K–12 Trends and How They Influence the Horizon of Higher Education

It’s natural to assume a “trickle-down” approach to trend spotting and believe that what’s happening in higher education guides educators and administrators in shaping the K–12 experience. After all, if entrance into colleges and universities represents the desired goal, then it makes sense that trends in higher education set the tone for how K–12 schools prepare tomorrow’s learners.

And that logic holds in some cases.

Take the use of personal computers and devices, for example. College students often come prepared with their own laptops and other equipment, but young learners in K–12 typically don’t bring computers or mobile devices to school. That’s partly because they use technology provided by the school — which parents expect, given that their tax dollars paid for those tools.

Because we know that today’s college students come prepared with their own technological devices, we can safely assume that tomorrow’s learners will do that as well. Therefore, it makes sense that K–12 schools would integrate these devices into their educational and administrative planning so that all students, regardless of financial means, are accustomed to personal technology.

But sometimes K–12 trends foreshadow changes looming on the higher educational horizon. These hints and clues can serve as a guide for the current focus of universities and inform future funding decisions and asset allocations.

This white paper discusses current trends, providing perspective on the differences between the K–12 and higher education environments, what’s happening in K–12 now and how these trends could affect higher education.
First things first: The Key Differences Between Educational Environments

K–12 and higher education are arguably more different than alike. So it’s important to acknowledge what makes K–12 unique — and equally important to avoid making sweeping generalizations about all K–12 schools.

Certainly we can make some safe assumptions about what’s on the horizon of higher education based on what we see in K–12, but we make those predictions with these five factors in mind:

1. **Patterns are tough to determine in K–12**
   Since public schools are required by law to educate all children, whereas students entering college represent a limited group of students with a more uniform skill set, it is difficult to make generalizations about K–12 students. For example, certain patterns might be true for high-achieving learners but invalid for students or schools viewed as low-achieving.

2. **Schools vary because students vary**
   Many factors, including homelessness, food insecurity, discipline and lack of parental involvement, affect a younger student’s success. Therefore, urban and suburban schools may have little in common.

3. **Equity is a big issue in K–12**
   Since a large part of K–12 school funding comes from local taxes, schools in high-poverty areas are challenged to provide the same resources as schools in affluent areas.

4. **Digital shifts are uneven across the country**
   Some schools move quickly to adopt new tools, while others barely move at all.

5. **Legal ramifications**
   The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) places parents in control over what information is collected online on their children under 13 years of age, so data isn’t as readily available for this group. And since student privacy and safety are important to all K–12 schools, data is often kept close to the vest, and trends are hard to spot — however, not impossible.

While K–12 schools and higher educational institutions are more different than alike, we can make some safe assumptions about what’s on the horizon of higher education based on what we see happening in K–12.
Speaking of K–12 Trends, What Are They? 
And What Might They Foreshadow for Higher Education?

We’ve acknowledged nine main trends* in the K–12 environment that affect how teachers teach and students learn, as well as the corresponding business and administrative models that schools adopt. We also offer some predictions about how those trends could affect higher education.

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1 This isn’t your father’s classroom — or even the one you might remember.

Today’s K–12 experience is more organic. Subject matter is threaded across multiple classes versus being regulated to one 45-minute subject period. For example, students may learn a math concept within the context of an art lesson.

In this new, more fluid educational process, technology plays a key role. For example, students might use the Internet or other sources of digital material to learn about bridges from around the world, then design their own using engineering software. In the final segment of the project, students would apply what they’ve learned by building an actual model and testing its weight-bearing properties. They might even design and create robots to carry out the actual construction. The whole learning process incorporates individual research and group work that use both heads and hands.

Changes extend beyond the classroom too. Business models are shifting to become more agile and open to trying new approaches, thereby accommodating a less rigid structure to teaching and learning.

What this could lead to in higher education:
> A more collaborative environment.

When students learn in hands-on, collaborative and competency-based environments, they demonstrate college readiness in nontraditional ways — and they’ll expect to continue learning in that team-based environment. For these students, learning is a group exercise.

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2 The use of blended learning is increasing.

Schools are increasingly open to incorporating online learning as a related component instead of spending time in a physical classroom. That means that time is freed up for activities that capitalize on face-to-face interactions.

In addition, physical areas within a school such as the library or shop class are now taking on new life as “maker spaces” and “fab labs.” For example, today’s students can participate in 3-D printing, laser engraving and other high-tech fabrication skills in middle and high school that students formerly learned only in technical school.

This blended learning trend is sure to continue, considering the progress being made in learning analytics, adaptive learning and digital platforms. With these methods in place, it’s likely that learning will continue to evolve and remain fresh.

What this could lead to in higher education:
> Personalized learning paths.

One size does not fit all; it really never did. Tomorrow’s college students may expect instructors to work with them to tailor project work or incorporate online learning components in the name of promoting deeper understanding, rather than simply assigning chapters from the same textbook. A huge upside: Learning various paths could open possibilities for students who might not succeed within a more traditional college learning environment.

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*Much of this content is inspired by research conducted by the NMC Horizon Report, 2015 Higher Education Edition, the NMC Horizon Report, 2016 Higher Education Edition and The Chronicle of Higher Education.
Speaking of K–12 Trends, What Are They? And What Might They Foreshadow for Higher Education? (cont.)

Students spend less time sitting in their seats and instead get up and move about. Both inside and outside the classroom, teachers are leading more active learning opportunities, such as project-based learning, problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning. School libraries, labs and other nonclassroom locations play increasingly important roles.

What this could lead to in higher education:

> Evolving roles of academic librarians.

With the advent of reshaping libraries into “maker centers,” the role of the librarian transitions into that of a media specialist. These leaders are now viewed as partners and experts in Learning Resources Centers who help students and teachers achieve better results.

And it’s not just computers. Tablets and smartphones are now less of a taboo in school and instead are viewed as tools that connect what the teacher is teaching with real-life applications. The effect on students: They enjoy more control of how they engage with a subject and personalize it to their own world and communities, which naturally results in brainstorming ways to fix problems.

What this could lead to in higher education:

> Increased academic technology skills.

Because young learners are accustomed to using varied technology tools to deepen their learning experiences, it’s likely that mobile technology will play a huge role in the future higher education environment. Being tech savvy will no longer be the exception but the norm. Educational institutions will need to accept that and provide a leadership role, as well as address how to integrate and support Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) policies.

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Education experts know that trying and failing, then trying again, is one of the key mechanisms of learning. Because games provide an environment where students can fail “safely,” and because games so strongly engage students’ interests, educators and course material publishers are more frequently “gamifying” their learning resources.

Game-based learning creates an environment where the learning and the proof-of-mastery — the test and assessment — are combined seamlessly. For example, you don’t need to test a student’s knowledge of the game World of Warcraft since that is evident by the level of game play that the student has achieved.
Today’s young learners are fully accustomed to working in groups made up of their classmates and teachers. Students seem to love this collaborative style because they’re more engaged in lessons and gain a sense of achievement when the team succeeds — which is especially rewarding for disadvantaged students. Digital tools make it easy to expand boundaries too, including the borders of their own country.

There’s another benefit to team-based learning. Students who have technological devices and bring them to school often end up sharing them with students who don’t. This act of helping others fosters a sense of teamwork and equality.

What this could lead to in higher education:
> More peer-to-peer interaction.

To continue to engage learners who are accustomed to working collaboratively, professors leading physical classes could consider assigning more team-based projects. If they’re leading online courses, professors may need to “force” the interaction a bit more, perhaps assigning team writing projects, for example. Instructors could also incorporate peer reviews and even grade students’ critiques of their classmates’ work.

Think of how easily young people take to social media apps, such as Snapchat, and how kids and teens are often viewed as highly valued consultants for mom or dad. Therefore, students are quite adept at researching and creating their own content and presenting the subject matter expertly and competently.

What this could lead to in higher education:
> Hybrid environments.

Students are accustomed to using learning tools and combining them in their experiences. Some tools are digital; others are interactive games. Certain tools are those that they’ve created; some are those that they’ve consumed. Even traditional lectures and textbooks count within the mix, but in all cases, students will probably expect an environment for learning that uses various tactics that complement one another.

Speaking of K–12 Trends, What Are They? And What Might They Foreshadow for Higher Education? (cont.)
It began with STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). Now the curriculum is becoming more balanced with the addition of the arts (the “A” in STEAM), design and humanities. This philosophy asserts that students will get the big picture of how knowledge and skills tie together in “real life” when disciplines more closely relate to one another in a learning environment. If barriers to learning exist between classes and subjects, they tend to dissipate in a STEAM setting.

What this could lead to in higher education:

> Increased popularity of information-rich programs.

A student with more exposure to STEAM subjects at a young age might know from that first robot-building project in second grade that he or she would like to pursue a career in robotics, so may not need to explore career options. And because STEAM learning prepares students for information-rich careers, we also could see a burgeoning popularity of those majors. Additionally, because the STEAM environment promotes collaboration among educators, some professors might introduce workshops, projects or even courses that cross traditional boundaries, teaching alongside professors from other disciplines.

Many schools now offer programs to help students earn college credits while still in high school. This means that a student can graduate with a professional certification, such as certified nursing assistant (CNA), which can become the building block for a community college licensed practical nurse (LPN) program. Another example: A computer numerical control (CNC) certificate could lead to an engineering degree. School systems are seeing success with building “career academies” as alternative high schools for arts, nursing, engineering and other fields.

What this could lead to in higher education:

> Students who continuously learn.

Students might jump-start their careers with foundational courses or degrees early on, but they can also expect to be lifelong learners who need to continuously develop skills as the job environment evolves. Programs that offer certificates or company-sponsored programs — where an organization pays for training to certify associates, offering better opportunity — could become more popular as well. Recognizing these trends can help higher education institutions plan accordingly, knowing that in the future students might not necessarily view a four-year school as the only way to pursue their career choices.

About 8 in 10 U.S. public high schools reported that students were enrolled in at least one dual credit course in 2010–2011, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That totals nearly 1.5 million students, compared to just 800,000 enrolled in dual ed programs in 2002–2003.
In districts of any size, there may be students whose native language is something other than English, and many of their parents may lack the skills to read or speak English at all. K–12 schools increasingly need to meet the needs of nonnative-English-speaking students and those from very different cultural backgrounds. Books and learning materials tailored to English-language learners are in high demand, especially for young adults versus younger children.

What this could lead to in higher education:

> Multicultural support.

Students who may have arrived in the U.S. only recently would likely benefit from support that varies from the needs of lifelong American students. For example, first-generation Americans might rely heavily on English as a Second Language classes. Other support services may be necessary as well to help these students adjust culturally and succeed.

The Nine Main Trends in K–12

1. More agile school environments
2. Increased use of blended learning
3. Deeper and more active approaches to learning
4. Emphasis on technology
5. The popularity of team-based learning
6. Students as content creators, not just consumers
7. Evolution of STEAM learning
8. Dual enrollment and in-school career academies
9. Growing cultural diversity

What’s on the Higher Education Horizon?

1. A collaborative environment
2. Personalized learning paths
3. Increased academic technology skills
4. More peer-to-peer interaction
5. Hybrid environments
6. Evolving roles of academic librarians
7. Increased popularity of information-rich programs
8. Students who continuously learn
9. Multicultural support
Despite the key differences between K–12 and higher education environments, trends in K–12 can help relay the expectations of learners and their families upon entering their higher education experience. Taking a look back can provide a look forward.

Younger learners are accustomed to trends that include team-based learning, technology, hybrid models and influencing their own learning and outcomes, which shape their college expectations. In part, higher educational institutions can address these expectations by personalizing learning, fostering collaboration, embracing technology, acknowledging the needs of multicultural learners and redefining the roles of academic librarians.

By always remaining aware of what tomorrow’s higher education learners are experiencing right now, institutions will be more prepared to immediately connect with new students in meaningful ways and help them determine their paths to success.
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