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Reimagining the University

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Woodrow Wilson, former president of the United States and Princeton University, once remarked that it's easier to relocate a cemetery than change a school's curriculum. Ben Nelson would agree. But this entrepreneur has decided to address the problem in a unique way. Next fall, **Minerva** will introduce its founding class of students to a new approach to learning where their needs come first.

"We are based around a curricular philosophy," said Nelson, founder and CEO of the Minerva Project. "We approach the problem in the opposite way in which all other institutions approach it. Whether it is about technology or a campus or the faculty, the way the typical university thinks is: 'Here are our assets. What can we do with these assets?' We look at it from the complete opposite way, which is: 'What does the perfect university look like? And how can we build it?' It may sound like a subtle difference, but it has a profound impact on student learning outcomes."

Nelson will present and participate with other education leaders on a panel discussion at the IMS Global's **2014 Learning Impact Leadership Institute** on: "Rethinking the University: A Student-Centered Design."

What Minerva is not is an online university, Nelson is quick to point out. But what it will become is an elite university that other institutions will soon want to emulate. And before you write him off as a wide-eyed idealist, consider that in just two short years, this former CEO of Snapfish and Community Ventures has already secured private equity funding to get the university operational, has recruited a former president and academicians from Harvard and other prestigious institutions to build the curriculum, has staff operating in six countries, and is partnering with the **Keck Graduate Institute** (KGI), one of the Claremont consortium of colleges near Los Angeles, that currently offers only graduate degrees in life sciences.

Welcome to the campus of the Minerva Schools of KGI. Except there is no campus. No football team, no



Ben Nelson, Founder and CEO, Minerva Project

bookstore, or cafeteria. Students will live together in residence halls, rotating among some of the world's most unique cities such as San Francisco, Singapore, and São Paulo. And its classrooms of fewer than 19 students will learn from active participation in discussion-heavy seminars led by faculty via live video.

"We will not offer remedial education, nor will we teach what most universities teach in the freshman and sophomore years," said Nelson. "They charge a lot of money for stuff students can learn by spending \$10 in a used bookstore or taking a MOOC for free. We just don't think it is moral to do that."

All of Minerva's students will take the same courses in the first year of matriculation. The curriculum will then offer 20 redefined concentrations across computational, social, and natural sciences, as well as the arts and humanities and business.

Nelson said tuition at the Minerva Schools at KGI will run about \$10,000, less than half of what it costs to attend a prestigious traditional university. And the 19 students selected to attend the founding class will do so tuition-free for the four years it will take to graduate. So far, potential students have applied from more than 75 countries although about a third of the initial applicants are from the U.S., he said. They expect that proportion to shrink in succeeding classes as Minerva gains increasing worldwide exposure.

The school's goal for using technology is to create active learning environments that improve upon the very best offline classroom experiences and they are well on their way. Minerva would rather take advantage of existing open technology, Nelson said, but unfortunately, it has been difficult finding vendors with robust enough applications and platforms to serve their seminar-based live video approach. "As a result, we are forced to develop our own unique platform. Do we want to build our own course registration system? Heavens no! But we're intelligent enough to know that we are operating in

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different countries and different time zones across myriad platforms. We are desperate to use as much available technology out there as possible, but if needed, we will build our system based on open standards."

Nelson said the idea for Minerva is rooted in his experience as an undergraduate 20 years ago at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. By his senior year, he was pushing for curriculum changes as chairman of a student committee focused on undergraduate education. While at Wharton, he also designed a series of short-term, non-credit seminars offered for the sake of knowledge. "I put this curricular plan together and the general reaction was: 'Yeah, this is much better than what we do, but it's never going to happen.'"

Perhaps one of the biggest misperceptions perpetuated by elite universities is the idea of their exclusivity, that they accept only the very best students. "In truth, they are capacity constrained so that perhaps 80 percent of their applicants may qualify, but they don't have the available seats to accept them. We want to do our best to stick to our long-term principle, which is admit everybody that's qualified. In our founding year, we are space limited. But in our first full year, which will be 2015, if you pass the (qualification) bar, you're in. But our bar is so high, I can tell you that less than 80 percent of our applicants will be qualified. We have raised the bar, not because we feel like being exclusive. It's quite the opposite. We want to be as inclusive as possible. But we are putting together a curriculum that very few 17 year olds can actually handle. We're not going to admit students that will be set up for failure."

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An enrollment of 8,000 to 10,000 students across all four years should make Minerva self-sustainable, he said. “The real impact we hope to have is by having other universities copy us. We want to upgrade the concept of higher education on a global basis. We’re happy to educate as many students who qualify for Minerva as we can find. But far more importantly is for other universities to take a close look at what we’re doing and see if they can provide the same kind of curriculum or experience for their students. Or do something even better. Our hope is that they will try to come up to our level if not try to beat us.”

For those attending 2014 Learning Impact Leadership Institute, Nelson has one essential thought he wants to share with them, and that is the awesome responsibility they owe to the students they serve. “Too often, they construct their institutions around making sure the kids are safe, that they’re happy, or that they will become good donors in the future. Those are responsibilities, no question. But it’s not their ultimate responsibility. Their ultimate responsibility is to society. It’s to take raw human potential and shape it in such a way that they will be delighted if their graduates are one day put in charge of the major institutions of the world. And it doesn’t matter which university you are, whether an elite school or a community college. Your responsibility is to create an informed citizenry, a citizenry that we are all excited about. If they focus on that, and have it at the heart of their institutional and curricular design, then I think the face of their institutions will change and it will change for the better.”

About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global is a nonprofit organization that advances technology that can affordably scale and improve educational participation and attainment. IMS members are leading suppliers, institutions and government organizations that are enabling the future of education by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors Learning Impact: A global awards program and conference to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality. For more information visit www.imsglobal.org or contact info@imglobal.org.

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