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[Access, Innovation and “Colleges for the 21st Century”: Interview with Peter Smith](#)

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Peter P. Smith, Ed.D. has a history of driving innovation in higher education that few in the field can match. (Full bio at the bottom of this article.) And he hasn't stuck to one track; he's the founding President of the Community College of Vermont, former Lieutenant Governor of Vermont, university Dean at George Washington U, Founding President at Cal State at Monterey Bay Assistant Director of UNESCO, and now the Senior Vice President of Academic Strategies and Development for Kaplan Higher Education. In 2010, Jossey-Bass published his latest book: [Harnessing America's Wasted Talent: A New Ecology of Learning \(2010\)](#) (Makes you feel kinda lazy, doesn't it?)



KCH: Your work and writing takes up the challenge of helping more students attend and complete college. Other well-known professionals in the field have argued, as I'm sure you are aware, that the problem is not that too few students attend higher education, but too many. Thoughts?

PPS: I have three thoughts about this. First, the people making these arguments went to college and graduated, as did their children and relatives. So, my Vermont puckishness would reply, "If it was good enough for them, it should be good enough for others who have been marginalized". If they are arguing that we have not gotten it right for previously marginalized learners, they are correct. But to then default to the "no college for you" position ignores the promise of opportunity that America makes to all as well as the history of American higher education. Second, we know definitively that with additional education comes better health, longer lives, increased voting and civic participation, and increased earnings. Those are the outcomes that will create a stronger social, civic, and economic

fabric in America. Sounds like a good investment to me. Finally, and importantly, we need more learned/skilled people in America, not fewer. The paramount question facing higher education is how we succeed with previously marginalized people to clear standards of quality.

KCH: You've long advocated for recognizing learning that occurs outside of colleges – in the workplace, for example. And you also point out in your book that our colleges no longer have a monopoly on information. Give this state of affairs, should our institutions of higher education migrate toward a focus on the evaluation and validation of learning?

PPS: Absolutely. But as I have ruminated on this subject, and watched the behavior of colleges since I published *The Quiet Crisis: How Higher Education is Failing America* (Anker, 2004), I have drawn two conclusions. First, most will not do it because their faculty-centric orientation makes faculty teaching and curricular control the focus, not assessment. Second, the few who do will tend to make it a boutique-style program, not a “Best Buy” for higher education assessment. So, it will lack reach. By the time I wrote *Harnessing America's Wasted Talent: A New Ecology of Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), I had concluded that we needed new types of institutions in the higher education space, I called them “Colleges for the 21st Century”. And these institutions would operate under a different set of principles and have different characteristics, including comprehensive assessment.

KCH: After dedicating much of your career to the public service within government and state colleges and universities, you're now at Kaplan University – one of the larger proprietary schools in the U.S. Does the proprietary model offer opportunities for innovation that are not available within non-profit institutions?

PPS: Again, the answer is “absolutely”. One of the main reasons that I chose to work at Kaplan was that I wanted to experience the culture of the “for profit” sector and see if they were any better at embedding and sustaining significant change and continuing innovation. Although businesses are subject to the same realities of organizational culture as any other organization, they are far more focused on the results, student learning and employment. So, employing teaching and learning practices that are known to be best practices characterizes the culture, not the infighting and autonomy that has come to characterize much of traditional higher education's behavior. Candidly, however, the accelerating pace of change outside of established institutions, including proprietary colleges and universities, will require that this sector be extremely nimble, just to keep up. Whether they will be able to do that, or yield to still other new institutions and programs, remains to be seen.

Peter P. Smith

Peter P. Smith, Ed.D. is the Senior Vice President of Academic Strategies and Development for Kaplan Higher Education. He is responsible for the development of mid-term strategies and program development to move Kaplan Higher Education, a \$1 billion business, to higher profitability and academic quality.

Dr. Smith is the former Assistant Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and served as the founding president of California State University at Monterey Bay (CSUMB).

As the highest-ranking American at UNESCO, he was responsible for the supervision and

management of some 700 full and part time staff located in more than 30 countries around the world. Headquartered in Paris, UNESCO's Education Sector serves the Ministries of Education in the world's less developed and emerging nations as their trusted intellectual advisor and advocate in developing and supporting national educational plans and strategies.

As founding president of CSUMB, he oversaw all aspects of leadership and development of the institution, working closely with the founding faculty. The university is widely recognized for its outcomes-based curriculum, a strong science and technology program, the first wireless computer network on a public university campus in America, a focus on first generation college students, and a commitment to service learning as a core component of the curriculum.

Dr. Smith, who holds a Doctor of Education from Harvard University, also advanced higher education in Vermont. He led a successful effort to implement Vermont's community college system, which included the design of its operating, administrative, academic, and assessment systems. Peter served as the first president of the statewide Community College of Vermont from 1970-1978, and was named President Emeritus upon resigning.

Later, he went on to serve as the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development for George Washington University. He increased the student body, earned a new facility, and added highly talented and diverse faculty during his tenure from 1991-1994.

In 1989, he was elected as a representative from Vermont to the U.S. House of Representatives. He served as Vermont's Lieutenant Governor from 1982-1986.

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