



Essays in Perspective

Higher Education Isn't Meeting the Public's Needs

by Frank Newman, Lara Couturier,
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Spring 2005, Volume 2



The Institute for Effective Governance is a nonpartisan membership and service organization founded by college and university trustees—for trustees. It is devoted to enhancing boards' effectiveness and helping trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities fully and effectively. IEG offers services tailored to the specific needs of individual boards, and focuses on academic quality, academic freedom, and accountability.

INTRODUCTION

In the decades since World War II, higher education has undergone much change. Shifting demographics, the movement from an industrial- to a knowledge-based economy, and advanced communication and technology, have heightened demands on our colleges to enroll more students and impart more knowledge and skills.

In doing so, however, higher education has focused on a form of competition based not on improving graduate skills and knowledge, but on institutional prestige and revenues. This focus has undermined higher ed's ability to serve the public and eroded the longstanding compact that governs the relationship between higher education and society.

In the following pages, the authors propose a renewal of that compact and identify seven critical areas in which the growing gap between the public's need and the performance of colleges and universities calls for new thinking.

The late Frank Newman was director of the Futures Project, based at Brown University and a visiting professor at Teachers College at Columbia University. He was a former president of the Education Commission of the States. Lara Couturier is the associate director and director of research, and Jamie Scurry is a research associate, at the Futures Project. This article was adapted from *The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality and the Risks of the Market*, published by Jossey-Bass in October of 2004. The article first appeared in The Chronicle Review section of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on October 15, 2004. It is reprinted here with permission.

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.

Higher Education Isn't Meeting the Public's Needs

Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry

Higher-education leaders, like many Americans, believe that we have the best postsecondary-education system in the world. Yet a dangerous gap is growing between what the public needs from higher education and how colleges and universities are serving those needs. That gap has received little attention within institutions because they lack clear measurements for their performance and because they are generally satisfied with the status quo. But if the gap is not closed, it will increasingly impede higher education's ability to serve the public and ultimately threaten colleges' ability to thrive and grow.

The decades since the end of World War II have been a period of change and turbulence, generating new expectations of higher education. Shifting demographics, the movement from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, new modes of communication, the rapid advance of technology, and the steady progress of globalization have heightened the demands on institutions to enroll a greater share of the population and to impart more knowledge and skills to students.

But colleges have been focusing their energies on a form of competition based not on improving graduates' skills and knowledge but on institutional prestige and revenues. That competition has been exacerbated by the rise of an expanding array of college rankings by publications like *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Princeton Review*, and *The Financial Times*.

The drive for prestige has led to important gains—most notably, an enormous advance in the quality of university research that has propelled America forward—but it has also hampered higher education's ability to serve the public. It has led to an inexorable mission creep as more four-year institutions push themselves toward the status of research universities, often developing low-quality and unneeded Ph.D. programs, and more two-year institutions seek to offer four-year degrees—while neglecting other important educational goals.

Over the past five years, we at the Futures Project have analyzed the new competition in higher education and have determined that unchecked mar-

ket forces are changing colleges and universities significantly and eroding the longstanding but unspoken compact that governs the relationship between higher education and society. We propose a renewal of that agreement, clearly defining higher education's role in serving societal goals and the public's support in return. We have identified seven critical areas in which the growing gap between the public's needs and the performance of colleges and universities calls for a new compact:

The need to take responsibility for learning. Ninety percent of college graduates have reported that their degree was useful in getting a job but did not prepare them with the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. Employers also are concerned about students' lack of critical thinking, the ability to write clearly, and other skills. Despite the overall value of a college education, growing evidence suggests that students are not gaining the knowledge that they need in crucial areas.

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Colleges should determine whether actual learning is taking place on their campuses instead of focusing on surrogate performance measures of limited relevance, like the scholarly reputation of the

faculty. Even though some institutions successfully measure learning outcomes—for example, Alverno College, Truman State University, the University of Phoenix, and Britain's Open University—most colleges continue to claim that it is too difficult or expensive.

Rather than assume that the students who have dropped out were simply a poor admissions decision, or that students who stop taking math courses despite demonstrated proficiency in high school are simply too lazy to do the hard work that math requires, faculty members must begin to ask hard questions about their own responsibilities. Much has been learned, for example, about how the brain functions and the many ways that students learn. Some students learn more by tackling a concrete problem, others by a discussion of abstract principles, still others by visualizing the subject in some form. Through new software technology, students can participate in simulation exercises that increase their comprehension, and faculty members can tailor course work to learning styles. But while many of those advances are now widespread in corporate or military training programs, little has changed in most classrooms.

It is time to elevate the status of teaching to that of research. Constant improvement in the teaching-and-learning process must take place. Moreover, colleges must communicate more effectively to the public about that process so that students can choose their colleges and courses based on the quality of the learning experience, not some vague sense of status.

The need to move beyond access to attainment. Today economic and social mobility re-

quires a college education. Between 1973 and 1999, for example, after adjusting for inflation, the median family income for a high-school graduate decreased by 13.1 percent, while it increased by 9.9 percent for a four-year-college graduate.

In the past, educators and policy makers have been most concerned about encouraging a greater portion of the population to enroll in college. But retaining less-affluent and minority students through graduation has become a growing problem. For example, Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, reports that those with the highest family incomes are “10 times more likely” to have a bachelor’s degree by age 24 than those with the lowest. Twenty-nine percent of African-American students and 31 percent of Hispanic students who enroll in college leave before completing their first year. Our goals must now include improving completion rates for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The need to be more efficient and productive. Experience has shown that colleges save money when they collaborate on various activities like purchasing materials, obtaining library resources, and building technological infrastructures, as well as by outsourcing more tasks. But most higher-education institutions don’t pursue those opportunities.

Moreover, colleges simply do not analyze their cost structure, particularly on the academic side. They view their growing costs as a function of their labor-intensive nature and beyond their control. They know the overall cost of the geology department or the admissions office, but not the cost of

mounting different courses, or the efficiency of using faculty time in varying ways, or whether a redesign would improve the effectiveness of a large introductory course.

Institutions also use revenues from popular and relatively low-cost programs, like business, to support costly and low-volume programs, like classics. Yet there has been little analysis of whether such cross-subsidies help institutions make or save money or support activities that meet the public’s needs.

As a result of higher education’s sustained growth over the past half-century, along with the dearth of performance data and lack of interest in analyzing costs, most institutions focus on raising revenues rather than improving efficiency. But it would be surprising indeed if, after careful analysis, costs and performance could not be improved.

The long-overdue need to support elementary and secondary education. Colleges have an array of responsibilities to public schools: education and continuing support of teachers and school leaders, alignment of the two sectors in terms of curricula and expectations, and research that improves classroom efforts. But they have been only sporadically involved in the two-decade effort to reform elementary and secondary education. In teacher education, for example, a growing number of school districts have become so disenchanted with the failure of college programs to deal with the conditions that teachers face that they now educate their own teachers and principals. New York City is a prominent example: It has established the NYC Leadership Academy to recruit and train principals.

Such neglect on the part of higher education must change; higher education has a clear self-interest in improving school performance.

The need to reduce conflict of interest in research. Corporate influence has surged throughout colleges, as overall corporate giving grew from \$850-million in 1985 to a whopping \$4.25-billion a decade later. Such support will only increase; state governments, recognizing research and development as vital to energizing their economies, are pressuring colleges to develop closer links with industry.

Because of that heightened corporate support, the volume of research has grown, but the risk to its integrity has increased as well. In a survey of almost 2,200 biomedical scientists, 410 admitted delaying the publication of their research results by six months or more over a three-year period for reasons such as to “protect the financial value of the results, protect the scientists’ lead in the race to produce a certain result, [and] delay the publication of undesired results.” A study by Stanford University found that 98 percent of university research on new drug therapies with support from the pharmaceutical industry reported increased effectiveness, while only 79 percent of studies not supported by the industry found increased effectiveness.

The trustworthiness of university research is crucial to America’s success. The lure of corporate sponsorship should not be allowed to supersede the integrity of scholarship.

The need to serve as society’s critic. Academic freedom was designed so that academics

would be free to teach and speak on controversial topics, and campuses could tolerate—even encourage—discussion that helped illuminate crucial public issues. But the amount and type of debate taking place on campus have changed markedly in recent years.

In part, fund raising has made presidents avoid taking positions that might upset their institutions’ patrons. The salaries of college presidents are also often supplemented by private money and can obligate presidents to donors who have contributed to their personal compensation. Clara M. Lovett, president of the American Association for Higher Education, also blames the presidential search process, which “screens out potential intellectual and educational leaders in favor of men and women who look, speak, and act like candidates for political office.”

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The need to rebuild political involvement to sustain democracy. Higher education’s role in society extends beyond building work-force skills

to include helping students understand their role as citizens and community members. Studies have shown that college graduates vote and participate in political campaigns at a higher rate than those who only attended high school. However, involvement in the political process for *all* groups, including college graduates, is falling. Voting rates are now so low that democracy in this country is endangered.

Civic responsibility is not limited to domestic issues. James M. Lindsay of the Brookings Institution has noted that public apathy has allowed special interests to gain growing control in foreign affairs, even when their actions are not in the best interests of the nation.

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Higher education has the ability and responsibility to influence understanding of the political system and engender a sense of civic responsibility in its graduates. But, as the education professors Joel Westheimer, at the University of Ottawa, and Joseph Kahne, at Mills College, have noted about educators in general in the *Campus Compact Reader*: “As long as we remain at the level of rhetoric, we can get most educators to agree that teaching how to be a good citizen is important. But when we get specific about what democracy requires and about what kind of school curricula will best pro-

mote it, much of that consensus falls away.”

The list of fissures between higher education's rhetoric and its performance is, in fact, long and growing. The rhetoric describes devotion to student learning when, in reality, the student bears principal responsibility for learning and the failure to learn. The rhetoric describes devotion to teaching while too many faculty members at four-year institutions are devoted to research, publishing, and outside consulting. The rhetoric calls for broader access to higher education while merit-based financial-aid programs are increasing at a greater rate than need-based programs, and institutions recruit the best and wealthiest students. The rhetoric calls for service to the community while attention is focused on improving rankings in magazines and newspapers. The rhetoric proclaims the importance of trustworthy scholarship that serves society while impartiality is undercut by corporate control of research and faculty conflicts of interest.

Every one of the problems that we've described lends itself to practical solutions. But the solutions require thoughtful and intentional public policies and institutional strategies, which in turn require the willingness of political and academic leaders to work together.

The two groups must ask what attributes are essential to preserving higher education's role as servant to the needs of society, so those qualities do not slip away to be lost forever in the heat of competition. The growing power of market forces—with the emphasis on revenue streams, large-scale corporate sponsorship of research, high presidential salaries, and other trappings of private enterprise—raise complex social issues that should become part of a national debate.

Political and academic leaders must grapple with such questions as: What are the social as well as economic goals for expanding access to higher education? What restraints on market forces are needed to preserve the public's interests? As boundaries blur, where is the appropriate dividing line between nonprofit and for-profit, between public and private? How much are the benefits to the student seen as a public good, and how much as a private good? Who pays for what? What skills, knowledge, attitudes, and capacities must graduates have for the world ahead? How much is a college education about the educated person, the life of the mind, and development of civic skills? How can the quality of learning be ensured? How can society ensure the integrity of research?

Meanwhile, each institution must ask what its responsibilities are to the public. Has the institution recognized the centrality of teaching and learning, even if it is a research university? Has it recognized that education includes more than simply job skills, that it entails development and practice of civic skills? Has it considered how use of resources, such as student aid, shapes the basic nature of the

institution? Has the institution served the public as a center of open discussion of controversial issues in a way that values evidence and analysis, or has it reneged on that responsibility to avoid offending donors and the community? What expertise does it have that can be shared in ways that improve society?

At the same time, state governments must take on the responsibility for identifying and communicating their priorities and expectations. Accountability needs to be a clearly stated expectation and a workable plan, not simply a phrase to be bandied about as a sign of discontent. Research has shown that states with such clear expectations receive better results from their institutions.

Governments today are struggling with the task of creating policies that encourage greater responsiveness and accountability on the part of colleges. Every institution needs to join in that effort and help create a renewed understanding of what higher education will do for the public, and what support—political and financial—the public will offer in return. The opportunity for contributing to our society has never been greater. ▀



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