

A Historic Model for Leading through Higher Education's Uncertain Future

By Hilary L. Link | July 1, 2024



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There is the moral of all human tales:
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails,
Wealth, vice, corruption—barbarism at last.
And History, with all her volumes vast,
Hath but *one* page—'tis better written here . . .

—Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 4.CVIII

To be relevant in the future for our changing society and world, higher education must adapt, embrace disruption and uncertainty, and learn to navigate constant flux. With the looming demographic cliff, questions over the cost and value of a degree, financial scarcity, ideological challenges, and the politicization of education, the status quo no longer suffices for most institutions. And that will only accelerate in the future.

To survive and even thrive, higher education must be willing to let go of the way things have been done, to envision entirely fresh and new approaches, new definitions of students, different credentials or pathways, innovative programs, and perhaps different missions in order to transform and create a long-term trajectory of success.

Looking to the past for a futuristic vision

But what if such a “futuristic” vision adapted for higher education wasn’t newly invented but already existed centuries ago? What if, as Byron or Giambattista Vico and other figures have noted, history is cyclical, and frameworks for education are as well? Leaders in higher education might do well to follow the sage words of Niccolò Machiavelli in his *Discourse on the First Decade of Titus Livius*: “Any one comparing the present with the past will soon perceive that in all cities and in all nations there prevail the same desires and passions as always have prevailed; for which reason it should be an easy matter for him who carefully examines past events, to foresee those which are about to happen in any republic, and to apply such remedies as the ancients have used in like cases; or finding none which have been used by them, to strike out new ones, such as they might have used in similar circumstances.”

And so, what if we found ideas for moving higher education forward by looking back at what education looked like in the Renaissance? In the end, the turmoil we face in our world—war, famine, plague, political and social changes, religious turmoil—were all present back in the Renaissance as well. Similarly, not unlike today given artificial intelligence’s rapid explosion, during the Renaissance the role and space humans occupied in the universe was at question. Take, for instance, the discoveries of Galileo Galilei and Nicolaus Copernicus, which led to an understanding of the universe as heliocentric and not geocentric, disrupting long-held religious and philosophical beliefs and created uncertainty and anxiety about one’s place in the universe. Sound familiar?

From the tumult and uncertainty of the Middle Ages came perhaps the greatest flowering of minds and inventions in art, literature, political theory, science, music, and more—the Renaissance. Isn’t it possible that our current moment of strife, challenge, and tumult could give birth to the same?

The Renaissance produced *many inventions* we still rely on today. A few of the most notable are bottled beer, submersible thermometers, parachutes, eyeglasses, the printing press, and flush toilets. But beyond transformative inventions, Renaissance thinkers model so much for us, including

- ways to embrace uncertainty, even though it may feel destabilizing and frightening;
- new lenses for seeing and speaking about learning;
- the incorporation of a wide range of educational opportunities—self-teaching, academies, guilds, apprenticeships, and universities—over the course of a lifetime; and
- an appreciation of and incorporation of past scholarship, technology, and art: Italian humanist scholars began to use new scholarly methods that gave them fuller access to the cultural legacy of the ancient world of Greece and Rome.

The ongoing relevance of the Renaissance is surprisingly common in a variety of fields, as we see:

- Philosophy scholar Gary Zabel writes, “While one might assume that political stability and economic security are prerequisites for intellectual and cultural experimentation, some of the most radical and far-reaching cultural work in the Renaissance was done in the periods of greatest insecurity.”
- For literary scholar José Angel Achón Insauti, “The global age [of today] is a time of uncertainty in which the referents of the Modernity do not satisfy us anymore. [It is instead] another age —The Renaissance—in which humans faced a similar experience and when those referents, now in crisis, emerged. The interpretation of this time as an age when ideas encountered, when new concepts and utopias were generated, when some projects triumphed and others were abandoned, is the key to face with critical experience the uncertainties of our present.”
- According to economic scholars Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna, “When the events of the present stop making sense for us, we can clarify the personal choices and social conflicts to be expected by looking back at how humanity coped in similarly historic circumstances.”

Renaissance artists, inventors and thinkers took the uncertainty that dominated their lives and found ways of trying to control it through knowledge, art, literature, scientific discovery, political organizations, and more. So why should we not implement past models to create an adaptable future model for education?

Emulating new paths to learning

As we think about how to reshape higher education for an uncertain future, we should therefore ask ourselves, what did education look like in the Renaissance, when an inspirational revolution took place across disciplines? While a number of great thinkers completed university study, many of the greatest minds on whose works and inventions we still rely today were not graduates of formal university structures. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Shakespeare, and so many thinkers who transformed our world *never completed formal university study*. In a moment of great upheaval, great thinkers and artists found their own paths to learning—including academies, guilds, apprenticeships, and self-teaching—in order to make sense of the destabilizing chaos around them.

We have to take a broader and more fluid view of what education means for a society in the throes of lightning-fast change. We surely need to be nimbler in what we frame as “higher education,” perhaps including more informal forms of learning, more apprenticeship-style learning for credentials, self-learning.

In that moment of great upheaval in the 1400s, 1500s, and early 1600s, the greatest minds found their own paths to learning that did not include a degree. *To me that is the viewpoint we must adopt—that not everyone needs a traditional university degree but that universities can and must still be hubs for different kinds of learning that inspires thinkers and doers.*

As our society pushes back on the cost and value proposition of a four-year or even two-year degree for all the right reasons of equity, access, mobility and more, there is an intriguing Renaissance model we ignore at our peril: the academy. As Ian F. McNeely writes: "Taking shape in the 15th and 16th centuries, academies provided an alternative to the sometimes pedantic university world, one that was open to new people, new ideas and new modes of intellectual expression . . . Princes, merchants, professionals and artisans gathered in them alongside poets and scholars . . . Ranging widely over literature, music, art, and natural science, they burst the confines of the traditional university curriculum."

These academies served as informal groups and loci of learning across different disciplines." Take, for instance, artist and scientist Galileo Galilei, a product of the academies of 16th- and 17th-century Italy and whose most revolutionary insights, observations, and writings are found at the intersection of the disciplines of math, physics, art, theology, and philosophy. Galileo's trained ability to realistically capture through drawing what he observed scientifically through his telescope, gave even more weight to his discoveries.

So what if we looked backward instead of forward?

It would be hard to argue that the world didn't need a Galileo, Michelangelo, or Da Vinci 400 or 500 years ago and even harder to argue we don't need that kind of transformative disruption in how we think, learn, educate, and work today and in the future.

The question is, Are we bold and brave enough to embrace it, or will our resistance to change obstruct us from seeing history in a new light?

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Tags: future of higher education, leadership challenges