

Looking Forward in Ominous Times: Two Pathways for Urban Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Higher education is in turmoil. In an age of growing and significant inequality, heightened racism, metropolitan resegregation, and demographic challenges, colleges and universities suffer countless consequences. Joined with a punishing public narrative that questions higher education's purposes, integrity, and necessity, public support for colleges and universities is in sharp decline. The results of this new political economy are severe underfunding and financial stress, enrollment issues, and heightened student debt, leaving very limited degrees of institutional freedom to alter this equation.

Colleges juggle agendas and work their way through budget dramas that results in sizing down their expenses sharply on the false hope that austerity is a formula to fiscal stability. Politically, a cloud of intensified and unfavorable governmental regulation looms over the higher education landscape and it promises to be at odds with how colleges and universities have perceived themselves, organized their governance, and designed student learning. There are alternative, progressive voices calling for free tuition, but these proposals come with their own attempts to narrow institutional freedom and provide no additional funding for added resources. Others predict that social media and innovative technologies will radically solve these problems on their own, but their version of student learning is a spartan model of education reduced merely to knowledge transmission and workforce preparation. Where are the necessary attributes for a modern, competent, and flexible workforce? These attributes include creativity, engagement, emotional development, ethical learning, and social consciousness.

The future will likely not be limited to these dynamics; unforeseen forces will play a role, but two specific outcomes will present themselves. One outcome is a market driven pathway and the other is entitled "the engagement pathway." As stakeholders in urban and metropolitan colleges and universities, we can let the market model work its internal logic and redesign higher education around a purely commercial philosophy or we can assert our agency in reinventing

higher learning so that it is robust, affordable, and engaging. Either our absence or our resilient creativity will spell the outcome.

The Market Model: A Dystopian Future

Left alone, market-based systems conform to a certain logic; when unfettered by intervening regulation and when composed of multiple providers, markets reward competition framed around cost, price, productivity, and sales volume. The direction of competitive activity moves significantly toward maximization of economic advantages and logic favors pricing that overwhelms rival competitors. Independent of the moral sensibilities of its leadership, any failure to fully maximize net revenue and adequately manage price and cost almost certainly will result in competitors who follow the logic of economic advantage, finding advantages in capturing more of the market and more revenue. Reinvesting additional revenue into increased productivity from reduced labor costs and greater use of technology allow the maximizers to outmaneuver the competition. Regardless of how communally sensitive institutional leadership may pride itself, competitors who have a lower cost of production and higher net revenue retain the ability to undercut competitors by lowering their pricing and consequently gain greater market share. The end game is to bury the competition, absorb their customers, and increase the bottom line.

While this pure type of market scenario rarely exists in full, the reward system points providers toward the market logic of competition and net revenue maximization. The underlying drama takes place in the actual production process and in higher education this means how we organize, cost, price, and deliver learning and, ultimately, degrees. For the last forty years American universities and colleges have been caught up in a somewhat similar market logic. The consequences of the market approach have proven to be significant at first but rather dramatic when put in a larger perspective.

The uninterrupted market model pathway will have a punishing impact on the future design and governance of urban and metropolitan universities and colleges. Some of the market logic has been at play in the current moment. For instance, the market model prizes cost reductions and productivity increases. The first step is usually the substitution of part-time labor for full-time labor; for the last twenty years, universities and colleges have hired part-time faculty in very large numbers. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data in 1970, four out of five college professors were full-time employees, with roughly 400,000 employed full time and 100,000 employed part time. By 2015, that ratio was virtually equal with approximately 800,000 full-time faculty members compared to 750,000 part-timers. By 2016, the ratio actually was equal. Part-time faculty are paid less, retain few or no employee benefits and teach large enrollment classes.

Eventually market logic pushes colleges to begin the substitution of technology for full and part-time faculty as a means to increase significantly the student / teacher ratio, one of the key metrics for controlling labor productivity and ultimately lowering the cost of educating a student. There have been nascent attempts by educational providers to use mass online courses (MOOCs) under the instruction of one or a few instructors to replace a large swath of traditional full-time faculty. As an unsophisticated and regressive approach, these efforts have largely failed due to their impersonal, anonymous, and unaccountable format, resulting in extremely low completion

rates and minimal learning retention. We do see, however, the rise of nonprofit attempts to compete with online education by major universities, initially reaching out to new markets of adult learners but now moving quickly to provide this approach for traditional undergraduate and graduate students. Much of this is about gaining market share through dramatic increases in enrollment and net revenue. Clearly more nuanced and personalized forms of the use of social media and online technology will appear and then we could see an accelerated rate of replacing full-time faculty. The market logic will significantly use this same dynamic in replacing administration and staff employees as well.

Market logic will dictate the inevitable evolution of mergers, acquisitions, and closures among universities and colleges. The market will punish an abundance of higher education providers, particularly those incapable of realizing significant economies of scale. We see the beginnings of this process with a number of closures and some mergers, mostly in the northeast but likely coming to a neighborhood near you.

Finally, market logic will invite nonacademic providers in direct competition with traditional nonprofit higher education. Amazon.com, Inc., and other large tech companies are currently moving in this direction. By reducing higher learning to direct workforce development, nonacademic providers will find little use for relying on public and private universities who retain governance and protocols that are often at odds with corporate priorities. The reductionist ideology now swallowing many community college systems is also finding its way into defining undergraduate education among state legislatures. This will result in reducing higher learning to apprentice education and ultimately mega tech companies and other conglomerates will find it affordable to produce the same results with greater productivity and flexibility.

While a dystopian and mordant description of the future of urban and metropolitan higher education, the market logic model will be a major force in shaping one possible future unless higher education and its leaders find a sustainable alternative model. One does exist.

The Engagement Model: Placing Community and Collaboration at the Center

The alternative to the pure market model is the engagement model. This approach values collaboration, integration, and partnerships over competition and revenue maximization. The engagement approach will require a major shift within the culture of higher education leadership and its success will demand courage by trustees, regents, and alumni. Additionally, it will need faculty members and administrators to be their best creative selves.

The engagement model is a pathway to fiscal stability. It creates added revenue and lowers educational costs by building on greater economies of scale. A greater division of labor among partnering institutions will realign costs and sharing infrastructure and back office costs will provide important savings. Redesigning the delivery of learning will provide a future model for prizing higher impact teaching practices. By focusing on a learning model that prizes experiential and civic learning, the engagement model provides a foundation for a new delivery system more compatible with a community-derived and problem-based curriculum, which emphasize the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) essential learning outcomes, such

as critical thinking, effective communication skills, cultural competency and diversity learning, and ethical and civic responsibility.

The engagement model is predicated on several foundational elements. First, collaborative partnerships are essential among universities and colleges. This is a difficult process that necessitates a dramatic cultural shift among senior institutional leadership and institutional cultures. Having spent their respective careers promoting the brands and niche qualities of their respective institutions to prospective students, families, alumni, foundations, and donors, presidents and senior officers must now redirect their efforts toward linking with former competitors. Colleges and universities now compete for students often by engaging in an arms war in housing and athletic facilities, dining services, and excessive institutional financial aid among other expenses. This is very problematic overall and this behavior drives up cost. In fact, increased competition in higher education, similar to health care, doesn't reduce price. Quite the opposite, it drives up cost in an oxymoronic fashion to even the most experienced economic theorists. The engagement model poses a more effective way to contain, if not reduce, cost and, ultimately, pricing, relying on inter-university collaboration. To gain economies of scale, senior leadership must find ways to share infrastructure costs in areas such as dining, maintenance, housing, insurance, endowment management, pension management fees, human resources, employee health care, auditing, and similar functions. Acting in a larger network of colleges and universities as a coordinated network will allow for greater leverage in purchasing and providing these support services.

The most impactful approach would be designed around a common network of institutions where each member institution would retain its individual name, endowment, and alumni but work under a banner promoting the opportunities for students, communities, and research available in a larger envelope of aligned and coordinated governance model. Not unlike a coordinated common market, individual institutional prerogatives would require the thoughtful balancing of network goals. There are some analogs for this model in American healthcare and banking networks. Statecraft would define executive leadership as well as decisive and local decision making within the primary institution. Patience, resiliency, and openness will be required of all the other institutional stakeholders.

After a time, when experience and trust are baked into the partnerships, educational and curricular integration across institutions are possible, if not desirable. The network design can address curricular and programmatic redundancy evident in current mid-sized and small colleges and universities, and it also can open up creative, exciting new curricular models of integrated teaching, learning, and research where an expanded resource base allows for deeper opportunities across institutions for both faculty and students.

Another dimension of the engagement model calls for deep partnerships with primarily, but not exclusively, local communities. The "anchor institution" approach is quickly becoming a benchmark for many in higher education where colleges and universities understand their relationship to specific communities or neighborhoods as essential identities where all parties are anchored in each other's geographical and practical biographies. These relationships are not understood as coincidental but rather as essential to learning, teaching, as well as institutional and neighborhood civic and economic prosperity. This is especially poignant for university

partnerships embedded in those forgotten, shadow neighborhoods of deep social and economic inequality where the anchor's work deeply transforms both the community and the university. Opportunities are open for individuals, communities, and all the stakeholders in the campus community. In these places the civic responsibilities of higher education can be profoundly impactful in addressing legacies of racism, ethnic bias, and the lost talent, intelligence, and creativity that sits ignored and uncultivated. Learning how to participate democratically in rising together as partners framed around a common geography and shared values, local residents, college students, and the larger campus community practice the arts of democracy learning lessons of responsibility and common purpose amidst the unique and celebrated identities within a community. Leadership and service are transformed into a powerful agency for engaging the opportunities and challenges in the civic space available in a democratic nation. Here, too, resources are aggregated among universities, the corporate, nonprofit, and governmental sectors so that the impact is exponentially increased within and across the geography. Grants, gifts, and allocations are now strategic and more attractive. Metrics capture the power of integrated work.

There are numerous examples of powerful anchor work. My own experience comes from a local partnership across five key policy areas with the most impactful framed around a highly integrated K-16 educational pipeline in a predominately Mexican and African American community. The Port Richmond Partnership has created significant individual educational opportunities for those usually ignored, feared, and restricted to low expectations and even lower resources, but it has also provided remarkable sense of agency to K-12 teachers and administrators, college students, and local allies. It changed the college, its culture, makeup, and reinvigorated its sense of mission. There are a number of stories like this that are emerging within higher education, particularly in the urban and metropolitan space. I refer to this work as the "civic imperative" of higher education. The economic benefits to the university are located in more engaged learning resulting in greater student retention, completion, and ultimately in greater net tuition revenue. Additionally, greater philanthropy and public support has and likely will expand, as will institutional and network reputations.

The engagement model's community-defined curriculum is predicated on strategic partnerships aimed at solving significant community challenges. Colleges and university curriculums will be primarily, but not exclusively, focused on problem-based learning opportunities for student cohorts (learning communities) in a combination of traditional classroom, field-based, and online groupings. Working from the identification of community assets and building toward addressing problems, students produce signature work and faculty will develop needed research and scholarship.

A new pedagogy is likely needed to nourish the engagement model of community problem-centered learning. The current design of the academy will be an impediment. It is inflexible, static, and predicated on a labyrinth of stakeholder veto points. Reform and progress of the sort built into current engagement success most often requires the circumvention of the current governance and organization now fixed into academic and administrative silos. There are more impactful ways of organizing learning and teaching; healthcare offers a glimpse of what could serve as inspiration for a more appropriate analog for universities. Hospitals now work through integrated teams of primary care physicians, internists, specialist physicians including surgeons, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, doctors of nursing practice, hospitalists, RNs, and a

variety of related nursing assistants. Patient care will be touched by these teams through interdisciplinary and integrated work. In more complicated cases, mental health and social work colleagues may be threaded into the patient care. This system is promising because the patient is treated in a more comprehensive manner. The challenge, of course, is the quality of the integrated work, the transparency of the individual practitioners in sharing knowledge and accountability, and the need for coordination. Without these components the integrated model can falter. Hospitals and the many associated professions are challenging traditional hierarchies in order to find successful outcomes and very low recidivism of readmitted patients. The latter is very costly to hospitals given their reliance on private health insurance and governmental reimbursements.

Even with the limitations in this healthcare analogy, the individual health professionals are strategically focused on the patient, the maladies, and the exponential power of their shared expertise in finding medical strategies and successful practice. What can we learn from this practice structure that would align with a problem based, engagement model of learning and can it lead to greater learning at a lower cost of education?

Imagine a different organization of faculty work and student learning where integrated teams attend to cohort groupings of students centered around the engagement of a particular problem or sets of problems arising out of a common partnership with a local or allied community. These teams would consist of a master teacher coupled with a team composed of a pedagogical specialist trained in reflective practice, a media and communication arts specialist similarly credentialed, and two advanced peer educators providing support for student learning, effective presentation, and civic responsibility. Instead of a larger core of expensive faculty members, this model would stratify academic work along the same lines as the hospital teams. They are strategically focused on learning, signature work and direct community engagement in addressing meaningful problems.

This model would lower the cost of teaching and learning as it arranges work differently. The master teacher would possess the traditional PhD or equivalent doctoral degree and the specialists would hold master's degrees in appropriate areas. The peer educators would be interns. The teaching team will rely on high impact learning practices in meeting the essential learning outcomes for career preparation, civic responsibility, and lifelong learning skills.

Of course, moving from the current model of university academic work to this model is fraught with immense political challenges. Current faculty members would fear the disappearance of their privileges and protections. Unions would fear declining memberships and senior administrators might easily wilt in the face of such resistance. On the other hand, students, parents, employers, and taxpayers would cheer its presence.

This model will inevitably evolve in some form in the market model and/or by nonacademic providers. The new delivery system need not be imposed on faculty but rather developed as a steady, evolutionary reform where academic work is more exciting, creative, and collaborative. The necessary genius to nurture its acceptance will require the rare interpersonal skills born to those leaders across the higher education spectrum who possess the vision, resiliency, patience, and empathy that fosters trust and courage in those with whom they work. The preservation of

urban and metropolitan universities will need a more compelling engaged learning model that is more affordable, sustainable, and creative.

Finally, the partnerships discussed earlier in the engagement model will easily integrate our nonacademic partners more directly in problem-based learning. Hospitals, schools, nonprofits, and corporate partners will share resources, labor and costs in this new model. It is in their interest to develop a new work force and to solve seemingly intractable problems in their overcrowded emergency rooms, challenged elementary, middle and high schools, civic arenas, and research labs.

Summary

On the whole, futurists usually suffer badly. Unforeseen challenges, new political realities, technological breakthroughs, and cultural patterns shape futures as well as markets. As one realist once said, “real life happens in-between plans.” I suspect the future reality lies somewhere in between these two possible pathways. The larger point is that higher education can allow other societal forces to predominate in shaping its future or it can challenge itself to find a pathway to a future where its commitment to deep learning will be predicated on our core values of evidence-based and logical reasoning, openness to new and challenging ideas and educating students to play their roles as creative, ethical, and civic professionals, all necessary for a dynamic economy and a robust, diverse democracy.