At the Los Angeles Business Journal, we have always been keen observers of the executive education and schooling landscape of our region. Education, after all, may well be the most crucial element in terms of increasing our odds of success – for ourselves, our employees and our families – throughout the greater Los Angeles region. And there are a number of questions that we’ve been hearing repeatedly from readers navigating the terrain of continuing education. But how best to answer those questions?

We decided now would be the ideal time to once again assemble a think-tank of local education experts and invite them to participate in an open forum, Q&A-style roundtable. Several questions were posed to this brain trust and what follows is a transcript of their responses.
California is one of the most diverse states in the United States, not only with regard to where people come from, but also in terms of the types of industry that it contains. The presence of all these diverse industries, including entertainment, high tech, information technology, manufacturing, the financial industry, the proliferation of eco-friendly ventures, make California the perfect place for students to have the opportunity to work in different industry environments as they think about building their chosen career. And with the growth of so many industries in the region, there are abundant opportunities for students to take internships in top companies and be employed after graduation. In addition to that, the unique California experience enables them to work anywhere in the world because of their early exposure to so many different cultures.

YUNZENG WANG

What would you single out as the latest trends in advanced education today?

SMITH: The trend that is most exciting for students is in the rapidly increasing number of options. Twenty years ago there were very few ways to gain a higher education, and most of those ways involved sitting at a desk in a classroom on a college or university campus to earn semester credit hours. Now you can earn a degree through very high quality online programs which require no face-to-face class time; hybrid or blended programs, which maximize the advantages of both traditional and on-line learning; multiple term and schedule formats including accelerated and weekend programs; complete departures such as competency-based learning, which focuses on the outcomes for students rather than time on task; innovations from the technology sector such as the Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs); or multiple ways to gain credit for learning that has taken place outside of the University such as Prior Learning Assessment which establishes credit equivalencies gained through professional and life experience.

What would you describe as the biggest challenge we face in education at the current time?

TEETER: The biggest challenge the U.S. faces in education today is the inability of high schools, colleges and universities to develop a globally competitive labor force. The de-emphasis of institutions in promoting career tracks that are not able to be easily automated or outsourced abroad, especially for those individuals who do not complete a Baccalaureate degree, has slowed the growth of incomes and damaged the country’s middle class. Educators today must insist that not every student need to complete a college degree – institutions, starting at early ages, should promote trades, labor and other skills jobs to students whose cognitive abilities are more complementary to those professional areas, which comprise career tracks that will afford students a stable, middle-class wage.

SMITH: Maintaining currency in an environment of escalating technological change is a huge challenge, but I see issues associated with cost, both from a student standpoint and from an institutional sustainability standpoint, as the issue for our time. Cost is a major driver for many of higher education’s recent developments from MOOCs to competency-based education, to badging or certificates. Even the wholesale development of distance education has emerged from an often mis-guided assumption that cost savings are to be had through online programs. The cost-burden on students has figured in the presidential election in terms of Hillary Clinton’s tuition-free college proposal. Even so, it is very difficult to dispute the value of a college degree in terms of lifetime earnings and quality of life.

What are the most notable changes you’ve seen occur in the education landscape when compared to, say 10 years ago?

HORAN: The job market has become increasingly competitive in the last 10 years. Business schools today need to focus on adaptability and flexibility in order to prepare students for their desired career goals and the technical knowledge needed by companies. In addition, employers are not only looking for hard skills, but are also looking for critical thinking and leadership skills. Peter Drucker saw this “shift to a knowledge society” where organizations will need executives, managers, and employees who can ask the right questions, manage information, innovate, and lead. Management education continues to innovate degree and curriculum offerings to address the changing landscape. At the Drucker School of Management, our curriculum focuses on balancing depth and breadth of business, but we also teach what we call management as a liberal art, where traditional business education, humanities, social sciences, and formal sciences intersect.

What are the benefits to receiving an undergraduate college degree here in California vs. out of state?

WANG: California is one of the most diverse states in the United States, not only with regard to where people come from, but also in terms of the types of industry that it contains. The presence of all these diverse industries, including entertainment, high tech, information technology, manufacturing, the financial industry, and the proliferation of eco-friendly ventures, make California the perfect place for students to have the opportunity to work in different industry environments as they think about building their chosen career. And with the growth of so many industries in the region, there are abundant opportunities for students to take internships in top companies and be employed after graduation. In addition to that, the unique California experience enables them to work anywhere in the world because of their early exposure to so many different cultures.

ARANDA: A Master’s degree is an important part of a life-long learning strategy. As the environment changes and becomes more complex so does the need for new skills. We are now in a knowledge-based environment that is focused on synthesis of information, idea generation, and cross-cultural relationship building. Knowledge and skills learned in an undergraduate education start to deteriorate about three years after graduation. Professionals need a portfolio of skills to meet these needs. While there are many ways to upgrade knowledge and skills a Master’s degree allows a person to acquire a blend of skills in a professional context.

TEETER: Within the corporate labor market, the Baccalaureate degree is no longer the terminal degree. Professionals seeking advancement into mid-level management or higher positions, time and time again, will see preferences, and in some cases, requirements, for advanced education beyond the undergraduate degree. Globalization’s forward march has transformed the U.S. and economies in a way to value services, information, and skills that complement advanced training in business, technology, education and other professional fields. Given these facts, participants in the labor market will need to continually seek graduate education to meet these needs.

WANG: A Master’s degree, and particularly a Master of Business Administration (MBA), can be a significant tool in one’s arsenal to obtain a management role in a target industry or company. Nearly all public indicators, statistics, and feedback from our alumni conclude a number of the same elements that make a Master’s degree more and more relevant going into the future. These elements include: MBA holders earn higher salaries that their peers who have a Bachelor diploma in the same field; Graduate degree holders have a lower unemployment rate; Candidates with MBA degrees are stronger contributors to the corporate bottom line, as they bring more advanced skills and experience with them. A graduate degree develops both the professional and personal skills that employers seek when hiring new and developing current staff. Going into 2017 and beyond, MBAs and other specialized Masters programs will continue to be in high demand. Especially at times of economic uncertainty, they offer candidates a way to develop their skills, build their tool sets and gain experience to prepare themselves for new opportunities that are ahead.

To what extent does a Master’s degree prepare students to assume leadership roles?

HORAN: Heading into 2017, how important is a Master’s degree?

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In 1891, the University of La Verne opened with 76 students and eight courses in a converted Victorian hotel next to the Santa Fe Railway.

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Graduate education complements leadership development in a variety of ways. Across the country, many graduate programs, in addition to business education, are implementing leadership training within courses or adding specialized leadership classes to their curriculum. Graduate programs not only prepare students to lead, they also provide students with perspective to consider and evaluate the leadership of their firms. Study of leadership theory applied to specific cases in business, government and not-for-profit sectors provides students with a basic grounding that complements their knowledge of Marketing, Strategy and related disciplines. Advanced degrees support the assumption of responsibility because students are trained to pause, reflect, and empathize as they work toward leading, motivating and developing teams of staff members.

As our world continues to get smaller, how can applicants be certain that the Master's degree or MBA program they choose offers a truly international perspective?

Having an international or multigenerational perspective requires, first of all, a mindset. To simply have knowledge of other nations or cultures is not enough. It is a questioning and non-judgmental thinking framework – a willingness to not have all the answers – that allows you to work with those who are different from you. The skills to draw out and clearly articulate interests – to build trust and collaborate to execute a plan – serves a professional well no matter the context. The Master's program must teach the student to understand and continually assess issues, not to know the answer (which stops thinking), because situations are constantly in flux.

Given the growing number of one-year Master's degree programs, what are the benefits of these programs?

What are the advantages of focused certificate programs vs. degree programs?

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What are the advantages of focused certificate programs vs. degree programs?
ARANDA: We face a world characterized by rapid change and increasing complexity. This demands that education be current and flexible in both content and delivery. An undergraduate degree, with its broad-based education, has a decreasing span of utility and must be constantly upgraded in some way. Certificates and Master’s degree programs are designed to keep the professional current. A program can never teach all that there is to know about any field no matter how long the program is. It is far more important to build a framework and appetite for continuous learning. Certificates and short-term degree programs can do this. In the future, it is likely that professionals will have an array of both.

What should higher education institutions do to ensure their programs, certificates and offerings are aligned with the specific needs of employers in the region?

HORAN: It is important to maintain strong relationships with businesses and community to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the specific needs of employers in the region. We have a Board of Advisors that guides the school on curriculum, program development and speakers/executives in residence. Our career development team does monthly career panels looking at different job functions and industries. We create courses that take students into the field locally, nationally and internationally to visit company sites, engage with alumni and meet with leaders in business and government. For example, in the first months of 2017 we have course trips planned to Silicon Valley and to Singapore and Hong Kong. For our working professionals, we want to ask them if what they’re learning in class is aligning to the needs of their work.

WANG: Business schools need to pay close attention to regional and statewide economic trends. Silicon Valley has been the home of California’s tech industry. Los Angeles is famous for its entertainment and fashion-related companies. And inland southern California is a growing hub for logistics and supply chain centers. In line with the demands from the industry in our region, the UCR School of Business offers a concentration in Operations and Supply-Chain Management in our MBA Program. The UCR School of Business will also be developing a Center for Supply Chain and Logistics, which will be able to partner with many of the companies that will be headquartered in the World Logistics Center that will soon occupy over 3,000 acres of land in the City of Moreno Valley. The Business School recently hosted an Economic Forecast Conference to discuss the demands we will face in inland southern California, which continues to be the fastest growing region in the California economy over the next five years. We aim to make UCR and the School of Business the premier educational institution that meets the needs of the growing industries and workforce across the region.

How can all higher education institutions in the region collaborate toward full employment?

ARANDA: Full employment is not just a statistic—it is a state of mind on both the employer and employee side. We no longer need people who just do as they are told; we have technology for that. We need people who can imagine and we need places of employment that foster that. Working together, education and employers can identify the knowledge and skills needed for the future. Education can provide a spectrum of learning opportunities but most importantly we need to foster the inter-
Both hard and soft skills are essential to be competitive in today's economy. When you are leading an organization, you are leading the people from within, which require the soft skills. With people being the driving force of any organization, managers must be able to assemble and manage teams in a technical specialization. Indeed, all of our degree programs strike a balance between people-oriented skills and technical know-how. Peter Drucker emphasized the importance of putting theory into practice and our approach is thus to integrate hard and soft skills through project work. Class teams work on different assignments, exercising hard skills such as quantitative analysis with soft skills by collaborating team assets and preparing presentations to sell the results of their work.

THOMAS A. HORAN

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Education Roundtable

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This rate of employment is comparable to the top 25 MBA programs in the nation.

What types of partnerships should higher education, business and community be engaged in?

Many colleges and universities in the region collaborate on a number of levels in an attempt to raise employment opportunities. For example, the School of Business at UCR was one of the founding members of the six universities (UCR, Chapman, CSU-Fullerton, CSU-Long Beach, Pepperdine, and Claremont’s Drucker School) that sponsor the Hire SoCal Graduate Business Career Fair each year. This event attracts over 30 companies and about 500 graduate business students. At the UCR School of Business, our Graduate Career Development Center has helped more than 86% of our students find work within three months of graduation for the Class of 2013 and 2016. This rate of employment is comparable to the top 25 MBA programs in the nation.

There is a debate that technical skills are more important in a knowledge economy than “soft” people skills, if so, should educational institutions focus primarily on developing technical skills?

Thomas A. Horan: Of course the answer is institutions should develop both soft skills and technical skills. Perhaps technical acumen alone can lead to career success in some high demand technical fields—engineering or programming for example—but employers continue to list communications, quantitative analysis, the ability to work in teams as high priorities for new hires. Importantly, employees seek employers who value the importance of putting theory into practice and our approach is thus to integrate hard and soft skills through project work. Class teams work on different assignments, exercising hard skills such as quantitative analysis with soft skills by collaborating team assets and preparing presentations to sell the results of their work.

Christian Teeter: Institutions of higher learning have an obligation to provide students cutting edge technical training in every academic discipline. Without this, the competitiveness of the school’s graduates dissipates over time. In spite of the high educational priority of technical skills, graduates of business education programs today face limitations without development of the so-called “soft” skills that make all the difference in working with colleagues. Application of emotional intelligence skills as espoused by eminent scholars such as Daniel Goleman make a huge difference for graduates in forging relationships, empathizing with others, and understanding organizational and cultural dynamics that transcend the institution’s organizational chart.

HORAN: Both hard and soft skills are essential to be competitive in today’s economy. When you are leading an organization, you are leading the people from within, which require the soft skills. With people being the driving force of any organization, managers must be able to assemble and manage teams in a technical specialization. Indeed, all of our degree programs strike a balance between people-oriented skills and technical know-how. Peter Drucker emphasized the importance of putting theory into practice and our approach is thus to integrate hard and soft skills through project work. Class teams work on different assignments, exercising hard skills such as quantitative analysis with soft skills by collaborating team assets and preparing presentations to sell the results of their work.

CHRISTIAN TEETER

ARANDA: Why do we have to choose? Both are important. Focusing a choice puts us in the position of embracing the tyranny of “OR” rather than the genius of “AND.” We cannot implement our great solutions without including others. We cannot move quickly on opportunities without trust. We cannot make good, long-term deals without engagement skills. You need both technical and engagement skills and, as you move up the organization, people skills become ever more important. The issue really is that in higher education we have been reluctant to teach “soft” skills because they are difficult to teach and hard to measure. But, truly important things are often difficult to measure as Albert Einstein revealed when he said that what really counts often can’t be counted.

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What leadership skills are important for leading multigenerational teams?

HORAN: Our program has some stellar faculty members that do research on this very subject. Professor Jean Lipman-Blumsen’s model of connective leadership asserts that the future of leadership is one that blends many approaches to lead diverse teams. She has observed that as we become more global, we work more closely with people from many different backgrounds. Her classes teach students how to leverage their strengths and grow their other leadership skills. Professor Jeremy Hunter conducts cutting edge research on the role of mindfulness in executive leadership and how to be an effective team leader under pressure. Professor Katarina Pick’s research illuminates the role of gender in communication across many generations in workplaces. The work of the faculty offers students robust approaches for successfully assembling and managing diverse teams.

TEETER: Appreciation of Diversity makes a huge difference in leading multigenerational and cross-functional teams. Leaders have to acknowledge that in a globally competitive environment, building a diverse team ensures that broad perspectives can be applied to the work and team’s recommendations. Without this, the team risks developing a work product that is uncompetitive or inadequate. Leaders of multigenerational teams must also have a firm grasp of demographic issues, and an appreciation for the communication styles, tastes, perspectives, and experiences of different generations of team members. This understanding will help leaders provide the most effective set of resources to support the team’s success.

How has technology altered the education landscape?

SMITH: In ways that we often don’t imagine and sometimes have difficulty managing. I was in graduate school in the 1980’s when personal computing first became ascendant, and was thrilled to have a word processor with a spell checker when it came time to write my master’s thesis. In the time since, we have lived through nothing less than the decline of print culture, the very foundation of education for a millennia. And the pace of change continues to escalate. What interests me is the difficulty of predicting the impact of emergent technology. When web-based distance education programs first emerged in the 1990’s there was much discussion about the end of traditional brick and mortar universities. The broader impact of on-line learning has not been to shutter universities so much as remove barriers to access to large numbers of previously un-served students such as working adults and residents of rural areas. The software platforms that originally enabled web-based distance education programs have evolved significantly, and are now robust learning management systems frequently employed in traditional classrooms as a way to organize learning, gather data, engage students on a deeper level, and assist in information delivery. Who knows what the impact of the current leading edge will be, but the potential of virtual reality, for example, is mind-boggling. Reading a textbook about the Peloponnesian war may be dry to some students, but a virtual stroll down the streets of Athens in 401 BC certainly would not be.

ARANDA: With advances in technology come new ways to learn. Podcasts, videos, webinars, and online instruction all are becoming commonplace. Soon virtual reality will invade the classroom. This access to technology is especially important to...
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Peter Drucker wrote widely about the importance of this vision by focusing heavily on case studies from various professional environments. Guest speakers, site visits, discussion of articles in respected periodicals, and business consulting projects afford a learning environment that allows students to see, understand, and apply core skills that develop the self, build professional credibility and maximize success in a team and organizational setting. Drucker felt strongly that the study of management, as a liberal art, would empower students with the critical thinking skills necessary to bring about real change in organizations and society. Indeed, the purpose of a management education is to take action – to be an agent of change and wield one’s education to drive results and improve people’s lives. SMITH: The programs I oversee at the University of La Verne are intended to serve the adult student market, and most of our graduate students are employed in a variety of fields. They are often motivated by career advancement, and they experience their academic programs through the prism of their professional experiences. Many members of our faculty are highly experienced professionals in their fields, which also helps to contextualize the academic experience and build a connection with students. We don’t do “theory” for its own sake, as might be the case with some traditional academic disciplines, but theory as it informs practitioners. Theory becomes important as it connects the individual student’s experience to a broader body of knowledge, amplifies and explains what they have observed, and provides a more disciplined foundation for decision-making and problem-solving.

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◆ What are some things Master’s Degree applicants should look for to be certain the program they choose provides life-long learning opportunities?

ARANDA: Unless it is a stepping-stone to a Ph.D., a master’s degree is generally a practitioner degree. Therefore, an enduring learning program must include the knowledge and skills that produce effective results. Look for a program that develops thinking, engagement and evaluation skills so that you can craft and execute resolutions to problems. Find a program that encourages students to avoid right or single answers in favor of solid principles and creativity so you will learn to pursue the “next right answer.” The world of work is not insular so seek out programs with lots of teamwork and projects – as painful as that might seem. Finally, be sure there are ways to learn to write and speak so you can articulate your ideas.

HORAN: We engage our alumni with various opportunities that continue to explore the latest in management and leadership. One of our biggest annual events of the year for both alumni and current students is Drucker Day, where we invite speakers to talk about their experiences and accomplishments on a specific topic. In 2015, we examined the vibrant creative economy in California and beyond; in 2016 we discussed the role of leadership from self to society in Drucker’s Leadership Arc. A program that values life-long learning will also provide opportunities for students to attend classes at a reduced rate so they can continue to brush up their skills and knowledge over the course of their careers. This past summer, we offered our Drucker Leadership Arc program to our alumni as continuing education to refresh their skills in the latest leadership and management innovations in a rapidly changing work force.

TEETER: Applicants for graduate business study should seek programs that foster and promote lifelong learning within an institutional context. At Mount Saint Mary’s University, for example, MBA alumni may return to campus each semester to audit MBA classes free of charge. This opportunity affords students the chance to return to campus to visit faculty, administrators and students, as well as to constantly refresh their skills in areas that were outside their original focus of study. Applicants should also seek graduate programs that have robust alumni activities that support professional networking, career opportunities, and intellectual engagement. Opportunities to return for further study and a robust alumni calendar foster engaged relationships with alumni and support a constructive, positive environment committed to lifelong learning.

◆ Looking to the future, what is the single biggest change coming to the world of higher education in the next 10 years?

SMITH: The opportunities for positive change are immense, and we will continue to see the escalating importance of technology. I hope the biggest change, however, is in addressing the cost of higher education and the resulting debt burden on students. The challenges and complexities are enormous, not unlike the cost challenge in the health care industry. The generational roulette that caught up those millennials who were first of college-age as the recession hit is a particular problem because they have faced high student loan debt and diminished job opportunities. I hope over the next ten years we regain the sense that higher education is a public good as much as an individual good.

DAVID SMITH