

FOREWORD

Reinventing American Higher Education for a New World Order

LONG BEFORE THE PANDEMIC upended the world, it was not an understatement to remark that American higher education is under fire. Yes, COVID-19 has had dramatic effects on education—and we continue to feel the repercussions—but what became visible during a time of turmoil are issues that have long been simmering near the surface. The foundational questions of “What is a college education?” and “Is college worthwhile?” received heightened attention as institutions scrambled to create new models in the face of an uncertain pandemic. However, these are core questions higher education has been grappling with for years. An increasing number of headlines and public conversations underscore growing mistrust of postsecondary institutions and whether the high price of many colleges and universities is justified.

The concerns and criticisms facing colleges and universities are numerous. Some suggest students are not learning critical skills that are relevant for today’s workforce. In addition, as data have become more

available, along with the ability to track students over time and across institutions, it has become clear that completion rates in American higher education are weak overall and dismal for some groups of students. In fact, even among graduates, there is growing variation in outcomes—while the average return to getting a college degree is positive and robust, there are a growing number of students who fall far below the mean to a level that suggests they are attaining little value. Beyond the benefits to individuals, there are also questions about the public returns to higher education with doubts about whether institutions are serving societal needs and are deserving of the government subsidies they receive either in direct form (i.e., state appropriations to public institutions) and/or through tax exemption (public and nonprofit private institutions). At every turn, colleges and universities are facing skepticism, and the public no longer takes on faith that higher education is worth the cost.

I write this as someone who has benefited from the best our system has to offer, with opportunities to grow in a multitude of ways, and my research for the past twenty-five years has focused on identifying and improving the good that is done by colleges and universities to support and advance students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Still, while the United States has some of the best institutions in the world, it also fails to serve large numbers of students. And so, this was the backdrop as American higher education began to experience the effects of COVID-19.

It was around the first wave of impacts felt from the pandemic, in April 2020, that I participated in a webinar with Paul LeBlanc, which was hosted by my institution, the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Paul has been a longtime innovator in higher education, leading Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) to become a powerful force and example in online education, in addition to its campus programs focused on traditional college students. At a time when many colleges and universities were forced to dismantle their usual models (and students were often responding quite unfavorably), Paul provided a seasoned perspective on how institutions could navigate the challenges, adapt in the face of evolving conditions, and address the inequities being experienced by

students. It was a timely conversation, but at the root of it, the issues we discussed were about higher education's future more generally, and it is wonderful to see many of those ideas now represented in this book. As higher education confronts increased scrutiny and doubt in the midst of continuing uncertainty, Paul's insights are sorely needed.

Beyond the debates about the value of higher education and the criticisms listed above, a much more pernicious concern relates to a core function of colleges and universities: fostering students' learning. Are students learning? Better yet, are they learning the critical skills and knowledge to make a meaningful wage and be productive members of society? Unfortunately, efforts to develop indicators on learning have been slow, incomplete, and suffered setbacks as there have been attempts to bring them to scale. The constant struggle—and at times inability—to measure learning is closely tied to the inadequate measures we default to when discussing college quality. It is quite telling that the predominate measure of college “quality” draws from the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings—notable for the fact that the bulk of the measures used focus on achievement that happened before the student ever stepped foot on campus (i.e., test scores and grades in high school). While those data may give some sense of the prior achievement levels of the student body, they do not reflect the ability of an institution to foster the growth of a student.

Perhaps this partly explains how our higher education system came to be built on a foundation that counts time, not learning. As Paul explains from the first page of chapter 1, the emphasis on credit hours, i.e., units of time, is a major fault for our current model of higher education. With clear insight, Paul discusses the many ways this system is problematic as a means to gauge student progress. This is especially true in a world with increasingly diverse students and mobility across institutions. During the past several decades, the number of students who are nontraditional in some way—older, part-time, concurrently employed, veterans, parents, and so on—has grown substantially. Students are also more likely to have disrupted patterns of attendance (i.e., stopping out and returning to college at a later time) and to attend multiple institutions. Also important is the fact that students are much more likely to have work experience

to couple with their postsecondary studies, leading to questions about how to credit them for the knowledge and skills they bring with them to class. The changes we see in higher education necessitate a new model—one that goes beyond the simple reliance on credit hours and the narrow conception of a college student being a recent high school graduate who attends college full time.

A related concern of importance is affordability. The list price of higher education has skyrocketed and now is far out of reach for most families. And with growing debt, concerns about affordability may be the crack that ultimately causes a dramatic change in the higher education system. Like so much else, financial aid is awarded based on credit hours, which keeps it disconnected from actual learning or growth. Paul presents an alternative by describing a system that provides financial support based on completing competencies, thus better aligning actions that would improve students' skills with the goals of taxpayers. With his attention to the necessary details, Paul's discussion of this important issue is a strength of the book and demonstrates a strong combination of the practical and the aspirational—both are needed to improve our system.

While I could continue detailing the challenges facing higher education and concerns about what needs to change, this is definitely not the time to give up on the system. To the contrary, there is incredible urgency in the importance of moving toward a better system. The opportunity to learn and ability to gain skills have become even more important to the life outcomes of individuals, and as a nation, the social benefits to education are critical to having flourishing families, communities, and economies. That is why this book is so timely and important. Beyond just interrogating the problems, Paul does the much more difficult task of developing and discussing implementation of a set of possible solutions.

Interestingly, some of his recommendations seem even more feasible and promising after a year experimenting with new modes of instructional delivery and types of student engagement and support. In fact, the aftermath of COVID-19 may bring higher education to a full-on reckoning. What was once hypothetical became real out of necessity during a year when campuses were forced to change their default conditions.

Meanwhile, questions about whether colleges and universities are teaching the right content became practical dilemmas for institutions needing to pivot their teaching. Starting afresh, many professors revisited the central question of course design: what are the learning goals? Moreover, in new formats, there had to be consideration for how we were going to measure whether actual learning was happening. So the shock to the higher education system caused by COVID-19 may have helped to focus institutions on the important issues that need to be considered in reimagining what the system could be. Indeed, necessity is the mother of invention, and the ideas presented in this book provide a helpful blueprint.

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