Talk of Change Is Not Change

Rethinking American Higher Education

A Call for Rethinking Higher Education

What is wrong with undergraduate higher education in the United States cannot be “fixed” in any of the usual senses of that word. Most recent proposals for reforming higher education miss the real point by focusing on reducing costs and increasing productivity and efficiency in one way or another. Each approach has its own fierce advocates and cynical detractors, but all of them circle the real target—the insufficient quality and quantity of learning in higher education—at some distance. The most commonly recommended strategy—infusing tough-minded business principles to improve management accountability—would produce nicer financial statements while continuing to divert attention from what is really needed: a complete rethinking of higher education.

As we explained in the previous chapter, the problem is one of value, not costs. But it is far easier to think of various schemes to reduce costs than to engage the tough questions about purpose, expectations, and outcomes in higher education. So we have proposals to shorten the baccalaureate curriculum to three years, offer low-cost bachelor’s degrees by eliminating various alleged frills (such as opportunities for personal contact with faculty members or advisors), replace traditional classroom instruction with online courses or programs, and increase
the productivity of professors. Not surprisingly, faculty tenure, alleged administrative bloat, and student services are frequent and easy targets for cost cutters. But all fiscally based proposals are really distractions, not true reforms; even if the nuggets of reasonability hidden in each of them were lifted up and implemented effectively, we would have only institutions that more efficiently fail to produce higher learning.

Proposed strategies that emphasize cost cutting might be especially dangerous if they actually worked—that is, if they succeeded in increasing operational efficiency. The accommodations made in the interest of lower costs would probably worsen the already critical condition of higher learning in higher education. Given the upside-down priorities in place on many campuses, the sacrifices demanded to cut costs might well come from academic programs, full-time faculty, and services that support student learning—not from offices that worry about rankings, competition with other institutions, consumer satisfaction, marketing, and image management. Few institutions would cancel plans to build a new stadium in order to ensure the construction of additional classrooms.

Consensus has begun to form among most thoughtful critics, inside or outside the academy on this point: it is no longer possible to think of making any real difference in higher education through minor adjustments or tweaks. There is an increasingly common recognition that truly fundamental change is needed—that something must be done and that the something has to be larger, more systematic and systemic, and far more universal than one little change here and another little change there. We are beyond fixes, cheap or otherwise. A simple, formulaic cost-cutting plan just won’t work.

In choosing the title of this book, the authors wanted to emphasize the need for such a systematic and systemic approach. We were not simply being inflammatory without purpose. Neither our assessment of the gravity and urgency of the problem—“we’re losing our minds”—nor our proposed solution—“rethinking higher education”—suggests a predominantly economic analysis or a primarily fiscal solution. Increasing efficiency will not stop the unacceptable loss of potential and opportunity for our students, and it will not accomplish what is so desperately needed—a thorough and candid rethinking of higher education itself. We intended to make it clear that what our nation is facing in higher education today is an actual emergency and that effectively