



Focus on the Future

Guest Predictions: Dr. Fernando Figueroa

Guest Predictions is a regular feature in which we ask leaders in a number of professions questions that affect us all. This is the full-length version of the interview published in the June Agenda.

Dr. Fernando Figueroa is the Provost/Vice President of Instruction for Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas. Fernando is a proud New Orleans Native and earned his Doctorate in Medieval English Literature from Louisiana State University in 1993. He spent 19 years in the classroom at both universities and community colleges prior to entering the ranks of administration in 2005 as the Dean of Arts and Letters for Morton College in Cicero, Illinois.

A study in contrasts, Fernando is an avid fountain pen collector and smart-phone user.

He counts among his greatest teachers his watercolorist wife Debbie and his two sons.

Q: What changes in your professional environment in the past 3-5 years have you found to be the most beneficial?

A: Access, pure and simple. Well, maybe not that simple; but the quantum level explosion of information mongers from a growing number of sources (mostly free) has broken our society (including those of us in higher education) loose from the ivory tower and set us adrift in finding whose information is best for us. With that freedom has come increased personal responsibility for designing our own educational experiences. We must reflect more as professors and administrators on how we craft these experiences; and we must start from the premise that everything we do is provisional and subject to revision and paradigm-quakes. For me and many in the profession, these conditions air out and open up age old structures, giving us a chance to create and act more like artists than managers of information delivery systems.

Q: What changes have been the most troubling to you?

A: Access, pure and simple. With the explosion of information out there, the nature of the education enterprise no longer has the cache' it once did. Since our focus as a nation has been on the specialization of knowledge and the monopoly of the local schools to provide it, this rapid shift (via the internet and smart-phones) has torn the walls down and redefined what we mean by terms such as "school" and "college". As a result, information now is perceived by many in our culture as bits and bytes and widgets and gadgets, only a click away at any given moment. Instead of having to remember anything, we leave it to our laptop or smart-phone to hold the info until we need it. While this is useful and very cool, it also gives the impression that information is valid only when it is immediately relevant. Thus, the pressures from state and federal agencies to provide tax-paying citizens with guaranteed "education" that fits their needs at the moment. But the world today is not predictable or stable in any way when it comes to what information is best to learn in any given moment. So higher education needs to focus more on creating educational

experiences that prepare people on how to train their minds to engage the unknown, for that is what awaits us every day. If we in higher education chase the rabbit down the hole of “information on demand”, we will find ourselves outsourced to the internet in short order. To be relevant, we must return to the focus of our enterprise: generating experiences that prepare people to be bold and feel confident they can meet the demands of the moment, whatever these demands are.

Q: How will globalization affect your professional area in the near term?

A: No walls. For us or them. Higher education has had the luxury in its history to see itself in competition only with other like institutions. Harvard with Yale, MIT with Cal Tech, Del Mar College with other community colleges in Texas. Now, our community college can and does help more and more people with Master’s and Ph. D. credentials to “finish out” their skills with certificates and degrees in application focused content. Or we offer the retiring boomers a chance to pursue alternative life and career dreams. The terrain is absolutely wild now. No rules. And while we work here, China and India are producing more and more people with the information and skills we used to think we alone had access to in this country. By sheer numbers, these billion member countries are gearing up for a population explosion of informed and educated people who will likely go to the economies that can make use of their talents. Right now, that playground is still the United States. But then what of our citizens? How will they fare? My hope is that we will focus more and more on designing educational environments that allow for U.S. graduates to think of creativity and design as essential to their personal and professional lives. This focus on design is the next great frontier of education. And we ignore it at our peril.

Q: What significant challenges might be anticipated in your professional area in the next few years?

A: Movement from the predictable to the unfamiliar. We need to prove by example that education does prepare us to face the never before seen. If we who eat and breathe education cannot adapt and thrive, then how can those who entrust their minds and money to us gain confidence that “education” matters or is of value in a world of constant creative self-destruction. Think about it. Most information is available free and online all the time. It has no office hours, no schedule of courses, none of that. We are right now in the most defining period of higher education since the 12th Century. We are the modern monks who will salvage the core elements that will survive these provisional times and mark the course for how we learn and, more importantly, how we become centers of calm in the middle of the madness that is our modern age. All of that in an environment that has yet to manifest.

Q: What are the greatest challenges confronting young professionals in Western culture today?

A: No clue. Actually, there are whispers in the dark; but the whole point is that the breadcrumbs are gone and the forest is thick and difficult to navigate. That’s the rough news. The good news is that there are no wrong responses to this environment. Safe is risky. Risky is safe. And there are no valid predictors of success. This is the age of the self-directed. Those who thrive in a yeasty environment and who love to harness the wild energies at hand, regardless of how edgy those energies might be, will live to create and design and fail and create again. The rest of the population will work for those hair-on-fire folks.