

Fast Foreword

The Forum for the Future of Higher Education

convenes each June for its Aspen Symposium to explore the challenges confronting colleges and universities. The Forum's 2011 Aspen Symposium began with a discussion of how widely visions of the purposes of colleges and universities vary, and thereby complicate the assessment of how well higher education in America is functioning. To some, college serves a primarily meritocratic purpose, sorting people by their abilities and talents as opposed to by the circumstances of their birth. To others, higher education underpins our civil society by cultivating informed and engaged citizens, and in that light broad inclusion is critical. Finally, for many students and their families, college is largely seen as a supplier of vocational preparation and a credentialing service (Menand).

Regardless of how one views the mission of American higher education, today the high cost of attendance, low graduation rates, and lower-than-expected employment rates of those who do graduate have together led to intense external pressure for measurement of the effectiveness of higher education. Calls for accountability from the President, Congress, Department of Education, state legislatures, and others have steadily increased in volume and force.

And while it is now widely accepted within the academy that some form of accountability is necessary, legitimate debate regarding appropriate outputs to be measured is ongoing. It's easy to measure credit hours earned and costs-to-degree, for example, but it's far more complicated to assess engaged citizenship and graduates' contributions at the workplace. Clearly, how one perceives higher education's mission influences one's view of how to assess its effectiveness (Powers).

Many would agree, though, that much of what goes on in our institutions is mired in tradition, and

that far more experimentation to increase quality and efficiency is called for. While there are some few instances of true transformations of teaching and learning, too many attempts are one-off efforts that have not scaled (Massy). That said, several leading universities are now experimenting with potentially game-changing new learning media and technology for their students (Guthrie, Thille). Adoption of new approaches at these universities harbors the potential to influence the direction and pace of adoption throughout higher education.

Much experimentation with new learning media is also occurring in the for-profit realm, where tradition has little to no impact. For-profit enrollment has increased dramatically over the past two decades. From 1999 to 2009, the for-profit sector accounted for 28 percent of the growth in the number of FTE students who enrolled in all U.S. two- and four-year institutions during that decade, and students in that sector now comprise just over 10 percent of all FTE students in the United States (Klorde Alva). Standardized, common courses dominate the for-profits' offerings, and their online courses enable quantitative analysis and comparisons of faculty, students by background, effectiveness of assignments, learning outcomes, and so on—all useful information that can be looped back to improve the courses (Rosen).

In this environment, the prospect of competitive disruption of higher education is becoming more real. Historically, higher education has been immune to such disruption because of the power of prestige in the higher education marketplace, where the quality of the product is hard to measure. But increased focus on outcomes and the steady improvement of low-cost online learning technology are changing that. As costs have climbed, the number of students for whom a traditional college

education is too expensive has risen. Likewise, online degree programs and credentialing have become an increasingly attractive choice, particularly as they steadily improve (Christensen and Eyring).

Evolution of traditional American colleges and universities is essential. American higher education's social contract is centered fundamentally on providing opportunity and undergirding our democracy by educating our citizens. Concerning the latter, the civic failure of American citizens with regard to the more than decade-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was noted by one Forum scholar: Collectively, the American people appear to have accepted war as a normal condition and consider it not unusual or even objectionable. Roughly .05 percent of Americans are doing the fighting and dying in these wars; 99.5 percent of us are not. We're also not paying for the costs of the wars being conducted in our name. Taxes have not gone up to cover the annual \$120 billion cost of the wars, and American citizens are not insisting that they do (Bacevich).

Expectations of American higher education are high. In addition to fulfilling its social contract, the knowledge generated and the discoveries made on our nation's campuses can help address societal issues such as slow economic growth, healthcare, the environment, and the demographic transition our nation is undergoing. The complexity of these challenges demand evolution of American colleges and universities, particularly to help meet the burgeoning need for higher education and to pursue research and discovery that benefit the public good (Crow).

It is unrealistic to expect colleges and universities to solve society's ills on their own, but that needn't diminish their commitment to expand their vision and scope. Research described at the Aspen Symposium indicates that gaps in academic performance are already present by the age of 3. Mean achievement test scores broken down by level of maternal education show gaps emerging at age 3 and fully established by age 5, when children enter the public school system. The more education a mother has achieved, the higher her child's achievement test scores are. What is most striking is that the gaps are changed very little by schooling between the ages of 5 and 18, even though the public schools attended by the children studied differed greatly. That is, test scores gaps opened up very early and the elementary and high schools, however badly or well they performed, essentially did little to either alleviate or promote these gaps (Heckman).

Colleges and universities could make significant contributions to addressing the performance of early childhood and

K-12 education, which ultimately have direct effects on the achievement of their own mission as well as on society as a whole. In that regard, a new culture of learning, one based on the notion of play in a bounded learning environment to cultivate and invigorate students' imaginations, is cause for optimism. As described at the Forum's Symposium, this new culture of learning puts questions ahead of answers, a form of inquiry where answers continually lead to better questions—the key to cultivating the imagination. This productive inquiry can help students make sense of a world in constant change, where context is shifting as fast as content (Brown and Thomas).

Clearly institutional missions are multi-faceted, and unquestionably the financial crisis and resultant declines in state support, federal research funds, and donations have made it more difficult for institutions to fulfill their missions. Unsustainable upward pressure on tuition has in turn increased pressure on institutions to generate additional revenue from other sources, including their endowments. Key lessons gleaned from the financial crisis for endowment managers are that risk persists despite diversification because all asset classes can indeed fall together, and liquidity is a far larger issue than most managers realized before the crisis.

The hardest lesson of the financial crisis may be that institutions need to plan for and build in flexibility for when problems arise. Adjusting spending gradually only prolongs the agony. Turning to other sources of income is unrealistic in today's environment, and while debt markets can be useful, they are not a panacea. Instead, cost reduction contingency plans prepared in advance serve to rein in typically overoptimistic planning scenarios, and help universities identify the level of risk that they can live with (Campbell).

The challenges facing higher education today are many and varied. Colleges and universities that will survive and flourish are those that recognize and honor their strengths while innovating with optimism. The key is to understand and build upon past achievements, while at the same time looking forward and evolving. Institutions that commit to real innovation are quite likely to find extraordinary rewards (Christensen and Eyring).

EDITOR'S NOTE: The editor wishes to acknowledge the authors who contributed to Forum Futures 2012 and whose work is directly reflected in this foreword. The remainder of this volume summarizes the research presented at the Forum's 2011 Aspen Symposium.

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