

The Transformation of Higher Education in America: Understanding the Changing Landscape

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There is much to admire about US higher education. At colleges and universities across the country, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, at schools that are public and private, secular and faith-based, large and small, a great many students receive a wonderful education. Our best undergraduate programs harness the power of a liberal education to help students develop strong and transferrable skills in inquiry and analysis and critical and creative thinking. Year after year, our best professional schools turn out talented physicians, nurses, engineers and architects. Our best research universities expand the boundaries of knowledge in every discipline. And every day, talented and creative faculty explore new curricular approaches and teaching methodologies to increase the quality of student learning on their campuses.

Growing Discontent

At the same time, there is a growing chorus of discontent about what is and is not happening in the higher education enterprise. Over the last decade, the concerns have become increasingly widespread and persistent. Scholars, think-tanks, foundations, professional associations and campus based centers and institutes, as well as state and federal government agencies have published reports, books, and papers and staged multiple convenings in an effort to clarify the challenges and to offer prescriptions for change. The most dramatic observations from all of this work — too often in the form of provocative sound bites — have found their way into the mass media and thus into the American consciousness. Ask just about anyone at a dinner party, at work, or on the train or plane about collegiate quality. The response is similarly disconcerting: Too few people who start college do not graduate. Too few graduates are job ready, not having acquired the knowledge, proficiencies and dispositions to compete in the global economy. College is becoming unaffordable for all but those from affluent families. And, sadly, higher education is no longer a powerful engine for social mobility.

Major Change is Underway

There is no shortage of efforts to address these problems. Colleges and universities of every stripe, from small private colleges to massive state university systems are developing new policies, programs and services designed to make college more affordable, to improve the quality of student learning and to close access and attainment gaps. New degree programs and even new institutions are springing up, using emerging technologies and innovative pedagogies with some adopting radically different business models. Given all of this activity, there is a growing consensus that higher education in the US is in the midst of a major transformation that will result in changes in the way it is delivered and experienced.

Viewpoint

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Multiple Points of View

The implications of changes of this magnitude have drawn many voices into the conversation; some observers comment from the sidelines, others are actively engaged in promoting or challenging one or another assumption or initiative. The issues are complex and perspectives vary widely, influenced in no small part by where one sits. Faculty and staff are anxious about how changes at their institution might impact their lives. Prospective students and their parents are uncertain about how to make good choices in an environment where traditional assumptions about both the value of higher education and about educational quality are being challenged. Policy makers are besieged by groups with a vested interest in one outcome or another. And private investors are excited by what they see as opportunities to make large profits by enrolling students in programs they have created or by selling their services to colleges and universities looking for ways to adapt to changing circumstances.

At the same time, there are some — including many in the academy — who bristle or are otherwise put off at the use of the term, *transformation*. Some of these skeptics believe that the innovations that are appearing will fail to stand the test of time and fade away, as have other highly touted remedies decades past. Others believe that the current wave of innovation holds little threat to long-established, traditionally configured programs, because many of the approaches diminish what they see as one of the key ingredients in educational quality, namely the face-to-face interaction among faculty and students. At best, they believe new technologies and models may survive as a way to provide an inferior brand of education to underserved students. Only time will tell whether what appears to many observers to be a fundamental transformation in the making will prove to be something else instead.

The Critical Role of Assessment

One thing is certain. Efforts to make higher education more affordable, to increase the level of student learning, and to enact successfully the equity and excellence agenda depend on having an established frame of reference by which to judge educational quality. Finding ways to make undergraduate education more affordable and accessible is an empty promise, unless that education meets some desirable standard of quality. The assessment of student learning has been largely accepted as that frame of reference and that makes The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) a key player in the national conversation about the transformation of higher education. George Kuh and Stan Ikenberry speak to this point in the first chapter of their book, *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education* (2015, p. 2).

“The big question is this: How will colleges and universities in the United States both broaden access to higher learning and also enhance student accomplishment and success for all students while at the same time containing and reducing costs? This is higher education’s signal challenge in this century. Any meaningful response requires accurate, reliable data about what students know and are able to do as a result of their collegiate experience. In the parlance of the academy, this systematic stock taking — the gathering and use of evidence of student learning in decision making and in strengthening institutional performance and public accountability — is known as student learning outcomes assessment.”

Staying Abreast of the Changing Landscape

As the pace of change has accelerated, the future of higher education has become more unpredictable and discussions about how to maintain its relevance to the American dream intensified. The amount of published material on the topic grows larger each year. As a consequence, all but the most conscientious observers, including most faculty, administrators,

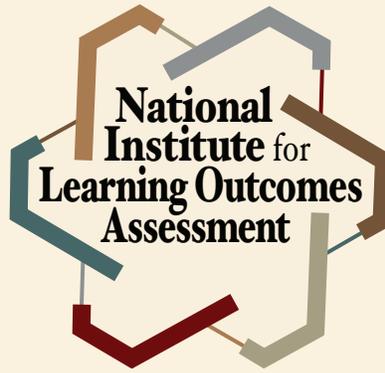
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trustees and policy makers, are likely to have gaps in their understanding of the problems that need attention, the range of initiatives now underway to address these problems and the likely consequences of adopting or failing to adopt one or another policy or initiative. To the extent that is true, their perceptions about and their attitudes toward the changes that are unfolding in higher education today may not be well informed, making it difficult for them to participate effectively in the ongoing dialogue.

To address this issue, I assembled a fairly comprehensive annotated collection of material that describe and analyze the changing landscape of American higher education from multiple points of view. The collection, *A Primer on The Transformation of Higher Education in America*, covers a variety of topics: changing paradigms, early calls for change, prominent analyses and prescriptions, critical concepts, processes and tools, prominent transformation efforts in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, barriers to change, critiques of “transformation”, influential websites, supportive foundations and other material of note.

These materials are intended to be a reference guide to better inform those interested learning more about the changes, both underway and anticipated, in American higher education. Entries were chosen for their relevance, prominence and potential impact on the ongoing conversation. Almost all of the entries contain links to original sources or locations where one can learn about the entry in more depth. The collection is available from the Resource Library on the NILOA website: <http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/BasisPrimer.pdf>.

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