

Success and Excess: The Contours and Character of American Higher Education Since 1960

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Abstract Higher Education in the United States during the six decades from 1960 to 2010 has been a success story characterized by expansion, prosperity and prestige. These characteristics, however, were inseparable from problems of excess and lack of clear educational purposes. Furthermore, these problems remain unresolved early in the 21st century, creating a crisis of confidence for colleges and universities.

Keyword Higher education

Colleges and universities in the United States from 1960 to 2012 experienced the paradox of prosperity combined with the dysfunctions of success. Contrary to the stereotype of academic institutions being stodgy and ill-suited to decisive change, the American university following World War II demonstrated a remarkable ability to make adjustments that helped it to solve problems for the nation and for enhancing its own operations. This included systematic, sustained responses to fulfill the charges of two major national reports published shortly after the war ended. The first was Vannevar Bush's 1945 report, *Science, The Endless Frontier* – a road map for large scale sponsored research and development in a peace time, domestic economy.¹ And, second, the 1947 Truman Commission Report, *Higher Education for American Democracy* – whose focus was on expanding access and affordability to formal studies beyond high school (Zook 1947).

My central argument is that in the United States our ability to build structures and policies that provide access to higher education surpassed our abilities then to provide subsequent attention and effectiveness in the substance and innards of

undergraduate education within the marvelous structures we have constructed and funded. Higher Education in the United States was no less than a success story – but one in which eventually unexpected consequences of policies and practices meant that often their solutions introduced a half century ago tended to foster a new set of problems which puzzle the public – and public policies – in the early 21st century. In this essay I will provide historical perspective on these various policies and programs, depicting them as the structure or stage within which the higher education dramas of teaching and learning was enacted by a changing cast of students and professors, along with deans, provosts, presidents and boards.

A provocative work that conveys the potential and problems of this half century era is the 1968 book by sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (1968). Timing may not be everything but it is important. Jencks and Riesman's *The Academic Revolution*, published in 1968, documented and explored what they called the “rise to power of the academic profession” in which professors gained prominence and prestige as experts and influential. A corollary was that by the early '1960s not only was higher education “news,” it was “good news.” Colleges and universities acquired prestige, legitimacy and even prosperity as they carried out two important functions – socialization and certification for late adolescents who were preparing to take their place in adult life. According to Jencks and Riesman, one of the triumphant institutions was what they called the “university college” – the academically selective, socially prestigious undergraduate curriculum, whether as part of a larger university setting or as a free standing liberal arts campus.

All this took place as part of the “partial triumph of the meritocracy,” in which “selective admissions” for undergraduates meant emphasis on academic achievements as measured by transcripts and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and awards such as Phi Beta Kappa election gained increased consideration alongside non-merit factors of family, wealth, and privilege. Prestige, legitimacy, socialization and certification, the ascent of the academically selective undergraduate “university college,” the partial triumph of meritocracy. For graduate and

¹United States Office of Scientific Research and Development, *Science, The Endless Frontier: A Report to the President by Vannevar Bush, Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, July 1945* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945).

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professional schools, it meant new resources and prestige for Ph.D. programs and for schools of law, medicine, and business. Together, these were among the themes they analyzed, all of which would have surprised, for example, an Abraham Flexner who in 1930 wrote about drift and lag in American universities compared to their counterpart institutions in England and Germany (1930). Whereas academics in the United States of 1930 were defensive and even apologetic about the uneven and low quality of their universities' graduate programs, by 1960 the American Ph.D. degrees conferred by members of the Association of American Universities had improved and were regarded as exemplary worldwide.

Starting Point: 1960

I ground the start of my analysis in a landmark event: passage of the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education (Douglass 2000; Thelin 1977).² For Clark Kerr, to anticipate the lyrics made famous by Frank Sinatra, 1960 was, indeed, a very good year. Kerr, President of the magnificent University of California, was entitled to justifiable celebration with the approval by the California legislature of the Master Plan for Postsecondary Education. California and its investment in higher education had already captured the national attention and imagination, starting with the 1948 cover story in *Life* magazine.³ That optimistic portrayal was confirmed a little more than a decade later with the consolidation and legitimization of an unprecedented document that brought together not only the state's University of California, but also its state colleges, community colleges, and its more than 60 independent colleges and universities into a marvel of diplomacy and coordination. Given its publicity and its timing of 1960, it serves as my starting point.

Structures and Systems: Statewide Policies, Programs and Projects, Circa 1960

The California Master Plan was sufficiently newsworthy that it vaulted Clark Kerr and California onto the cover of *Time* magazine in 1960, heralded as "Education: Master Planner."⁴ In sum, here was the blue print by which a large, prosperous state showed how one could provide access and affordability that edged from elite toward mass and even

universal higher education. Perhaps more symbolic than the *Time* magazine cover was that in 1963 for the first time Harvard looked to the West as it invited Clark Kerr to present its prestigious Godkin Lectures. A year later these would be published by Harvard University Press as *The Uses of the University* – a slender volume that the editors of *Change* magazine selected it as the most influential book on higher education in the latter twentieth century – and Kerr himself became the most renowned higher education leader of the era (Kerr 1964; Thelin and Wells 2002).⁵

The case of California was prominent and, indeed, still remains influential and imitated. At the same time it is important to note that there were state-by-state variations on the theme of popular support for extending higher education in the 1960s. In New York the SUNY and CUNY systems included more than 90 campuses. Massachusetts, a densely populated and education minded state, was markedly different in approach than, e.g., California or New York in that the historic and numeric dominance of established private or independent institutions suggest a state model that placed relatively less influence on creating state systems (Freeland 1992).

A significant legacy of the decade was that in numerous states legislatures provided generous funding for portable college tuition scholarships to state residents – scholarships that could be used at either a public or private college. These scholarship programs increased student choice, narrowed the "tuition gap" between public and private institutions, and signaled that states were committed to keeping tuition price low not only by providing subsidies and low charges at public institutions (Odell and Thelin 1981). Such was the breadth and choice of the various higher education public policies in the Golden Age. The common denominator was that despite state and regional variations, higher education was good news and seen as central to national fulfillment and promise.

So far so good. Indeed, the "New Frontier" aphorism that a rising tide lifts all boats included colleges and universities. This connection was hardly a surprising, given the "academic revolution" effect of bringing some highly regarded professors as experts into government service. For example, McGeorge Bundy, an influential member of the Kennedy presidential cabinet had come from being Dean at Harvard, further real and symbolic illustration of the deference and prestige that government and industry now extended to higher education. Yet beyond and within the celebration of master planning and legislative persuasion, it was not long after 1960 that there were warning signs that the structures and provisions put into place by state systems and by individual institutions were starting to face sources of internal tension.

² 1960 Donahoe Act, Amendment to the California State Education Code: Sections 2250–22705 (Sacramento, California: General Assembly of the State of California, 1960). See also, Douglass (2000); and also, Thelin (1977).

³ "University of California: A Photographic Essay," cover story for *Life* magazine (October 25, 1948) vol. 25, no. 17, pp. 88–112.

⁴ "Education: Master Planner," cover story for *Time* magazine (October 17, 1960).vol. LXXVI, no. 16.

⁵ Kerr (1964). See also, "Who's Who in Higher Education," *Change*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Feb., 1975), pp. 24–31. Thelin and Wells (2002).

The Federal Roles in Higher Education, Circa 1960 to 2012

Many, perhaps most, of the expansions and innovations through 1970 I have described thus far were a national mandate that was carried out primarily by state governments. The irony was that these goals were outlined in a national or federal commission report – the landmark 1947 Truman Commission report on Higher Education for American Democracy. Where the federal government did take a substantial role in the funding and shaping of American higher education was through sponsored research – including creation of such agencies as the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and, later, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This presence was sufficiently strong so that by 1963 Clark Kerr identified the so-called “Federal Grant University” – in which somewhere between 15 and 20 top flight research universities received about 80 % or so of the sponsored research grant dollars flowing from federal agencies.

The corollary was that the federal government did not show much presence outside sponsored research grants until after 1970. The biggest surprise, especially to the higher education establishment of most university presidents and national associations was that Congress deliberately opted to reject the academic lobbying for direct financial funding to strong, established institutions. Instead, the belated arrival of the federal government into undergraduate education came in the 1972 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. And, it arrived in the form of portable undergraduate financial aid programs – the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG), the Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant (SEOG), and the creation of the hybrid Sallie Mae (Student Loan Marketing Agency). The BEOG, soon renamed as Pell Grants in honor of their ambassador and architect, Senator Claiborne Pell (D) Rhode Island, introduced a new calculus of coordination and information sharing – all with the intent of providing tuition grants to students with demonstrated financial need – and with great choice as to where a student might carry those federal tuition grant dollars (Thelin 2007).

There was another secondary contribution of the 1972 reauthorization – the federal funding and creation of the so-called 1202 commissions – statewide coordinating agencies which were to act as mediators and conduits in the flow of various funding and incentive programs from Washington D.C. to state capitols and, then, to campuses – both public and private.

Analysis and Archaeology of the Era, Circa 1960 to 1970

First, allow me to consolidate some 1960s slogans from corporations, consumerism, and campus to suggest the pervasiveness

of spending in many, perhaps all, aspects of American life in this era. In 1960 the CEO of IBM, Thomas Watson, Jr., commented wryly to a colleague: “Each year I give my legal staff an unlimited budget – and each year they over-spend it.” Moving west to the plains of Texas the neon sign above the Lone Star Café proclaimed that it was *the* place “Where too Much Ain’t Enough.” In California, a state campaign to reduce forest fires in state parks used the motto, “Keep California Green and Golden” – but for most of the public it was an invitation for prosperity and affluence.

Finally, the related message for higher education came about in Claremont, California when economist and former university president Howard R. Bowen of Claremont Graduate School advanced his “revenue theory” of higher education – namely, that “Colleges raise all the money they can – and spend all that they can raise (1980).” The residual message during the 1960s was that Americans, whether in paying for higher education or other consumer goods, had become a nation of spenders – a behavior that drove up both costs and prices.

Problems Within the Policies and Programs After 1960

The construction of master plans and policies in higher education bring to mind another large project of the same era – namely, funding for and construction of the federal highway system. Today the two projects share a comparable fate: both are still familiar, we rely on them and use them – but they are in need of infrastructure repair. Furthermore, a half century after their creation, subsequent generations of Americans take them for granted. They are no longer news. And what one finds in the 21st century are sporadic arguments for an initiative for an overhaul or new model. One of my favorite litanies is thus: Jump forward to the 1990s when a succession of state flagship university presidents said to donors and alumni at fund raising dinners, “We used to be state supported. Then we were state assisted. Now we are state located.” Well, in the spirit of consumerism language, I do not buy that.

Before addressing the financial future of higher education, I wish to summarize some major developments after 1960 that impeded the ability of the heralded master plans to fulfill or satisfy (Gose 2002)

- Undergraduate curriculum discontent: recall that among the first issues raised by Berkeley undergraduates was not only political dissent – it was curricular concerns. Slogans included, “the impersonality of the multiversity” and at registration tables, the new course computer IBM cards were pinned to one’s shirt, with the inscription “Do Not Fold, Bend, Spindle, or Mutilate.” Here was a sign of my earlier theme – the master plans were reasonably good at enrolling students, but silent on determining good models

for the form and process of a sound educational experience within the walls. One indicator of this discontent was the emergence of the “cluster college” movement, characterized by the slogan for the new University of California at Santa Cruz, in which the aim was to “make the university seem smaller as it grew larger (Grant and Riesman 1978; Clark 1970).”⁶

- Campus unrest in the form of student political dissent elicited a loss of confidence by legislators and citizens in the ability of campus leaders to administer their own campuses.
- Most surprising was that in 1971 some innovative studies by economists of higher education systematically documented that an alarming number of seemingly strong, established colleges and universities faced budget shortfalls that constituted a “New Depression (Cheit 1971).” The original studies were circulated among a relatively small circle of colleagues. By 1973, however, the story broke. In my opinion one of the most underappreciated and overlooked incidents in U.S. higher education was the financial stress and double digit inflation from 1971 to 1985. It is understandable that today the concerns over the financial health of higher education is our paramount concern. What seems to be forgotten in the discussions is that three or four decades ago the Carnegie Commission report, “Three Thousand Futures,” warned that somewhere between 25 % and 33 % of American colleges were in serious risk of financial disaster (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education 1980; Mayhew 1979).⁷ The fact that this did not happen was one of the most unexpected responses: colleges and universities underwent a managerial revolution that essentially “saved” them.
- The Managerial Revolution and Solutions: I think one of the most over-looked, impressive developments in American higher education starting in the late 1970s was what has been termed a “managerial revolution.” Faced with adversity and bleak prospects, both colleges and universities took systematic, sustained efforts to analyze and improve their administration – and their responsiveness to students, alumni, and donors as constituents. The offices of institutional research, budget and planning, financial aid, admissions, development, and alumni relations were either implemented or drastically strengthened in the wake of the bleak news about “higher education’s new depression.” The resilience and courage of presidents and boards to understand the gravity of financial and enrollment problems of the late 1970s was remarkable – and explains why so few

colleges folded, despite dire predictions by national foundations and higher education associations. Administrative offices went from being passive to being active and systematic, from amateur to professional – a venture that coincided with the increased availability of data bases and computer technology for informed decision-making (Thelin 2000).

- Since 1985 and the start of financial recovery, a dramatic story within higher education has been what economist Charles Clotfelder called “Buying the Best (Clotfelder 1996).” By this he meant that a small number of academically and financially strong private colleges and universities staked out strategies for an extended talent hunt for outstanding undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Here was the start of a growing chasm between what were customarily the top state universities and the top independent universities. It is a development that still is consequential and operative in 2012.
- Access Reconsidered – Race and Ethnicity: My favorite analytic strategy is to disaggregate data and generalizations, to probe the differences and exceptions within large proclamations. In the matter of social justice and increasing access and equity on the basis of race and ethnicity, higher education since 1960 overcame the most invidious policies of exclusion and racial segregation. Yet the subsequent, more subtle problem has been the persistence of sorting and tracking, often in which factors of race and ethnicity show a strong overlap with low and modest income.
- Access Reconsidered: Gender: One temptation is to lump all under-represented constituencies into a single group. I resist and reject this because I think it glosses over crucial distinctions which show disrespect to each particular constituency. Patterns of exclusions by race and ethnicity are markedly different than those for gender. Consider graduate school applications and enrollments – and diversity, especially in matter of gender. Whether in 1960 or 1990 or 2010, women had achieved access to undergraduate education and showed relatively strong academic performance and bachelor’s degree completion. From the point of view of legislators and planners, “the system worked.” Only on closer inspection do we find its differential sorting. The major shortfall for women and higher education was admission to graduate and advanced professional schools. The changes since 1970 are astounding. But the sources are not obvious. A 1975 study of admissions to Ph.D. programs at the University of California, Berkeley presented the following problematic findings: although there were no statistical indicators of gender discrimination in any department, there were large disparities favoring the enrollment of men for the entire Graduate School (Bickel et al. 1975). The most impressive, interesting

⁶ Grant and Riesman (1978). See also, Clark (1970).

⁷ Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1980). See also, Mayhew (1979).

development since publication of that study in 1975 is the gains women have shown in numbers and proportion of graduate students in Ph.D. programs and in the advanced professional schools of medicine and law.⁸ And, these gains continue to diffuse upward into leadership roles not only in the campus but also in professions, government, and business.

Consumed by Consumerism: American Colleges and Universities Since 1985

The lessons in management and incentives colleges learned during the late 1970s and early 1980s provided the principles that would guide them over the next quarter century. The difference is that its successes would drift over the next two decades to become excesses. For example, in 1977 a college president who deferred maintenance on landscaping and buildings learned the hard way that this repelled prospective students and their parents. Painting the shutters and trim on the admissions office – and dormitories, along with mowing the lawns were wise investments that made a campus both safe and attractive to students. What followed was the temptation of consumerism gone awry in which construction of new, expensive facilities had few checks and balances.

One variation of student consumerism is that students want tuition prices to be kept low. And the converse is true – students may be willing to pay a lot if they think they are going to receive the quality and breadth of services – and lifelong advantages in terms of professional entree and lifestyle – they seek (Hacker 2007). Colleges tended to ascribe to the latter dictum – to a fault. Starting in 1985 colleges increased dramatically spending on residential halls, student services, recreation facilities, and intercollegiate athletics. All these enhanced “college life” and made a campus attractive – and at the same time increased both cost and price. Merit scholarships enabled a college to compete for top academic students, even those without financial need. Yet to do so increased the student scholarship expenditures. This strategy served all colleges well for about a quarter century. But it was predicated on robust returns on endowments, investments, and tuition revenues. It creaked and groaned, at least at some colleges, as expenditures continued to outpace revenues.

The story is the transition from Clotfelder’s *Buying the Best* to Ronald Ehrenberg’s *Tuition Rising*. It has become difficult, perhaps impossible, for a college that wishes to be prestigious, selective, and competitive to reduce or even taper spending. And here I return to the lament of state university presidents, who tell prospective donors and alumni, “We used to be state supported. Then we were state assisted. Now we are state located.”

⁸ See, for example, Jonathan D. Glater, “Women are Close to Being Majority of Law Students,” *The New York Times* (March 26, 2001).

This may well be accurate over the past 3 years – but the complaint has been around for much longer. I track its roots to 1978 in a University of California alumni magazine column. Why is this claim suspect? First, universities and many colleges diversified their funding. Traditional streams such as tuition revenues were increased. State subsidies usually did increase, but perhaps not as much as the rate of inflation or as much as state university presidents requested. More important were diversification into aggressive private fund raising by all institutions, increased reliance on federal (rather than state) payments for services (especially in hospitals and health sciences), and pursuit of sponsored research grants from both federal, state, and private foundations. The net result was that the typical university budget pie had expanded. Even when a traditional source – e.g., state subsidies per student – increased in actual or even adjusted dollars, by definition they shrunk as a percentage of the total institutional budget pie. It was a change in proportions, not necessarily a decrease in state funding.

Many college and university presidents behaved as if they were “one term governors.” By this I mean that one spends, builds and adds with immediate gratification – a ribbon cutting ceremony, an admonition that any objection to high costs is disloyal. Combined with this was the undeniable, irresistible pressure that one must spend to improve and remain competitive. Construction projects were an obvious way to “show progress” – but they also often led to an over-investment crisis (Vladek 1979). One syndrome fostered by the temptation of over-spending on selected programs was reliance on internal cross subsidies. The adage attribute to Harvard (“each tub floats on its own bottom”) was not really followed. Data from the Delta Cost Projects indicate that at state universities, each year an increasing percentage of each state dollar for students has gone to non-educational expenditures (Desrochers et al. 2010).⁹

Another example that cuts across public and private institutions is institutional spending on intercollegiate athletics. At the level of big time NCAA Division IA sports, only about 15 to 20 out of 300 varsity sports programs are self-supporting. Even a well-endowed institution such as Stanford University felt the pinch of a large intercollegiate athletics budget by 2009.¹⁰ No matter. Institutional subsidies prop up programs that operate in the red. Eventually, however, such strategies run into objections and problems. In academics, there are prestigious programs that are associated with large dollar amounts. Unfortunately, it often refers to expenditures rather than income or revenues (Sperber 1990; Suggs 2003). Most sobering was that in 2009–2010 surveys and studies by the Knight Foundation

⁹ Desrochers et al. (2010). See also, Jack Stripling, “Follow the Money,” *Inside Higher Ed* (July 9, 2010).

¹⁰ Libby Sander, “After Big Cuts, Mighty Stanford Longs for Sunnier Days,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 8, 2009).

Commission indicated that many university presidents reported that they, as presidents, had lost control over spending on intercollegiate athletics programs (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics 2010).

As for the matter of over-expansion and unbridled spending, I think that “big science” is Exhibit A as a source of problems and reconsideration in the 21st century. The original rationale was that, of course, a physics department will be competitive for large federal research grants – and will pay for itself. In fact, competition for federal research grants is sufficiently competitive that physics departments at some aspiring research universities do not do well in attracting sufficient grants and external funding. A rough estimate is that there are about 120 universities committed to advanced science research – and serious pursuit of federal research grants. This is testimony to the paradox of success in that since World War II there has been a re-shuffle and intense competition among established research programs and a host of relative newcomers (Graham and Diamond 1997). At the home campus “big science” is hailed as a potential source of added resources. The sobering reality is that investment in infrastructure, staff, research support and annual salaries for highly paid science professors and research assistants are not easy to recoup from external grants. At some research universities the “big science” departments are subsidized from elsewhere – including such unlikely and under-appreciated sources as the departments of English and History. Unfortunately, few presidents and provosts have faced this development. Furthermore, many research universities have spawned an unwieldy morass of research institutes and centers, resulting in incoherent and expensive institutional expenditures.

The university budget is the most philosophical of documents. It shows priorities. It also is a statement of intent, not actual behavior in allocation of resources. At worst, it is so misleading as to be a work of fiction. The conventional wisdom is that faculty resist financial scrutiny. That is unfortunate because if one really were to have access to the actual, detailed numbers, there often would be some interesting surprises. Among those are the following:

- Allegedly impractical departments often “pay their own way” in terms of student tuition dollars. Furthermore, they often provide surpluses that subsidize other departments, some of which are thought to be money makers.
- Personnel represents the largest single category of university expenditures – an insight that often leads to charges of faculty deadwood, high salaries and low productivity.¹¹ Well, perhaps – but I wish to see this presented more as a

finding than as a belief. Comprehensive review of faculty productivity at the University of Texas and Texas A&M documented that most faculty more than paid their own way. Comparable national studies by the University of Delaware project tended to confirm that expenditures on faculty salary were not the sources of university financial strains (Middaugh 2001).¹²

What one finds is that universities, as with most complex organizations, are not wholly rational in their decisions (Ehrenberg 2000). In each case, a cross subsidy can be justified on its non-financial contributions to the overall institution. The determinant, then, will be genuine institutional priorities and missions. These need to be reviewed and revised. What it cannot be is perpetually delayed or ignored.

Misunderstandings, disagreements, and problems in reforming higher education today are often due to unfortunate misuses or confusions on meanings of essential concepts. Paramount is the failure for students, parents, legislators, and academic officials to make distinctions between “cost” and “price (Finn 1978).” Second, in analyzing institutional performance, I think is a tendency to treat as synonyms “efficiency” and “effectiveness.” American colleges and universities have been relatively effective – but far less efficient in achieving that. What becomes most troubling is when academic institutions *decline* in both efficiency and effectiveness. Whereas Alexander Astin characterized the undergraduate experience in 1977 as “Four Critical Years,” by 1993 he alerted readers that most undergraduates took 6 or 7 years to finish their bachelor’s degree – if they completed it at all (1978). Comparable concerns about low performance came from *Crossing the Finish Line*, the 2009 study of state university retention and degree completion by Bowen et al. 2009; Hess et al. 2010.¹³ A complication is, however, that alleged low percentage of retention and bachelor degree completion did not necessarily signal a *declining* performance by colleges and universities. Historical analysis has indicated that American colleges and universities have had a long “Tradition of Attrition” in which college officials and professors were relatively indifferent and unconcerned about drop-outs. Indeed, in some cases a high “wash out rate” in the era from 1930 to 1960 was heralded as a source of institutional pride – a sign that academic standards were high (Thelin 2010). Official concern over attrition and failure to complete degrees only became a source of concern and intervention after 1970 – at a time when higher education access and expansions had increased dramatically in numbers and as a percentage of high school graduates.

¹¹ Richard F. O’Donnell. *Higher Education’s Faculty Productivity Gap: The Cost to Students, Parents & Taxpayers*. 2011. Rick O’Donnell, “Why Productivity Data Matter.” *Inside Higher Ed*. July 20, 2011.

¹² Paul Fain. “Faculty Pay Is Not Part of Academe’s Cost Crisis, Expert Tells Trustees’ Conference.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. April 4, 2006. A1. See also, Middaugh (2001).

¹³ Bowen et al. (2009). See also, Hess et al. (2010).

I rely mightily on Chester Finn's 1978 work, *Scholars, Dollars and Bureaucrats* in which he good naturedly walked through the labyrinth of "access" versus "choice" in where our daughters and sons ultimately go to college. These distinctions could be masked or glossed over in an extended period of prosperity. If, as was the slogan in 1960, a rising tide carries all boats then a half century or so later the sequel is that a draining reservoir exposes the hulls of *all* academic boats to scrutiny. Barnacles rot, and perhaps some rats leaving a sinking ship provides a good time for dry dock and essential repairs. Put another way, in 1997 Arthur Levine observed that higher education in the United States is no longer young and new. It has become a mature industry.¹⁴ Symptomatic of this is a gradual, persistent loss of special treatments and exemptions. For example, numerous city councils and county governments have pressed to reduce the property tax exemptions historically enjoyed by colleges and universities – not especially surprising since they often are the largest land owner and largest employer in a community.¹⁵ Important to note is that this depiction does not refer only to large universities in small towns – such as Indiana University in Bloomington or the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana. It holds also for The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Brown University in Providence, and Harvard University in the Boston metropolitan area.

Making sense out of a half century of changes, especially for such a large, complex enterprise as higher education in the United States, calls for caution and care – including avoiding the temptation to rush to judgment or cast blame. The most enduring explanation to me comes from sociologist Martin Trow's 1970 essay in *Daedalus* – his reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal higher education (1970). Trow noted without polemics that when a state or a nation seeks to go from educating about a third of its 18 to 21 year olds to a new standard of 60 % or more, the structures and systems are subjected to great pressures. This is not necessarily bad – but it is inescapable and unavoidable. Trying to achieve mass higher education eventually becomes inherently inefficient – which is not to say it is not worthwhile. In other words, expanding the admissions net to enroll a large number of students probably means that a university will be hard pressed to maintain a high graduation rate. Furthermore, it signals that such quantitative

changes are accompanied by fundamental qualitative changes in what the college experience is and what the American campus is. This describes the situation in which many colleges and universities found themselves by 1970.

College and university presidents often lament (or complain) that in the early 21st century they face the difficult and unfair problem of lack of funding. I disagree with this emphasis – and regret that it pulls attention away from more essential problems facing higher education. Who can argue with the claim that more resources – whether from state appropriations, donor gifts, federal research grants, tax breaks, increased scholarships from foundations, or student tuition payments – would help to balance the budget and make annual institutional life easier? Perhaps so – but, to indulge in this line of reasoning (and hoping) is tantamount to the classical theatrical convention of *deus ex machina* – some miraculous, contrived solution from outside and on high surfaces that enables the university to pay the rent and that allows business as usual.

The problem is that such a solution just might promote "business as usual" at a time when the need is for clear, fresh thinking about what a college or university should be, what an undergraduate education ought be. My worry is that more money would tend to promote more of the same. Financial crises are not the fundamental problem. Rather, they have brought to the fore more essential questions of educational purpose and institutional mission (Delbanco 2009). To suggest some of the loss of clear purpose in higher education, consider that this year is the sesquicentennial of the Morrill land grant Act in which "A&M" stood for "agriculture and mechanics" (and military and mining). Today my estimate is that "A&M" stands for either "Athletics & Money" or perhaps "Athletics & Medicine" as the pillars of the American university.¹⁶

The American college and university of the early 21st century is a success story. Its history since 1960 has been remarkable, interesting, in large measure because it has included tensions, contradictions, and problems befitting a diverse society – and, its embracing these differences and tensions have made it the marvel of governments and universities worldwide. The historical legacy is, ironically, that we need to connect past and present but not in a manner which merely attempts to mimic or replicate the past. The emergence of a large for profit sector of degree granting colleges along with the accessibility and appeal of internet learning are undeniable (Bartlett 2009; Wilson 2010).¹⁷ I also think there is a lag or avoidance in which established 4 year

¹⁴ Arthur Levine, "Higher Education's Status as a Mature Industry," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 31, 1997) p. A48.

¹⁵ Jennifer Levitz, "Ivy League School to Pay City Millions: Tax-Exempt Brown University to pay Providence \$31.5 Million Anyway," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 1, 2012). See also, "Boston May Ask Its Colleges to Pay More in Lieu of Taxes," *Boston Globe* (April 6, 2010). See also, Goldie Blumenstyk, "Town-Gown Battles Escalate as Beleaguered Cities Assail College Tax Exemptions," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 28, 1988); Lois Therrien, "Getting Joe College to Pay for City Services," *Business Week* (July 16, 1990) p. 37.

¹⁶ John R. Thelin, "Higher Education's New 'A&M': 'Athletics & Medicine,'" *Inside Higher Ed* (June 16, 2009).

¹⁷ Bartlett (2009). See also, Wilson (2010).

colleges have not fully acknowledged the presence and importance of community colleges – an institutional category that now enrolls a majority of college freshmen. These accumulated changes indicate a very different configuration and enterprise than that which characterized our institutions and constituencies in 1960. The standard of expectation of a campus enrolling academically strong undergraduates who have just graduated from high school, study full time, reside on campus and graduate in 4 years tends to describe a shrinking proportion of college students nationwide. Traditional sources of funding, such as tuition payments and state subsidies, probably will not increase sufficiently to meet annual budget needs. In sum, we face in higher education in the United States no less than a “New Deal” in which colleges ought to renegotiate their charters and societal compacts.

Further Reading

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