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Too 'Old School' for our own good?

St. Norbert College

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**President
Thomas Kunkel**

New technologies bring greater opportunity to forward-looking educators

*In this article, which first appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education, **President Tom Kunkel** challenges colleges and universities to embrace new technologies of communication as they revisit the ways they deliver higher education.*

Kunkel, formerly the director of the Project on the State of the American Newspaper, points out that, two decades ago, the newspaper industry ignored and then denied the coming new digital reality, to its eventual cost. Higher education, similarly, may imperil its own future if it ignores the potential for digital creativity.

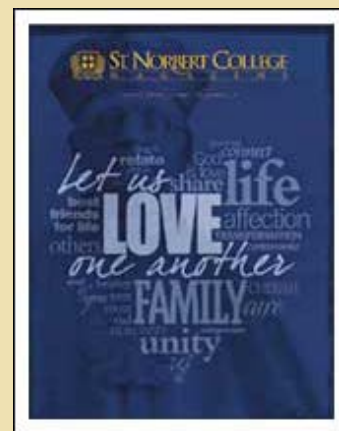
This article first appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education on Nov. 17, 2009, and is reproduced here by kind permission.

Too 'Old School' for Our Own Good? By Thomas Kunkel

I came to higher education from a previous career in the newspaper industry. About two decades ago, newspaper companies began to see an unfocused but powerful phenomenon in the distance: the beginning of the digital revolution.

Unsurprisingly for a business that hadn't fundamentally changed all that much in a century, it didn't know what to make of this development. It first ignored, then denied the technological – and soon thereafter cultural – advances until they were beyond ignoring or denying. But print media's eventual embrace of the new digital reality may well have come too late, as suggested by the code-blue condition of even our most venerable newspapers.

I should say, by the way, that I was hardly an avatar of change myself; I was just as conflicted as the next ink-stained wretch. But I'm also a pragmatist, in large part for having lived through our seismic media shift. That's why it bothers me to see much the same kind of denial today in traditional higher education that I saw yesterday in newspapers.



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[Too 'Old School' for our own good?](#)

President Tom Kunkel challenges colleges and universities to embrace new ways of delivering higher education.



[A new face in the cafe](#)

Steve Pyne (Dining Services), who has Down syndrome, was profiled in this recent article in the student newspaper, the St. Norbert Times.



[La Perichole](#)

St. Norbert College Magazine dropped in on a rehearsal for this three-act operetta production, to be staged on campus.



[More than a photo](#)

A gallery of images from a trip that connected a child in Kenya with his sponsors in the United

What do I mean? I mean that both the newspaper industry and higher education have largely failed to recognize the internet as an emerging competitive threat or a useful tool to be exploited. Both have been reluctant to innovate their core products. Indeed, both have operated in a kind of self-constructed bubble, assuming they can conduct business the way they always have – by imposing lavish price increases as if it were a sovereign right, for instance, or taking a young-adult audience for granted. And both newspapers and higher education have imagined they would be around forever.

Of course, the atrophying newspaper industry is demonstrating that might not be the case.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that all nonprofit higher-education institutions turn themselves into miniature University of Phoenixes. The traditional strengths of residential colleges like my institution, St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, are apt to remain our strengths for a long time to come. Certainly, I don't expect that 17- and 18-year-olds will stop dreaming of an idyllic, intellectually stimulating and parent-free place to transition to their adult lives.

Still, although it might appear to the casual observer that our students' lives move to the slow, centuries-old rhythm of academe here on our picturesque campuses, it is a fact that they also live online, and living online means living untethered to the clock.

They watch movies and their favorite television shows whenever they choose. They download music on impulse, day or night. They bank when they want, they catch up with their friends when they want. The computer even tells them when the dorm washers and dryers are free. (Last time I checked, their computers didn't actually do the laundry for them, but doubtless that day is coming.)

We cannot afford to ignore the myriad ways this digital environment has shaped the lives of our students. Today's college students grew up in a world of anytime-anyplace computer connectivity. They assume ubiquitous internet access the same way I assume the TV will come on when I hit the power button. Meeting their expectations means more than providing the occasional online course and plenty of electrical outlets for their laptops.

Colleges must use the technology of communications more inventively – for teaching, yes, but also for what we assign and accept as homework and course projects. Creating videos or multimedia presentations would take at least as much imagination, and doubtless be more interesting for students, than another six-page term paper.

We should rethink the times of the day and week we schedule our courses, perhaps keeping our students' biorhythms in mind more than our professors'. An 8 a.m. class that's great for a 58-year-old professor is purgatory for the sleep-deprived 18-year-old. And why can't certain types of courses run on Saturdays or Sundays only? We should even reconsider how rigidly we define a semester. There are other ways to aggregate the hours that we now pour into our familiar September-to-December and January-to-May molds. For instance, the weekend and flexible schedules of consumer-friendly (and highly successful) executive M.B.A. programs should tell us something. The costs of college are such that tomorrow's consumers should quite rightly expect us to facilitate their getting through the experience as briskly as possible – on their timetable, not ours.

Similarly, colleges must begin looking at one another less as

States.



A father's love

Jeff Kratz '92 offers a unique perspective on a father's love.



Words from life

The poetry of **Ken Zahorski** (English, Emeritus) deals with fathers and sons, phases of life and familiar figures remembered across the years.



World view

Gratzia Villarroel (Political Science) speaks with **Dean Michael Marsden** on international issues and educational opportunities.



Man of property

Joe Jones '12 sits down with **Mike Dauplaise '84** to discuss an education in entrepreneurship and the launch of Jones' third business. He is 21 years old.



Dick Bennett on Gary Grzesk

The basketball legend remembers his years presiding over the storied defensive career of Grzesk, current coach to the Green Knight men.



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competitors and more as partners. Today's students come to us from a variety of backgrounds and means, with ever-broadening needs and expectations. How can we create inviting entry points for them? St. Norbert, which doesn't have an engineering major, recently signed an agreement with Michigan Technological University to allow students who want to be engineers to start at our campus and finish at Michigan Tech's. That is just one of many creative partnerships we've pursued.

We must do a far more imaginative job of integrating the current student generation's two educational worlds – the digital and the traditional – and utilizing the respective strengths of each. A course on leadership, for example, could be made more dynamic by combining conventional lectures with virtual group projects with peers around the country, and by videoconferencing with industry leaders from all over the world.

More than ever, colleges should ask themselves, what do we stand for as an institution? Do our stated values permeate our campus? How can we enrich and augment the classroom experience? What avenues do we offer students for personal growth and self-awareness? When a prospective student asks you what makes your college special, do you have a good answer? In a world with so many higher-ed options, colleges had better have a persuasive answer when a prospective student asks, 'Why come here?'

My institution is the only college in the world founded by the Norbertine order of Roman Catholic priests, and the ancient order's charisms of community, service and contemplation are our college's core values, too. I think we're doing a pretty good job of adding new dimensions to our classroom experience, too, but where digital creativity is concerned, we're just setting out on what I expect will be a lengthy, adventuresome and sometimes scary trek into the future. And I say 'scary' with confidence, because I remember well the trepidation of my prior life in newspapers. Still, it is precisely because of that experience that I know we must, and will, wander from our comfort zone toward our higher-tech destiny.

Fortunately, the newspaper-higher ed analogy is not a perfect one. For one thing, most of the digital-based competition for higher ed isn't free, and it's hard to imagine it will be anytime soon. So we may have a little time to figure things out. But if we can't rouse ourselves to better embrace the 21st-century realities that our students take for granted, we may one day get just as flattened as my old papers did.

And unlike the newspaper industry, higher ed can't use the excuse that we didn't see it coming.

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