Toward More Productive Higher Education Systems

by Ronald Fischbach

America’s tax-supported colleges and universities are currently enmeshed in a crisis. Legislatures are demanding more productivity, as measured by accelerated graduation rates, while at the same time students, for a whole host of reasons, are not progressing through their course work as quickly as they once did.

The culture of today’s tax-supported university is quite different from that of the university of yesteryear. The average age of U.S. students, for example, according to the U.S. Department of Education, is 26 years old,1 an increase of 28 percent since 1980.2 The perception of a university education being four years on a resident campus is no longer a reality.3 Today’s college students, more than ever before, are married, partially or fully employed, and financially responsible for funding their own education. Students are finding it increasingly necessary to work to pay higher tuition fees.4 Completing a degree in four years is now rare, and if taxpayer backing for today’s institutions of higher learning continues to be tied to this standard of productivity, publicly supported higher education is doomed.

In the wake of this crisis, more and more of America’s colleges and universities are facing three daunting challenges: (1) maintaining a maximized and ethnically diverse student enrollment while not exceeding resources, (2) retaining students long enough for them to complete their degree programs, and (3) increasing

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graduation rates within four years. To make matters even more challenging, higher education institutions must accomplish these tasks while public resources are declining. Further complicating the picture is the prospect that the resolution of any one of these challenges may result in the exacerbation of one or more of the remaining challenges. The time for bold and new initiatives to bring about a meaningful change in higher education is now, before permanent and crippling consequences beset many of America’s institutions of higher learning.

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The Changing College Population

According to projections, by the year 2015, 16 million students will be enrolled in higher education, an increase of 2.6 million from 1995. Based upon population trends in the general population, minority students will make up 80 percent of this increase. Arizona, California, Florida, New York, and Texas, with large populations of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islanders, will account for more than half of the overall increase. The proportion of Caucasian students on campuses will decline from 71 percent in 1995 to 63 percent in 2015 and these students will be a minority on campuses in California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, New Mexico, and, soon afterward, Texas. Hispanic-American enrollments will increase from 11 percent to 15 percent. Asian-American enrollments will rise from 5 percent to 8 percent, and African-American enrollments will remain steady at about 13 percent. While minority college enrollments will climb, their growth will not keep up with African-American and Hispanic population growth for the age group of 18 to 24 years. As a consequence, by the year 2015 African-Americans’ and Hispanics’ involvement in higher education will actually decrease in proportion to their populations.

Given the financial situation faced by most minorities, the probability that tax-supported colleges and universities will have to shoulder the overwhelming proportion of this new wave of college students is great. In 2001, 22.7 percent of African Americans and 21.4 percent of Hispanics were poor, compared to 11.7 percent of the total population. By comparison, 9.9 percent of Caucasians and 10.2
percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders lived in poverty in 2001. The impact of minority students upon tax-supported college and university productivity measures is profound.

**TIME TO COMPLETE A DEGREE IS INCREASING**

Data indicate that in the year 2000, approximately 42 percent of public college students and slightly more than 55 percent of private college students completed their degree programs in five years. The increase in time needed to complete degrees has been attributed to a variety of factors, including students’ need to work, students initiating their college programs at an older age (family, job, and community activities compete with school), not having parents who have attended college, membership in an underserved minority group, and inadequate high school preparation.

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Today’s average freshman attending a publicly supported institution of higher education can anticipate an undergraduate college career of at least six years. The rates of degree completion vary substantially among students of different racial groups. Asian and Caucasian students enjoy the highest four-year completion rates—38.8 percent and 37.6 percent, respectively—while the lowest rates occur among Mexican Americans (21.3 percent), American Indians (21.6 percent), Puerto Rican Americans (23.6 percent), and African Americans (28.9 percent). Without substantial changes in college and university policies that reflect the changes in student demographics, future students will require more time to complete their degree programs.

Reversing the college dropout rate presents another mountain to climb for the college and university policy maker. Studies show that U.S. high schools are failing to prepare students to face the rigors of college life. American high schools are usually enormous in size, some with as many as 5,000 students. Their facilities are aging, ill-equipped to meet today’s technological challenges, and made up of large, impersonal classes. A measure of the poor preparation experienced by today’s high school graduates is the fact that more than a third of entering college freshmen are
required to enroll in remedial course work upon entering college.\textsuperscript{14} Fully 25 percent of college students drop out, and half of first-generation college students do not get a degree.\textsuperscript{15}

**Higher Education is No Longer Affordable**

Increasing tuition at American colleges and universities has made higher education less affordable for most low- and middle-income families.\textsuperscript{16} Between 1976 and 1996, the average tuition at public universities increased from $642 to $3,151 (a 391 percent increase). Tuitions at public two-year colleges, the least costly of all types of higher education, increased from an average of $245 to $1,245 (a 408 percent increase) during the same period.\textsuperscript{17} These increases become particularly alarming when compared with the change in the Consumer Price Index during the same period of only 282 percent.\textsuperscript{18} As the general affordability of higher education has decreased, the demand for cost-effective, tax-supported higher education has increased. Although there are more private colleges and universities than public ones, 78 percent of all students and 81 percent of all undergraduates are currently enrolled in public two- and four-year institutions.\textsuperscript{19} Economists are quick to point out that a big factor in selection of a particular university over another is tuition cost.\textsuperscript{20}

The University of California and the State University of California, two of the nation’s largest tax-supported systems, experienced enrollment increases of 4.9 and 5.1 percent respectively during the 2001 academic year. In addition, California’s community colleges have grown by 6.5 percent during the same time period.
California officials expect that enrollment in all three segments of public higher education will continue to experience strong growth. The California Department of Finance projects that by the year 2011 enrollment will increase by 26 percent over the 2001 enrollments, or 587,000 students. The complex interplay between increasing tuition, protracted college careers, changing student demographics, and the cost associated with delivering a college education have left college officials between that proverbial rock and hard place.

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Who is responsible for the growing crisis?

How did higher education get into such a quagmire of conflicting challenges? Shared governance in colleges and universities has been interpreted to mean not only that faculty have the primary responsibility for educational matters such as the status of faculty and research and instructional programs, but also that they have involvement in educational policy, including the setting of institutional mission statements, objectives, planning, budgeting, and the selection of administrators. With the growing fiscal crises in many states, pressure to rein in shared governance has been growing. Current criticisms point to faculty obstructionism rendering the governance system unable to respond appropriately to today’s crises in higher education. In the words of a 1998 Association of Governing Boards (AGB) statement on governance, “Many governing boards, faculty members, and chief executives believe that internal governance arrangements have become so cumbersome that timely decisions are difficult to make, and small factions often are able to impede the decision-making process.” The AGB recommends that governing boards restate their ultimate responsibility and authority, explicitly clarify who has the right to make or participate in specific kinds of decisions, establish deadlines to speed up decisions, and clarify ambiguous or overlapping areas of authority.

A “top-down” approach to university administration has been the outcome. Less opportunity for faculty participation in decisions that require “in the trenches” knowledge of the facts has, in part, brought about the crisis faced by those who are left to make the tough decisions. It is time for the faculty to return to their
rightful role as equal partners in the governance of tax-supported institutions of higher learning.

**IT IS TIME FOR BOLD POLICY INITIATIVES**

In times of depleting resources and dwindling taxpayer support for higher education, parochial concerns over academic turf protection and wasteful use of resources must come to an end. No longer can the taxpayer afford to support inef-

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**Taxpayers can’t afford to support inefficient duplication of academic services across academic departments or across campuses within university systems.**

Efficient duplication of academic services across academic departments, as well as across campuses within university systems. For example, the fundamentals of statistics and research design are courses that are replicated in numerous departments throughout today’s universities. Similarly, virtually identical academic programs, such as teacher credentialing are offered on sister campuses throughout tax-supported university systems. Permitting entire campuses to hibernate into a semi-vegetative state during the summer months is another inexcusable waste of resources. Administrators and faculty have failed to address the paramount issue of how the university structure can be modified to free up resources required to address the educational needs of the current growing population of college students.

Today’s university must be directed toward the learning needs of students and away from being structured to support the academic interests of faculty. The time has come to shift the focus toward finding ways to more efficiently produce thinking and creative graduates. In the article, “Design Thinking as a Centerpiece of the Creative University,” Lindsay Johnston states that problem-based learning moves students away from the constraints of memorization toward the expanding possibilities of creativity and imagination. The rigid structure of discipline-based universities fosters incestuous thinking and discourages the cross-pollination that comes from breaking down the walls of the traditional academia. If learning is to take place, the current structure must be challenged. The very organization of a university must encourage cross-disciplinary learning. A university’s accountability is intertwined with student productivity. The extent to which learning takes place is the true verification that the university is doing its job.
Large tax-supported universities have an opportunity to reorganize their campuses to greatly reduce duplication of courses and programs. Campuses should be required to identify where duplication exists and propose plans for sharing programs and courses across academic department and campus boundaries. There should be clear criteria to judge when duplication is justified, and when it’s not justified, it should be eliminated. Technology such as two-way audio/video transmissions and the Internet can serve to bridge the gap between campuses. University administrators should encourage the idea that students are not enrolled at a particular campus but are attending a university that has a variety of locations from which they can choose. Programmatic requirements and course numbering should be reviewed to bring all campuses under a uniform set of standards. In this 21st century university, a student could concurrently attend a number of campuses (particularly with the assistance of modern technology) and have many more options for course and program selection. Applications would be made to the university system as a single entity. Applicants would indicate the campuses they would like to consider to be their home base. They would specify which of the other campuses they would be willing to attend. Depending upon the applicant meeting admissions standards, his or her interests, and availability of resources, an individualized program would be created that would maximize the use of resources while minimizing the time required to complete the prescribed program. As part of an overall effort to reduce waste, funding for year-round academic programming on all campuses would be a cornerstone of an effective enrollment management policy. Furthermore, minority students would be better able to afford the cost of attending summer sessions if they were part of the regular academic year and subsidized by tax dollars.

Once faculty and administrators have gotten the system to operate more efficiently, the next step is to make sure that state funding is responsive to the mission-driven needs of higher education. Currently, the state budget process drives enrollment policy and resource allocation decisions. When economic times are lean, fewer dollars flow to tax-supported higher education. The consequences of such budget cutbacks are fewer classes, more reliance upon part-time instructors,
and a general reduction in the quality of education. An alternative would be to adopt an enrollment funding practice that drives and controls the budget process. Under such a funding mechanism, state allocation calculations to higher education would have to be responsive to changes in enrollment. As qualified applicant-demand increased, there would be a corresponding increase in funds to support higher education.

The formulation of effective policy will require vision, courage, and sacrifice on the part of both faculty and administrators. The current budgetary crisis need not result in the demise of the opportunity for students to reach their academic goals. Twenty-first century policy changes that support student learning—not just faculty interests—are needed to restore the relevance and credibility of today’s university. New policies that recognize the need to restructure the relationships between academic units—be they within or across campuses—to put aside archaic academic turf wars in deference to maximizing the educational value of existing resources, and funding models that acknowledge the fundamental value of higher education to the nation are needed now. Is anyone ready to lead the way?

ENDNOTES

6. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
Ibid.


Ibid.


W O R K S C I T E D


