What’s Really Wrong With Higher Education and How to Fix It


Since World War II, higher education has been celebrated as an “engine of opportunity” in the United States - and our nation's colleges and universities have been the envy of the world. More recently, however, critics have proclaimed that American higher education is in crisis. They cite the rising costs of a college education, the failure of graduates to get good jobs, and the pervasiveness of “political correctness” on campuses.

In an “exit interview,” William Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, expressed a different and even more fundamental criticism. The claim that the United States is an upwardly mobile society “rings hollow,” Kirwan indicated: “Our nation and our universities have got to come to grips with this problem, and I don’t think enough is being done to address this issue.”

In Lesson Plan, William Bowen, president emeritus of Princeton University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Michael McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation and president emeritus of Macalester College, provide a concise, compelling, and, at times, courageous analysis of the ways in which institutions of higher education are failing to provide equal opportunity and lay out an ambitious reform agenda.

The authors demonstrate that many undergraduates drop out or take far too long to
complete their degrees and that colleges and universities don’t do nearly enough to
recruit and retain minorities and poor people. Drawing on rigorous empirical
evidence, they also correct many other misconceptions about higher education.

Bowen and McPherson reveal, for example, that the highest default rates are
among students who borrow relatively small amounts of money, often less than
$10,000, and then do not complete their degrees. Many defaulters have enrolled in
for-profit colleges, whose six-year completion rates are less than 40% (compared to
63% for public institutions and 73% for privates). Accreditation, Bowen and
McPherson imply, should be tied to a minimum graduation rate. And the federal
government might distribute financial aid dollars directly to colleges and
universities, rewarding those who bestow degrees on a substantial percentage of
their low income students.

Bowen and McPherson also reveal that students who start out at community
colleges and then transfer have a much smaller chance of completing
undergraduate degrees than those who begin at four-year colleges. The disparity is
just as present for students with modest academic credentials as for those with
higher SAT scores and high school grade point averages. It turns out as well that
Justice Antonin Scalia was wrong: students who enroll in institutions with median
academic credentials above their level actually do better in earning degrees than
those who “under-match.” These findings are especially important, the authors
emphasize, in light of President Obama’s proposal to eliminate community college
tuition for most students.

And the authors demonstrate that a decline in state funding per student - and not
“administrative bloat” - is the principal reason tuition has gone up so much in public
institutions. The ratio of executive, administrative and managerial staff per student
has in fact gone down in the past twenty years although, to be sure, there has been
a shift from a relatively low-skill non-academic workforce to information-technology
professionals and scientific support staff, with higher salaries.

Although Bowen and McPherson are academic insiders they do not hesitate to take
on a herd of higher education sacred cows. The authors criticize colleges and
universities that make extra efforts to recruit and accept applicants with high SAT or
ACT scores in an effort to bolster their rankings in *US News*, despite abundant
evidence that grades in secondary schools “are a far, far stronger predictor of
success in college” than standardized tests.

Bowen and McPherson recommend that “merit based aid” (which is often awarded
to students from affluent families) be reduced or eliminated. Students who qualify
for special scholarships, they point out, would go elsewhere without such
inducements, perhaps even to a college better suited to them. And the money from
merit based awards could be spent on recruiting and retaining “less privileged”
students.

However, the authors do not support a “debt free education” for undergraduates.
Students work harder and more purposefully, they imply, if they have some “skin in
the game.” In fact, after pointing out that the average debt of a bachelor’s degree
recipient who borrows is $30,000 (the cost of a new car loan), they suggest that
some students do not borrow enough, substituting on- or off-campus jobs that prevent them from getting degrees in a timely way (or at all).

And Bowen and McPherson take aim at other sacred cows. They assert that there are too many Ph.D. programs in the United States - and suggest that scaling them back could produce major savings. They support legal challenges and/or direct government intervention to "restore some semblance of integrity to college sports," align it with the educational mission, and undermine the willingness of institutions to hire coaches at exorbitant salaries and build expensive training facilities and stadiums. And they advocate creating a skilled "teaching corps" that would be composed primarily, if not exclusively, of non-tenured faculty.

Implementing the lesson plan of Lesson Plan won't be easy, of course. It will take leaders who are willing to take risks. And it will take consumers who resist slogans, take the time to understand what's really wrong with higher education and what it will take to fix it.

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