Is Higher Education in Turmoil?
By
Dr. Robert A. Scott, President, Adelphi University

Is higher education in turmoil? We read about athletes at Division I universities whose status as privileged residents has lead more than once to irresponsible behavior and arrests. We read about SAT results that have been scored incorrectly.

We read that Members of Congress want to make substantial changes to the Higher Education Authorization Act, making for-profit career schools eligible for federal financial aid on the same basis as campuses like Amherst and without meeting the standards previously set in response to scandals. And we read that the Secretary of Education's Commission on Higher Education wants to create new accountability standards and even do away with the historic regional accrediting system that has served the nation and higher education so well.

We read about faculty focused on themselves, with students disregarded as members of a learning community. Faculty scholarship is described as arcane and self-serving, with "mobbing" among faculty and beer kegs and orgies the norm among students. We have heard people talk about higher education as that place where the "inmates run the asylum," and where undermining presidential authority is commonplace. There now is a demand for "balance" in faculty political views and a test for political correctness in classrooms.

Such reports can cause people to think that these statements characterize American higher education at large. But they don't. Only 10% of institutions in American higher education play athletics at the Division I level, and only a small percentage of them host sports programs in which athletes are treated as celebrities, live by themselves as a group, and are excused from rules that apply to others. When the news media comment on faculty who don't teach, they are writing about a few research universities and their institutes, not higher education across the nation. When the news media talk about tuition pricing as out of control, they cite costs at a narrow band of institutions, not higher education in general. When the media report on colleges not providing sufficient courses for students to complete their degree work in four years, they talk mostly about institutions whose budgets have been cut by their state and ignore the costs of Information Technology (IT) equipment, software, staff, site licenses, and compliance required to meet today's expectations for instruction.

This is not to say that everything is fine. We always can do better. With over 80% of students in public institutions of higher education, the potential for political interference in trustee appointments, in staffing, and in policy is ever present. Just think, the top two higher education leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives

---

Invited Address, Long Island University Club, New Hyde Park Inn, New York, May 8, 2006, based on an essay prepared for *The Boulevard, May, 2006.*

received almost $1 million in political action committee (PAC) contributions from private career schools at a time when their Congressional committee was debating whether to reduce requirements instituted earlier to protect the public from fraudulent practices by such organizations With higher education seen more as a private benefit than as a public good, we see reductions in state support and greater reliance on tuition and fees - - and then political complaints about tuition increases and reductions in quality follow.

We can do more to assure that students are advancing in knowledge, skills, abilities, and values, and that faculty seek continuously to improve the effectiveness of their teaching. After all, college faculty are the only professionals whose training does not include a supervised clinical experience as part of their preparation. Of course, the popular media guides don't focus on teaching effectiveness. They are more interested in "input" measures like student SAT's and faculty PhD's than on teaching, advising, and student progress. As a result, colleges often place emphasis on what is rewarded, just as individuals do.

Universities and colleges are not immune from societal forces and values, and some ignore their role in teaching moral reasoning and in preparing citizens because of criticism from parents, peers, and patrons. "Animal House" behavior does not usually start in college.

Media coverage is another influence that fosters poor decisions. Scores of institutions are leaving NCAA Division II for Division I in part because of media coverage and in part due to the mistaken belief that they will make money. Consider our local scene. The six colleges in Queens, Nassau and Suffolk which participate in Division II sports represent over 300,000 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and parents who are disappointed each week by *Newsday* because student-athletes whose high school teams were covered extensively are now ignored. This is not true of the Division I teams in the same region. Very few universities make money on athletics, but the pursuit of media attention and money still often prevails over reason.

Is there grade inflation? Yes. Is it a serious problem? Not as much as our lack of ability to assure student learning through objective means. We need to find ways to separate assessment from teaching, as it is done in some institutions and in some countries.

Higher education is not in turmoil. If anything is, it is federal and national policy towards higher education that has lost its way. How else can we explain the eagerness of Congress to equate a program offered over the Internet by a for-profit school as equal to those offered by collegiate institutions that face critical peer scrutiny and are held accountable to their stakeholders in face-to-face encounters with students, alumni, and the local community? Could it be the PAC money cited earlier?

This is not to say that on-line education is bad. The concern is about proportion, mission, and support. Many colleges use on-line technologies in courses taught on campus for use in exchanging information routinely and on those special occasions when the professor is at a conference or ill, or when students are away from campus at a theatre festival or athletic conference tournament. Still more colleges use the Internet for communicating with alumni and friends of the university. Information technology provides a means for instruction, but the transformation of students through interaction with faculty is the goal, and that is not the result simply of a transaction - - an exchange of money for degree credit.

There is much to applaud about U.S. higher education, especially when compared to the past and to institutions around the world. We have a greater diversity of institutions and a wider variety of degree levels and programs to pursue. From two-year associate degree granting community colleges to prestigious research universities offering post-doctoral work, we provide opportunity for nearly every student to find a good "fit" between preparation and aspiration.

The diversity of institutions fosters access for individuals; the wide array of federal, state, private, and institutional grant, loan, and work-study programs fosters affordability; and regional accrediting bodies, professional associations, and state and federal agencies all foster accountability for quality. However, efficiencies can be found in the federal student loan programs and accountability measures can be made more effective.

Institutions still serve as curators of the past, critics of the <u>status quo,</u> and creators of the new. They are leading institutions in the socialization of generations, both directly and indirectly, through the parents, teachers, and other professionals they prepare. There are critics of universities' efforts to celebrate diversity and add to curricula, but they usually cannot cite "dead white males" whose works deserve to remain required or new authors whose works should be excluded. And the evidence is that goals for diversity in student enrollment and faculty hiring are important contributors to the preparation of citizens.

While some complain about soaring college costs, they tend to focus on the most prestigious institutions. In fact, average private college tuition and fees in the United States is $21,235, about one-half that charged at the most expensive. Average public college tuition and fees total $5,491. Colleges and universities set tuition levels after considering other sources of revenue, including state assistance to public institutions, and philosophical, political, and market forces. In an effort to be affordable and competitive, almost all institutions discount tuition to some extent, ranging from just over 10% to nearly 60%.

Why do tuition and fees rise faster than inflation? The answer is that the "market basket" of items purchased by a college differs substantially from the market basket for the home. Chemicals, glassware, technology, software, governance and compliance requirements, and competitive forces add to the cost of

operations. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, the average private university tuition is only one-half the amount cited in headlines.

Increasingly, colleges and universities have developed partnerships with business and other employers, which have resulted not only in research opportunities for faculty, but also in internships and work opportunities for students. Likewise, many colleges have active partnerships with school systems and school leaders, lending their expertise and helping prepare the next generation of teachers, students, and leaders. But this is not enough.

I have been "Principal for a Day" in New York City three times, and several times in Newark before joining Adelphi, and frequently visit schools and superintendents on Long Island. I know first-hand that there is more we educators can and should do to work with schools on professional development, leadership development, and curriculum development, especially with regard to math, science, foreign languages, and technology. We can do more to help support teaching the scientific method and help students distinguish between and among the various ways of knowing - - fact, faith, and fear - - and discern truth from fiction in sources such as the Internet and self-published books.

We also can do more to work with business, industry, and the non-profit sector to create internships and alliances, without abandoning our independence and integrity. The concern about "commercialization" in higher education-industry partnerships is real, but not impossible to manage.

It has long been known that those who earn a college education are more likely to enjoy good health, civic involvement, higher income, career flexibility, and other benefits when compared to those who do not go to college. Colleges emphasize the advancement of students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, and foster values such as team work, putting others above self, setting goals and facing challenges, reflecting on results, and respecting a diversity of opinion and backgrounds. Higher education is the agency to prepare students for the global world we face, including opportunities to study language and culture, both here and in other countries. College is where many find their best friends, spouses or partners, and lifelong networks.

Can President's do more to lead and manage? Of course. I recoil when I hear campus presidents complain that they are limited in action by tenure, union agreements, and lack of resources. University leaders have numerous points of leverage to employ in achieving agreed-upon goals. Yes, campus governance can be complicated, what with numerous constituents with varying agendas, but the processes for "shared governance" are known. Most often, the problems are a lack of clarity about goals, an absence of communication about process, a sense of injustice in the distribution of resources, and a misunderstanding about the relative roles of trustees, faculty, administration, and students.

At times, these "problems" are exacerbated by the president's absence from campus due to the demands of fundraising and other forms of resource development. Such presidents seem to have forgotten that fundraising is to enhance the environment for teaching and learning, in which faculty and students are central. Fundraising is not, at its core, about the entertainment of potential donors in posh settings. Fundraising is most successful when the academic enterprise is central to the effort. In such cases, presidents and board members bring potential donors to meet the faculty and students whose lives will be enhanced by new gifts. And, in the process, goals, communications, fairness, and an understanding of roles is enhanced.

Is this a time of turmoil? No. A time of change? Yes. A time of increasing opportunities and challenges? Absolutely!