

Considering the Possible Future of American Higher Education

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Abstract: As with all other social institutions, the pace and complexity of change make it challenging to predict what the future holds for the American higher education enterprise. While the broad mosaic of colleges and universities that comprise this enterprise has collectively been described as the best such conglomeration of its kind in the world (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005; Harvey, 1998) several concerns are now surfacing that must be acknowledged and considered. Literally spread across the broad American landscape is a constellation of two and four-year institutions --public and private; secular and religious; urban, suburban, and rural; large, medium and small colleges and universities - which have generally been regarded as providing access and opportunities for students of all races, ethnicities, ages, and social classes.

Keywords: American higher education; public higher education; private higher education

David Ward, former president of the American Council on Education and Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, makes reference to the “social compact” -the collective agreement among government, citizens, and institutions that has made postsecondary education in the United States broadly accessible and a model for international education for more than 50 years. However, issues of cost, diversity, technology, and the interrelationship between these factors, set against an increasingly polarized political background, present challenging, perhaps even ominous, concerns regarding the future of higher education in America. These factors stand to, individually and collectively, impact the operation of American higher education in the future and the manner in which individual colleges and universities respond to them will in turn be affected by the cultures, values, affiliations, and finances of the various institutions. Ward expresses concern that the social compact seems to be eroding, and that in some circles, higher education is increasingly regarded as a private benefit, rather than a public good (Harvey, 2008). Postsecondary education has entered an arena that is considerably more fluid and dynamic than in the past, and while some institutions will embrace this environment of transition and change, others will not, and they are likely to suffer the repercussions.

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As higher education has become the key factor in providing opportunity for economic success, it now also clearly serves a “gatekeeper” function that will have a fundamental impact on the degree of social equity that is likely to be realized in the America of the twenty-first century. In contemporary American society, “an individual’s level of opportunity for economic success and well-being largely depends upon higher education” (Kirwan, 2013). Even as access to higher education has increased through the proliferation of two-year institutions and the use of the internet as a postsecondary educational platform, making college more affordable has now become an issue that is ingrained in the political narrative and, as such, it has become a part of the standard spiel that office-seekers recite to their audiences, at both the national and state levels. The economic recession has prompted the American public to clamor for more effective, less expensive ways to increase access to higher education, and as Kirwan notes, “the fact that making progress on the critical issue of social equity rests primarily on the shoulders of the higher-education community specifically obligates us to embrace innovative ideas that would enable us to meet this awesome responsibility.” While this observation carries a certain amount of dramatic effect, this responsibility is not newly bestowed. As far back as 1947, the Truman Commission proclaimed that colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to offer an experience in tolerance and understanding which grows out of democratic relations with students from various national and religious backgrounds. The Commission also noted that to the extent that intolerant attitudes against members of minority groups are given support by educational institutions, the fabric of our democratic life is endangered. (Bowen, 2005)

Arguments that the academy harbors a responsibility to push a democratic nation towards the pursuit of social justice for all peoples appear to have been supplanted by a recognition that in the twenty-first century, maximizing the nation’s human capital development and creating opportunities for innovation opportunities necessitate enrolling and graduating larger numbers of students of color from colleges and universities -especially African Americans and Hispanics. This acknowledgement has come from a number of prominent educators, corporate leaders, and public figures, including President Barack Obama. Following Obama’s reelection, a significant amount of discussion ensued about whether social processes, including educational opportunity, had moved into a stage where racial considerations had ceased to exist. While this circumstance would be highly favorable if it existed, unfortunately, this is not the reality (Harvey, 2011). Beneath the surface, America still contains rampant inequality, significantly structured along racial and ethnic lines, even while there has been enormous social progress over the past fifty years.

Research by Bowen suggests that students from the underserved racial and ethnic communities do not have access to the same network of resources and thus are

likely to have acquired less social capital than their white, middle-class counterparts. As a result, even when they are well prepared for college they often select institutions for which they are academically overqualified and where graduation rates tend to be low. This situation which is referred to as “mismatching” has been ascribed to a lack of information, planning, and encouragement and is one reason why students of color tend to be overrepresented in the community colleges and in non-competitive four-year institutions. Certainly students need to find the educational environment that best suit their preparation and personalities, but they also need to be aware of all the options that are available to them and not simply settle for matriculation in an institution that offers fewer academic options and networking opportunities than might be available to them in a different setting. But skepticism about the value of college also persists in some quarters -particularly among politicians, pundits, and numbers crunchers (Carlson, 2013).

As the cost of college has become more prohibitive, so has the difficulty level increased for many families to identify and then acquire the resources that are needed to enroll prospective students in a selected institution? While there is increasing chatter among some contrarians who question the “value” of a postsecondary education, the economic benefit to a person who holds a college degree over someone with a high school diploma is estimated to be more than \$1 million in added lifetime earnings. Respondents to a recent Pew Research Center poll of college graduates also indicated that they were more satisfied with their jobs and they credit college with helping them grow intellectually and socially (Carlson, 2013). However, the increasing costs of college have created a huge divide in the access patterns to higher education, such that at present, “a child born into a family in the highest quartile of income has about an eighty-five percent chance of earning a degree, while in contrast, a child from a family in the lowest quartile of income has less than an eight percent chance” (Kirwan, 2013).

Financial aid policies and practices have taken a significant change in direction over the years, and the consequences deserve close analysis. The very concept of financial aid was originally proposed as assistance to students who could not afford the costs of college. However, the idea of merit-based financial aid was introduced in the 1990s, and since that time, the allocation of state funds in that category has increased substantially, and the distribution process has skewed to benefit students from the middle and upper classes, rather than to those who are the most financially needy. As merit-based aid has risen significantly throughout the nation, for the most part, the increases have occurred at the expense of the need-based aid that is distributed on the basis of the level of family income. This shift in policy frequently rewards those students who started out with material advantages and who have access to school systems with superior academic resources, rather than students who have limited means who attend schools with limited resources. For

students at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale and increasingly among middle class individuals as well, reliance on student loans to fund college attendance has become a widespread and worrisome phenomenon. As this transition has occurred throughout the society, it has also raised increasing concern regarding the level of indebtedness among the borrowers, as well as their repayment capability. Both the number of student debtors and their average balance increased seventy percent from 2004 and 2012 (Carlson, 2013). At the national level, current outstanding loan debt is estimated to be about one trillion dollars, and about thirty percent of the loans are delinquent.

African Americans and Hispanics are the groups that are most severely underrepresented in American higher education, and they will also be impacted most adversely by the increasing expense associated with acquiring a college degree, and the necessity to borrow money to attend postsecondary institutions. Individuals within these groups are not only considerably less likely to graduate from high school than their white and Asian counterparts, but they also have substantially lower family income levels and financial resources. At the same time, the compelling demographic shifts that are taking place in the American society clearly show that the percentage of the standard college-age population who are Black and Brown will increase dramatically over the next several decades. Finding ways to increase their presence and success in higher education institutions is essential to the economic wellbeing and social stability of the nation. Within the next several weeks, the United States Supreme Court will issue a ruling regarding the use of affirmative action as a tool to increase the enrollment of students of color in selective institutions of higher learning. Should the Court reverse the 2003 decision that it rendered in support of affirmative action when then Justice Sandra Day O'Connor stated her expectation that affirmative action would be an appropriate tactic for another twenty-five years from that time, the outcome would be that "many public colleges and universities would almost instantly become whiter and more Asian, and less Black and Hispanic." (Liptak, 2011)

One important aspect of the higher education experience that will not be directly addressed by the Supreme Court decision is the continuing underrepresentation of people of color in the faculty ranks at American colleges and universities. Lynch observes that "there is a lot of attention placed on the changing face of college students but I feel that for college campuses to truly remain effective long term, diversity in faculty needs to be a paramount concern" (Lynch, 2013). Current statistics indicate that out of the total pool of faculty members in the nation (1,439,144) only about seven percent are African American (95,095) and about four percent are Hispanic (57,811). The figure for African American faculty deserves further clarification since it includes those individuals who hold positions at the cohort of institutions known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which were founded to educate African American students at a time when they

were not welcomed at institutions where white Americans received their postsecondary education. The percentage of African American faculty members who are employed at the nation's predominantly white colleges and universities would certainly be less than seven percent if the numbers of African American faculty members employed at HBCUs is subtracted from the total amount.

It is important to have a robust pool of faculty members from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in predominantly white colleges and universities. Not only does their presence send a message to white students about the intellectual capacity of their various communities; they also provide visible and tangible role models to the students from these communities. Gaff (2000), comments that, "the faculties of colleges and universities, as well as doctoral students in the pipeline, remain overwhelmingly white. At this time, the academic profession facing a turnover of large numbers of faculty members, has an opportunity to shape the future faculty to look more like America and more like the increasingly diverse student population. It has an opportunity as well to exercise leadership with respect to human equality. Further, it is most often from the pool of faculty members that the highest level of administrative officers of colleges and universities are selected. According to the American Council on Education, presidents at public universities are overwhelmingly white at eighty-eight percent. The pipeline to the top also lacks diversity since at the time of the survey, ninety-three percent of those who hold positions as chief academic officer or provost were White, and among deans of academic colleges, which are considered "stepping-stones" to the top two levels of executive responsibility in the higher education community, eight-seven percent were white.

Prince calls attention to a different concern and that is the negative impact of the disconnection between the structural entities that provide educational services across the learning continuum. He argues that in taking a dismissive "hands-off" posture toward the primary and secondary educational sector, colleges and universities forfeit the opportunity to help support teachers, enhance curricula, and most important to motivate and inspire students so that they firmly set their sights on attending a college or university. The demographic significance of the prospective pipeline of students is underscored by Picca and Feagin, 2007 who have observed that "by no later than the 2030s - and well before that in many large cities and states -the majority of students in the K-12 system will be students of color, and soon after that, the majority of students in the pool from which we draw first-year college students will likely be students of color." Coles points out that higher education remains "one of the great equalizers of society, with the ability to uplift untold numbers out of grinding poverty and other hardships." (Roach, 2013)

Particularly because of these difficult economic times, the graduation rates of students have become a widespread concern. In order to move the maximum number of students through institutions of higher learning in the shortest possible

time period, with a degree in hand as they exit, Kirwan (2013) calls for a “stronger culture of completion on our campuses”, and extends his support of new teaching and learning paradigms that offer lower-cost means of delivering high-quality instruction. The transition in pedagogical style that began in the latter part of the twentieth century has been vastly accelerated by the new technologies. There was a general recognition that the historical professorial mode of presentation, sometimes referred to as the “sage on the stage” was becoming outdated and that students wanted more engagement in the learning process rather than a didactic lecture where they were expected to absorb certain facts and details, then repeat them back to the instructor in an examination to ensure a satisfactory grade. Generation X students were more amenable to having a learning environment where the instructor functions as a “guide by the side”, shaping the framework for the inquiry process and then helping steer them through the stages of investigation and discovery, which then propel them to the conclusive points of realization and understanding.

The incredible pace of technological progress has created a schema in which the current generation of students receives and process information in a manner that is distinct from the traditional, rote practices of the past. According to Pizzetta, “it's not just that the formats are different, but when students use digital texts they are no longer thinking about reading from beginning to end. They jump around in their reading. Instead of being confined by the text, their understanding of the subject really blossoms when they are able to be creative in their research about the subject.” Blaine concurs that “students are different now. They grow up in a digital world and they don't learn the same way students did forty years ago.” (Roach, 2013) In order to be successful, modern pedagogical techniques must be adaptive to these changes and take advantage of the multi-tasking abilities that have become the norm for students, illustrating the cohesive interface between humans and machines. The information explosion has brought us to the realization that is not the accumulation of content that is the end game; so much as it is the recognition of the need to be a continuous learner, along with the vital ability to separate the factual from the fanciful. Coles acknowledges this need for innovation and adaptation when he says, “we need to meet the consumer of tomorrow where they are today. Young people are already getting the content they want when they want it and how they want it. As an industry, higher education is in a crisis.” (Roach, 2013)

James Carville, an advisor to former President Bill Clinton and currently a political commentator, has been known to say, “never let a good crisis go to waste.” For colleges and universities, many of whose very identity is intricately tied to a sense of tradition, heritage, and history, the prospect of significant change is certainly unnerving, but they would likely resist describing the current set of circumstances as a crisis. Still, it is short-sighted not to acknowledge that technology has become

omnipresent in our lives and has created learning opportunities that have never existed before in human history. For the first time, anyone can literally access information anywhere and at any time. Simultaneously, the exponential explosion of data has altered the framework of instruction from one of simply memorizing facts to one of mastering the process of accessing information and then being able to discriminate between the factual and the fanciful. This transition point also provides a fantastic opportunity for members of the higher education community to work with our colleagues in the K-12 arena to ensure that age appropriate teaching and learning materials infused with the critical concepts of diversity and pluralism are developed and used in these school settings as well. At the time when there seems to be an “app” for almost everything, serious consideration should be given to the development of computer applications that will be geared towards the reduction of prejudice and the celebration of diversity.

Members of the American higher education community, especially those who are the leaders in the academic and administrative realms, should creatively combine the new technologies with the timeless institutional values of equity and fairness to inculcate an appreciation of diversity, both as a part of individual development and as a key element of the ethos that binds the community of learners, from preschool to the postsecondary levels. The backdrop has been set for courageous leadership to expand the participation of historically marginalized populations in the American system of higher education, and the realization of this goal will benefit the nation in both the material and ethical dimensions. In short, the academy stands positioned to guide the nation towards a genuine enactment of its majestic goals and a realization of its democratic promise. Hopefully, it will seize this opportunity, and in doing so, set an example for the world of how colleges and universities can truly become instruments of empowerment for all of the residents of a nation, and not simply for a selected group that holds the historic advantages and benefits of power and influence.

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