INTRODUCTION

The system of higher education in the United States is both remarkably resilient and elastic. There is no denying, however, that those of us in higher education have faced and will continue to face tough challenges, as we seek to improve access and navigate a rapidly altering technological and fiscal landscape. I am presently an administrator at a remarkably well endowed non-profit (private) four year institution, a nationally ranked liberal arts university. Within the University of Richmond, I lead an unusual School, devoted to Leadership Studies. I am a historian of economics; my observations in what follows consequently also draw upon the work of eighteenth and nineteenth century political economists who thought deeply about the common good. It is perhaps helpful to remind the reader at the outset that economics at that time was far more accessible than it is today; and economists then were deeply engaged in topics of interest to the general public. In particular, they were at the forefront of efforts to achieve equity, human rights, and dignity for all; and they were convinced that equal access to educational opportunities would do much to mitigate existing, substantial inequities.

Before I proceed, I wish to recognize and, indeed, celebrate the significance of the Consortium on Higher Education Researchers (CHER). Whatever success we obtain in achieving economic and social progress going forward is in large measure because of research such as that encouraged within CHER.

In 1867, John Stuart Mill addressed the Inaugural class at St. Andrew’s University with these words to its professors:

You are to be a part of the public who are to welcome, encourage, and help forward the future intellectual benefactors of humanity; and you are, if possible, to furnish your contingent to the number of those benefactors. Nor let anyone be discouraged by what may seem, in moments of despondency, the lack of time and of opportunity. Those who know how to employ opportunities will often find that they can create them: and what we achieve depends less on the amount of time we possess, than on the use we make of our time. You and your like are the hope and resource of your country in the coming generation.
I fully agree with Mill (and I will return to this magnificent address more than once throughout the essay).

My main theme in what follows is optimistic: while we can do better (more on this in the substance of the essay), our system of higher education, with all its variety and variability, has performed remarkably well over its relatively short history (ours does not hark back many centuries as it does in Europe, where the Scholastics were largely responsible for establishing universities). But I will also stress some cautionary notes that in my view must temper the optimism: first, supposing the democratic ideal of equal access to advanced learning, we are failing to live up to that promise; and secondly the financial model for higher education is under severe strain. My main argument, that post-secondary education offers our greatest hope for the commonweal, provides the urgent appeal for why we must resolve these challenges and “offer the most real of gifts” to the next generation – equality of access to extraordinary educational opportunities.

The essay begins and ends with optimistic notes. In between, I provide a more detailed treatment of the very real challenges in higher education. I close with a defense of why, in my view, we must overcome those challenges – first, a strictly economic (and thus instrumental) rationale for equity in higher education, and then and perhaps more importantly, a defense of post-secondary education from the perspective of the “common” or public good.

WHY IS THERE CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM? WHAT DO WE DO RIGHT?

The system of higher education in the United States educates a remarkable number and proportion of students between the ages of 18 and 24 (and many more who return to higher learning at a more advanced age). Over the last forty-five years (so, in two generations), the percentage of 18–24 year olds attending a post-secondary education institution has increased by about 61%, moving from about a quarter of the eligible population to 41% in 2102. That constitutes a substantial achievement in a fairly short period of time.

It is also the case that, compared to a European system or that in my home country of Canada, the American system of higher education has remarkable variety both in terms of cost of attendance, size of institution, and groups served. There remain some all-women or all-men’s colleges, which tend to be rather small. So, too, are HBCU’s, historically black colleges and universities. Large universities are sometimes research powerhouses, such as Ohio State or Michigan State; but sometimes they are religiously affiliated, as Liberty University is.

Private universities and colleges make up the bulk of the institutions of higher learning and tend also to be quite small, sometimes serving an incoming class of 300 students. The country is populated by a large number of such small colleges. Many readers will know that small colleges, especially, have faced extraordinary economic challenges over the last few years. Such, for instance, was the difficult situation at Sweet Briar College, a women’s college founded in 1901 in Virginia.