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Embracing a New Paradigm in Higher Education

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Introduction

According to a 2017 survey (Jaschik & Lederman, 2017) of 706 college and university presidents, only 12% of respondents think a majority of those in the U.S. understand the nature and intent of higher education. College and university presidents' perceived disconnect between public perception and institutional objectives stems from a decades-long reconfiguring of both perceptions and practices of higher education—the "esoteric" knowledge it has historically produced and protected, and the rise of consumer- and neoliberal-market-driven demand for career education, development, and training. Consequently, now more than ever both the public and government officials focus upon and hold higher education institutions accountable to produce graduates well-prepared for the workforce (Tandberg & Ness, 2011). As a result, the philosophy and practice of U.S. higher education are undergoing radical change, in large part fueled by the disintegration of both the financial model and the states' commitment to fund higher education that historically have sustained it; state appropriations to higher education are far below pre-recession levels in 48 of 50 states (Berman, 2016), and few predict a dramatic increase in state appropriations in the coming years (Weeden, 2015). Concurrently, the volatility of college enrollments—primarily the result of birth-rate-based demographic shifts that forecast an overall decline in the number of high-school graduates entering college—is leading many institutions to initiate aggressive recruitment and fundraising initiatives.[1] To make matters worse, two of every three institutions have experienced a decline in number of donors since 2007, even though the average-sized college and university donor's gift is on the rise (Ruffalo, 2017). Given the changing context of U.S. higher education the task falls upon those of us in higher education to decide whether and how to heed the call of public officials and private individuals to reinvent higher education so it continues to serve its dual purpose as public and private good (Weeden, 2015.).

We argue the model for higher education institutions of the near future will need to emphasize civic responsibility *and* career mobility if institutions are to accommodate and adapt to an industry-friendly higher education model focused upon increasing public support, tuition dollars, and corporate partnerships (Hart Research Associates, 2011). Current financial conditions, coupled with the introduction of new curriculum delivery modes, skill- and competency-based learning, low-cost education providers, and the disproportionate rise and governmental support of for-profit and technical institutions signal a potential paradigm shift in many higher-education institutions. This emerging paradigm prescribes organizational structures and an institutional mission that encourage industry-need-focused education and job placement, sometimes at the expense of, or at least in combination with, the exploration and accumulation of knowledge for knowledge's sake. As higher education's constituents—students, their families, and the citizens who partially fund public higher education (Harnisch & Opalich, 2017)—call upon institutions to justify the ever-growing cost of a college education, institutions are asked to heed constituents' calls for degrees that "get students jobs."

While many faculty members and administrators profess their reluctance to respond to these perceived exigencies and embrace so-called market-driven motivations and objectives, we argue these current perceptions of higher education might yield critical opportunities for pedagogical discovery, curricular diversity, and financial sustainability. By creating curricular opportunities that cater to the diverse needs and desires of learners and managing expenses effectively to produce revenue streams to support ambitious educational missions, higher education institutions might arrive at a sustainable, practical, and more inclusive model of higher education that serves the educational needs of twenty-first-century learners. We argue that, in the process, faculty need not sacrifice their ethos as academics or their intellectual mission as professionals in order to operate within higher education's current clime. Faculty will, however, need to rethink and reinvent the ways they frame and deliver twenty-first-century higher education so as to prepare students for future life and work few of us anticipate or imagine. In the following sections, we lay out and describe three main disruptions we see as instigating the paradigm shift we describe in higher education. In our paper's final section we offer recommendations for curriculum innovation that emphasize holistic learning and experiential development as essential components to producing graduates both well-equipped for citizenship and ready to reap the rewards of satisfying work.

Three Sources of Disruption

If the 2000s brought with them a startling rise in online and for-profit educational institutions and diverse modes of curriculum development and delivery (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009), the current decade places a spotlight on the financial (in)stability and volatility of such outfits and approaches, ushering in a new era of public accountability and institutional assessment of public higher education institutions which echoes past decades' changes to PK–12 public education. Due primarily to significant decreases in state funding support, a majority of public institutions now pay closer attention to measures of organizational effectiveness and efficiency, and most colleges and universities work actively to improve graduation rates, emphasize student employability, and introduce experience-based education, all backlit by a higher-education marketplace that encourages fiscal responsibility and consumer- and industry-driven priorities. In such a climate institutions are forced to justify their educational mission and practices, assess how close institutions come to meeting stated learning outcomes, and publicize performance metrics on student job placement, average starting salaries, and student-loan-debt levels. In the following section we explore how the changing nature of institutional revenue, system-wide accountability, and calls for educational reform by industry and students alike are three forces (among others) that disrupt so-called traditional models of U.S. higher education.

Disruption 1: Financial (In)stability

Reductions (or, in some cases, lack of increases) in state appropriations to higher education are primarily responsible for many of the financial challenges public institutions have faced over the past decade. As Lacy, Tandberg, and Hu (2017) find, there is a direct correlation between state support for public higher education and the success of the institutions they help to sustain. Despite a few negligible exceptions,[2] in most states appropriations to higher education remain significantly below pre-2008-recession levels.[3] Furthermore, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education reports that, post-2012, many state legislatures have increased allocations to two-year institutions, community colleges, and vocational schools, while reducing support to four-year institutions and research universities (Brown, 2016). Consequently, four-year institutions and research universities are increasingly reliant on alternative sources of funding: gifts from private donors; operating revenue generated by grants; profits from extension programs like post-baccalaureate certificates; and monetization of existing resources and capital assets. Dramatically shifting sources of institutional revenue have some members of the university

community—faculty members, especially—questioning whether outside influences are threatening academic freedom and turning universities into corporate entities driven by ever-increasing revenue demands (Lazerson, 1997).

Certainly some institutions find themselves in better positions than others to attract donors and monetize assets and resources. Reductions in state funding coupled with enrollment declines and decreases in donor support are leaving fiscally unstable institutions vulnerable to practices often relegated to the business world: merger, closure, or even declaring financial exigency.[4] Smaller, nonprofit, and rural and regional colleges and universities are in greater danger of closure than their larger, publicly funded counterparts because of their heavy dependence on shrinking state support, tuition dollars, and donor funding.[5] Merger with a larger, more financially secure institution is often the only feasible alternative to closing campuses (Henking, 2017); recent examples from institutions in Georgia, discussions taking place in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Oregon, and the "One University" system project in Maine all center on maximizing efficiency, creating economies of scale, and restructuring statewide higher-education systems to adapt to a rapidly changing and a more-competitive-than-ever academic marketplace as high-school-graduate streams slow.[6] Many institutions have been forced to make difficult cuts to operational costs and curricular programs, sometimes at the expense of much-needed academic and student services vital to student success yet not deemed essential to staying open for business (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). Correspondingly, many institutions have seen high-paid administrative positions proliferate which can bloat an institution's budget, drain its financial resources, and keep an institution from hiring faculty and bolstering academic program offerings.[7]

Disruption 2: Accountability

Cuts to public, higher-education spending coupled with increased scrutiny of student-loan-debt levels, graduation rates, and student job prospects post-graduation have encouraged greater financial responsibility among many institutions, therefore encouraging streamlined processes, improved efficiency, and creation of more accessible, affordable curricula that emphasize job mobility and lifelong, application-based learning. Now more than ever at the mercy of dwindling public financial support,[8] colleges and universities are forced to exercise more financial discipline, wary that continued tuition increases will negatively affect enrollment rates and the financial health of students post-graduation (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Bates, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015). At the same time, President Barack

Obama's call for publicly available college report cards and public oversight of students' overall post-graduation preparedness continues to redefine curricula in ways that respond to a neoliberal, consumerist higher education model in which the marketplace becomes the arbiter of an institution's success. Similar to the influence of the last two decades' radical healthcare industry reforms initiated by federal legislation, higher education is being refashioned from the outside in.

While constituents and legislators criticize ballooning tuition rates, in reality most students do not pay sticker price. In fact, the tuition and fees most students pay are lowered significantly by substantial financial aid packages. As Ho and Slavov (2014) contend, "much of the increase in sticker prices merely reflects an improvement in the ability of schools to price discriminate, or charge different prices to different students for the same educational services." The authors positively characterize price discrimination as a way to make higher education more affordable and accessible to a larger number of people, with wealthier and international students footing the bill and subsidizing those with greater need who receive a larger share of an institution's available financial aid. While the most visible sign of higher profit margins may controversially be lazy rivers and amusement-park-like campuses (Stripling, 2017), higher tuitions also support generous financial-aid packages used strategically to recruit and enroll students with financial need. As Ho and Slavov (2014) argue, "generous financial aid is crucial for making higher education accessible to talented individuals who might not otherwise be able to afford it."

Disruption 3: Addressing the Needs of Industry

Industry and alumni remain among the most vocal, external proponents of change (NACE, 2016). Employers who hire graduates now influence university curriculum because they argue they are in the best position to inform institutions of the skills and abilities graduates must have in order to perform jobs effectively. For instance, across industries employers maintain they seek graduates with well-developed oral and written communication skills, the ability to think critically and solve complex problems, and the desire to work collaboratively in groups and teams. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has consistently, for more than a decade, ranked these skills at the top of a list of skills employers seek in new graduates. NACE (2016) lists these too as abilities employers claim students most lack.

One firm claims employers place less emphasis on a student's college major than they place on job-related skills, abilities, and experiences (Hart Research Associates, 2013). In particular, some argue employers often prefer liberal-arts-educated graduates who typically

display both academic knowledge and field experience (O'Shaughnessy, 2016), quality e-portfolios, and résumés listing a breadth and depth of experience, rendering them well-equipped to contribute to a growing economy (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Others claim more important than a higher education institution's reputation (Hart Research Associates, 2013) or the student's major, employers now seek graduates with internship and job experience,[9] a commitment to volunteerism, and a diverse skill set with a willingness to learn (Thompson, 2014). Graduates who possess these skills may be perceived as better-rounded and able to think critically so they can self-educate themselves on new skills and abilities (Miller, 2014). Effectively, the traditional, college-level curriculum is not antithetical to the new neoliberal-market-driven demands of jobs-oriented learning, but we argue it will need to be sculpted so students make strong connections between the classroom and the workplace. So, for example, an active-learning-based approach to an English curriculum can (and should) still teach traditional content, but in a way that develops and highlights industry-valued skills.

Exposure to and an appreciation for diversity in the collegiate setting is another way higher education institutions can harness the curriculum to prepare students to be good citizens and model employees. The range of economic and demographic[10] backgrounds from which incoming college students come is expected to grow in variety, yet the number of students receiving high-school diplomas is decreasing due to long-range trends in birth rates (Seltzer, 2016). Research shows undergraduates' exposure to a diversity of people and ideas increases students' social development, prepares them for a globalized workforce, and enhances the multidisciplinary, humanistic experience of the traditional, liberal-arts degree (Hyman & Jacobs, 2009). Therefore, increasing appreciation for a diversity of people and ideas—a diversity of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion—prepares graduates for responsible democratic citizenship and to enter a globalized workforce in which they will be expected competently and thoughtfully to interact with colleagues from a diversity of backgrounds.

In the final section of this paper, we suggest adaptive approaches to reinventing pedagogy, accelerating inclusion of a diversity of people and ideas for cultural competency, and enhancing institutional sustainability, all while respecting an institution's ethos as academic and holding true to the "spirit" of higher education. We recommend innovative approaches toward active, engaged learning that prepare students for democratic citizenship, including the pursuit of happiness through meaningful relationships, rewarding work, and service to society.

A Sustainable Model: Reinventing Higher Education

The changing demographic of high-school graduates, the professed needs of the marketplace, and the restructuring of funding models that historically sustained and guided higher-education practices make reimagining higher education's philosophy and practice more urgent. For example, some students and families embrace entitlement and instant gratification so openly they challenge the traditional model of a four-year degree. For such constituents four years seems an eternity and they wonder, "Why should a bachelor's degree take four years to complete?" In fact, while there have always been a few gifted and precocious students who complete degrees in less time, some schools like Purdue (which recently entered into a deal with for-profit Kaplan to deliver its online courses) have formalized three-year tracks to bachelor's degrees, just one of many signs higher education is rethinking its traditional approach to the degrees and services it provides—and bowing to parental and legislative pressure to reduce student-loan debt. While this expedited, high-velocity, but untried curricular model may not be suitable for all students, it is one way of reducing the cost of a college education that does not require additional state funding or a change to state funding formulas, while offering options to suit consumers.

A three-year degree, however, is only one of several means to deliver high-velocity education. As the number of adult learners will soon triple the number of college-age students, higher education institutions turn to educating adults seeking non-traditional paths to degree or credential, or who seek post-baccalaureate certificates to advance in jobs. For example, a new program at the University of Rhode Island helps registered nurses who do not yet have a bachelor's degree attain a degree online in a series of 7-week courses designed to work with their 12-hour-shift work schedules. Similarly, while universities have long offered summer courses in condensed formats, many now capitalize on short-form, one-to-three-week, winter-recess-intersession courses to help students catch up or condense time to degree; many such courses are "experience-based." Of course intersession courses are a way for universities to access revenue streams and monetize resources unused during winter recess, so the initiative is calculated to serve the dual purpose of supporting condensed time to degree and institutional revenue streams.

Blended curricula and online formats can offer possibilities outside the confines of a traditional 12-, 14-, or 16-week semester, and can include more than just a mix of face-to-face and online instruction.[11] For instance, faculty in the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island developed a "Career Road Trip" during the winter recess that meets online and face-to-face for one week, then goes on the road for a week meeting corporate executives across

three states for an intensive professional-development experience that includes traditional classroom time, online meetings, and discussions, as well as assignments, career networking, executive seminars, and workshops. A current, profitable national trend at universities offers such credit-earning, study-abroad opportunities as travel to Cuba to study architecture, study abroad experiences in Belize to film Mayan culture and explore ancient ruins, or alternative spring breaks to build school libraries in Tanzania, a trend toward emphasizing experience-based curricula with active forms of learning and a blend of instructional approaches and formats, most often in what are typically perceived and marketed as vacation destinations. One challenge going forward is to move such programs within reach of all students, not just middle- and upper-class white students who have traditionally been beneficiaries (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011).

Many potential students may not have (or desire) the luxury of participating in a traditional degree program, yet there is an institutional obligation to help students achieve the kind of education they desire and deserve. If higher education institutions firmly believe in this obligation, then they need to meet students where students are, and often that means outside the traditional 14-week semester or even the standard bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. The escalating cost of college tuition and the workforce demands of industry present opportunities for higher education institutions to offer skill- and competency-based programs that develop students' capacities for embarking on rewarding work. Not all students are prepared financially (or academically) for the demands of college, and institutions can still facilitate intellectual and professional growth through microcredentials, nanodegrees, and other certifications that allow students to develop expertise and specialized skills either in lieu of or in addition to a college education. Time will tell whether the market will truly favor and reward such credentials; as of now, the financial burden one bears in registering for such non-traditional programs may or may not produce the kind of salary and return on investment one would hope to obtain upon completion.

Certainly job advancement and mobility are driving factors in post-baccalaureate certificate programs and the desire for learners to gain stamps or badges in what Arthur Levine (2000), former president of Columbia University's Teachers College, refers to as one's "educational passport." In the future, he argues, degrees will become less important, emphasis will be placed more on outcomes, and the competition for delivering those outcomes will become even greater, as a plethora of educational providers enter the marketplace. Indeed, colleges and universities are just one kind of provider in a competitive educational

marketplace that will become more, and already is, populated by a wide variety of institutions offering a range of credentials. Additionally, the more industry claims universities are failing to develop specific, required skills in graduates, the more employers are beginning to develop their own academies to train (rather than educate) employees with skills they claim most benefit their company and industry. As higher-education professionals, we have an opportunity to increase revenue by partnering with corporations rather than allowing them to do their own training, but such a shift will require unbundling traditional degrees in favor of industry's demand for *à la carte* solutions to job-specific needs.

Even within a traditional higher-educational framework the opportunity to partner with industry can be seized in a variety of ways to increase institutional revenue, from corporate–partner curricula to executive- and professional-mentoring programs. In the former students and faculty team up with corporations to work on issues plaguing a company or industry. Helping to produce solutions and provide deliverables to industry, students actively define and create, experiment and analyze, develop and refine critical-thinking skills required for working in industry. Such partnerships most closely connect to the university's mission when collaboration benefits the greater good, whether it be a communication course collaborating with a soft-drink manufacturer to market the benefits of recycling, an engineering class working to produce lower-emission, hybrid, and alternative-fuel-source vehicles, or an intermediate Spanish course partnering with a local department of health to develop strategies and the language used to communicate issues related to diabetes and healthy living to Spanish-speaking populations, the approach and desired outcomes are the same—each of these examples encourage students to exercise knowledge and critical thinking through immersive and active-learning techniques.

While partnering with a company, not-for-profit, or government agency may help students understand the connection between academic curricula and the professional contexts in which their learning can be applied, executive and professional mentoring programs can produce a similar outcome. Some maintain (Bozionelos, Kostopoulos, Van der Heijden, Roussea, Bozionelos, Hoyland, Miao, Marzec, Jędrzejowicz, Epitropaki, Mikkelsen, & Scholarios, 2015) mentoring is one of the most important indicators of professional success. Although nothing could replace the important mentoring relationships faculty develop with students, executive mentoring offers a bridge from the academy into industry, and a potential pathway to networking opportunities for students to parlay into internships and job placement upon graduation. Alumni may be the first to volunteer for such an initiative, but many

community members and leaders readily will accept an invitation to share wisdom and experience with students. Some studies suggest (Livingstone & Naismith, 2018; Hall, Walkington, Shanahan, Ackley, & Stewart, 2018) students become successful in their careers largely as a result of the mentoring relationships they experience with faculty in college. The primary goal of a mentoring program might be to provide students with a clearer understanding of their professional goals, and also how their learning and skills relate to particular job paths.

We purposefully have left technology out of our discussion so far in favor of speaking to growing capacity to meet current challenges in higher education.[12] While technology are likely to replace some future jobs, personalized and adaptive learning systems have, to some extent, already done so (Kim, 2017). We argue there is no better way to solidify the future role faculty and administrators will play in colleges and universities than to define this paradigm shift to best benefit students. Miller (2014), in an article for *HuffPost,* envisions the campus of the now-nearly-here 2019 as a place not dependent upon technology, but rather well-versed in using technological means to enhance analysis and synthesis of knowledge. The ability immediately to look up facts and figures on a smartphone and the recent evolution of university libraries into electronically driven creators, not just repositories, of information, has already revolutionized the very nature of research and the essence of libraries (Miller, 2014). Humans are not very accurate at predicting future technological changes, but prior evidence suggests most change will drastically transform the ways faculty approach teaching practices. Consequently, we argue faculty must embrace new technologies as the most surefire way of remaining relevant.

One thing is certain, however: higher education institutions of the future will be very different than the ones with which we have become comfortable and familiar. As we explore in this paper, the changing nature of institutional revenue, frequent calls for system-wide accountability, and demands for educational reform by employers and students alike are three forces disrupting the traditional model of U.S. higher education and ushering in a new paradigm to which colleges and universities attempt to adapt. We argue, rather than resist the transformations now upon us, let institutions embrace change as a critical opportunity to reinvent pedagogy, increase instructional diversity, and promote financially sustainable models of higher education. By creating educational agendas that serve the needs and desires of a diverse set of learners, and producing revenue streams to support ambitious educational missions, higher education faculty and administrators can create a sustainable, practical, and more inclusive model of higher education that fits the educational needs of twenty-first-century learners and industry.

Endnotes

1 While some states, like Texas, will experience an increase in the number of college-bound high-school students, many states, particularly in the Northeast region, will experience substantial declines over the coming decades. Overall, the number of college-bound U.S. high-school students will be lower in 2032 than today. Demographic shifts also mean fewer white students and higher rates of Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander students (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016).

2 Illinois is viewed as an anomaly here, with the current higher education budget showing a 29% increase since the 2008 economic recession (Brown, 2016).

3 For example, *The Atlantic* reports the 3.4% overall increase in appropriations since the recession is modest compared to the declines witnessed since the 2008 recession; 39 states increased funding of varying denominations and 10 experienced between a 0.4% and 8.8% decrease (Brown, 2016).

4 It is not the small size of the faculty or student body, or the often-isolated settings that cause institutions like Burlington College to shut their doors (Bernam, 2015). Rather, closures most often occur because these institutions have a lower tolerance for financial and administrative error than their public, land-grant, or elite counterparts (Wootton, 2016).

5 This higher likelihood of closure for smaller, community-centered universities—many of which are local fixtures and cultural staples—diminishes the diversity and strength of the U.S. higher education system (Wootton, 2016).

6 Creating equitable pay for faculty across two—and sometimes three or more—institutions and the impact of combining different campus cultures make mergers a challenge. Having faced these trials, Georgia's mergers saw eventual overall success and can act as a guide for other states seeking to initiate smoother mergers in the future (Gardner, 2017). On the "One University" system in Maine (Gardner, 2018), Marcus (2016) reports that according to "system officials," the One University "reorganization has resulted in a 37 percent decline in the number of administrators at the universities and will save about $6.1 million a year."

7 For more on this, see Marcus (2016) and Zywicki and Koopman (2017). For an earlier, alarming look at the explosion of administrative positions, see Ginsberg (2011).

[8] Public institutions also face restrictions on federal funding for research, reduced subsidies, and excessive media emphasis on student-debt rates (Ehrenberg, 2014).

[9] Achieving these competitive and crucial internship opportunities, however, are usually contingent on a student's strong academic record.

[10] However, there is concern the current U.S. presidential administration's anti-immigration stance might bring a decrease in international students and thus a decrease in overall racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity within institutions (Rudgers, 2017).

[11] Clearly online courses are no panacea and they still have their critics. Edmundson (2012) suggests how a "real" course creates intellectual joy, at least in some, and how an internet course will never replicate that kind of intellectual engagement. Instead, he argues how "Internet learning promises to make intellectual life more sterile and abstract than it already is—and also, for teachers and students alike, far more lonely." While there is some truth to this, one need not go far to find examples of highly engaging online courses. Online education is still in its infancy.

[12] For a discussion of technological disruptions, see Roth (2015).

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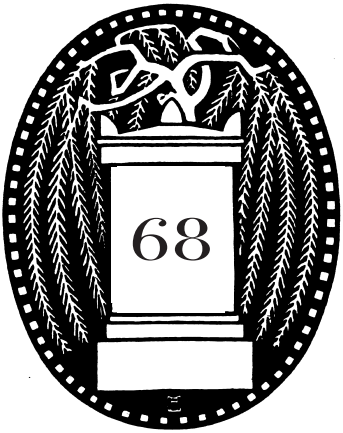

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