Faculty Workload and Productivity In For-Profit Institutions: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Henry Lee Allen

Henry Lee Allen is professor of sociology at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He studies the relationships between social networks, academic disciplines or organizations, complex systems, and select societies in mathematical sociology. The aim is to understand the impact and dynamics of systems of higher education, global science, innovations, and ideas. Allen has explored these interrelationships in articles about the United Kingdom, Canada, and Israel.

Momentous social changes are taking place in systems of higher education. These changes affect social networks, markets, and institutional policies. They also affect the interconnections between social structures, processes, and outcomes.[1] Nowhere are changes more apparent than in the for-profit higher education sector.[2] This sector has given a new student cadre access to postsecondary institutions.[3] Structural differentiation should allow for some effective for-profit institutions. But government leaders may have unwittingly unleashed many pitfalls on the academic profession.[4] Socio-economic trends, notes one observer, suggest "that the future will include further declines in faculty compensation, independence, and intellectual freedom."[5] Will the emergence of the for-profit sector abet these declines?

For nearly two decades, critics—citing supposed professorial nonchalance about improving achievement outcomes for undergraduates—demanded greater accountability and assessment. But the same critics ignored the explosive growth of for-profit higher education, a sector with sparse assessment, minimal oversight, and little public accountability.

Political interests, not evidence about quality, merit, and feasibility, fueled the sector's growth. Congress has siphoned off scarce resources to subsidize these unproven for-profits—$32 billion according to a 2012 U.S. Senate committee report—while reducing appropriations for nonprofit higher education.[6] The result is a system of "educational sharecropping" promoted by entrepreneurs, though some instructors were complicit by their labors or acquiescence![7] The sector often provides a lackluster education, saddles students with enormous debt, and presages a painful future in the job market. A "free market" ideology, applied to the for-profit sector, may account for this lack of accountability.[8]

Some activities, the committee report notes, appear legally questionable:

> Internal documents, interviews with former employees, and Government Accountability Office (GAO) undercover recordings demonstrate that many companies used tactics that misled prospective students with regard to the cost of the program, the availability and obligations of federal aid, the time to complete the program, the completion rates of other students, the job placement rate of other students, the transferability of the credit, or the reputation and accreditation of the school.[9]

What networks generated the expansion of for-profit higher education? How has this expansion affected non-profit colleges and universities in an era of cost containment and rising tuition? Does the expansion of for-profit higher education enhance the entire U.S. academic system? This essay assesses for-profit higher education and its consequences for faculty workload and productivity.

THE FOR-PROFIT SECTOR

Table 1 lists the policies, investments, and outcomes related to for-profit higher education. These policies promote disproportionately meager results for public investments despite the prevalence of performance indicators and assessments. Some institutions seek profit levels that appear disconnected from academic or instructional expenses. In any case, company profits come before academic achievement, assessment, and student development.[10] Concerns about retention are minimal. For students who opt out, the specter of debt paralyzes any future academic achievement. Organizational incentives and processes are not in sync with the modal educational practices needed for student success. Instead, this sector thrives on narrow incentives that maximize enrollments.

How do for-profit colleges produce these outcomes? “For-profit colleges seek to enroll a population of non-traditional prospective students,” states the Senate committee report, “who are often not familiar with traditional higher education and may be facing difficult circumstances in their lives.” Recruiting materials, the report adds, “indicate that at some for-profit colleges, admission representatives were trained to locate and push on the pain in students’ lives.” Their training also included ways to “‘overcome objections’ of prospective students in order to secure enrollments.” Finally, “companies trained recruiters to create a false sense of urgency to enroll and inflate the prestige of the college.”[11]

The average tuition and fees at for-profit institutions were: $19,806 for certificates ($4,249 at public colleges); $39,988 for associate degree programs ($8,313 at public colleges); and $67,702 for bachelor’s degree programs ($52,522 at public colleges).[12] Higher withdrawal rates than found for their nonprofit counterparts accompanied the higher tuition rates. In 2008–09, nearly 63 percent of students (474,817 enrollees) withdrew from associate degree programs at for-profit institutions. About 54 percent (374,264) and 38 percent (246,792) withdrew from bachelor’s degree and certificate programs, respectively. These results translate to an overall 54 percent withdrawal rate. “Among the 15 publicly traded companies,” notes the committee report, “55 percent of students departed without a degree”—a predictable result for institutions that spend disproportionately more public money on marketing, recruitment, profits, and executive compensation than on instructional costs.[13]

Few for-profit institutions eschew scams to lure or entrap students. Vulnerable populations, such as service members, veterans, spouses, and families, are easy targets:

> For-profit colleges gather contact information of prospective students, or “leads,” by paying third-party companies known as “lead generators” that specialize in gathering and selling the information. Among the

Table 1. Key Policies, Investments, and Outcomes: For-Profit Higher Education Sector

Policies	Investments	Outcomes
Build capacity of for-profit sector without definitive scientific evidence or rigorous assessment data.	$32 billion in federal funds; 25 percent of total Department of Education student aid.	Over half of students leave without a degree; tuition rarely set below available federal student aid.
Subsidize the business model of higher education.	Companies spend $4.2 billion on marketing and recruiting (22 percent of all revenue).	76 percent of for-profit students controlled by stock companies or private firms.
Political deregulation of for-profit sector absent longitudinal evaluations.	19.7 percent profit margin with $3.2 billion in pre-tax profit.	More than 500,000 students leave without a degree or certificate.
Allow high tuition in for-profit sector.	$7.3 million to chief executive officers.	63 percent of associate degree-seekers depart without a degree.
Failure to monitor educational quality and infrastructure.	For-profit institutions employ 35,202 recruiters, but only 3,512 career services staff and 12,452 support services staff.	Students assume exorbitant loan debts with precarious employment prospects.
Allow for-profit sector to receive the largest share of military educational benefit.	Pell Grants allocated to for-profit sector increased from $1.1 billion to $7.5 billion between 2000 and 2010.	77 percent increase in associate degrees; 136 percent increase in bachelor's degrees.
Lackluster investigation of the cost-benefit of allocating taxpayer funds to for-profit institutions.	Eight of top ten recipients of post-9/11 GI Bill funds = 37 percent of benefits; 50 percent of Department of Defense tuition assistance benefits.	15 publicly traded for-profit education companies received 86 percent of taxpayer revenues.
Failure to build the capacity of existing institutions in public sector.	Companies spent $3.2 billion on instruction (17.2 percent of revenues); pre-tax profits were $3.6 billion.	Higher tuition for students at most for-profits than at community colleges or flagship public universities.*

Note:

* "Bachelor's degree programs averaged 20 percent more than comparable programs at community colleges and flagship public universities. Associate degree programs averaged *four* times the cost of degree programs at comparable community colleges. Certificate programs similarly averaged *four and a half* times the cost of such programs at comparable community colleges." United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, 2012, 3.

62 lead generators used by companies analyzed, the cost per lead ranged between $10 and $150. Lead generators advertise themselves as a free, safe, and reliable way to get information about college, but lead generator Web sites generally direct students only to schools and programs that pay them, and have a history of engaging in online marketing using aggressive and misleading methods.[14]

For-profit institutions flourished while states imposed performance indicators on their public colleges and universities.[15] Congress has directed billions of dollars to their coffers, while penalizing misappropriations of federal funds, such as welfare fraud. Faculty unions performing this way would not escape public scrutiny. Tables 2 and 3 show the significant federal investments made in a sample of for-profit institutions in 2009.[16] Table 2 shows the proportion of revenues derived by for-profit higher education companies from Title IV funds, and from military benefits. It also reports the proportion of revenues from the Ensuring Continued Access to Student Loans Act (ECASLA) of 2008, aimed at assuring the availability of federal loans to students by increasing the liquidity of the student loan marketplace.

FACULTY WORKLOAD AND PRODUCTIVITY

For-profit institutions rely on accessibility and convenience, personal contact, and technology—especially online learning—to attract customers.[17] An enrollment exceeding 153,000 students made the University of Phoenix the nation's largest private institution in 2003. Marketing focused on practically oriented working adults who did not resonate well with traditional institutions.[18] It touted research on its featured programs that concluded, "There is no significant difference between the cognitive outcome scores of online students versus campus students."[19]

As a flagship for-profit institution, the University of Phoenix builds its curriculum and pedagogy around a protocol of core questions: Do the students know what they should know? Can they do what they should be able to do? Have we helped them develop values that are appropriate to their profession? Are they achieving their life and career goals? If this formula is successful, the company argues, its education business should flourish:

> It is part of our university's attitude, and it relates to our for-profit orientation. If we focus on the right things—student knowledge, skills, and attitudes—and we achieve the right outcomes, the enrollment and the profits will take care of themselves.[20]

The university claims to grow by connecting its services, technologies, and courses in networks of recruiters, marketers, administrators, faculty members, and counselors conducive to its student body.[21]

The reality differs from these aspirations. Retirees, contingent labor, and practitioners make up the for-profit faculty workforce, notes one study. The for-profits show a greater range of faculty abilities, less shared governance and professional autonomy, and suspect academic freedom.[22] We lack data on the characteristics of successful faculty within this system: their educational background and attainment. Nor do we know how they manage teaching, research, public service, and institutional obligations. As for compensation, are they salaried, or paid by the number of students or courses? Do they share the profits?

A Phoenix academic affairs team recruits faculty members in conjunction with a marketing department that determines the most attractive courses. Screenings and training programs weed out faculty, leaving only 50 to 60 percent of applicants eligible to pass the four-week training modules.[23] Mentorship with and observations by an experienced faculty member complete the socialization process; more evaluations follow.

Once hired, faculty members must support and counsel students who face the intense, often overwhelming pace of on-line learning. Courses are developed using a top-down approach reflected through a centralized rubric, because "most faculty practitioners do not have the training to create a pedagogically effective course by themselves."[24] Input from "content experts" complements and often complicates faculty feedback. Absent performance indicators and assessment data, the verdict is out on whether other for-profit institutions mimic these practices.

A need to manage classroom and technology may overwhelm teaching, notes an observer of faculty workload and productivity at Phoenix:

Table 2. Estimated Proportion of Revenues Derived by For-Profit Higher Education Companies from Federal Sources: FY 2010

Company	Share from Title IV Funds	Share from Military Funds	Share from Federal Dollars (= Title IV + Military)	Share from Estimated Non-Reported Title IV Funds
Alta Colleges	83.9%	4.6%	88.5%	6.4%
American Career College	79.0	1.1	80.1	14.0
American Public Education	26.0	51.4	77.4	0.0
Anthem Education Group	81.9	0.5	82.4	6.2
Apollo Group	85.3	3.4	88.7	0.0
Bridgeport Education	85.1	8.6	93.7	0.0
Capella Education Corporation	78.2	2.6	80.8	1.6
Career Education Corporation	81.5	3.8	85.3	0.9
Chancellor University System	86.7	0.7	87.4	*
Concorde Career Colleges	83.2	2.4	85.7	*
Corinthian Colleges	81.9	1.2	83.1	8.0
DeVry University	77.5	3.4	80.9	0.0
ECPI Colleges	74.5	7.7	82.2	5.0
Education America	83.9	2.0	85.9	6.2
Education Management Corporation	77.4	2.5	80.0	*
Grand Canyon Education	84.9	2.2	87.1	*
Henley-Putnam University[a]	0.0	57.9	57.9	0.0
Herzing University	86.1	1.3	87.4	*
ITT Educational Services	60.8	5.1	65.8	*
Kaplan Higher Education Corporation	85.9	2.0	87.9	*
Keiser School[a]	77.4	1.2	78.6	8.4
Lincoln Educational Services Corporation	82.7	1.3	84.0	*
Med-Corn Career Training	84.3	0.0	84.3	*
National American University Holdings	76.1	3.9	80.0	5.7
Rasmussen Colleges	78.8	1.8	80.6	*
Strayer Education	77.7	7.1	84.9	*
TUI Learning	12.2	64.3	76.6	*
Universal Technical Institute	72.5	2.5	75.0	3.7
Vatterott Education Holdings	87.0	1.2	88.1	*
Walden University	76.4	1.4	77.8	0.0

Source: United States Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2012, 1: 1038.

Notes:

* No reliable estimate available.

[a] Data listed is for FY 2009.

Table 3. Post-9/11 GI Bill Disbursements to 30 Companies by Sector: August 1, 2009–June 15, 2011

Sector	Veterans Trained	Amount Paid	Cost Per Veteran
	2009–10		
For-Profit	76,746	$ 639,831,862	$ 8,337
Private Non-Profit	49,470	416,022,759	8,410
Public	203,790	696,687,673	3,419
Total	253,260	1,112,710,432	4,394
	2009–11		
For-Profit	151,980	1,586,754,240	10,441
Private Non-Profit	95,006	1,005,996,363	10,589
Public	361,535	1,678,127,527	4,642
Total	608,521	4,270,878,130	7,018

Source: United States Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2012, 1: 1039.

> Time management is critical. For example, neglecting to make the necessary time commitment is the most frequent reason prospective faculty members fail the University of Phoenix's training program; they do not spend enough time with the students. When teaching a course, one instructor estimates that it takes *five* times longer to teach a course the first time versus the fifth time. He has to build "sweat equity" until he hits his rhythm with the course and retools it to increase efficiency.[25]

Organizational problems accompany these professional issues:

> As college size increases, intra- and interdepartmental communication also becomes a challenge. One college alone employs 3,000 faculty members. Communicating new policies, procedures, or even meeting times is cumbersome. Not every faculty member reads e-mail regularly or attends on-line workshops or quarterly meetings, making it difficult at times to enforce consistency and best practices among faculty members.... On a broader scale, keeping current with other college and institutional activities challenges faculty, too.[26]

As for executive compensation:

> The CEOs of the publicly traded, for-profit companies took home on average, $7.3 million in 2009. In contrast, the five highest paid leaders of large public universities averaged compensation of $1 million, while the five highest paid leaders at nonprofit colleges and universities averaged $3 million.[27]

Federal largess, notes the Senate committee, subsidizes executive compensation at for-profit institutions.[28]

In 2010, over 80 percent of faculty members in schools studied by the Senate committee worked part-time while ten companies exceeded this benchmark. "Five companies," the committee report added, "had more than 90 percent part-time faculty."[29] Dire straits make many instructors complicit in this educational sharecropping, but these statistics raise quality concerns. Despite their advertisements, many for-profit institutions have abysmal results in career placement, under-developed infrastructures for student support, and dubious accreditation records.

Most affected are uninformed, first-generation college students struggling to make ends meet in an era of economic downturn. About 13 percent of community college students, 48 percent of four-year public college students, and 57 percent of four-year private non-profit college students take out student loans. At for-profit colleges, 96 percent of students do so. The for-profit industry could barely exist without this federal subsidy.[30]

How much debt do students in for-profit institutions accumulate? Among students at public and non-profit private colleges, 12 and 25 percent, respectively, owe $30,000 or more. By contrast, 57 percent of students in for-profit colleges and universities carry that amount of debt.[31] Many institutions offer students high-interest loans with more detrimental terms than federal loans.[32] Expected default rates range from 42 to 80 percent, and 47 percent of all federal student loan defaults came from these students.[33] For-profit students had a 23 percent unemployment rate in 2008–09—before the full impact of the Great Recession. These students pay more for less quality.

In the last 20 years, many politicians lambasted faculty unions, tenured professors, and academic institutions for the problems they found in undergraduate education.[34] Yet, federal and state authorities, and accrediting agencies, have not demanded of for-profits the standards of merit expected from nonprofit public and private postsecondary education. Markets, tax rebates, spending cuts, and deregulation have not corrected this tragedy of the commons. Some for-profit institutions avoid scrutiny by using falsified information and incomplete records, or by exploiting academic and legal loopholes.[35] Nor have advocates of continuous improvement and ongoing assessment focused on for-profit colleges. The highest standards of transparency and corporate ethics remain elusive.[36]

The findings of the Senate committee report lead observers to ask if Congress could have better served the adult learner. Perhaps Congress could have provided greater incentives to community colleges to increase their enrollments, promote equality of opportunity, and enhance their effectiveness. These public institutions have a proven track record of success with adult learners, first-generation students, and military personnel. In any case, both private and public colleges have entered the competition, often via on-line learning.[37]

Access to higher education through online learning appears inevitable.[38] Few can contest the technological innovations making online and distance education accessible to more students. Such access requires mechanisms to insure fidelity to the best standards of higher education. Assessors can use exemplary programs, like Walden University, to benchmark these standards.[39] NEA has created similar metrics to insure quality online education for its members.[40] Within a protocol of graduated sanctions, it has established robust, authentic policy guidelines that curb abuse. Students must obtain degrees, acquire gainful employment, and avoid loan defaults.[41] The goal should be the same level of assessments aimed at regular faculty, departments, and typical colleges and universities.[42] But, much more needs to be known about faculty quality, curricula, learning outcomes, the human or social capital of graduates, and expenditures in the for-profit universe.[43]

CONCLUSION

Universities and colleges produce, certify, authenticate, and replicate knowledge. They cannot exist apart from human labor—even if faculty use technology to supplement these tasks. Dissonance over for-profit institutions is not over their existence; many have been around for decades. It is over the resources and roles they now occupy.[44] Social change affects the structure, operations, and outcomes of higher education industry. In turn, organizational units, market forces, and on occasion, happenstance differentiate academic labor.[45] The infusion of federal funds allowed for-profit higher education to expand and channel resources to private interests. The future of postsecondary education is determined by institutional struggles over rights and jurisdictions and by the fate of academic labor.[46]

For some, privatization and practicality are *the* panaceas for restructuring higher education.[47] A business model is ubiquitous and omnipresent, notwithstanding its limitations for public goods and social justice.[48] Advocates for for-profit institutions represent a powerful coalition of adult learners, sympathetic politicians, and savvy entrepreneurs.[49]

Is for-profit higher education a bottomless pit for taxpayers? Can its reliance on advertisements, location, and technology serve the public interest better than public institutions? Are efforts to redirect educational processes away from the control of the academic professions credible? Will exploited students have any legal redress from malpractice or fraud? Has the for-profit sector become politically exempt from the rigorous quality, assessment, and performance mandates imposed on public institutions? The verdict is not yet in, but research indicates that tangible social interactions or relationships are pivotal to learning.[50] Academic achievement is not the manipulation of digital images and technological magic, nor the distillation of perfunctory facts and generic screencasts. It involves tacit, subtle factors of socialization, human development, cognition, and inculcation.[51]

Politicians and their allies constantly call for "merit" at all levels of education, except fiscal allocations to for-profit higher education.[52] Congress, having created this exception, will probably neither police it nor assign culpability to abusers. NEA and similar associations must monitor Congressional policies and the quality of for-profit higher education.[53] These associations must expose the sector's fallacious assumptions and nonexistent scrutiny on behalf of exploited students and concerned, but uninformed citizens.[54]

Spending cuts, increased scrutiny, and mounting student loan debt spells trouble for public higher education.[55] Improving the academic professions and redirecting scarce federal dollars toward this sector would better build capacity and human capital. Exposing the forces preventing this redirection is the real challenge.[56]

NOTES

This topic is controversial. I've focused on evidence compiled by the United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, though many other studies have examined for-profit higher education. The bibliography lists these studies. Minority or opposing viewpoints are interspersed in the text and the reference list.

1 Committee on Research Universities, 2012.

2 Hall,2012.

3 Kinser, 2006.

4 Johnson, Cavanaugh, and Mattson, 2003, Diamond, 2004.

5 Bousquet, 2008, xv.

6 Tierney and Hentschke, 2007.

7 Bousquet, 2008. My wife suggested the term "educational sharecropping" when I shared my preliminary ideas and findings with her.

8 Sperling, 2000. The Apollo Group is an institutional device that protects the University of Phoenix from regulatory harm (138-142). "Free market scientism" is the ideological belief that markets are the social technologies best equipped to solve social problems—without rigorous scientific evidence to justify this notion for indivisible or public goods.

9 United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, 2012, 4. See also PBS Frontline: *College, Inc.* (a 2010 documentary about for-profit higher education)

10 I have observed this phenomenon up close: My son and daughter-in-law worked in this industry.

11 United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, 2012, 4.

12 Ibid, 3.

13 Ibid., 5. The dropout rate was 46 percent at privately held companies.

14 Ibid., 4.

15 Ibid.

[16] Ibid., Appendix 10 and Appendix 11.

[17] Oblinger, 2012.

[18] Pirani, 2003, 5. The average age of entering students was 34.

[19] Ibid, 5.

[20] Ibid, 6. These ideas originated from Craig Swenson, provost and senior vice president.

[21] Rainie and Wellman, 2012.

[22] Tierney and Hentschke, 2007, 98-106.

[23] Pirani, 2003, 10-12.

[24] Ibid., 9.

[25] Ibid., 6, 7.

[26] Ibid., 7.

[27] United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, 2012.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid, 6.

[31] Ibid, 7.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Powell, 2011.

[35] United States Senate, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, 2012, 8.

[36] Knapp and Siegel, 2009, volumes 1-3.

[37] National Education Association, 2012.

[38] Champagne 2011; Breneman, Pusser, and Turner 2006; Pusser 2005.

[39] National Education Association, 2012.

[40] NEA does not condemn online programs or distance learning, and does not oppose for-profit higher education per se.

[41] National Education Association, 2012, 7-9.

[42] Porter, 2012.

[43] Kezar and Maxey, 2012, Sageman, 2004.

[44] Kirp, 2003.

[45] Estrada, 2011.

[46] Bleak, 2005.

[47] Ruch, 2001.

[48] Sperling and Tucker, 2002.

[49] Rosen, 2011.

[50] Goleman, 2006.

[51] I make these comments after taking an online course under the auspices of a premier university, and from experiences with screen casts from technological think tanks and research corporations.

[52] Hentschke, Lechuga, and Tierney, 2010.

[53] Valente, 2010.

[54] Young, 2012.

[55] Hall, 2011.

[56] Consulting a representative sample of academic labor across the spectrum of postsecondary public institutions would be a much more viable strategy than ignoring them or acting against their interests and the public good.

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