Reconsidering the Future of Undergraduate Education

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Increasingly, colleges and universities in the U.S. are expected to achieve greater efficiency, equity, and improved outcomes for students in the process of selecting, attending, and completing college. This bar of expectations is high because postsecondary education is not only important to individuals, but also to the culture and economy, national priorities, and global competitiveness. Considering the important role that postsecondary education plays across every sector, it is not surprising that professional associations, corporations, and state and federal agencies continually seek to understand and influence postsecondary education. The importance of higher education to individuals and the society has prompted national debates ranging from curricular content to issues of access, quality, and cost. As a result, numerous reports by blue ribbon commissions, associations, foundations, and agencies have presented the challenges and recommendations that need urgent and sustained attention to improve postsecondary education.

One of the first reports to galvanize national attention was the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education established by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell to examine quality in education (<https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>). The report focused largely on high school education, pointed to alarming underachievement, and issued multiple recommendations for reform. Various groups criticized the data and took issue with the composition of the committee; nevertheless, the report sparked a national dialogue, and many more reports followed throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the twenty-first century.

Subsequent reports seem to fall into one of two camps: either highly critical of higher education overall or focused on specific proposals for reform, often giving special attention to general education and the major. For example, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* issued by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1984 (<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED247880>) focused on curricular content and, unsurprisingly, emphasized the central place of humanities in the undergraduate curriculum. Time and space preclude even a list of report titles and sponsors, but suffice it to say that the reports largely

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dealt with issues of content, educational quality, processes, and outcomes (or some combination thereof).

In recent years, as state funding for public education declined, tuition and fees climbed, and access and outcomes diverged along racial, gender, and socioeconomic dimensions, the lens of accountability and action seems to have widened. Philanthropic foundations now collaborate with state and federal agencies to set educational targets, leverage funding, and measure outcomes of colleges and universities. Prominent in this area are the Lumina Foundation and the Gates Foundation, which I have discussed in earlier issues of the journal. While other groups may have genuine interest in the access-affordability-outcomes agenda, few have the resources and/or reputation to garner national attention. Thus, of particular interest is the research on postsecondary education being conducted by the influential and highly respected American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS).

The academy, founded in 1780, is one of the nation's oldest learned societies and is an intellectual heavy weight. Since its beginning, the academy has invited to membership leading scholars, artists, scientists, corporate and public leaders, plus conducted research, convened meetings, and issued publications on the critical social and intellectual issues and challenges of the time. Just over 4,000 U.S. and 600 foreign honorary members currently hold the prestigious designation of AAAS fellow.

Recently, I came across the work of the AAAS Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education, funded by the Carnegie Foundation. In 2016, the Commission launched their first report, *A Primer on the College Student Journey*. The Commission had the arduous task of assembling “reliable facts and evidence” on preparing for college, getting into college, paying for college, and getting through and out (see <https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/publication.aspx?d=22363>). I like that the report mentions in the conclusion the old statement that everyone may be entitled to an opinion, but everyone is not entitled to their own facts. This 49-page report is data-rich, filled with facts, and useful to frame a conversation on undergraduate education across all types of institutions.

The AAAS report begins with foundational “takeaways” on undergraduate education: public colleges serve the majority of students, many of whom are adults and/or attend part-time; attendance rates are at an all time high, but many students are unprepared for college work; many students do not graduate, and others do not graduate on time; and to fund their education more students are borrowing, and those who do not graduate are most likely to default on loans. Importantly, we are reminded that associate degrees and certificates are a large part of post-secondary education (p.1). While none of these general statements will strike active practitioners and followers of higher education as news, the value of the report is in the indepth data and figures that undergird each statement. The report provides solid evidence on the status and challenges faced by specific student populations and institutional sectors. At the state or the college level, this report could be used to put the college-journey conversation into context and to launch a campus dialogue on performance and priorities.

The Commission produced subsequent publications on alternative postsecondary credentials, financial aid, economic impact of increasing college completion, and policies and practices to support improvement in undergraduate teaching. The final publication of the Commission in December 2017 addressed *The Future of Undergraduate Education: The Future of America* (<https://www.amacad.org/cfue>). The report notes that the conversation on U.S. undergraduate education has moved from one of quantity

(increasing the number attending) to issues of quality and affordability. Three priorities to improve the undergraduate experience are highlighted: strengthen the student educational experience, increase completion and reduce inequities, and control costs and increase affordability. Each priority has carefully crafted recommendations and examples of promising practices at selected institutions. This report is well-reasoned and merits careful attention.

None of our fields of knowledge exist in a vacuum, nor do our institutions; therefore, to ensure relevance and sustainability, it is increasingly important to step back and conduct a self-appraisal and to set our disciplinary and institutional work in context. I encourage administrators, faculty members, and students to review these important publications by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. I applaud their commitment to quality, accessible education for the individual and the society.