In fall 2010, I attended two distinct conferences on the future of higher education. One concerned higher education issues in the United States. The other focused on critical issues associated with global education in Europe. The conferences concluded that higher education in this new century has become a mature industry – there is a new normal. If it is to remain relevant, it must change.

These seminars reminded me of what we have seen in other critical areas in the United States. The newspaper, steel, and automotive industries have been weakened dramatically due to competition and technology. The banking system was nearly driven to default by the housing crisis of 2008. All of these factors affect higher education in indirect ways. How will higher education be impacted during the next 10 years? What are the issues that will affect progress? Clearly, the technology revolution will be a critical factor.

Traditionally, higher education evolved around a classroom. In the strictest sense, it is not necessary to be on a campus at all to teach and learn. For 20 years, higher education has offered everything from single courses to doctoral degrees online. Like digital readers have changed our interactivity with books, higher education is beginning to grapple with the reality of digital technology, which changes instruction.

In 2010, our University introduced an online master’s degree in nursing to complement the existing online degrees and courses within the School of Graduate and Professional Studies. While expanding the reach of Stevenson’s graduate programs, the nursing degree also addresses a compelling national need. Innovation requires higher education to blend traditional needs in new ways.

Cost. Higher education is expensive, however, a democracy requires highly-educated people. Meanwhile, it is difficult to create any cost-saving efficiencies in higher education.

The reality is, however, that the American consumer and the federal and state governments are critical about cost increases. American consumers look for “best values” as they educate their youth. As the market generally shows, only those institutions that are the most cost-effective will be supported.

For-Profit Colleges. In the early 1980s, I worked with the administration of then Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburg on a higher education study. There was a high level of resistance in Pennsylvania to even permit for-profit colleges to become part of the higher education conversation, although the situation was resolved.

With the creation of the University of Phoenix, business leaders have discovered the profitability of higher education. There have been almost 2,000 colleges added in the last 20 years since the for-profits expanded. Clearly, these institutions have a role to play. But it is also clear that they will need to be student-centered and operate with integrity if they are to survive. The power of the for-profit colleges has changed the landscape of higher education and has made it much more competitive.

Careers. Probably not since the advent of the land-grant colleges in the 1860s or the creation of the community colleges in the 1950s has higher education been forced to focus on careers and jobs after graduation.

Stevenson’s student-centered program, Career ArchitectureSM, helps undergraduate and graduate students design their careers not only for employment after graduation, but also for potential career redesign.

The recession has made career preparation in higher education as important as the introduction of seat belts was in the 1960s. As with the automotive industry, these changes will require a complete reevaluation of the assumption about higher education.

Future. There is a very exciting aspect to all of this. With the tremendous number of people in the world needing education, higher education has a major role to play. In order to make the significant contribution it surely can and should make, higher education will need to evolve into a different type of provider: offering more programs, expanding uses of technology, and creating financial efficiencies in program generation and support services.

In 2011 and beyond, Stevenson University is responding to evolving demands with its emphasis on career education. We continue to adapt our use of technology while remaining committed to cost-containment. At the same time, we are determined to make a difference for our students in their personal and professional lives, as we serve the broader community.