

A confluence of crises in higher education

Higher education is undergoing an accelerating transformation driven by financing and student demography. At the same moment in history, our species is facing rapidly cascading unprecedented crises of climate change and sustainability. Although considered by most to be part of the Public Trust, public colleges and universities are no longer funded as such. As budgets have become tighter, many states are experiencing a decline in available students. Although the challenges facing students today include traditional concerns such as preparing for a career, learning transferable skills, and getting good grades, over recent decades these changes have influenced the character and viability of the college experience. Career pathways have become more diverse and confusing. Higher education has responded to our environmental imperative in a fitful and inconsistent manner. There are no common standards for ecological literacy.

In 2017, for the first time most public institutions received most of their revenue from tuition rather than government appropriations. The viability of public institutions is increasingly driven by the interests of donors and corporate sponsors. Critical determinants of financial health include the revenue from intellectual property, investments, and student services. As universities have adopted corporate management styles, students, faculty, and divisions within the university are managed as financial assets or liabilities. Functions such as human resources and online programming may be farmed out to third-party for-profit corporations. An incoming class is evaluated in terms of its ability pay full tuition, while tenure track faculty are evaluated almost solely in terms of grant support with indirect costs and the prestige of published scholarship. At many institutions, underpaid adjuncts without employee benefits have become the teaching force for undergraduates. Because of the decline in public support, many students are forced to acquire substantial debt at near-commercial interest rates to finance their education. Parents, students, and their state legislators are demanding accountability, while admissions bribery scandals and misconduct of research are rocking the very foundations of the academy.

The student body has become more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, country of origin, age, and prior experience. This trend is accelerating. By 2025, students of color will comprise a majority of high school graduates and soon after 2030 they will be the majority on many college campuses. Students of color are more likely to be first-generation matriculates and come from families with limited means. Effective recruitment of these students will require fundamental changes to the financing of higher education. The reliance on student debt and the revenue that this generates is unethical and unsustainable.

The compelling emphasis on environmental and social issues in the context of impending climate catastrophe and sustainability creates new opportunities for programs and their students. The majority of the over 2000 interdisciplinary environmental programs have been created within the previous 30 years. There has been a flourishing of new majors and sub-degree programs, but the pathway between campus and career is far from straightforward. Standards for such programming are lacking. Climate and biosphere disruptions have made it urgent that higher education produce practitioners able to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines and understand tradeoffs among solutions, yet there is no consensus on integrative pedagogy. Students who learn through disciplinary convergence must also have the ability for critical thinking, normative competency, and superior verbal, written, media, quantitative, and information literacy.

While academic institutions continue to be organized in linear hierarchical structures, with departments as the core unit, students and society, and in some cases university leadership, are

recognizing the need for interdisciplinary and other boundary-spanning approaches. Highly productive collaborations are possible among the physical, natural, and social sciences. The arts and humanities are the foundation for effective environmental programming and prosocial development. Yet departmental boundaries and budgetary definitions inhibit necessary collaborations. Rules for tenure and promotion of interdisciplinary scholars remain largely undefined. External stakeholders (parents, communities, businesses, political bodies and others) are asking for increased engagement with higher education. Financial and institutional constraints on programs and faculty, coupled with the demands for immediate responses in the age of instant telecommunications, leads to more stress and less time for everyone.

Our situation as a species and as educators is simply dire. This requires us to rise to the challenge of a new level of service and commitment even as sources of support are inappropriately defined and become less reliable. Across university departments we must reaffirm the overarching mission of higher education to maintain and renew civilization. As teachers and program developers we must develop new structures and approaches to teaching and learning. Continuation of traditional pedagogies must be evidence based and critically evaluated. While we transform ourselves and our programs, we must also become fully engaged in deliberative university governance and financial development. Rather than be defined simply as a cost center or revenue center, departments must fully engage with administrations and provide credible evidence for the critical nature of their programming. We must professionalize classroom and departmental management rather than continuing the haphazard processes that have traditionally characterized higher education.

Moving forward, we must answer the following questions thoughtfully and with action-oriented planning. Rather than an academic discussion of these issues, we must develop a fact-based consensus through a critical review of options, applying successful management tools from outside the academy where appropriate.

What are the priorities for your program?

How can the program ensure the success of all students in the context of these profound changes?

How can your program thrive among other programs competing for scarce resources?

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Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, April 2018.