

Le plus ça change...

What's Happening to Public Higher Education

edited by Ronald G. Ehrenberg

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This issue of *Thought & Action* asks, “Will the past define the future?” While the answer to this question may depend on your definitions of past or future, not to mention present, the history of higher education makes it clear that our past certainly makes some strong suggestions about our future. One example from Harvard College illustrates this idea. A tutor was asked to take over his mentor’s course load, but at half the salary and without the academic title of professor. The year was 1877, the assistant’s name was Henry Cabot Lodge, the professor’s name was Henry Adams, but other than the salary Lodge had to settle for—\$1,000 a year—it could have happened yesterday.¹ The explosion in the use of contingent faculty has become one of the most controversial issues in higher education today, and is directly related to larger issues about the role of public higher education in modern society. The essays collected in Ronald Ehrenberg’s *What’s Happening to Public Higher Education?* address these issues in detail.

The book grows out of a May 2005 conference at Cornell University, where Ehrenberg, an economist, directs the Cornell Higher Education Institute. In addition to some national overviews, including two articles that examine the impact of increased contingency on student achievement, the book provides a series of informative case studies of individual states. The volume closes with two essays by college presidents projecting trends into the future that to me represent an overly optimistic view of that future but do make clear what the challenges are.

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The authors discuss the attempts by public institutions of higher education to respond to changing demands and populations in the face of decreasing governmental support. Ehrenberg lays out the challenge by observing that “the twin goals of increasing, or at least maintaining, both the quality of public higher education institutions and their accessibility to students from all family income levels will be difficult to achieve in the years ahead. (xxi).” The report issued last fall by the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership*, addressed the accessibility and affordability issues, especially with its call for increased need-based student aid.³ But the Spellings Commission never really grappled with the quality side of the argument other than providing ideologically driven calls for innovation. The subsequent championing of an increased use of contingent faculty reflects an understanding of higher education that is foreign to most faculty. One wishes that the commission had at least read these essays, which provide a knowledgeable picture of current challenges to public higher education from within, instead of purposely championing the outsider’s viewpoint.

The authors did take note of the beginnings of the turnaround in state funding of the last several years, but more importantly, they emphasized the distinction between the short term recovery from cyclical cuts in aid, and the long term trend toward state disinvestment in higher education. David W. Olien, in his case study on the University of Wisconsin System, notes that the effects of economic cycles “were less pronounced on the boom side and more pronounced on the bust side,” adding that “the UW proportion of the state budget dropped from being 13.7 percent of the state budget in the biennium ending in 1975 to 8.4 percent for the biennium ending in 2005 (303-5).” This disinvestment is reflected across the country, and will not be turned around without a major shift in the underlying political climate, a shift that goes beyond any potential partisan realignment.

While the essays collectively do a good job of setting the challenges within a structural environment that political decisions have created, I found that they did not provide enough in the way of political discussions about how to change those structures. And I was surprised with the lack of any mention of the various struggles over academic freedom and the so-called Academic Bill of Rights in the case studies. Those battles have distracted faculty and institutions from mounting as strong an effort as they should have in restoring necessary funding to institutions of public higher education. But those are relatively minor reservations, perhaps made as a political historian reviewing a collection of essays by economists. The book admirably sets forth the challenges we face. It is now up to us to use the information it provides and engage in the struggle. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ John Garraty, *Henry Cabot Lodge*. Alfred Knopf, New York. 1953. p. 53.
- ² U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf (accessed July 25, 2007).