

Avoiding a Tragedy of the Commons in Postsecondary Education: New Opportunities for Assessment

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At this moment in history, human capital — the stock of knowledge and skills citizens possess — is our country’s principal resource. To develop human capital requires a high performing educational system, as education is the primary venue for preserving and enhancing human capital. But a storm is brewing in plain sight. Unfortunately, too few of our leaders recognize or are talking about it and its daunting implications. Here’s a brief, incomplete, but ominous sketch of the problem and what it means for assessment.

About one sixth of the U.S. adult population lacks a high school diploma. Forty percent of all students starting college are academically underprepared. Only about three of five college students earn a degree within six years. And the quality of many of those degrees is suspect. The combination of rising costs and declining revenues further exacerbate the dire human capital situation, making the prospects bleak for significantly reducing social and economic inequalities. All this points to what political economists such as Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom call “a common pool problem” (CPP). When higher education is viewed as a public good, the CPP represents serious distortions in the production and consumption of undergraduate education. When the CPP becomes acute, as is the case with postsecondary education today, either bold action is required or the common pool problem becomes a permanent crisis, what Garrett Hardin called a “tragedy of the commons.”

We can soon anticipate a significant national debate about the undergraduate CPP similar to that recently focused on K-12 education. What is not certain is whether we will muster the will to address it. While some selective colleges and research universities will survive untouched, largely for prestige reasons, most institutions will be affected. The longer term, material worry is that the undergraduate CPP could become a permanent crisis, characterized by insufficient resources and lack of political will to overcome it.

The first step toward dealing with the postsecondary common pool problem is to recognize that it exists. Leaders from outside and inside higher education must work together to configure postsecondary education, so that the enterprise provides all citizens the opportunity to reach their potential by improving their knowledge and skills to the highest levels. This will involve a fresh focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and, most likely, substantial restructuring colleges across the postsecondary sector.

Because of the size and importance of the postsecondary CPP, an urgent need exists to build a sizable research program on assessment dedicated to advancing all aspects of the field. A major goal is to create assessments that faculty will find appropriate to fully integrate into their teaching. Assessment can also help us learn more about the real costs of student learning, the best practices for student learning, and the effectiveness of accountability systems.

Viewpoint

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The research program will need to create opportunities for collaboration between experts in pedagogy, cognitive scientists, measurement specialists, and education technologists who now have much to contribute to our understanding about how people learn. Faculty from various disciplines must be key players in this new research program. Encouraging examples that suggest significant progress in improving teaching and learning already exist, such as the Open Education Initiative at Carnegie Mellon University.

In other words, we need many more hands on deck to build a stronger body of evidence from which faculty, administrators and policy makers can base decisions. Yes, it will take more resources. The budget for postsecondary education research is a rounding error on the Federal non-defense department research budget of 150 billion. That must change.

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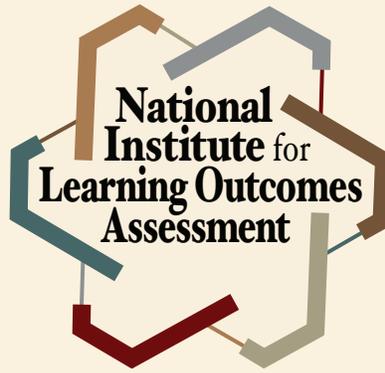
For additional information on this topic, see the following:

Benjamin, R. (2012). *The new limits of education policy: Avoiding a tragedy of the commons in undergraduate education*. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Benjamin, R. (2003). The environment of American higher education: A constellation of changes. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 583, 8-30.

Benjamin, R. (2007). Recreating a faculty role in university governance. In J. Burke (Ed.), *Fixing the Fragmented University* (pp. 70-98). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Benjamin, R. & Chun, M. (2009). Returning to learning in an age of assessment. New York, NY: Council for Aid to Education.



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