

Higher Education Reform

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Something needs to be done about higher education in the United States. Not only is it becoming ridiculously expensive, forcing parents and students to take on huge amounts of debt, the cost to taxpayers who support the public colleges and universities is a constant source of debate in state legislatures where, more and more frequently, budgetary constraints require reductions in funding that in turn put an even greater burden on the institutions, resulting in a further increase in tuition. As tuition and fees have gone up, the accessibility to education beyond high school for young people in families below median income levels has become increasingly difficult. What I propose below results from my experience teaching at a major state university (Colorado State University in Fort Collins) and at a regional community college (Colorado Mountain College).

My first recommendation, and probably the most controversial for some, is that all colleges and universities get out of the business of professional sports. (Yes, professional. Compare the coaches' salaries and the athletic department's budgets with those of the professors and academic departments and tell me otherwise). Since when does a school's football team or basketball team have any bearing whatsoever on its success at teaching Shakespeare or Quantum Mechanics? Will a doctor, engineer, or first-grade teacher be better off in their professional careers because their undergraduate institution ranked in the top 10 in an intercollegiate sport? A close look at a school's intercollegiate sports income and expenses, including the construction and maintenance of sports facilities and a large stadium, team travel and sports scholarships, would reveal that in most cases it is a losing proposition. College sports should be limited to co-educational intramural sports, bringing the advantages associated with sports participation (teamwork, fair play, and health and fitness) to the entire student body and not just a select few.

Second, faculty tenure should become a thing of the past. Contract renewal should be based on the individual's effectiveness at teaching his/her subject material and, in the case of the graduate faculty, based on their research activities. A teacher should expect contract renewal following a decent performance evaluation, just as any good employee in businesses everywhere. Student evaluations may be included if they are ascertained to be based on a fair evaluation of the teacher's performance, and not based on his or her affability, leniency in testing and grading, etc.

The institutional structure of the education environment also needs serious reform. Fortunately, the infrastructure for this reform is already in place. The changes I propose here involve reorganizing and changing focus for the institutions that currently exist. Even so, these changes will not be easy, for many of the faculty and administrative personnel involved will need to reorient their thinking and change some long held biases and attitudes.

First, graduate school courses and faculty should be completely separated from the university's undergraduate programs. My experience has shown that for the most part (there are always exceptions that prove the rule) distinguished researchers make very poor undergraduate teachers. For one thing, their principal interests lie in furthering their research, enhancing their careers, their recognition among peers, and, often, establishing independent, for-profit companies on the side. The result is too little time

and attention invested in helping struggling undergraduates to learn the basics of a particular subject. For example, one of my colleagues who was assigned to teach undergraduate organic chemistry filled his lectures with material far beyond anything a beginning student could hope to understand, but covered by giving 5-choice (a through e) multiple choice tests and giving a "C" grade to anyone with a 20% score or better. (It doesn't take a math genius to figure out that random guessing without even reading the question should result in a 20% score). Not surprisingly, this professor's student evaluations at the end of the course ranked him among the top teachers on the faculty.

With their own distinct division within the university system, these individual's job descriptions and requirements would be quite different from those of the remaining faculty. No longer strapped with teaching large undergraduate courses, they would have more time to pursue their research goals, write grant applications, and teach the much smaller graduate classes consisting of very motivated and highly prepped students intent on learning the more esoteric details of subjects relating to their chosen professions. Trips to attend conferences and workshops would not be nearly so disruptive to their teaching schedule. And as is currently the case, their salaries could remain at two to three times those of their teaching colleagues, justified by the money they bring into the school from research grants. By separating the functions and faculty of the graduate school from the rest of the university, it will become much easier to perform cost/benefit analyses of individual departments and of individual faculty members to determine who is really benefiting the university and furthering its mission. In many cases, the grants obtained and patent royalties earned might clearly justify keeping a highly paid professor on the graduate staff, while in other cases it might be obvious that some faculty members are simply working the system and should be evaluated with a bit more scrutiny.

With the graduate school and graduate (research oriented) faculty separated into their own division, the undergraduate teaching mission of the university can be more easily and honestly addressed. Here the main goal is education, and the faculty hired to perform this task are no longer expected to excel in research while maintaining a heavy teaching load and spending countless hours working one-on-one with students who might be having difficulty understanding basic material. Faculty evaluations can be based on performance gauged by student achievement as judged by standardized final exams (see below). Students requiring remedial work can more readily be identified and directed to resources that provide the needed background material. With the emphasis now on quality teaching, research in education and the psychology of learning can be pursued to study new and better approaches to teaching, an area that, under the current system, is generally given short shrift as being unworthy of a faculty member's time and effort. This environment would encourage implementation of new and more effective teaching techniques.

The greatest change of all, however, will be in the role of the junior, or community, college system. Here emphasis has always been on teaching the basic courses in each major field of study. Since only the first two years of a four year undergraduate curriculum is offered, a Master's degree should be a sufficient requirement for the faculty. A major part of my proposal involves a substantial increase in the degree of coordination between the local colleges and universities and their regional two-year institutions. It is essential that students receive full credit for coursework taken at a community college when he or she transfers to a four-year institution. But for that to happen, the faculty at the four-year college must be assured that the quality and depth of material covered at the two-year school is on par with the course work at the larger institution. For this to happen, one of the job requirements for the undergraduate faculty must be to work with those teaching at the community colleges, both in

curriculum planning and development, and in achieving a high degree of professionalism in handling their classes.

In some cases, it may turn out that such a close relationship between these two institutions can be achieved that the associated college or university can turn the entire first two years of their college curricula over to two-year institutions. This would, of course, enhance the enrollment for the two-year college while enabling the undergraduate program at the college or university to concentrate on the “upper division” classes. An added advantage for students would be in those areas where the student might require remedial work. The community college is in a better position to both recognize this need on the part of the student, and to address this need by offering the necessary remedial courses, something that colleges and universities are often reluctant to do.

Setting the community college classes to the same level as their university equivalents would considerably lower the cost of higher education for a great many students. Gone would be the stigma currently associated with spending the first year or two at a local community college. Many students would be able to stay at home. Others might be able to rent rooms at nominal cost at the homes of fellow students. Teacher salaries would be elevated to be on par with those teaching undergraduate classes at the university, and the community college could increase its full-time faculty and pursue a greater emphasis on quality teaching. Remedial classes would become the domain of part-time instructors and evening classes. Future college students could then work days while making up deficiencies resulting from inadequate high school preparation, and at the same time save money for future college expenses.

At the university level, the undergraduate faculty would have fewer classes to teach, but in place of the lower division classes there would be the requirement to oversee the quality of teaching at the various regional community colleges that would be serving as “feeder” schools for the university’s future students. Thus there would be no massive layoffs of current faculty. By becoming more involved in the surrounding communities, the university would shed some of its elitist aura and find itself responding more to the specific needs of the people it purports to serve.

Finally, there is the issue of the elephant in the closet that most traditional colleges wish they could ignore – online instruction. If the goal of higher education is to provide students with a broad yet useful base of knowledge in order to prepare them for successful citizenship and professional competence, then relevant knowledge obtained from all available sources should be taken into account. Yet the quality and depth of online instruction is quite variable, and will probably continue to be so. The only solution to this dilemma will be for each for-credit class to have an associated set of standardized final exams that accurately reflect the material content judged important and sufficient for mastery of the course.

Students enrolling in a college or university should be allowed to “test out” with full credit for courses for which they have prepared through community college or online course work by taking these standardized exams and demonstrating a satisfactory level of competence on them. There should be no recrimination on the part of administration or faculty in this regard. Students should be able to enroll at the level appropriate to their degree of mastery in each field, without regard to how or where that knowledge was obtained. These same tests could be used to evaluate incoming students’ competence levels obtained through community college classes.

Only when these reforms become widely accepted and firmly implanted into our higher education system will these institutions be able to address the needs of our 21st century youth. At the same time, the cost of obtaining a college degree should come down, reducing the financial burden that our current graduates are saddled with through a substantial part of their lives.