

Implications of Innovation Theory: How Sustaining and Disruptive Innovations Impact American Higher Education?

Chun-Mei Zhao*

Senior Scholar
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

David Cheng

Assistant Dean of Student Affairs/Research and
Planning, Division of Student Affairs
Columbia University

Abstract

In the business world, Clayton Christensen's acclaimed innovation theory sheds light on future directions of many industries. Disruptive innovations challenge the status quo, propel the renewal of existing products and services, and eventually unseat the established and successful players that operate on traditionally defined standards of excellence. Is the theory equally applicable to the field of higher education? This study examines the suitability of the theory in the higher education context. The study found the innovation theory does not completely apply to higher education. That is, elite, top-tier institutions are not threatened by disruptive innovations. Instead, disruptive innovations largely operate among the lower strata of the higher education market. Institutions positioned in different strata have different motivations in responding to sustaining and disruptive innovations emerging in higher education. This has important implications for higher education institutions as they struggle to survive and/or thrive in the marketplace.

Keyword: Sustaining Innovation; Disruptive Innovation; Market Stratification