

INTRODUCTION: Today's Quality Context

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WHY IS AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER FIRE?

A generation or two ago, accreditation was typically a gentle, collegial affair. Once every few years, a college wrote a report, a team visited and offered some advice, and that was pretty much it. The concept of accountability was not on many folks' radar screens. Government policymakers and the general public seemed to accept that, if a college was accredited, its quality was fine—end of story.

What a different world we live in today! Almost every day seems to bring some new report or statement on the perceived shortcomings and failures of U.S. higher education. Accreditation processes have become more onerous and the aftereffects—an additional report, visit, or public censure—more serious and more numerous, affecting as many as two-thirds of colleges undergoing review.

What on earth has happened? Simply put, there is a growing perception—and evidence—that *U.S. colleges are no longer meeting the United States' needs effectively*. And this concern is broad-based, with four particularly prominent voices:

Jargon Alert!

Institution

Institutions of higher education go by many different names: college, university, institute, school, seminary, and academy, among others. Most people in higher education, including many accreditors, use the generic term *institution* to refer to them all. I have always found that term a bit off-putting. Students in the United States do not “go to institution”; they “go to college.” So in this book I use *college* as a generic term to refer to a two- or four-year college, university, and any other institution of higher education.

- Government policymakers, both state and federal
- Private foundations such as Lumina and Gates that are increasingly driving higher education reform (Marcus, 2013)
- Employers
- Students, both currently enrolled and prospective, and their families

There are many other voices, of course, including research organizations such as the National Institute on Learning Outcomes Assessment, higher education associations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and think tanks such as *The Hechinger Report*. But the four voices I have listed—especially government policymakers and private foundations—seem to be driving much of the conversation.

Each of these groups has somewhat different concerns, but there is a good deal of overlap. Government policymakers, for example, want to address the perceived concerns of their constituents, who include employers and students, and students want educations that meet employers’ needs.

In what ways do these groups believe that U.S. colleges are no longer meeting U.S. needs effectively? There is a constant ebb and flow of issues raised in op-eds, white papers, and Congressional

hearings, of course. But Paul LeBlanc has summed up the major concerns: “Cost, access, quality, productivity, and relevance problems . . . are reaching crisis proportions in higher education” (2013, para. 6). The federal government expresses similar concerns when it defines higher education quality as “compliance with federal law and regulation in relation to *employment, graduation, consumer protection, transparency, and affordability*” (Eaton, 2013, para. 3, emphasis added). Altogether, three general issues have been pervasive over the last decade and show no signs of going away:

- Economic development
- Return on investment
- The changing college student

A fourth key issue, higher education’s historic culture of isolation and reticence, is discussed in Chapter 4.

Economic Development

Higher education is under a microscope because it is fast becoming a necessity for economic development, rather than “a luxury or a privilege reserved for the elite” (Duncan, 2013, para. 17). As the Council on Foreign Relations has explained, “Human capital is perhaps the single most important long-term driver of an economy. Smarter workers are more productive and innovative. It is an economist’s rule that an increase of one year in a country’s average schooling corresponds to an increase of 3 to 4 percent in long-term economic growth. Most of the value added in the modern global economy is now knowledge-based. Education, especially at the college level, will therefore likely become even more important for a nation’s economy and an individual’s income” (2013, p. 1).

Research confirms this. “Going back to the 1970s, all net job growth has been in jobs that require at least a bachelor’s degree”

(Council on Foreign Relations, 2013, p. 5) and, “by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training, up from 28 percent in 1973” (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 15).

But current U.S. college completion rates raise doubts about whether U.S. colleges can meet these needs (Morrill, 2013). In a competitive global marketplace, “other countries are lifting their high school and college attainment, while the United States is not” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2013, p. 1). The United States no longer leads the world in the rate of college completion; it now ranks twelfth among thirty-six countries in the higher education attainment of 25-34-year-olds (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). The United States is now one of only five OECD countries in which the proportion of 25-to-34-year-old men with post-secondary education is *less* than the proportion of 55-to-64-year-old men with post-secondary education.

Higher education needs to be not only available but effective in graduating students with the college-level skills and competencies that employers—and the economy—need. Those skills and competencies are discussed in Chapter 11.

Return on Investment

A generation or two ago, someone with a high school education had a good prospect of making a decent living. But in 2011 the median annual earnings of those in the U.S. holding only a high school diploma was under \$24,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). This makes postsecondary education an economic imperative for individuals as well as for society. While there are many benefits to a college education, as discussed in Chapter 5, college tuition and fees—and the time students spend in college—are viewed fundamentally as an individual economic investment leading to a better standard of living. Today, about 75 percent of entering full-time first-time students say that a very important reason they are going

to college is to make more money, and over 80 percent say an essential or very important goal is to be very well off financially. These percentages are up dramatically from about 45 percent and 33 percent, respectively, forty years ago (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2014; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007).

At the same time that the need for a college education has been growing, the costs of higher education have been persistently growing faster than the general cost of living (Evans, 2013). Today, the average tuition charged by *public* colleges in the United States is second highest among OECD countries (OECD, 2013), although it is offset to a degree by a federal investment in postsecondary financial aid reaching nearly \$180 billion in 2011 (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012).

Why is college so expensive in the United States? A major reason is that it is traditionally a labor-intensive endeavor (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013), and many of the costs associated with that model, such as health insurance, facilities upkeep, energy costs, and regulatory compliance, have been spiraling up. Another reason is that state support for public colleges has seen years of decline (Lederman, 2012), pushing more of the cost of public college onto students and their families.

Despite rising costs, an investment in higher education continues to pay off. U.S. citizens with more education are more likely to be employed, are more likely to be working full-time, and earn more on average over their lifetimes (Berger & Fisher, 2013; Council on Foreign Relations, 2013; Looney & Greenstone, 2012; OECD, 2013; Regnier, 2013), with lifetime earnings outstripping their investment. From the 1970s to 2012, the “college wage premium” doubled from 40 percent to 80 percent (Schramm, Aldeman, Rotherham, Brown, & Cross, 2013).

Of course, average earnings are not guarantees. Everyone knows someone with a college degree who is struggling to get by. Earnings of college graduates vary by job: musicians, video producers, preschool teachers, probation officers, social workers, and

others in public service and the arts may earn less than accountants, chemists, and engineers. Some employers require college degrees for positions that may not pay well and for which a degree is not essential to job performance. The head of Enterprise Rent-a-Car has said, for example, that Enterprise hires people who are “college educated” simply because it is “a sign to use that they’ve accomplished something” (“Enterprise asks,” 2006, p. 6B).

The variability in earnings of college graduates has led to calls to provide consumer information comparing tuition against starting salaries as a crude measure of return on investment. It has also led to increasing questions across the United States about the value of spending time and tuition on courses such as those in the liberal arts that do not appear to relate directly to a better-paying career. I talk more about the liberal arts and general education in Chapter 12.

The Changing College Student

Anyone who works at a U.S. college today knows that today’s students are very different from the college students of a couple of generations ago.

Changing demographics. More people in the United States than ever before are going to college, and they are from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Today, for example, 43 percent of undergraduates are over 24 years old (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012).

Fewer with the resources to pay for college. The percent of 25-year-olds with student loan debt has increased from 25 percent to 43 percent in less than a decade, and the average student loan balance has nearly doubled in the same time (Brown & Caldwell, 2013).

Weaker preparation for success in college (ACE, 2012). Some of today’s college students are those for whom learning does not come easily and who have always struggled a bit in school. Lectures and homework assignments are not enough to help them succeed in

college; they need research-informed teaching and support, as discussed in Chapter 12.

Fewer following the traditional college pathway, in which high school graduates immediately go on to college as full-time students and remain at one college until they graduate. Today, only one-quarter of U.S. college students are attending college full-time at residential colleges (Complete College America, 2011). As they increasingly try to balance college classes with a job and family responsibilities, today's students are more likely to “stop out”—stop attending college for a semester or more, and then return—and “swirl” among colleges and programs as their needs, career paths, and lifestyle change and evolve (Kelly & Hess, 2013).

Jargon Alert!

Swirl

Student *swirl* (Adelman, 2006) refers to students moving back and forth among multiple colleges, such as between community and four-year colleges. Students who swirl may not transfer formally from one college to another.

Initiatives to Address These Concerns

In recent years there has been an explosion of efforts attempting to address these concerns, including:

- Research and ventures on improving student learning and student success, discussed in Chapter 12
- Challenges to the traditional higher education model of full-time face-to-face study of credit-bearing courses, discussed in Chapter 6
- The rise of national accountability movements, discussed in Chapter 16

- Advancements and improvements in the assessment of student learning, discussed in Chapter 13
- Calls for accreditation reform, discussed in Chapter 2

For More Information

The two go-to resources for breaking developments in the world of higher education are *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (www.chronicle.com) and *Inside Higher Ed* (www.insidehighered.com). Both deliver daily e-mails with links to the day's news.

Another great resource for cutting-edge information on the forces affecting higher education is the Lumina Foundation's daily e-mail, *Higher Ed News*. It consists of links to news stories and newly released studies, white papers, and the like.

Jeffrey Selingo's *College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* (2013) is an excellent review and analysis of the challenges currently facing U.S. higher education.