

Politics and Education: Position-Based Battles, But Where's the Case for Reform?



INTRODUCTION

THE NEW ACADEMIC YEAR LAUNCHES AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF CLASHES AND COMPROMISES BETWEEN STATE LEGISLATURES AND PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN RECENT MONTHS, MUCH OF IT ABOUT MONEY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY. WHILE SOME STATES PROVIDED SHORT-TERM RELIEF TO STRUGGLING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS BECAUSE OF UNANTICIPATED TAX REVENUES, IN MOST CASES THE LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS ABOUT THE BIG ISSUES WERE LEFT UNRESOLVED. SOME EXAMPLES:

- Texas Gov. Rick Perry announced he would not seek a fourth term after ten years of pitched controversies over the role of research, teaching, the regents, access, accountability, metrics and overall quality in higher education in his state. What's been happening in Texas essentially is a template for the issues in other states.
- Newly elected North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory, whose state has developed a premier university system, declared that an "educational elite" supports "worthless courses" in the liberal arts that don't lead to jobs and threatened to withhold tax funding.
- In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott lobbied university leaders one-by-one to cut tuition rates, bypassing boards of trustees who have the authority.
- Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Washington and Nebraska are among the states where universities have agreed to hold off tuition increases if lawmakers give them more money. California Gov. Jerry Brown signed a budget bill that includes a 5 percent increase for public universities as part of a four-year plan to boost state funding by 20 percent while freezing tuition.

While the picture varied across the nation, linking state funding and college costs was a consistent theme, yet sharp strokes of fiscal pens alone will not produce the comprehensive reform necessary for the 21st century, and they are detrimental to efforts to recoup educational and economic advantage for the U.S. A better model would be for political, government, business and community leaders to convene in data-informed environment and address the real issues. This critical first step could refocus the conversation on the "value" of college and university assets and how to grow them. Then legislators and educators can use those standards to determine the ROI of their investments – and their collaboration for constructive change.

VALUE PROPOSITION #1 – AN EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Increasingly a bachelor's degree is a prerequisite to employers, who are looking for the best qualified workers for entry-level positions. What's more, according to a *Chronicle of Higher Education Special Report*, new graduates applying for jobs often do not have the analytical, communication, research and problem-solving skills necessary to succeed in today's workplace and thus to continually improve their quality of life.

In a survey of 318 private and nonprofit sector executives this year, 93 percent of respondents agreed that "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major." In this report by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, about 75 percent of employers surveyed also stated that they would advise their own children to pursue a liberal arts degree that teaches broad-based knowledge and critical thinking skills. While there are other well-rounded paths to an undergraduate degree through business, science and engineering, liberal arts has always had a practical dimension directed at employability and cultural literacy, or the skills, knowledge and humanistic awareness needed for its times.

Not only will graduates in today's global society likely have several jobs and careers, technology is constantly shifting how things work. *New York Times'* columnist Thomas L. Friedman contends that graduates need to be "innovation-ready." The value-added of a higher education is that graduates have the ability to learn and assess information and acquire new knowledge when they need it. Institutions that are strengthening the fundamentals of their liberal arts and core curricula are, in fact, responding to market demand.

VALUE PROPOSITION #2 – EDUCATION WHERE YOU WANT IT AND WHEN YOU WANT IT

If nothing else, MOOC-mania has stirred up a healthy debate over creative and pragmatic alternatives to traditional classrooms in traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions as the favored path to a diploma. Rapidly diversifying learning technologies (iPads, mobile and more) and preferences of students are forcing academic and administrative resisters out of their comfort zones. The future is taking shape around course redesign in a variety of disciplines, incentivizing faculty to change, rapid growth in new models such as game-based learning for a new generation of learners and self-paced learning that improves performance and speeds the time to degree.

Accelerated three-year degrees and the "\$10,000 degree" movement in states like Texas, Florida and Ohio have engaged academics and legislators, though not necessarily in collaboration, to come up with the next best thing. Retention is at the top of legislative lists since almost half of students in two- and four-year institutions currently fail to complete their degrees in six years. Since Tennessee kicked off the idea in 2010, many states have now tied public university funding to degree completion and other metrics that guide funding formulas.

In addition to college costs, a significant motivator for these efforts has been the rise of the “non-traditional” or what some call the “post-traditional” learner. Data show that the “traditional” 18- to 22-year-old full-time undergraduate student residing on campus *represents little more than 15 percent of the higher education population in the United States*. New statistics data from the U.S. Department of Education reveal that while enrollment of students 18-24 increased 52 percent between 1996 and 2010, the group will grow only 10 percent between 2010 and 2021. Conversely, students who are 25-34 years old will increase by 20 percent and those 35 and over by 25 percent.

This diverse group of post-traditional learners includes adults who want to complete or advance their degrees, part-time students who work and part-time students with families, among others, but they all have one feature in common: they are rarely opting for a four-year campus residential experience. Serving this growing population of students is upending both educational delivery models and approaches to “student success.”

VALUE PROPOSITION #3 – A GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE U.S. THROUGH RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The previous trends add up to dangerous consequences for the United States and our overall quality of life and well-being. Failing to produce enough educated graduates with the right knowledge and skills means that our businesses and industries will lack the talent they need to maintain or innovate – and to provide even more jobs. A McKinsey Global Institute analysis in 2011 predicted a shortage of up to 1.5 million workers with bachelor’s degrees or higher in 2020.

Coupled with this scenario, declines in state funding threaten the ability of major public research universities to produce premier research that is vital to a competitive U.S. economy and the well-being of society. In 2012, the National Science Foundation reported a 20 percent decline in per-student funding for the nation’s 101 major public research universities between 2002 and 2010, with 10 states; 10 states had decreases ranging from 30 to as high as 48 percent.

Former Oklahoma Gov. and U.S. Senator David Boren, now the president of the University of Oklahoma, knows the issues well from both sides of the aisle as an elected official and a university administrator. In an editorial in the *Tulsa World* in April, Boren argued that “most Americans have barely noticed a trend that gravely threatens our future.” With “almost no public debate,” he charged, “our budget decisions are causing the dismantling of our system of public higher education,” which has undergirded U.S. economic growth and strength since World War II. “In only a decade we have dropped from first place in the world to 12th place in the percentage of our young people going on to college.”

Another state has accepted this challenge in a significant way to advance its self-interests, providing a model that others might consider. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy signed “Next Generation Connecticut” into law in June to begin revitalizing the state’s economy through unprecedented investments in STEM research and education at the University of Connecticut. A \$1.5 billion construction component will invest in new scientific laboratories, advanced equipment, new classrooms and housing; another \$137 million in operating funds will hire hundreds of faculty and expand the student body in STEM fields – in response to the bioscience, engineering, digital media and technology jobs that are revitalizing the state’s

economy. The governor sponsored the bill, which was endorsed by more than 100 businesses and received overwhelming bipartisan support in the General Assembly.

VALUE PROPOSITION #4 – FOSTERING NEW DIALOGUE BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND EDUCATORS

The very value proposition of higher education is being challenged – so we propose that politicians and educators become far more collaborative in developing solutions instead of butting heads. This could start with politicians investing more time in learning about the mission and opportunities of their colleges and universities, not grandstanding on headline-making proposals that dilute both energy and constructive debates.

“Creating a New Compact Between States and Public Higher Education,” which was released in late June by a task force of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, is a positive response to the turbulence of the past few years. The blue-ribbon panel, which focused on “making public higher education a state priority,” urged lawmakers and public higher education leaders to form a new alliance on accountability, finances and affordability.

As critical first steps, they emphasized that university leaders must “address public higher education’s change-averse reputation, especially as it involves online and other alternative educational delivery models,” and that both sides “develop a shared understanding of critical higher education priorities in their state.”

By contrast, the “Next Generation Connecticut” legislation passed and signed in June may be the first to show what’s possible when government, business and higher education collaborate with the end in mind. Construction investments of \$1.5 billion will bring scientific laboratories, advanced equipment, new classrooms and housing; another \$137 million in operating funds will hire hundreds of faculty and expand the student body in STEM fields – in response to the bioscience, engineering, digital media and technology jobs that are revitalizing the state’s economy. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy sponsored the bill, which was endorsed by more than 100 businesses and received overwhelming bipartisan support in the General Assembly.

It’s reasonable for lawmakers and politicians to hold public institutions to tenets that guide private enterprise – a commitment to innovation, market-driven outcomes and effective and efficient operations. The good news is that there are signs of change, but a surer path toward reform would be the collaboration of politicians, university executives, business and community leaders and philanthropists to develop a new “master plan” for public higher education. Through their leadership they would demonstrate commitment to real results and restore their constituents’ confidence in the value of one of the nation’s greatest assets – attainable higher education.

AUGUST 2013

*By RJ Valentino, President, and Janis Johnson, Senior Partner
www.napagroup.com*