

Higher Education for the 21st Century: Transitioning Colleges to Better Serve the Needs of Today's Students

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If I ask you to close your eyes and imagine a college student, who do you see? Most imagine an eighteen year old, living in a college dorm, learning how to negotiate adulthood, studying hard and, for some, partying harder. Your image would not be incorrect, but it only describes a minority, in fact a shrinking portion, of American college students today.

America's typical undergraduate looks much more like I did when I went to college, with a 2 year old daughter, working full time, and attending Jamestown Community College in rural New York State nights and weekends. Today, most students balance work, family and school. In 2011, the majority of students do not live on campus and work at least 10 hours a week. As importantly, over 50% of all undergraduates in America attend a community college. College is no longer a time away from the real world, a transition to adult life nor the proverbial ivory tower—rather it is one piece in the complicated puzzle of students' lives and an integral part of our world.

College is a profoundly different place now than it was when America established the policies and business models that frame higher education. Higher education, and the rules that drive the financing and organization of colleges, must change—a difficult prospect for institutions that still dress in 13th century scholar gowns for graduation! But if colleges and American higher education policy do not

respond to an evolving world, they will cede the future to others.

Who Enrolls in American Colleges and Universities Today?

LaGuardia Community College, where I have served as president for 11 years, hardly seems to be a "typical" institution of higher education. Housed in old factory buildings in the Borough of Queens in metropolitan New York City, LaGuardia serves over 77,000 students, with 17,500 students pursuing an associate's degree in areas as diverse as occupational therapy assistant to philosophy, biology or accounting. An additional 60,000 individuals attend the College's continuing education programs seeking hands-on skills and workforce training that range from learning enough English to become a hotel maid to entrepreneurs learning how to apply for a small business loan. LaGuardians are pretty typical urban community college students. They are mostly minority (36% Hispanic, 15% Black, 18% Asian, 11% white), and about half are traditional college aged (52% are 17-22) with a large percentage who are older (27% are 23-29; 18% over 30). They are studying business (26%) technology (17%), allied health (23%) and the liberal arts and sciences (34%). They are poor, with the majority living below the poverty level. And 80% or so of the incoming freshman class needs remediation in English composition, or mathematics or both

despite having a high school diploma or a GED credential. One hundred percent of them commute to campus, over 90% work, and 20% are parents. The majority attend college part-time.

Compared with their community college counterparts, four year college students are more likely to be traditional aged, attend full time, be white, and be middle to upper middle class. Estimates are that about 25% of students in four year colleges need some type of remediation.

LaGuardia Community College will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year. Over those forty years, access to a college education for a typical American has grown, in part thanks to the disruptive innovation of community colleges and in part to federal policies like the G.I. Bill and Pell Grants, which opened doors to higher education tremendously. Enrollments have almost doubled, from under 9 million students in the 1970's to over 20 million undergraduate and graduate students today. The overwhelming majority of US students attend public colleges (~75%), with 16% at private and 10% at for-profit colleges.

The last fifteen years have also seen far-reaching changes in who provides higher education, with the growth of the for-profit sector in the US jumping from 400,000 students in 1998 to almost 2 million in 2008. For-profit colleges enroll about 10% of the nation's college students, but get about 25% of all federal student-aid disbursements, receiving \$26.5 billion in 2010 (up from \$4.6 billion in 2000). Of the top 10 recipients in the US of federal Pell dollars, seven are for-profit colleges. Students at for-profit colleges are very likely to supplement financial aid with loans backed by the federal government. For-profit colleges derive just under 80% of their income from the federal government.

While the for-profit colleges have benefitted their shareholders greatly (outperforming the Standard & Poor's index by a huge margin), the payoff for individual students is less clear. Graduation rates at for-profit colleges remain quite low. For example, compare the for-profit

University of Phoenix, Kansas City's graduation rate of 8.8%, to the 42.5% at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. It's not surprising, given that for-profit institutions spend a fraction of what public and not-for-profit institutions spend on instruction. Students at for-profit colleges, when they do graduate, do so at great personal cost. Twenty-five percent of for-profit BA degree recipients have a college debt of more than \$40,000, compared to only 6% of public BA graduates. Even though students at for-profit colleges make up only about 7% of all federally-underwritten loans, they make up nearly 50% of all loan defaults.

Thus, changes in demographics and providers of higher education make the landscape of who enrolls in college, and where they enroll, quite different from when the policies and practices that establish the federal response to college—primarily helping students pay for college through the federally-supported financial aid system—were developed. It is time to recalibrate our financial aid systems to meet the needs of today's college student and more wisely invest our very limited resources.

Financial aid is indexed to tuition, so that the colleges with higher tuition receive greater amounts of federally-funded financial aid. One radical suggestion is to divorce Pell dollars from tuition. Pell would no longer reward institutions that increase tuition year after year and eat up scarce federal dollars.

We also need to put funding where the students are. The nation's financial investment in community colleges has been laughably low. They receive one-third the public funding that four-year colleges do to educate a more academically needy student body. Fewer resources mean fewer tutors, academic advisors, computers, and full-time faculty. Equally distributing Pell dollars to all students would help community colleges now bursting at the seams with students, while encouraging prospective students to enroll in lower-cost, high-quality community colleges. Another idea to consider is to reform the Pell program to reflect the needs of adults who are going to college, allowing Pell awards

to be modified to reflect the longer “time to degree” it may take adult students and providing expanded tax credits to encourage adults to accumulate new skills and knowledge.

An even easier federal-level recommendation would be to give up the nostalgic notions of college-going practices that now frame how the US government collects information from colleges. LaGuardia Community College is required to report on only the “full time, first time students” who are attending, which represents less than 20% of the students served. The US government does not even try to measure students who enroll at colleges for workforce development—a number estimated to be over 6 million in community colleges alone. It would be a great benefit if the US government tracked the outcomes of students as they move from multiple high schools to multiple colleges.

Support the transformation of faculty roles through the use of technology

One of the realities that colleges and universities face is that the new global and technological imperative requires America to educate more of her people to a higher level than ever before. The bar has been permanently raised. It’s why America’s competitors in China and India have begun to invest so heavily in creating new colleges and universities. To accomplish a radical revision of educational philosophy and practice, governments and educators must arrive at a clearer understanding about how the basic requirements of society have changed in the post-industrial world. It is necessary to embrace the reality that, as more people go to college, the colleges awaiting them must be transformed if students are to succeed. The most effective way to do so is to harness the untapped potential of great faculty.

At the same time as technology was revolutionizing how Americans work, it also transformed scholarship. Remember life before Google? One used to rely on experts, reference materials, or exhaustive library searches to get information. In life before Google, it was the

college professors who had the facts—they had done the research, read the literature, and connected the dots. A college professor could engage his or her students in a world of information they could only dimly imagine. But technology has altered the relationship between knowledge and the knower, erasing geographical and institutional boundaries, creating new kinds of communities, and underpinning work in completely novel ways.

Seemingly overnight, the specialized knowledge that was the provenance of college professors became available and easily searchable. Of course, just having the information available doesn’t mean all students can now learn on their own, no more than having access to libraries did in the past. The challenge is not finding the information, but rather helping students learn how to manage, evaluate and transform information into knowledge. For that you need faculty.

College faculty today face a two-fold challenge. First, they must be effective with the vastly differently skilled students in their classes. Because while those new students must be educated to a higher level of sophistication than ever before, they do not possess the academic skills of the smaller group of more elite students of the past.

Second, faculty must learn how to incorporate the ways in which technology has modified the very nature of learning. New technology is leaping ahead of pedagogy. Instead of lectures, students can now learn with online resources that are engaging and interactive. A student can view animated analyses of chemical processes or interactive charts showing the impact of changing values on mathematical concepts—things that used to require long hours and deep thought. In one short decade, the purpose of most college faculty—to transmit their knowledge and understanding to create informed critical thinkers fluent in quantitative, scientific, social and political spheres—has forever changed. Happily, the faculty role can now be supported and enhanced by tapping into technology in previously unimagined ways.

To elevate colleges and universities to the next level, the country must begin to invest in college faculty in a new way. Unlike high school teachers, who have scant training in a discipline but some in pedagogy (teaching practices), college faculty present the reverse. They are highly skilled in their discipline, but have almost no professional development in how to teach. Colleges set up their reward systems to promote faculty who perform well as scholars and researchers—almost never for teaching. Even at community colleges, which profess to value teaching, there is a dearth of research on how to teach well, or how to measure effective teaching. This is particularly important for faculty teaching the millions of academically challenged developmental students who need remediation in order to prepare for college. As the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation points out, a problem is that developmental students far too often encounter “courses not taught with the student in mind, and with little effort . . . to ensure the course is more than a rehash of what the student failed to understand in high school.” A change requires a re-thinking of college faculty roles and responsibilities, and consistent institutional support.

To invest wisely in faculty development, it is necessary to combine the cost-savings and innovation of technology with student outcomes. Most professional development activities for faculty are one-shot conferences or workshops. The dissemination model consists of hoping faculty will try the new method upon returning to their campus. This rarely works. Instead, the federal government could be a catalyst for the new forms of professional development that are emerging around the country. One of the more exciting projects in supporting faculty development to improve remediation is a Gates funded project entitled Global Skills for College Completion (GSCC). The GSCC project focuses on capturing what successful developmental mathematics and English faculty do in the class using technology (online faculty portfolios, a searchable library of classroom practices, and

a collaborative interactive dialogue of faculty), then linking changes in faculty practice to improvements in actual student outcomes.

GSCC’s use of new technology tools affords a deep look inside developmental mathematics and English classrooms in 14 different states. The results after three semesters of intensive study are very encouraging. The technological tools tap the faculty’s collective wisdom through a system of scholarly practice that integrates the doing of teaching with the research on teaching, using student work and student outcomes to document success. The final goal of the project is to develop a hands-on, totally electronic professional development process that allows faculty the freedom to identify their personal attributes and strengths while achieving better student outcomes. Ultimately, this can lead to a system of formal certification where the tens of thousands of faculty teaching developmental education receive appropriate credentialing. This is the kind of research-based, outcomes-focused professional development for faculty that is needed and well worth the investment.

As technology, both through online learning activities and increased sophistication of assessment techniques, makes possible a clearer connection between student outcomes and faculty performance, teaching effectiveness may gain ascendancy as a criterion for both continued faculty employment and scholarly recognition. It is possible to project a catalytic federal role in supporting investment in faculty. A federal program could pay college faculty (especially adjunct faculty) a wage bonus if they voluntarily become certified as expert developmental educators. Any certification would have to emulate the principles of GSCC, so that certification wasn’t just “book learning” but an actual demonstration of proficiency in teaching. With a minor infusion of dollars, the government would enhance pass rates in remediation by spurring the development of more effective faculty, ultimately leading to more Americans graduating from college.

Changing time and resources spent on remedial classes in community colleges to increase effectiveness

Developmental faculty are heroes, facing students every day who have graduated high school, but are unprepared for college-level work, afraid of mathematics, and confronting personal challenges. These faculty help almost half of the students achieve in a semester or two what 12 years of school could not. What if, instead of bemoaning the millions of dollars wasted, we acknowledged the pivotal role of remediation in re-claiming thousands of students each year? The power of raising the status of remediation could be a game-changer for increasing student success and faculty commitment. What if the US government established a five year program that created incentives for faculty who were able to increase the pass rates on their campus, linking successive years of funding with increases in student outcomes—sort of like the incentives given to doctors to serve in poor, medically underserved communities? A significant role for the federal government would be to work with the private vendors of assessment exams to create a national standard of cut-off scores. Right now, who goes into remediation is based upon nationally-normed tests, but cut-off scores vary widely.

To speed remediation on college campuses, it is important to create a different set of metrics and rules so that Pell grants, state funding and other support dollars become flexible enough to allow for innovation, intensity and the provi-

sion of wraparound services that help students stay in school and earn a degree. We currently provide federal financial aid and degrees based primarily on “seat time”—how long a student attends a specific class. As interactive authentic assessment of individual student competencies become more common, the ability to assign financial aid based on learning becomes possible. This might also include highly functioning assessments that take the place of transcripts, and assessments of expanded definitions of competencies, such as problem solving, interpersonal skills, or initiative, that re-imagine what is assessed and how it is represented.

Remediation and college completion could be accelerated by framing it within a social context. The federal government could provide incentives for local Community Based Organizations to work collaboratively with remedial students to provide integrated support services in a community that focus on college completion.

Conclusion

To undertake the necessary transformation of higher education, the country must do three things: (1) Respond to today’s undergraduates; (2) Restructure, not reduce, the investment in higher education; and (3) Re-imagine and support an American professoriate for a networked world. Only when US public policy follows the actual contours of the higher education landscape will we create the colleges and universities we so desperately need.
