

Higher Education: Loss of Identity

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Abstract

No longer seen as the land of opportunity, the United States is struggling to regain its status as a world leader in education. To accomplish this, it will first need to provide a clarity of purpose with respect to the roles played by institutions of higher education. The struggle over the past thirty-five years with issues in K12 have now risen to the postsecondary level bringing with it a loss of identity for colleges and universities. Not until the function of the college and the university can be clearly articulated and communicated internally to the faculty, students, and administration and externally across the U.S. to the stakeholders, will a resolution be possible.

Introduction

It would be difficult to argue that America is still considered among the top countries in the world with respect to K12 education. Critics of the American educational system often point to poor results on standardized tests, both at home and internationally, and to grade inflation at the local levels as ways of concealing the problem from the taxpayers. Even more disturbing, to some is that when the United States is compared to countries across the globe, it is no longer seen as the land of opportunity. In a report published by the Social Progress Imperative (Porter, Stern, & Green, 2016), one hundred and sixty countries were examined and evaluated on three components: Basic Human Needs, Foundations of Wellness, and Opportunity. These measures were established to allow inferences to be made about the country beyond those normally based on GDP. In comparison to the other 159 countries, the United States ranked surprisingly low: twenty-second in Basic human needs, thirty-fifth in foundations of wellness, fifteenth in opportunity. Overall, the United States ranked nineteenth in social progress due, at least in part, to the growing disparity between extreme wealth and extreme poverty and the barriers that impede progress for those who are poor.

A Nation Still at Risk

This issue, although a highlight of the 2016 presidential election, is not new and can be traced back to the early days of the Regan administration. Concerned that the quality of education had declined to a level that was failing to meet the needs of the nation and that the purpose of education to develop a competitive workforce was not being met, Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, formed the *National Commission on Excellence in Education*, and charged the members to examine the quality of education in the across the United States. One of the requirements placed upon the commission was that it report its findings within 18 months of its first meeting, and in accordance with this requirement the commission published "*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*" in April 1983. In its report, the eighteen-member team, drawn from among private, public, and educational sectors, outlined the strengths and weaknesses of American education.

Since its publication, the report has become one of the most influential policy reports of the past 100 years. An assessment of the quality of teaching that ranged from elementary through post-secondary institutions was at the heart of the report. The information provided through the report was then compared to information provided by other developed nations that the U. S. government, perceived as direct economic competitors. Although written more than thirty years ago, the introduction to the report, reads as if it were written today in support of the make America Great Again campaign:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. 5).

More than a quarter century later Presidents Bush and Obama, still struggling with many of these same issues, attempted to address the problem through legislation. The first attempt, which is no longer in effect, was the controversial, yet bipartisan, No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Signed into law on January 8, 2002, by President George W. Bush, NCLB acted as an update to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The second attempt, was a competitive grant, known as *Race to the Top*. It was signed into law on July 25, 2009, by President Obama, and was intended to reward innovation in K-12 school districts.

The Role of Education

Though postsecondary institutions were not directly addressed in either legislation, their issues have not gone unnoticed. In fact, they have, over the past decade, come under strict public scrutiny for the financial investments that are associated with postsecondary education including rising tuition costs, concerns over mounting student debt and a lack of ability to repay loans attributed to students not getting jobs immediately upon graduation. The responses of both colleges and universities in an effort to remain competitive for federal funding and student loans have led them to diversify program offerings to better align with the job market resulting in a loss of identity for both.

Locke defined education as a social process that moves individuals from immaturity to adulthood. In the United States, this was historically seen as the role of higher education and in particular, the colleges that were created as transitional institutions that helped individuals move from adolescence to adulthood, by learning from the great minds of the past to better position themselves in the present. Unlike colleges, however, universities were focused on expanding the knowledge base of the discipline through the development of adults who were transitioning into professionals. While colleges would strive to help individuals understand the commonality of the human experience by studying the past to understand the present, universities were focused on reshaping society by redefining the future. In keeping with this vision, more than 100 years ago, John Dewey, arguably the most influential philosopher and social critic of the 20th century, published one of his seminal works (1916), in which he outlined his philosophy of education and the critical role that it played in maintaining a free and democratic society. In it he identifies the function of the educational when he states: "As a society becomes more enlightened it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end." (p. 20). In identifying the many challenges associated with the delivery of a publicly funded educational system, he called for a fusion of vocational and academic studies which he viewed as a necessary revision toward a goal of universal education and the advancement of both the individual and the society. Defining democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87), Dewey saw education as a means of learning from rather than repeating the past through a variety of lived experiences. The past in and of itself does not lead to the present any more than it does the future; rather, it is in the process of leaving the past behind that it has its greatest impact on the present.

On the one hand, the outer world presents the material or content of knowledge through passively received sensations. On the other hand, the mind has certain ready powers, attention, observation, retention, comparison, abstraction, compounding etc. Knowledge results if the mind discriminates and combines things as they are united and divided in nature itself. But the important thing for education is the exercise or practice of the faculties of the mind till they become thoroughly established habitudes (p. 61)

The Origins of Higher Education

Originally derived from the Puritan culture, American colleges were established to serve the needs of the church, the schools, and the society through the education of public servants (Delbanco, 2014). Prior to the Civil War, colleges focused on the education of an elite group of men to assume positions of social responsibility and leadership (Bok, 2015). Through the emergence of universities in the post-Civil War years came the movement away from a curricular focus on the Liberal Arts.

No longer recognizing postsecondary education as a time for self-examination and self-discipline it came to function as a social screening ground meant to prepare individuals for wealth through specified professional rather than generalized intellectual preparation. Even colleges that did not transform into universities felt the pressure to adapt. This intensified after World War II, where in an effort to meet the growing demand for college degrees, many colleges started to add vocational and professional programs.

The very word “university” acquired a new meaning, it had previously been used interchangeably with the word “college”, but now it denoted an entirely different kind of institution whose mission encompassed research and professional training alongside the teaching of “undergraduates”-a term that came into general use in order to distinguish candidates for the college degree from those pursuing more advanced studies (p.78).

This new system was modeled on the German universities, which focused on research and academic freedom where the right to know was central to the professors who could focus on their scholarship and research without the concern of teaching undergraduates. This trend has continued and resulted in the original purpose of college becoming diluted. This dilution continues as colleges further expanded the number of degree programs offered in an effort to compete for students against larger public institutions (Selingo, 2013). To further complicate matters, institutions must address the societal shift that views students as consumers, which has led to very different expectations of the college experience. A similar challenge arises from the fact that taxpayers, and the government agencies that represent them, have all but abandoned the traditional views of education taking instead, what might be interpreted as an anti-intellectual view by becoming focused on the economic benefits of a college degree. In seeking to evaluate the quality of an institution on strictly measurable outcomes, we have lost sight of the purpose of higher education and it is arguably this departure from intellectual development grounded in the liberal arts to an outcome based pragmatism focused on job oriented curricula that is responsible for the failure of American schools and the decline of the American Dream.

The Cost of Higher Education

The responsibility for the decline, however, does not solely lie with political or social pressure, much of it has resulted from actions of the colleges themselves. Over the course of the past thirty years, American colleges, through increases in tuitions and fees have created affordability issues resulting in an almost pre-Civil War system where only those with the means to pay for it can attend. Unlike the previous system, however, it is no longer the family itself, but rather the social family – the taxpayers, who through grants and loans will provide the financial means. According to The College Board (2016), annual tuition for public four-year institutions increased on average by 3.9% between the years 1986-87 and 1996-97, 4.2% between 1999 -97 and 2006-07, and 3.5 % between 2007 and 2016-17. Over the same period, the average annual increases in tuition for private non-profit institutions were 3.9%, 3.1%, and 2.4% respectively. This translated, in 2015-16 to an average of \$14,460 in financial aid per FTE undergraduate student, and \$27,740 for each FTE graduate student for a total of \$240.9 billion in grants. That same year, an additional \$11 billion was borrowed from nonfederal sources. Thirty-six percent of an undergraduate’s education is funded by federal and nonfederal loans while 55% of the cost is covered by grants. For graduate students, approximately, 64% of the cost is covered by loans and 33% through grants. Veteran’s educational benefits also increased from \$4.5 billion in 2005 to \$14.3 billion in 2015-16. The default rate in 2011-12 for students who completed their programs was on average 9%, whereas for those who left without completing it was 24%. The commitment to pursuing a postsecondary education has increasingly become tied to financial assistance provided through the public and private loans and grants and when these loans are not repaid, questions over the value of the investment come into question. What is being promised and what is being delivered by colleges and universities has come to the forefront of the discussion.

Beginning with the Higher Education Act (HEA), in 1965 and throughout subsequent reauthorizations, accreditors of institutions of higher education (IHE) have been called upon to serve as the gatekeepers for Title IV funding which provides institutional access to federal financial aid. With this move, verification of compliance with federal regulations has become an ever-increasing part of the accreditation process. It has been well documented through Federal reports and coverage by the media that Federal financing has ballooned due to rising institutional costs and reductions in state and local funding. Nonetheless, while accreditors struggle to focus on quality improvement, the Department of Education has been applying increased pressure for the role of accreditation to focus on the safeguarding of federal funds and the assurance of institutional fiscal accountability.

Accountability and Accreditation

But, as evidenced, with this increased financial investment into education at both the state and federal levels, has come much deserved scrutiny with respect to the quality of programs that are currently being offered at the college and university levels. One way that this concern has been addressed is by increasing the rigor of accreditation at both the institutional and program levels. Nonetheless, when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of the institution and its programs, measures associated with the documentation and measurement of student performance is often cited (Price & Randall, 2008). For example, The Middle States Commission on Higher Education, requires institutions not only to identify learning outcomes but to provide evidence that graduates from their programs have met them (Jones & Price, 2002). Following suit, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) requires that, "Evaluations must be based on the quality of the learning experience and scholarly outcomes, not rigid interpretations of standards" (AACSB, 2013, p. 5). This requirement is specifically addressed in section C of AACSB Standard 7, which states that:

Curricula facilitate and encourage active student engagement in learning. In addition to time on task related to readings, course participation, knowledge development, projects, and assignments, students engage in experiential and active learning designed to improve skills and the application of knowledge in practice is expected" (p. 30).

This requirement is further emphasized in Standard 8, which in seeking "Assurance of learning" refers "to processes for demonstrating that students achieve learning expectations for the programs in which they participate" (p. 30).

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has gone a step further in the governance. Standard 3: Candidate Quality, Recruitment and Selectivity, identifies minimum percentile criteria in reading, writing and mathematics for acceptance into an accredited program. In addition, Standard 4: Program Impact, requires that accredited programs provide data in support of employer satisfaction including employment milestones such as promotion and retention as well as completer satisfaction – that they perceive themselves to have been well prepared for the job. Aside from the requirements, the language itself becomes offensive as what was once touted as a vocation, is now being identified by its accreditors as a job. Clearly, the four freedoms of the university identified by Mr. Justice Frankfurter in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (354 U.S. 234, 1957, 175), though entrenched in precedent are dead in practice.

. . . It is the business of a university to provide that atmosphere which is most conducive to speculation, experiment and creation. It is an atmosphere in which there prevail 'the four essential freedoms' of a university - to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study." *The Open Universities in South Africa* 10-12. (A statement of a conference of senior scholars from the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, including A. v. d. S. Centlivres and Richard Feetham, as Chancellors of the respective universities. 1) (p. 255)

Today, the financial environment in which both colleges and universities exist is increasingly tied to federal funding. With the mission to Fund America's Future, one student at a time, the Federal Student Aid Organization (FSA), in 2015, under Title IV programs, which include: Federal Direct Loan, Federal Pell Grant, and Federal Work-Study programs, reported that approximately \$128.7 billion in federal financial student aid was disbursed to 42 million students attending 6,101 postsecondary institutions. According to this same report, this was an increase of 7.3% or \$82 billion from 2014 with nearly \$30 billion of the total monies being disbursed in Pell grants. The shift to what has been seen as a smooth direct lending process, which has moved from a bank-based system to one that moves the funds directly between the student and the Department of Education, has resulted in new pressure for postsecondary institutions to bear the responsibility for graduates who default on their loans.

With this shift has come a crackdown on for-profit schools resulting in a decline in enrolments. New legislation such as the Gainful Employment Act, and the Higher Education Reauthorization Act (the ninth since 1965) have also added to institutional responsibility. Under Section 435(a)(2) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, institutions that, since 2012, have default rates in excess of 30 percent for each of the three most recently completed federal fiscal years, will lose their eligibility to participate in the Federal Direct Loan and Federal Pell Grant programs. Institutions that have default rates of 30 percent or greater for any single year are required, under Section 435(a)(7) of the HEA to establish a Default Prevention Task Force (Historically Black Colleges, 2014).

The government is responsible to the taxpayers who expect that this monetary investment in America's future is not only repaid, but that the money has been wisely invested in programs that have produced not well-educated graduates for the sake of education, but rather for the sake of employment. The problem, however, is that neither has apparently come to fruition. With respect to repayment, an analysis of the 2010 cohort by institution type showed default rates ranging from 9.3 percent to as high as 20.9 percent for public institutions, 8.0 percent to 21.8 percent for private non-profit institutions and between 20.9 percent and 22.1 percent for proprietary institutions, for an overall default rate of 14.7 percent. This overall rate had fallen to 13.7 percent by 2013 and 11.8 percent by 2014; however, almost 60 percent of borrowers fail to renew their payment plans on time resulting in increased debt due to interest (Mayotte, 2015). The costs are clearly too high and although over-borrowing is on the decline, it too remains high. Though struck down in *Carr v. St. Johns* (1962), some are calling for the return of a university's right to act "in loco parentis".

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) the annual prices for an undergraduate education inclusive of tuition, fees, room and board were approximately, \$15,640 at public institutions (a rise of 34 percent since 2003), \$40,614 for private non-profit institutions (a rise of 25 percent since 2003), and \$23,135 for private for-profit institutions (a decrease of 16 percent since 2003) (NCES, 2014). Despite this increase in cost, the 6-year graduation rates reported for the 2007 cohort graduating by 2013, remained low at 58 percent for public institutions, 65 percent for private nonprofit institutions and a shocking 32 percent for private for-profit institutions.

The Direction Moving Forward

It is this paradigmatic shift that has negatively impacted the quality of education (Bok, 2003). As colleges and universities across North America continue to struggle with their identity and purpose they have moved further away from the liberal arts base that was once the bedrock of postsecondary education. To remain viable, colleges will need to focus on a holistic vision of education with emphasis on the individual and not the profession. However, this cannot be done in a manner that is simply a return to the old model. Value must be reconceptualized and examined in a manner that will allow the focus to shift from being almost exclusively financial to one that understands the benefit of an education to the individual. And this benefit to the individual will translate into a benefit to society through elevated citizens.

In framing the debate about college in purely economic terms, we ignore the value of college as the place where students transform themselves-by meeting others with different backgrounds and beliefs, by exploring new subjects, and by making mistakes and learning from them, all with the end result that the student leaves the institution with an education, not just a job (Salinger, 2014, p. 9).

The change will need to be developed in a way that provides colleges and universities with distinct functions that will enable each to define a unique identity in a manner that will encourage diversity without the risk of being penalized through a lack of funding. According to Bunis (as cited in Craig, 2015), administrative priorities are at the heart of the problem. Because of the complex natures of both the university and the college and a failure to identify clear metrics to assess rather than measure institutional effectiveness, administrators, says Craig, do not have appropriate data to manage effectively and this has led to the public's perception of colleges and universities failing to deliver on their promises.

Postsecondary education needs to serve students for the betterment of society rather than viewing them as customers for the purpose of profit (Craig, 2015; Deresiewicz, 2015). They will need to abandon marketing techniques that attempt to sell their programs and their brands as products rather than processes. But customers want products not processes and they want results immediately.

The world is rapidly changing and both colleges and universities are attempting to keep by developing programs that they believe will deliver on what the consumer wants rather than moving slowly and methodically to develop programs from which society will benefit and for which there will be a need. But higher education is seen as an economic market and in an economic market, it is not always the best that wins, but as Darwin pointed out those that survive are those which are most adaptable to the circumstances in which they find themselves. To move forward slowly and methodically in a consumer-driven market environment is synonymous with rapidly moving toward extinction. Convenience has overtaken substance, and the attainment of a degree has come to overshadow the knowledge, reason and critically thinking for which it stands. There is a cost to research that is both monetary and intangible. For public institutions, the need to enroll higher numbers of students is related, not so much to the classroom as it is to the laboratory because with an increase in enrolment comes increased funding that can be applied to research.

For the private tuition-driven colleges and universities, this need to enroll students is directly related to their financial health. Along with the monetary increase comes a decrease in quality as more classes are taught by adjuncts who are no more committed to the institution than is the committed to them. This decrease in commitment, says Selingo (2014) results in a lack of bonding between students and professors that are integral to the maturation and educational process. The problem is further exacerbated as the professor-student relationship becomes tainted by the need for faculty to be evaluated by students through what many have described as little more than satisfaction surveys. Replacing the student with the customer has resurrected Arthur Miller's (1949) classic play, as effective teaching and scholarly advancement are not measured by content alone but by being liked, and not just liked, Biff, but well-liked.

Conclusion

Both colleges and universities serve numerous purposes ranging from building the knowledge base through research and discovery to assisting in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Selingo, 2014). To value this as a society will require changes at both the institutional and governmental levels that allow colleges and universities to conduct business in a manner that is conducive to the purpose of each. This change should not come at the expense of the individual who chooses a college with the expectation of being provided an undergraduate education grounded in the liberal arts for the purpose of intellectual growth leading to the betterment of society. In addition, Universities will need to focus on research and the further development of the individual by building on the liberal arts base and tailoring his or her skill sets to a prospective profession. In order to ensure high standards and high quality programs, governing and accrediting bodies need to ensure that institutions only advance programs conducive to their function and that faculty operate in accordance with the expectations of their appointment. While universities may require, from their faculty, excellence in teaching, it cannot be at the expense of research or scholarly contributions to the field. Students need to be provided choices that are clearly bifurcated, and colleges and universities need to follow through on their promises.

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