Throughout history, all organizations and industries have changed, and, just as every other mature industry has in the past, higher education will be transformed during the next 25 years. When organizations don’t make the necessary changes, occasionally, whole industries disappear. However, this is not necessarily bad news—every college and university can take advantage of transformation to improve, both from a quality and efficiency standpoint.

The transformation of higher education will be gradual but significant. One of the drivers of change that is already having an impact is ever-evolving technologies. We have already embraced this at Stevenson University with our fully developed online division that offers multiple degrees and has students studying in various states and countries around the world. We also offered our first MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course, last fall to students throughout the United States and in more than 25 countries. Nearly 700 students took advantage of this online opportunity, and we intend to offer a second MOOC in 2014.

Another change due to technological innovation will be reduced expansion of physical facilities. A good example of this is today’s university library. With the introduction of digital retrieval, most libraries have become less storage-centered and more of centralized learning centers. Books are shared among universities. Scholarly articles are retrieved in a digital format. And when books are used, they can be stored in specially designed warehouses.

A second driver affecting higher education is cost. Universities have become too expensive, and many parents and students are unable to afford the tuition. At the same time, the media and federal government have begun to criticize the efficacy of higher education. The net tuition to students may become too high, and many colleges are in danger of creating serious financial patterns that they will be unable to alter when necessary to adjust.

A third reality facing higher education is the public perception that higher education is not a valuable experience. Although this is a difficult accusation to prove, many critics are reporting that both salaries and employment rates are not high enough to justify attending a university. The result of this observation has been a new trend toward more career education. Yet much of higher education in America is still designed to offer individual disciplines with a special emphasis on liberal arts, especially on the undergraduate level. This traditional academic structure has a difficulty in responding to these emerging consumer career demands.

In many ways, the current situation in higher education is almost the “perfect storm.” It is predicted that many institutions will be forced to close during the next 25 years. New technology, increasingly more costly tuition rates, and new educational expectations will combine to make it difficult for higher education to find the necessary enrollment numbers. Unfortunately, because most institutions like Stevenson are highly dependent on enrollment, it will be difficult to move forward without significant changes in the way we operate.

Each college and university can survive if it is able to adapt. By looking positively at changes in technology, programs, price, faculty, and staff, we may instead be in a position to strengthen our educational offerings as well as our outcomes. Stevenson University is fortunate to already have begun the transformative process. We created online education in 2006, we created Career ArchitectureSM as a career process in 2001, and we began constructing our residential campus in 2003. We remain competitively priced and continue to look for ways to improve efficiency. All of these steps have been helpful in shaping our future, although there are of course no guarantees. Although higher education has an uncertain future, if we continually focus on student needs and seek ways to adapt, we can make the type of significant contributions in the 21st century that we did in the 20th.

Despite challenges, higher education has a vital role to play in the coming 25 years. Improvements made by American colleges and universities via technology will likely affect education around the world. Whatever effective solutions we fashion will also be available to industrially developed countries and Third World countries. There is nothing more important this century than developing a quality educational experience worldwide. In many ways, higher education could prove to be America’s most powerful and valuable export because nothing significant can happen in a person’s life without a quality educational experience.