An interview with ***Steve Foerster***, President of New World University

Steve Foerster is a writer, technologist, educator, and the President of New World University. He talks about his thoughts on higher education with ***Peter Ruben,*** IPP's COO, who is busy making inroads by networking with educational leaders with his vast experience in senior management roles at major media companies, most recently, HSN Inc.

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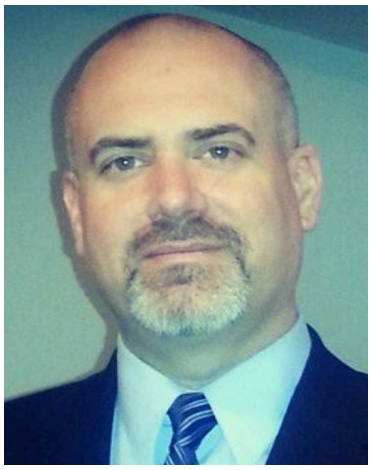

STEVE FOERSTER
PRESIDENT
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Peter: *How did you get started with higher education?*

Steve: It's funny, because people who knew me when I was young often find it rather amusing that I ended up in higher education. I was a late bloomer academically, not taking university studies seriously until my 20's, when I became a father and realised that it was the key to being in a stronger position to provide for my family. But after I finally developed an interest in higher education I became enamoured with it, and wanted to develop my own ideas about how it might be designed.

To that end, after a first career in technology and finance, I decided to transition into higher education. While I later designed courses, I mostly worked on the support side, first in student services and then directing online learning for a few U.S.-based institutions. I also found myself supporting international students, often advocating for their interests to the administration, and this led to a number of friendships that endure to this day.

My goal working in higher education was to learn the right way to do things, and while more often than not I actually ended up learning how *not* to do things, that too was invaluable experience. After several years, I was ready to put my own vision of higher education into practice, and that's when New World University was born.

Peter: *What are your thoughts as a leader of higher education?*

Steve: If there's anything that higher education leaders should be sure to do, it's to listen to all of the stakeholders of their institutions, students, faculty members, alumni, and others in the surrounding community who are impacted by our institutions. This is true now more than ever, when many of our students are wrestling with the effects of racism and deserve to be heard by those who run institutions that supposedly serve them.

Moreover, especially since higher education has an "ivory tower" reputation for being slow to change, we should also be open to learning about different ways of doing things, because there are a number of interesting trends out there.

My institution, New World University, is based on the confluence of a number of these trends. Our curricula are based on open educational resources (OER) rather than on textbooks from commercial publishers. Our materials are available in a way reminiscent of MOOCs, massively open online courses. Our assessments take advantage of the competency-based education (CBE) approach in which students can earn credit on their own schedule by demonstrating what they know when they're ready. And our mobile-first approach better meets the needs of students with uncertain access to computers.

I'm certainly not saying that every institution needs to be on the cutting edge, and sometimes there's a lot to be said for tried and true ways of doing things. But there's a lot of value in keeping an open mind, even to suggestions from unusual sources.

Peter: *Where is higher education headed with all the advancements in the technology?*

Steve: I've long believed that a world where different modes of instruction happily coexist will remain the norm. I remember during peak MOOC hype that a few more excitable people were predicting that online learning would mean the end of the traditional university experience as we know it, but I thought then as I do now that classroom learning, online learning, independent study, and blended learning each have their constituencies, and that all will continue to play important roles in higher education.

One development I do think is worth a mention is mobile learning. Given how many people in

the world, especially young people, have a smartphone but not necessarily consistent access to a desktop or laptop computer, advances in m-learning are probably the most important to watch as scalable solutions to reach students worldwide.

Peter: *What are some challenges that higher education faces?*

Steve: Internationally speaking, I think it's an oversimplification to think of higher education as a single thing. For example, in wealthier countries where population growth has plateaued, the challenge is declining student populations, which are leading to unfavourable mergers and closures of smaller more financially vulnerable institutions in countries like the United States. Relatedly, countries that heavily depend on an influx of international students to supplement their systems, like Australia, are finding themselves struggling with the prospect of decline of that population.

Conversely, however, in countries where there are large numbers of young people, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the struggle is to build capacity fast enough to accommodate the demand for higher education.

Peter: *Do you think higher education will change in design and delivery with the current COVID-19 crisis?*

Steve: It's certainly a tumultuous time for educational technology! The global pandemic has led to a lot of hasty implementation of remote learning where often lecturers and professors have not had as much time as would be ideal to transition their courses to distance learning. It's understandable, and I realise that we've done the best we could, but I'm a bit concerned that a whole generation of young people is getting the wrong impression about what distance learning means, and that if they have a marginal experience now it will lead to unwarranted scepticism about distance learning in the future.

Obviously, the sooner the danger has passed the better, but if the pandemic does require us to spend more time conducting remote learning than we initially expected, I'm hopeful that one

silver lining would be faculty members having greater familiarity with online learning. After all, educational technology is a core part of the tools of the academic trade in the 21st century, and faculty members shouldn't expect that understanding of it can be left to others.

That said, once the danger has receded, I expect that many students and faculty members will be happy to return to shared physical spaces, and that reports of the demise of the classroom have been greatly exaggerated.

Peter: *What are your thoughts about higher education accommodating workforce needs of job training, upskilling, and guild education?*

Steve: I'm all for it. Ultimately we're responsible for helping our students reach their goals, and for most students, that means teaching them the skills they need to be more successful in the labour market. One of the happiest days of my life was when I learned that one of our first students had been hired as a marketer because of the marketing course of ours that he had just completed, because I knew that we had played a role in his ability to succeed at what was important to him. As part of that, there's every reason for us to work with employers to determine how the programmes we offer will prepare our students for a successful professional life.

That doesn't mean, however, that higher education should simply be vocational training. Indeed, perhaps the most important skill in the 21st century workforce will be the ability to think critically, and nothing encourages that like familiarity with the liberal arts. As we have done for decades, our role will be to strike the most useful possible balance between them.