

Current trends for Paris study-abroad meeting, June 18 2011

In 2010 Monique Fecteau heard a talk I gave on current trends in American higher education to a session at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages convention in Boston. Subsequently she was kind enough to invite me to present something similar to you, although while indicating that it would make sense to focus less on foreign-language teaching and more on undergraduate education writ large, which has been my main preoccupation at the Mellon Foundation and which has to be a primary interest for this audience. But to get us started, I would like to step back and venture, in very broad and rough strokes, some observations about the evolution of U.S. higher education since World War II that I think it would be useful for us to keep in mind. They will provide a framework for thinking about the immediate past and the present, if not the future.

[As a preface to these remarks, I'd like to evoke tangentially—by referring to questions that arise incessantly in the newspapers I follow, the NYT and *Le monde*—the kind of problem that seems to me to command our attention in the world of not-for-profit higher education. On June 29, 2009 *Le monde* ran an essay by Max Dorra, a medical doctor and a philosopher, on the willful blindness or at least self-excusing complicity of a European population that understands why the life expectancy of Africans is thirty years less than theirs, but facing the moral imperative sits back and does nothing beyond tokenism to close the gap. A week later, a commentary by Michel Rocard, a former prime minister of France, explained why the European electorate had thrown its support to politicians who oppose regulatory reform of a banking system that had just been saved from disaster with public money. Six days after that, *Le monde* printed three full pages exploring public and professional acquiescence to the marginalization of “general culture” and the humanities in the French national educational system. On that very same day, Paul Krugman’s op-ed column in the *New York Times* focused on the contradiction lived by leaders and citizens who understand that measures against global warming are absolutely urgent and who nonetheless abdicate, leaving to future generations the lot of dealing with accelerating environmental deterioration. A few days later, in the Sunday’s NYT-*Magazine*, while spelling out the compelling arguments for rationing health care, the philosopher Peter Singer also described the self-centered human responses and demagogic political dynamics that negate those arguments in the U.S. In each of these five cases, what looms in the background is a kind of massive collective inertia or indifference that inclines people to treat well established,

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slowly evolving systems of social organization as inviolable, as moving on an inevitable course that can't be redirected even when it is clearly harmful or unjust. All of you know that analyses of the sort I drew from just two sources in a two-week period in the summer of 2009 appear week in and week out in dozens of publications. We encounter them so constantly that we assimilate them to our sense of what is normal and inevitable and beyond our reach, rather than assuming that task of educated people is to use their knowledge and analytic abilities to solve the problems we encounter.

I evoke these collective problems, of course, precisely because U.S. higher education is, unmistakably, another case of a monumental and dynamic system that we generally regard as a slowly evolving behemoth, largely immune to effective intervention. The system is made up of more than 4000 colleges and universities, of public and private sectors, of sub-systems in each of the 50 states, and of numerous institutional types that make for a daunting social, economic, and organizational stratification. Users of the Carnegie classification of institutions often visualize the system as a pyramidal hierarchy with as many as eight layers: on the bottom are the most numerous, the community colleges, and at the top are the elite research universities and liberal arts colleges. Carnegie also lists a variety of graduate and professional schools without locating them precisely in relation to the hierarchy, but their integration into the system is evident enough. Historically, an essential feature of the system has been the mobility it affords to agents—students, faculty, institutions—who operate within it and expect good academic performance to enable them to move up the educational ladder. Thus the structure of the system appears in some respects to coincide with that of society-at-large; since the educational system both reflects and determines vital socio-economic realities, we conceive of education and society as fundamentally interdependent.

Before I evoke some of the prominent trends that have become evident as higher education has evolved over the past half-century, let me just note parenthetically that, in the avalanche of literature about higher education, one encounters something of a theoretical dispute about the nature of the globalized system we are working with at the present time. According to the traditional view, which is well represented by an excellent book entitled *Mission and Money: Understanding the University* by Burton Weisbrod, Jeffrey Ballou, and Evelyn Asch, institutions of all kinds at all levels have had to undergo what is often termed *corporatization*, i.e., they take on the characteristics of businesses functioning in a market and making ends meet by balancing

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revenues and expenses. In doing so they can nonetheless, according to the establishment view, maintain their educational missions designed to serve the public good as separate enterprises: the administration would handle the business, the faculty would take care of academic matters; respectful negotiations between them would both protect the integrity of each dimension within an institution and protect higher education in general from external forces that provide it with resources and whose influence might compromise academic freedom or the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. In the main, those external forces are of course the state and private business interests, with which education would sustain a relationship of carefully modulated interaction.

This mainstream view of education as an industry that situates particular institutions or firms in a market where they compete for faculty, students, and all kinds of financial support is of course one that takes this competition to be a productive force or tension. Competition for reputation and resources, it is said, keeps institutions under pressure to improve. The model is that of beneficent capitalism.. It becomes problematic when the competitive impetus that invades the institutional axiology or value system ends up sanctioning the winner-take-all reflex that Robert Frank and Philip Cook described 15 years ago in *The Winner-take-all Society*. The push for competitive advantage fuels the process of commodification, i.e., the conversion of education into a salable product that the student-and-parent consumers measure in relation to their return on an investment in future earning capacity. They thus appreciate their commitment in terms far removed from the ideals of liberal education, which projects preparation for responsible citizenship, personal maturation, cultural enrichment, even altruism as fundamental outcomes.

According to the revisionist view, represented by Academic capitalism and the New Economy by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, the winner-take-all reflex now has the upper hand. They argue that the system of higher education has become so immersed in the development of a knowledge-based economy that its institutions are agents participating in the construction of a “capitalist knowledge/learning regime.” For Slaughter and Rhoades, this globalized system that depends on information technology is building new networks of actors and new organizational arrangements that “span and blur the boundaries between public and private sectors,” between the academic mission and the operation of the education business, between non-profit and for-profit enterprise, opening the way to a subordination of the public good to the vagaries of the marketplace. Study-abroad programs would seem to be particularly

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susceptible to this blurring of the lines. While both the mainstream and the revisionist viewpoints offer important insights into the way the system functions, neither is commensurable with its what I would characterize as its unmanageability, which is a function of such factors size, complexity, unpredictability, creativity, and the special responsibility that derives from the privilege of being educated.

The rudiments of the higher-education system, both disciplinary and institutional, were consolidated during the first decades of the 20th century, and at least until recently they have been remarkably stable. What began to change dramatically after WWII, stimulated by the GI bill, was the size of the system and its concomitant drift toward the numerical dominance of public higher education, which now serves over 80% of the U.S. student population. Of the key trends I shall mention here this morning, the overwhelming dominant has been systemic growth, sometimes called massification, and along with it, since the late 1960s, a dramatic increase in the cost of a college education. The expansion that started after WWII, as colleges and universities adjusted to the influx of returning soldiers, can be regarded as a shift that moved our society toward a new middle-class standard for academic achievement. The norm had become during the first half of the 20th-century a high school diploma; it would henceforth be the college diploma. Higher education was understood to be the key to a more prosperous, rewarding life, and the percentage of the population achieving the bachelor's degree continued to rise until the 1970s—precisely the decade when the rapid escalation of educational costs became a matter of public controversy. The cost factor threatened to end the trend toward a progressively more educated general population that characterized American society from the start of the 20th century until the 1970's and that many observers cited as the principal source of the country's rise to global economic and technological predominance. Since the seventies, however, that societal educational advance has stagnated in the U.S. Meanwhile, as Claudia Golden and Lawrence Katz stress in an influential 2008 book, *The Race between Education and Technology*, many first-world nations have moved past us in levels of average educational achievement. Internationally, the U.S. is losing ground in the race for educational advantage.

Rising cost has also impeded the concomitant movement toward a more egalitarian society that upward educational mobility appeared to make possible. Telling evidence of this stagnation can be found in at least three vital phenomena: (1) the alarmingly high incidence of college students who drop out without completing a 4-year degree, (2) the general multi-level

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retreat from affirmative action and equal opportunity that has left the effort to promote diversity in higher education lagging in most tiers of the system, and (3) the withdrawal of resources from the great public university systems that Christopher Newfield describes in Unmaking the Public University. This last development can also be characterized, as nearly all the experts who study higher education do, as the privatization of the public university. The dramatic loss of support from state appropriations since the early nineties has necessarily been accompanied both by a rate of tuition increases sharply higher than in the private non-profit sector and by the emergence of massive fundraising and endowment building by the flagship public universities. Even with the compensation for lost public monies that these growing private income streams provide, the quality of academic life in these public institutions has suffered.

There are, I think, several other highly visible trends in American higher education of the last four decades that should be kept in mind by anyone who aims to understand the system as a whole. I propose to specify three kinds of evolution that seem to me to be major factors worthy of constant attention, and then to underscore some secondary factors that will densify a picture of undergraduate education that it's easy to oversimplify.

- The first of these is the adjunctivation of the teaching force and the transfer of a great deal of basic teaching over to the corps of adjunct faculty. Between 1975 and 2007, the percentage of full-time tenure-track faculty fell from 57 to 31, while correlatively the non-tenure-track percentage rose from 47 to 69, of which half were on part-time appointments, as opposed to only 30% in 1975. Needless to say, the destabilizing effects of this massive shift on both the experience of college students and relations within the teaching faculty are extensive and profound. Within the system, the effects of adjunctivation vary enormously, as do the roles of non-tenure-track faculty in the various tiers of higher education or types of institution.
- The second vital trend is a growing professionalization of research and teaching that extends the norms and policies, the academic culture of research universities and their specialized faculties across the system into institutions that are not research-intensive. In parallel with the vision of productivity that accompanies the pervasive stress on research, focused on objects of specialization that become progressively narrower and more numerous, there has been a steady reorientation of the curriculum away from the liberal arts, toward careerist interests that we might regard as the students' professionalization.

Business has become the dominant undergraduate major in U.S. colleges and universities, and both the field of education and the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor now deploy a discourse that emphasizes the connections between academic fields of study and gainful employment in the real world. One of the paradoxes of professionalization inside the institutions of higher education is that the domains of research and teaching have been driven further and further apart for tenure-track faculty, who are preoccupied with research productivity. This has happened even though the current party line in the upper tiers of higher education has it, first, that faculty research makes for better teaching and, second, that participation in research organized and mentored by faculty should be a decisive feature of the undergraduate experience. What I call the undergraduate-research movement, which is one of the three or four most prominent trends in undergraduate education at the moment, actually intensifies institutional commitment to an academic culture privileging research.

According to an intriguing Mellon-sponsored study by John Cross and Edie Goldenberg, Off-track Profs, this research culture is the primary lens through which academic tenure should be understood. The productivity imperative ultimately situates tenure, not as a guarantee of academic freedom or job security, but as the driver of a value system and a workforce hierarchy; it is what makes college teaching a profession. The research machine thus exerts both positive and negative influences not unlike those of ideology in a Marxist account of socio-economic infrastructure, i.e., openly and conceptually, yet also, because it is inadequately understood and is fetishized, invisibly and irresistibly. In all events, the development of undergraduate research in the humanities and social sciences that draws students into collaborations with faculty is perhaps the current trend that cries out most strongly for attention from study-abroad programs. A key question faced by many institutions has to do with rising seniors who have just returned from study abroad: how can they articulate research interests they have developed abroad with the capstone project they pursue upon their return?

- A third trend of potentially great consequence has been the development of for-profit universities that make heavy use of web-based delivery of instruction and depend largely on teaching specialists hired on short-term contracts. The for-profit sector is still small, but some believe its impressive growth rate is cause for alarm. One such commentator is

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Frank Donoghue, author of The Last Professors, a short book focused on the faculty workforce that foresees a transformation of all but the elite colleges and universities as the market exerts its hold on a public sure to opt for the lower price and greater convenience the for-profit career-oriented schools will offer. If Donoghue's chilling prediction turned out to be right, moreover, the expansion of for-profit education would go hand in hand with a sharper segregation of the high-end of elite institutions from the rest of the higher-education system. In those affluent upper-echelon schools the "last professors" would carry on teaching society's most privileged students. This exclusivity would reinforce the complicity of that "research-and-liberal-arts" elite with our ruling political and financial establishment. As you know, this elite-perpetuating complicity is illustrated decisively by studies of the educational background of those who have held influential positions in the federal government, regardless of political party, over the past century; and, as you must realize, understanding it analytically is more likely to occasion support for it than opposition to it

Be that as it may, the impact of for-profit education is reflected in a recent trend that is surely worth underscoring in the study-abroad context: the deployment of online instruction, not in so-called distance learning, but in regular courses offered in classic, on-campus settings, either for the ostensible purpose of improving the learning experience or for that of saving money and space, or for both. Experiments with hybrid courses that combine classroom and online instruction are being conducted on many campuses as well. The implications of successful online courses are of course significant for study abroad programs since, theoretically at least, the portability of instruction makes courses accessible to students wherever they may be on the planet. The problem, of course, is that it raises many questions about the long-term viability of the residential model of education, which is just as important for study abroad as it is for campus-based study back home.

One can tag these major trends I've noted so far as

--massification,

--stagnation of average educational achievement,

--cost-escalation that may undermine the link between education and social progress,

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- casualization or adjunctivation of the faculty workforce,
- professionalization that pervades all levels of the system, and that in undergraduate education makes for the veer toward vocational training and the rise to dominance of undergraduate business programs
- birth of a for-profit sector that reinforces both online delivery of instruction and the use of adjunct instructors

To this list of trends, let me simply add, in conclusion, a few punctual remarks on a few other notable phenomena that preoccupy observers of undergraduate education.

- a culture of materialism and hedonism
- curricular emphases on interdisciplinarity and globalization
- an emerging concept of digital literacy, grafted onto the other basics, with a continuing retreat of the arts
- an imposition of accountability in the form of measured learning outcomes required by the accreditation agencies

1. Student culture. Higher education in the U.S. moved smartly away from the *in loco parentis* framework in the 1960s. The ensuing institutional culture, much less inflected by students' contact with faculty, less likely to involve an intellectual maturation mediated by interaction with thoughtful adults, veered toward a *laissez-faire* ethos that weakened barriers to an anti-intellectual, conformity-driven party culture and shifted responsibility for dealing with students increasingly to so-called "student-life" professionals. The mechanisms of the *Big Sort* described by Bill Bishop, whereby like-minded people congregate together, are generally free to do their work on college campuses. Connecting the higher-education process to the formation of students' attitudes and character or to a certain social and cultural enlightenment has generally become more difficult, notwithstanding the programs in elite schools that embrace community service and involve faculty in residential learning. The recent book by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, argues on the basis of the College Learning Assessment and student surveys that students are making little or no progress because they are not studying enough, are too caught up in partying and social networking.

2. Curriculum. During the last two decades we have witnessed a bending of the curriculum in institutions at all levels toward two horizons, that of interdisciplinarity and that of globalization,

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and a less lofty, but pervasive validation of instruction in writing. These developments are reflected less in the basic structure of the curriculum, still determined by traditional disciplines and departments, than in the proliferation of programs and centers that require faculty from diverse fields to contribute to collective endeavors in both instruction and scholarship. These are important, potentially positive changes to the extent that they may well be the loci for the revalidation of general culture and humanistic values that were once associated with liberal education. The issue is essentially whether humanities, and especially the overarching fields of history and philosophy, will be able to construct narratives of globalization through the lenses of the process itself, rather than those of an American/Eurocentric empire.

3. The information society and economy. The information revolution bred new forms of inquiry and understanding initially in the sciences and social sciences, but has now spread across the board and is perhaps most saliently instantiated in the so-called *digital humanities*. The question is whether something on the order of digital literacy has to be a core component of a serious college education, or whether it can simply be assumed that students will acquire it on their own, owing to its pervasiveness in their culture. The case for teaching it has to do with the need to integrate the digital or the cognitive economy into the understandings that remain essential for a viable human society. In the academic world, the pressure on young scholars whose work takes them toward digital publication is currently enormous because the system has not yet adjusted, it has merely understood that it will have to adjust.

4. The assessment movement. The trouble with requiring measurable learning outcomes across the board is of course that it is readily possible in some fields and almost impossible in others, with many gradations of difficulty in between the extremes. But efficiency and productivity are delicate goals in the field of education, and the rush to assess is having multiple effects, some positive and some negative. The important point is doubtless that fields and programs need to deal with the issue collectively. That's as true of study-abroad programs as it is of all other academic areas.

Conclusion. The economic crisis that descended upon us in 2008, coupled with student demand for new areas of study in many colleges and universities, has forced U.S. institutions to recognize that they may simply be unable to sustain themselves if they continue to go it alone, rather than to collaborate in some areas where they lack the resources to meet their students' needs or to

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cooperate in areas where competition is not a significant factor, but economies of scale achieved by institutions joining forces may turn out to be. The interest in developing consortia, whether among institutions that are homogeneous or between colleges and universities that are quite different in make-up and scale is perhaps worthy of attention in the universe of study-abroad programs. Potential collaborations among APUAF members might well be a topic worthy of exploration in future meetings.

Philip Lewis, 6/18/11