

Changing the Subject

Costs, graduation rates and the importance of rethinking the undergraduate curriculum

By Robert Zemsky and Joni Finney

A PALPABLE EDGINESS now swirls about much of higher education. While business as usual still holds sway—at least most of the time and in most institutions—the specter that haunts is a future of escalating risk: for public institutions, more, perhaps even draconian, budget cuts; for private institutions, new worries about where their students are going to come from and whether those students can continue to afford the tuitions they must charge; and for the nation’s richest and most selective institutions, a humbling sense of false pride and broken promises.

Not surprisingly then, just two issues now dominate discussions of higher education: costs and outcomes. American higher education today is an expensive enterprise that frequently lacks both the will and the know-how to do things differently. It is also an enterprise in which an embarrassingly large number of students start but do not finish a baccalaureate education—that, and the fact that completion rates all too often track the wealth, location and ethnicity of enrolled students.

What does surprise us, however, is the fact that these two concerns—escalating costs and disappointing attainment rates—have long been treated as separate issues. It is a division of responsibility as well as blame that mirrors higher education’s view of itself as having a hard side where monies are concerned, and a softer, more nurturing side when helping students achieve their academic ambitions.

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Over the last year we have increasingly come to ask: Are we sure these concerns have either separate causes or separate consequences? Is it not possible that controlling costs, encouraging more adaptable and nimble institutions, and achieving higher graduation rates each requires the same rethinking of a collegiate production function that

has become both too expensive and too cumbersome to achieve the academic purposes for which it was originally designed?

...and spend all the money they raise

Since the 1980s, the dominant explanation for how and why colleges and universities cost so much has been Howard Bowen’s telling observation that “universities will raise all the



money they can and spend all the money they raise.” The way to excellence and reputation lies principally in having more money to spend on the good things colleges and universities want to achieve. Just as clearly, the quickest and easiest way to make colleges and universities cost less is to starve them of revenue—a proposition that the recession and state budget shortfalls are now testing with a vengeance.

Given the near absence of new monies and the looming presence of more economic bad news, higher education’s leaders have come increasingly to portray themselves as being caught in what John Immerwahr of Public Agenda has described as an “Iron Triangle.” Somehow they must find ways to simultaneously control costs, increase quality, and improve access—and that, they argue, is simply not possible.

State policymakers, less persuaded by their universities’ arguments and newly frustrated by their universities’ reluctance to change, have begun to experiment with strategies that use the power of the public purse to exact greater efficiencies on the part of their states’ public systems of higher education. And yet the result can best be described as an operational cul-de-sac. Rhetorical tough love hasn’t worked. Budget incentives have not yielded changed educational processes. Reducing state appropriations, along with limiting tuition increases, has yielded public colleges and universities that spend less money without becoming either better or demonstrably different. Salaries can be reduced, positions left unfilled, perks and amenities eliminated, all without impacting the basic production functions that shape the enterprise’s teaching and research missions.

The tragedy of the commons

It is this dismal prospect that has led us to search for a different set of strategies for controlling and perhaps even lowering the cost of a college education. Here, the question we asked ourselves was simply, What costs the most money? And

our answer: the curriculum!

We start, then, with the curriculum, invoking a concept economists use to illustrate how perfectly rational actions on the part of individuals can, when summed, produce unintended and devastating consequences. The “tragedy of the commons” tells the story of what happens when a

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community-owned pasture (or commons) is at or near its capacity in terms of the size of the herd that can be fed without destroying the pasture itself. Even then it remains in the interest of each farmer to increase the size of his own herd since he, like each of his neighbors, has a right to feed all the cattle he acquires on the same pasture where his, as well as his neighbors’ cows graze. The problem occurs when the total number of animals exceeds the pasture’s grazing capacity, and the pasture begins a near

irreversible cycle of decline. For economists, the moral of the tale is that a perfectly rational act (the individual sending just one more animal to graze on the commons) can have a devastating impact on the system as a whole (the withering of a productive pasture).

In many ways the dilemma now facing higher education reflects the tragedy of the commons. Three decades of constantly adding new programs and more choices to the undergraduate curriculum have yielded colleges and universities that are economically unsustainable and educationally dysfunctional. To understand how this came to pass, we need to revisit a piece of curricular history that dates back to the 1960s. Sparked by student revolts in Europe and a wave of student-led political protests in this country, American colleges and universities responded by granting students more personal freedom and by adopting curricular changes that reduced both general education and graduation requirements. In time, the faculty, who had at first opposed student demands that they be allowed to “do their own thing,” discovered that what was good for the goose was even better for the gander. Few faculty enjoyed grading senior theses or comprehensive examinations, or teaching the required course sequences that comprised many major and pre-major programs at most institutions.

What took hold was a laissez-faire environment in which nearly every possible subject was admitted to the collegiate curriculum, provided the new course was taught by a fully qualified member of the faculty. Whole new disciplines and concentrations were similarly added, often in response to demands that full recognition be granted to specialties that previously had been considered outside the accepted canon. At the same time, except in the sciences, most courses became stand-alone experiences not requiring prerequisites or, in fact, much if any coordination among the faculty who taught similar courses in the same department or discipline.

For those of us on the faculty, the lessening and then the elimination of most requirements proved a bonanza. We could teach what we wanted—principally our own

specialties—when we wanted, without having to worry too much about how or what our colleagues were teaching. Each course became a truly independent experience, and our principal responsibility was to absorb our fair share of the enrollments, thus ensuring our department would not lose valuable faculty lines.

For students, this commitment to unfettered curricular choice proved more than appealing—a chance not only to do their own thing, but to change their minds, not just once but frequently. The curriculum became a vast smorgasbord of tempting offerings. Faculty seeking to insure adequate enrollment were careful to tailor their requirements and expectations to meet student tastes. Students could design their own majors and concentrations. But as has become increasingly obvious, too many students also got lost, unsure of what it took to graduate, on the one hand, or, on the other, unsure as to what was actually being asked of them in terms of either subject mastery or learning skills.

Institutions faced even greater problems—and here is the core of the financial side of our argument. The more open-ended the curriculum became—the more faculty and students were free to set their own schedules—the more resources, both financial and human, the institution required to meet its educational obligations. Adding more courses and majors to the curriculum forced the institution to spread its current faculty resources ever thinner, to increase the number of full-time faculty, or, as has proven most often the case, to hire more adjunct faculty.

The result was an almost endless series of undergraduate curricula in which “almost anything goes.” That observation was supplied by the Association of American Colleges (AAC)’s “Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community” (1985). The report went on to complain, “We have reached a point at which we are more confident of the length of a college education than its content and purpose.” What was true then is even more so today. Repeated calls for greater efficiency and the more parsimonious expenditure of public funds and tuition receipts have been rhetorically responded to and then largely put aside. In the meantime the fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum continues unimpeded.

And as before, worries about the escalating cost of an undergraduate education, on the one hand, and, on the other, the large numbers of students who begin but do not finish a baccalaureate education have remained separate

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concerns. Those who focus on costs talk about outmoded work rules including tenure, presidential salaries and perks, the avariciousness of athletic departments, and higher education's commitment to research always trumping its commitment to teaching. Those who worry about the curriculum continue to focus on its fragmentation,

on a corresponding devaluing of the liberal arts, and on the continued sense that “almost anything goes” when it comes to approving new courses, new majors, even new disciplines.

Curricular change as the solution

The way out of this box, we believe, is to change the curriculum to productively constrain both student and faculty choice. We would start by having students choose not among an expanding menu of courses, but among a much shorter list of curricular pathways—that is, an ordered sequence of courses linked together by faculty design. This curricular structure would yield a much more efficient match between student needs and institutional resources. There would be fewer underenrolled courses and, not so incidentally, more courses taught early in the day as well as on Mondays and Fridays (perhaps even on a Saturday morning).

We would also use a cohort model in which sets of students take most, perhaps even all of their courses together. Faculty responsible for remedial and developmental educational programs using a cohort model report important learning advantages leading to substantial increases in student attainment. At the University of Pennsylvania we teach in a graduate program that employs a fixed curricular pathway (no electives at all) and a cohort model in which peer learning is a constant, and faculty discussions of what and how each of us is teaching occur regularly.

Several other innovations would be made more likely by this restructuring of the curriculum. A changed curriculum that employs well-defined pathways through the curriculum could also award credit for demonstrating competence in the subject without having the student sit through a particular course. In general we believe a changed curriculum could take greater advantage of technology, both to achieve better learning outcomes and to verify that specific competencies have been mastered. In the process of recasting the curriculum it should also be possible to take greater account of the large numbers of students who will earn their undergraduate degrees while attending several, rather than just one, undergraduate institutions. Finally, it is even possible that such a curriculum would allow students to graduate in three rather than four years.

The kind of reform we have in mind has one final distinguishing characteristic—it cannot be accomplished without full faculty engagement. Only the faculty can design the curricular pathways we have in mind—a lesson that those who constantly prattle about greater efficiency and more learning productivity need to keep in mind. ♦

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