is true for higher education. In the United States higher education is a "system" that includes such diverse options as Harvard University, St. Cloud State University and the University of Phoenix. Students can get an education – a very good education – from each of these institutions.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that all three would be equally successful at meeting the individual needs of these students. Why can't all students benefit equally from taking the same Psychology 101 course or earning their entire degrees online? Such a question is grounded in the belief that all one gets from higher education is the sum of the packets of information passed out in the 40-or-so courses that commonly comprise a college education.

At Harvard students get essentially the same information as at other institutions, but they also are tested by world leaders in the company of some of the best students in the world. Students have access to unique resources and graduate with a life-changing association with a "world-class" brand – the reason why students and their families are willing to pay over \$50K in tuition per year for that Harvard education. It's also why, over two decades ago, Harvard Business School Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter predicted that institutions like Harvard would continue into the future without fundamental change despite rising tuition costs.

At the University of Phoenix students also can get the information. They cannot play football for their institution. They cannot take part in community service learning opportunities created by their professors to meet the needs of local schoolchildren or conduct research through course work that results in practical applications to benefit local businesses. The University of Phoenix thrives because it has made a science of developing and delivering standard educational packages at times and places that make it possible for adult learners to achieve their objectives.

At St. Cloud State University students also get the information contained in those packets. But at St. Cloud State the people who teach that content pride themselves on also offering every student a wide variety of opportunities to put classroom learning into practical use. As a public institution St. Cloud State has a commitment to preparing graduates for life and citizenship as well as for work. Students

achieve these objectives through many different academic programs designed to meet the needs of Minnesota and Minnesotans. They gain practical knowledge and develop a broad educational foundation that prepares them for lifelong learning. And yes, they can play football at St. Cloud State ... or engage in more than 200 other opportunities to build life skills for a lifetime. Students at such an institution engage in activities that greatly benefit their communities and create a rich learning environment. In fact, schools like St. Cloud State must be what they teach if they are to be successful.

These differences among different kinds of institutions serving students with different needs mean that as we address the increasing costs of higher education throughout the next decade, we cannot talk simply about how to deliver courses at a lower cost. We must seek to understand what these institutions in all of their variety do for our nation. Only then can we talk about whether or not we can afford these institutions – and perhaps if we can afford not to have them. Change must come and we must control costs but we must also start this work with the right understanding and the right questions.