

Changing Higher Education

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I've spent almost 50 years in higher education, as student, professor, and researcher.

Many core principles I once believed in, I no longer do. I believe that radical re-thinking and re-structuring of higher education (particularly the US version) is needed. What made sense 50 and 100 years ago, no longer does.

The 4-year BA or BS degree is wasteful of time and resources; it encourages goofing off and getting drunk, and breeds contempt for the enterprise.

The hallowed liberal arts tradition, once a noble ideal for an affluent middle class with few financial worries, has today become little more than a lockstep of requirements or a smorgasboard of superficial learning.

The goal of universal higher education itself makes little sense if all that means is that you've been to college. Not that you've learned to think critically, write fluently, or make use of in-depth knowledge of something.

Undergraduate education, at least for most of the first two years, is a combination of boring, useless, large lecture classes and the occasional stimulating conversation with other students. Faculty are neither teachers nor mentors; they are distant voices taking an hour off from their research.

The point of liberal arts or general education in college has been to broaden horizons, to give students a taste of the wide range of human ideas and ways of thinking. This broad and superficial experience may or may not be useful for a career in management; by itself it probably does not deepen one's experience of the rest of life; and it gives the term "academic" much of its negative sense.

In most disciplines, the BA degree says no more than that you've read a list of books or textbooks. And the MA is not much better; there is very little that students can actually DO afterwards that they could not have done before, or without. The PhD is serious professional training, most of the time. So are degrees in law, business, engineering, and medicine. And in many parts of the world, students successfully begin such degree programs directly out of secondary school.

What stimulates a broad curiosity about many areas of knowledge is not a required curriculum, but a diverse network of friends and a life that spans many tasks and domains of action. It is not made in 2 years or 4 years, but in 20 years or 40 years. The claim that its foundations are laid in the liberal arts experience is mostly anecdotal, and even if partially true, is not necessarily so.

Learning that lasts is learning that finds a use and continues to do so over many years. That use may be a use for pleasure, or for profit, or both. But it is necessarily learning of something we take seriously, something we enjoy learning, something we learn in depth.

We can take pleasure in watching the Discovery Channel or Animal Planet or reading at random in Wikipedia. But this is not the purpose of higher education.

Higher education should focus on the in-depth and intensive learning of one or two special subjects, disciplines, or professions. It should do so from the very first term of the very first year. If students are not ready to decide what they wish to study, then let secondary education provide them the means to do so. Liberal arts education is the proper business of the secondary schools, not of the universities.

The US is perhaps the only country in the world which has not learned this lesson; perhaps because our secondary schools are the worst in the world, perhaps because it has been politically profitable to expand higher education faster than we have prepared students to benefit from it.

Because undergraduate education does not have a serious purpose, no one really takes it seriously. Not the faculty, who know that their time is far better used in research or teaching graduate seminars. Not the students, who know that they are being left mostly to their own devices, and that not very much is being expected of them.

Higher education should be challenging. It should be demanding. It should push students to do more than they believe themselves capable of doing. That does not mean it cannot also be exciting and enjoyable, and in fact it would be more so if there were a serious sense of accomplishment to be found in it.

Large lecture courses are a historical anachronism. Really good lectures can be recorded and viewed at leisure, individually or in small groups, stopped along the way to be discussed, questions noted down and shared online with peers and teachers. E-Lectures can be constructed to be at least somewhat interactive, with the lecturer posing questions, and even with alternative digressions depending on the student's or group's virtual answers.

Large lecture courses are an educational fraud, and they continue only because of a failing economic model in the large modern research-oriented university.

Classes should be taught by faculty, to rosters of not much more than 20 students in a seminar room. The student capacity of a department or university is limited by this model to the number of students that can seriously be taught face to face and with substantial direct interaction and dialogue. Departmental productivity is properly measured by the brilliance and accomplishments of graduates; not by the number of students who have walked the hallways.

New media and communication technologies, and more confidence in students' ability to learn on their own or in small groups of peers, or perhaps mixed with more senior students, can substantially expand the capacity of a department beyond what a purely traditional model might lead us to expect. But no one yet knows what that multiplier might be, nor how best to achieve it. We have no incentive to explore these options because we wallow in the unearned revenues of our large lecture halls and our exploited graduate teaching assistants.

The small discussion or problem sections taught by those graduate students are supposed to make up for an absentee faculty and the known boredom of the lecture hall. Which for the most part they simply cannot do. It is the rare graduate student who has the time, the training, the experience, the commitment, and the fluency with the subject to be able to engage students in genuine seminar-style learning. Faculty who know how to teach advanced classes of 15 or 20 students in an intellectually exciting way know how hard it is. We know we cannot expect this of a graduate teaching assistant.

Nor should we. A teaching assistant should be just that, a second leading voice in the seminar class, an apprentice teacher, working with a faculty member, not trying to replace one. Learning to be a future faculty member, or a future leader of collaborative groups in whatever field.

Just as higher education has come to be distorted in its purpose and its practice by the political economy of un-educably large enrollments in lecture courses, it is similarly hamstrung by the need to support graduate students financially by having them teach its surplus undergraduate population. Graduate students contribute disproportionately to the future lifeblood of the economy, which ought to support them completely, requiring only such service as contributes, genuinely, to their future competence as researchers, teachers, and professionals. Of course they should work as research assistants, and assistants to faculty instructors, and in some other capacities as mentors to undergraduates or junior peers. But as students, not as non-unionized semi-slave laboring employees.

The financing of higher education does need to change in the US, to be something more like it is elsewhere (though already too many other countries are mistakenly trying to emulate our bankrupt model). The funding of a department or professional school should be based first of all on the number of faculty, through their salaries and modest support for their research. Each faculty member in turn has a teaching load, and the collective teaching capacity in classes of not much more than 20 determines the number of students that can be enrolled and so the number that can be admitted annually. Of these a proportion should be determined between graduate students and undergraduates.

Tuition for graduate students, already something of myth, should simply be abolished. It seems reasonable to abolish tuition for undergraduates as well. Students who are well qualified and performing well are an investment for society and the economy as a whole at a national level. There are also going to be, under this model, initially at least, a whole lot fewer of them.

To expand the capacity of higher education, rather than to simply inflate it, means that we will need to increase the size of the faculty, not the number of seats in university lecture halls.

All the pieces in this puzzle are of course inter-connected. As the higher education system has become hyper-inflated we have wound up with a diluted enterprise. We have many more institutions of higher education than we have well-qualified faculty to teach in them. This is all driven by a tuition-based funding model and the political drive to maximize the number of higher education students overall. It seems that we need to contract the system to its actual carrying capacity, and then expand it responsibly.

Of course that is not politically feasible. So the best alternative is to designate a small percentage of all higher education institutions as national universities, fully funded for both faculty and students, at an educationally realistic faculty-student ratio. This is the subsystem that will produce the best graduates, and it is the one that can be expanded gradually as more well-qualified faculty become available.

The teaching responsibility of the national universities will be lightened somewhat by changes in the system of degrees already suggested. A 2-year bachelor's degree as pre-professional or pre-postgraduate preparation, replacing the current 4-year degree. Terminal master's degrees in appropriate fields, building directly on these, or professional degrees as at present. Or direct entry into doctoral programs for other fields, with no master's offered. Six years of higher education should be as much as anyone needs, and as much as the national system should fully fund. More than that is economically wasteful and encourages goofing off at the taxpayer's expense.

The US rose to world pre-eminence in many areas because of its powerful and effective higher education system – in the 1950s and 1960s. Not because of the system we have today, which is a cruel illusion and an invitation to economic disaster in the century ahead. We have the image of a large and thriving system of higher education, but not the substance. We have large numbers of students passing through its gut, but coming out little better educated than when they arrived. They don't know very much, what they know is scattered and superficial, and they haven't a clue how to apply it to any substantive problem or unanswered question. At least not as a direct result of the instruction they've received.

Of course there are exceptions. There are students who learn a lot on their own, or from their peers. There are students who dog faculty members and pick up more. There are small, advanced seminar classes in the last two years of undergraduate study in a major, and in some departments they are even taught by full-time faculty. There are a handful of expensive elite universities that do lavish more attention on their undergraduates, though often still less than what we know they need. Some of these exceptions point to the way to how to make a radically reformed university system work well.

Also well known in higher education is the phenomenon of the adjunct or part-time faculty member, cheaper labor, sometimes well-qualified, but often less so, and generally without the experience or time for professional continuity, development, and collaborative communication that full-time faculty need to teach consistently well. Where they are employed to fill a special need that cannot be filled with a full-time appointment, that's an asset to a department. Where they are being used to balance the budget or relieve the full-time faculty from teaching duties, they function to distort the work of the university. Their use should be strictly limited in a reformed university system.

If you've learned how to read programmatic policy essays, I don't need to summarize this one for you. You can skim back and list the major points and recommendations perfectly well for yourself, along with a sense of how much you agree or not with each. And maybe you have a few more points to add, or ideas about better alternatives. You can do what we'd all hope all college graduates could do, but we know perilously few can. Our current system isn't working well, it's not economically efficient, and the conditions for its survival today don't encourage it to improve, but rather seem to be leading it further and further away from what we need it be. The time for complacency is over. Time to put changes in motion is running short.

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