



# Essays in Perspective

Focusing on What Matters

by Clara M. Lovett

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## INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have long been deemed central to the economic and social progress of the United States and beyond. Yet with changing demographics and increased media and public attention, higher education finds itself at a crossroads. Once sure of what mattered, many institutions now find themselves uncertain of the future and unclear about the proper focus of higher education. What major public policy issues should engage higher ed's attention if it is to remain a vital institution in American life?

In the following pages, author Clara Lovett outlines some key issues central to the vitality of higher education in the 21st century. Lovett contends that it is essential that institutions of higher learning be willing to "rethink" themselves, whether in terms of traditional departments and schools, or even categories such as "domestic" and "international."

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Through its periodic *Essays in Perspective*, the Institute for Effective Governance seeks to stimulate discussion on key issues in higher education. The opinions expressed are those of their authors.

# Focusing on What Matters

Clara M. Lovett

When I reflect on the current state of higher education, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* often come to mind. There is abundant energy in American higher education; there are ideas and experiments as well as an unprecedented concentration of human talent and material resources. There is confidence, bordering on arrogance at times, in the importance of our enterprise to the economic and social progress of the United States and beyond.

But there is also confusion about what is real and what matters in the world around us, and uncertainty as to where we should focus our efforts. We are mesmerized by sideshows, the kinds of issues that attract newspaper headlines and television coverage but are of no consequence to most of our fellow citizens, including most college students—for example, the hysteria surrounding the admission processes of a few elite colleges that enroll a tiny fraction of college-bound women and men and boast about their rejection rates. Distracted by peripheral controversies, we risk losing sight of what really matters now to our fellow Americans and to people around the globe and then being befuddled by weakened public support for our enterprise.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colleges and universities received public and private support and accumulated impressive resources because we did work that mattered. We opened our doors to G.I.s returning to civilian life, thus improving their lives and also avoiding a massive unemployment crisis. We embraced the civil rights movement and its offspring, affirmative action. We shared with other countries not only our expertise in building democratic institutions but also our knowledge of how to eradicate disease and improve crop yields. We developed weapons that deterred our external enemies but also promoted international treaties and institutions that made wars among major powers less likely.

Because we understood what kinds of work mattered and what was expected of us, we transformed our institutions or created new ones—for instance, community colleges—to meet new needs. Our position at the center of American life is evident in the fact that college degrees have replaced high school diplomas as the passports to middle-class status and income. We are also receiving greater media attention than we did in the past—a mixed blessing, perhaps, but a sign that the public considers the work we do, its impact on society and

the economy, and its cost all important.

But do we understand as clearly as we did a generation ago what our fellow citizens and the other 95 percent of the world's people need from us? Do we know how to transform our institutions quickly enough to meet emerging needs? When it proves impossible or impractical to change the missions and extend the reach of existing institutions, are we ready to create our own alternatives? If not, are we at least willing to legitimize what others have created?

I would like to suggest here the major public policy issues which should engage our attention if higher education is to continue as a vital institution in American life. Engagement with those issues will require, I believe, that we rethink familiar organizational units, such as departments and schools, and relinquish dated epistemological categories such as “domestic” and “international.”

### **DEMOGRAPHICS, REVISED SOCIAL COMPACTS, AND NEW INSTITUTIONS**

**I**n the “domestic” realm, surely our country's changing demographics are the defining issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The percentage of immigrants in our population is probably as high, (possibly higher; no one knows for sure) as it was at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More importantly, in the next 20 years or so, several states will go the way of California; they will become “no-majority” states.

Higher education's engagement with the new demographics is occurring on two levels. First, colleges and universities are admitting the largest and most diverse student population we have ever known. Like the influx of G.I.s after World War II, this is a change that we did not initiate and have not always welcomed. But the new students are here to stay, and they are making many of our institutions more interesting and richer intellectually.

Second, the new demographics are altering and

undermining the social compacts of the 1960s and 1970s that gave rise to affirmative action policies and programs. A generation ago, academic scholars provided most of the philosophical and legal underpinnings for affirmative action. Most academics regarded affirmative action as a controversial, yet legitimate and effective, way to correct historic social and economic inequalities between the white majority and the African-American minority. Today, at least in areas where no ethnic group is dominant, those scholars and their disciples are challenged to find other ways to address inequalities that may be greater and more intractable than the old ones—of class, culture, and age, for instance. Most higher education leaders acknowledge that the older compacts are in serious trouble, but at the present time they are focusing their efforts on defending the status quo rather than on developing and proposing policy alternatives.

Today's academic leaders have the talent and resources to find such alternatives and thus to play as significant a part in strengthening American democracy as their predecessors did through engagement with the civil rights movement and the war on poverty. However, before they can explore the larger implications of the new demographics with authority and legitimacy, they must demonstrate that they understand the implications closer to home, for their own campuses and their own sector of society.

Within higher education, we need to rethink models of undergraduate and graduate education that we have assumed were universally valid and everlasting. Recently, academic colleagues like Jody Nyquist and others have acknowledged the need to abandon a one-size-fits-all approach to graduate education, especially to the doctoral experience at our research universities, in light of changing demographics and enrollment patterns. They have also challenged the notion, common in the culture of our research universities, that the

master's degree is a "consolation prize" for graduate students unable or unwilling to withstand the rigors of doctoral education, instead of a distinctive educational experience with inherent value and specific goals.

We have been much more timid, however, in addressing the implications of changing demographics for undergraduate education. We have been creative in devising support systems and mentoring programs for the "new" undergraduates, especially for young, non-white students. We have also modified class schedules to accommodate the needs of working adults. These efforts have made our traditional campuses more accessible and hospitable to the majority of today's undergraduates. But, with rare exceptions—such as the private, for-profit University of Phoenix and the online, competency-based Western Governors University—we have yet to design institutions with the new majority in mind.

To do so, we need to find what Arizona State University's President Michael Crow calls "a new gold standard" for higher education. The old gold standard for the baccalaureate experience—a small, residential, liberal arts college located in bucolic surroundings—maintains a powerful nostalgic hold on the academic imagination and, to a lesser extent, on the American public and the media. The defining features of this type of college are the dominance of the traditional disciplines in the curriculum and in campus governance, the relative isolation of the campus from external influences, and close interaction between faculty and a residential student body.

It is not difficult to understand why this model of undergraduate education has retained its appeal over time. It appeals to academics, many of whom were prepared for further study by these kinds of colleges and are only comfortable in their intimate and secluded settings. The public finds the idea of the small campus attractive because it is designed

to shelter the young from society's perils while giving them access to knowledge and social networks that presumably will last far beyond the college years.

But for all its academic and social benefits, documented or perceived, this model cannot continue to be the gold standard of American undergraduate education. The changes in our student bodies demand that we strengthen and legitimize other types of institutions that already serve a large majority of American undergraduates: community colleges, non-residential colleges and universities, and distance education providers.

Today, about three out of four undergraduates are enrolled in these types of institutions, often simultaneously. Regardless of ethnic background or economic means, these students share a set of characteristics. They are 25 and older, and they are partially or entirely financially independent. They combine college attendance with other pursuits, and they attend more than one institution before they graduate. Out of necessity or by choice, these students are also most likely to enroll at colleges and universities in urban and metropolitan areas.

What kind of gold standard makes sense for them? Of course they need access to sound, up-to-date curricula. But that is just the beginning. Millions of these "new" students, especially working adults over the age of 25, are among those who will attend more than one college or university before they graduate. They want opportunities to demonstrate what they already know and can do regardless of where they acquired that knowledge. They need to earn degrees based not on course grades but on comprehensive assessments according to criteria that faculty experts are entirely capable of devising and implementing.

The new gold standard must be based not on input measures (for instance, freshman SAT scores, percentage of applicants admitted, student/faculty ratios) or institutional reputation but on outcomes,

especially documented student learning on licensure examinations or on other measures yet to be devised or widely used. College degrees based on the assessment of competencies would meet the needs of a majority of today's undergraduate students. This approach would also go a long way toward meeting the demands of legislators, donors, and others for evidence of institutional effectiveness.

With this kind of focus on results, institutions would be freed from the financial imperative to enroll as many students as possible and keep them enrolled as long as possible. In addition, community colleges, "commuter" universities, and other institutions low on the academic pecking order would be freed from pressures to imitate the prestigious but costly practices of their "betters." They would be able to focus on what matters: the quality of their curricula and the value they add to their students' quality of life and earning potential.

Further, the new majority of undergraduate students would worry less about being admitted to the most prestigious colleges (usually also the most exclusive and most expensive) and about the lifetime consequences of not being admitted. In time, they would learn that demonstrated competencies that can only be acquired through hard work in academic and other venues are the best predictors of success in life and in the workforce.

### **WEALTH DISTRIBUTION AND COLLEGE COSTS**

A second "domestic" issue that matters is the changing pattern of wealth accumulation, distribution, and control in our country. Higher education can and should play a major role in investigating the root causes and addressing the implications of wealth inequalities such as this country has not experienced since the Gilded Age. In particular, economists and sociologists could help us understand why, over the past 20 years, we have en-

joyed unprecedented prosperity, low interest rates and unemployment, and favorable global markets, yet have run short of capital for public investments, including transportation, water and sanitation systems, health care facilities, and education. But, again, higher education's credibility in addressing this very significant matter will be much stronger if its own patterns of resource allocation and expenditures are examined and changed first.

Our students, the public at large, and the media are questioning why the cost of attending college keeps rising faster than the rate of inflation or the CPI, thus threatening to make the income gap into an education gap that will in turn perpetuate the income gap. In recent years, our responses have oscillated back and forth between resigned defensiveness and belligerent petulance. We have lobbied those who hold the purse strings in Washington or in our state capitals. We have spared no effort to find new sources of revenue, through fundraising, research projects, distance education—whatever might work in our particular circumstances. But how many of the hundreds of campus and system teams that are working on "the problem" acknowledge that the issue is deeper and more systemic than any campus committee can contend with?

A retrospective look at where the health insurance industry was a decade ago might help us better understand the financial problem in higher education. In the early 1990s, most Americans who received insurance coverage through their employers belonged to various types of indemnity plans. The system worked well enough until several trends converged to cripple it. Patients began to expect the latest in technology-based diagnostics and treatments, and physicians began to factor the considerable cost of malpractice insurance into their charges. At the same time, medical utilization rates began to climb because sophisticated tests and drugs became more widely available, the insured

population aged, and the uninsured appeared more frequently in hospital emergency rooms.

The initial response of the industry was to reduce services and raise premiums to cover what it deemed to be unavoidable cost increases. The first result was an increase in the number of uninsured Americans, most dramatically among the working poor; the second was a major public outcry, followed in short order by Congressional scrutiny. Today, not all these issues have been resolved, and the number of uninsured citizens in the United States remains the largest of any Western country. But at least the leaders of the health insurance industry began to recognize that the problems in their industry were structural and long-term and began to renegotiate longstanding relationships among the key providers. None of the parties involved in the renegotiations would describe the resulting compacts as ideal. Yet the system is functioning, notwithstanding the high cost of technology and the steady increase in utilization rates among older policyholders.

Like the health insurance industry, all public colleges and universities (and quite a few private ones) need to recognize the structural nature of the gap between expenditures and revenues, identify the most serious pressure points in the system, and address them.

A meaningful way to begin might be to reaffirm what once was clear to educators and the public: that there are and should be differences of mission and obligations between public and private institutions. For a number of reasons, over the past 30 years we have lost sight of those differences and blurred the boundaries between the two sectors. Our obsession over the place of our institutions in the Carnegie classification can result in our forgetting to ask some fundamental questions. Does it make sense to group institutions by the type of degree programs they offer, by the amount of research funding they generate, or by the number of doctoral de-

grees they award each year?

Is there no meaningful difference, for example, between a private research-intensive university, free to choose what it does and whom it serves, and a public one in the same category that was created to serve specific regions and communities? Is it appropriate for a public college to compete with private ones by capping enrollment or by adopting admission standards and pricing structures that may exclude resident applicants while leaving the door open to academically stronger or more affluent non-residents?

Recently, Frank Newman, former president of the Education Commission of the States, urged public colleges and universities to renegotiate their relationships with state legislators and governors. This is good and certainly timely advice, but it will not work unless higher education's leaders bring something to the negotiating table. At a minimum, they should bring evidence that they are willing to rethink their missions and obligations and to make the appropriate internal adjustments.

For instance, the leaders of public institutions might commit openly and unequivocally to refocusing financial aid on low- and middle-income applicants instead of using it for merit scholarships in hopes of climbing another rung or two up the ladder of academic prestige. If they take seriously their responsibilities to keep public colleges and universities accessible and affordable to low- and middle-income students, they might also consider dropping out of the ongoing arms race for faculty with big reputations and bigger research contracts. Funds now expended in (mostly unsuccessful) attempts to stay in the wrong race might be allocated, for instance, to creating more course sections in high-demand subjects or to improving salaries and support systems for competent but less-famous faculty. Or they might make it possible to lower the overall cost of operating public institutions.

At least in the public sector, each of these pos-

sible responses to the structural gap between higher education's expenditures and revenues requires renegotiations among interested parties: students, whose expectations are shaped by selective private colleges; faculty, who often have career goals inconsistent with institutional missions; staff; and policymakers, including governing boards, system heads, and legislators.

As in the health insurance industry, before negotiations can even begin, each party will have to stop waiting for Godot in the form of "greater efficiencies" that on most campuses are no longer possible given current notions of quality, or of more generous appropriations that are unlikely to materialize even in a stronger economy. As long as higher education's leaders look to others—students, legislators, or donors—to address systemic financial problems at their institutions, they will lack the credibility and moral authority necessary to address national issues of wealth distribution and control over the economy.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARITY, GLOBALIZATION, AND ACADEMIC STRUCTURES**

**I**n today's world, issues that matter—for instance, the consequences of underdevelopment or the influence of religious fundamentalism in the United States and elsewhere—are more closely intertwined than ever before. Consequently, study of these issues must cut across disciplinary boundaries. Especially in scientific and technical fields, we are experimenting with ways of working that are problem-centered or learning-centered rather than discipline-centered. But on most campuses the necessary transformation of academic programs and organizational practices to make them more capable of supporting interdisciplinary teaching and research is still in its infancy.

Even when we earnestly desire to engage and solve problems, we find ourselves shackled by tra-

ditions and structures that are poorly aligned with what we need to accomplish, such as departments and schools or faculty senates. These legitimate and jealous guardians of the academic disciplines are ill-equipped to support and sometimes even hostile to work that transcends traditional boundaries. They are even less willing or able to support the work of project teams that include university staff and community and business partners and that function beyond the control of the faculty's elected representatives.

The status of the United States as the world's only superpower in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century presents some of the greatest opportunities for scholars interested in cross-disciplinary research. But the same obstacles that hamper higher education's ability to shape our country's domestic agenda also impede its attempts to reclaim a leadership role in the global arena.

Global scholarship has some special challenges of its own. There are gaps in the overall capacity of our universities that sometimes hinder their ability to inform foreign policy. When the Soviet Union came apart, for instance, few academic experts were on hand to provide strategies, or even simple information, about the newly independent republics of the Caucasus region and western Asia. Post-9/11 there was a shortage, real or alleged, of academic experts on the Middle East, and we do not know as much as we need to about regions and states in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nevertheless, our colleges and universities have a greater capacity to engage in teaching and research on national and regional issues around the globe, and to assess the actual or probable impact of American policies on those issues, than they had between the end of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War. They now have many more faculty experts, for instance, on the global economy and on key international organizations like the International Monetary Fund.

And indeed, much individual scholarly work is already being done on global issues. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, academic historians traced the development of our nation's pursuit of "Manifest Destiny," while scholars of international relations saw in that breakup the demise of the very notion of balance of power, as well as the unraveling of the treaties and institutions of the post-World War II era. The new world order has also offered unprecedented opportunities for research and engagement on the part of economics and business faculties, because so much of the strategy behind *Pax Americana* is tied to our country's ability to influence or control international markets.

In contrast to what happened in the 1950s and 1960s, however, talk show hosts and print media pundits are tapping the expertise and wisdom of these scholars more frequently than are our elected and appointed leaders. This may in part be because the internal organization of our universities does not exactly facilitate the teamwork necessary to translate solid academic research into comprehensive public policy alternatives. And the still-prevalent forms of organization that favor discipline-based rather than problem-based research and teaching become especially problematic for scholars concentrating on regions or states whose cultures do not function according to Western epistemological categories.

## CONCLUSION

Higher education's self-imposed constraints have been evident for some time and can only be surmounted if high-profile educators make it a priority to engage issues that matter and suggest alternatives to current domestic and global policies. For these educators to do otherwise projects an inappropriate model of behavior for students and faculty. Watching such behavior, students believe that they need not take responsibility for the fu-

ture, but only enjoy (or endure) the present. And faculty feel empowered to withdraw to their ivory towers, even when this means averting their eyes from the public policy implications of their own research.

The role of the academy in shaping our public policies has been on the wane since the Reagan era. For more than a decade, many colleges and universities have been content with being engines of economic development through their research and degree programs. This role, although certainly a useful and legitimate one, has generated less controversy and more accolades than engagement with sensitive issues like affirmative action, patterns of wealth distribution, or the role of the United States in the world ever could. But this is also a very limited role. It cannot be a substitute for the larger investigations, debates, and policy alternatives that are urgently needed and that will, if they take place in the next decade, make a positive difference in our society and in the world.

Higher education needs to reclaim as rapidly as possible the moral authority that it has forfeited over the past 20 years. While its leaders remain silent, the American society and the world order of the future are taking shape without the benefit of the alternatives that academic experts can and should provide. But this will happen only if and when we recognize that the quest for alternative ways of understanding and serving today's society must begin with us, our students, and our institutions. ■

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