

REINVENTING HIGHER EDUCATION

The Promise of Innovation

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Editors

Conclusion

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MUST UNIVERSITIES CHANGE? How might they change? Can they change in significant ways on a broad scale? The chapters in this volume have offered a range of answers to these questions, not identical by any means. But their consistent thrust is this: change is necessary, at least for many institutions. Change is also inevitable, and plenty of examples show that it's possible. Yet change is difficult and complicated, especially at scale. The real challenge ahead will be how to overcome the ubiquitous disincentives for change outlined in the previous pages. Only then can innovation begin to take hold in American universities—and spread.

In the first chapter, Dominic Brewer and William Tierney succinctly laid out the imperative for innovation in U.S. higher education, a mixture of demographic, economic, and technological forces. Yet Brewer and Tierney set a less-than-encouraging tone about prospects for reform, citing an array of obstacles. Many colleges and universities have failed to learn from innovations that have become routine in other service industries; these range from intelligent use of new information technology and rethinking of rigid labor roles to focusing on a central educational goal, thus avoiding the mission creep that has too often characterized postsecondary institutions. Throughout U.S. higher education, it seems, incentives to innovate vary enormously and—often because of public policy barriers—are

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frequently too weak to induce colleges and universities to break out of the straitjacket of standardization.

Still, despite all the barriers to innovation that exist, these chapters reveal many examples of creative practices that have emerged within traditional universities, in brand-new postsecondary institutions, and through an array of new providers that have entered the higher education market. Indeed, some of the most promising initiatives are cited in multiple chapters. Several authors point to the work of the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT), which relies on technology and peer instruction to redesign introductory college courses, lowering their cost and improving academic outcomes. Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative has become similarly influential; it creates online courses that draw on cognitive psychology to tailor lessons to individual learners, both independent students and those studying in traditional institutions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, innovation has also thrived at universities that were designed from scratch as test beds for serving students in new ways. One oft-cited example: Western Governors University, created by nineteen mostly Western states, which has attempted a paradigm shift. Moving away from the model of granting credit for seat-time in traditional classrooms, it tests students to see which subjects they have already mastered, then offers targeted online classes that allow them to complete degrees (typically in career-oriented subjects) on an accelerated timetable. Another brand-new university, the Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, is highlighted by Jon Marcus as a promising exception to universities' historical resistance to change. The central Pennsylvania college is emphatically student-centered, with no traditional academic departments and no tenure for professors.

Similarly, in his discussion of how to improve teaching productivity, William Massy cites the University of Minnesota–Rochester (UMR), which employs a large number of instructors devoted to teaching and applies cognitive and behavior science, together with a heavy dose of technology, to its pedagogical mission in the health sciences. In a full-length study of UMR, Kevin Carey suggests that it provides even broader lessons for the

entire postsecondary sector, arguing that the new college's ability to serve students much more effectively at a relatively lower cost is paradigmatic of the possibilities for reinvention of public universities.

Gilbert Hentschke and Peter Stokes provide still more examples of fresh approaches to postsecondary learning in their chapters on the extraordinary growth of for-profit and online learning. The two are often intertwined, of course, because industry leaders like the University of Phoenix and Kaplan University offer some or all of their degrees online. Moreover, beyond the for-profit sector, traditional universities are beginning to include some online learning in their menu of course options. It would surely not have been imaginable as recently as forty years ago that more than one out of every four students would have taken at least one class delivered through distance learning. Indeed, Stokes suggests that online education likely meets Harvard School of Business professor Clayton Christensen's definition of disruptive innovation—both creating new markets and cannibalizing old ones.

Despite all this activity, however, the question the authors address both implicitly and explicitly remains: why have these frequently discussed innovations failed to spread more widely and quickly within the traditional sector where most students are still enrolled? As Brewer and Tierney declare at the outset of their chapter, "In order for successful innovations to drive gains in productivity, they not only must be created, but must be adopted by others." But from using new technology to reshaping course offerings to rethinking how professors are deployed, traditional universities have been slow to experiment with new ideas and slower still to adopt them. Even the well-regarded course-redesign work of an organization such as NCAT remains limited to about sixty universities around the United States.

Notwithstanding the willingness of new institutions to innovate, brand-new campuses just aren't established very often. And while the universe of for-profit postsecondary institutions is expanding rapidly (despite growing regulatory scrutiny), the sector's top-down management and curriculum design, coupled with a strong outcomes-focus, remains alien to most traditional universities. Online learning, too, is frequently discussed but less

frequently relied on as more than an adjunct to, or transmission vehicle for, conventional instruction. Hybrid models show promise, as with the partnership between the University of Southern California's school of education and 2tor, Inc., the online institution created by Princeton Review founder John Katzman. For now, though, such arrangements remain rare.

How might innovation spread more quickly? Most fundamentally, institutions must have incentives to actively seek out promising innovations, and then invest the time and resources necessary to experiment with them. This is partly a question of providing colleges with practical tools—like the productivity measures Massy describes—to assess what they are currently doing and how they might do it better. But Massy reminds us that such guidance is unlikely to drive real change without the support and encouragement of campus leaders. Presidents, provosts, and other senior administrators must encourage professors and departments to innovate. That's difficult when fundamental barriers persist, such as the practice of tying government funding to enrollment rather than to graduation and learning outcomes. Moreover, regional accreditors, while more attuned to outcome measures than in the past, still tend to foster uniformity across institutions that would do better to pursue new and more effective ways of teaching undergraduates.

More broadly, political support is crucial. There have recently been encouraging signs on this front. Former West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, the 2010 chair of the National Governors Association, placed higher education reform at the top of his policy agenda, calling on his fellow governors to focus on improving higher education productivity, defining it in terms of improving enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates. Still, as Paul Osterman points out in his analysis of barriers to community college improvement, lawmakers themselves must persist. More than half of the twenty-six states that adopted incentive-based funding schemes for community colleges in recent decades later discontinued their schemes, which were typically never well funded or particularly effective. In the wake of the 2010 midterm elections, many higher education reform initiatives will fall under the control of new political leadership. Whether incoming govern-

ors and state legislators will continue their predecessors' higher education work or choose to strike off in a different direction could fundamentally alter the incentives for innovation.

Even with the encouragement of policy makers, universities can do little progress unless they are well informed about successful innovations, which ideas have been successfully piloted and which are the best candidates for widespread adoption. Despite islands of excellence and thinking, higher education has yet to develop the kind of research and development network that emerged during the nation's decades-long reform movement. Readers of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Higher Ed* may keep abreast of innovative practices that have blossomed on a piecemeal basis on campuses across the country, but this knowledge often fails to accumulate, limiting the extent to which promising experiments can spread.

We cannot realistically expect unanimity on these matters; of course thoughtful analysts such as Ronald Ehrenberg see the changing role of faculty less as a desirable imperative than as an inevitability that ought to be managed carefully by improving the selection, evaluation, and training of instructors. Here, too, even reluctant innovators need guidance. Perhaps the top-down governing structure of for-profits, which Hentschke highlights, has lessons for institutions in which faculty governance, including decisions over curriculum, is a long-cherished prerogative that has not always met students' needs.

Perhaps wide-reaching higher education reform will be driven only by external forces, as Marcus suggests. There are some signs that this is beginning to happen. In the spring of 2010, the financially beleaguered University of California (UC) proposed to reach more students at lower cost to UC (a though not necessarily to students) by piloting an online learning program that backers say could eventually lead to high-quality online bachelor's degrees. There is even evidence that some opinion leaders in the higher education trade associations are beginning to recognize the need for innovation. In July 2010, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities vice president for academic leadership and change, George Mehan, argued

"It is past time to think in profoundly new ways about how we organize and deliver instruction, structure and sequence the curriculum, design and assess learning environments. In short, we can use the current economic crisis to re-imagine the entire undergraduate experience."

But many faculty members remain dubious about such fundamental changes. At the University of California—Berkeley, for example, while the systemwide faculty senate approved the pilot classes, UC—Berkeley's faculty association and graduate student union have expressed serious concerns about the proposed online program; similar opposition scuttled an online degree program at the University of Illinois several years ago. As Marcus points out, comparable sentiments have frustrated change for centuries. Put simply, many universities remain institutionally conservative places. Previous economic downturns have often led to a batten-down-the-hatches approach, in which universities cut back existing programs, freeze or postpone hiring, and put plans for new facilities on hold. There has been little of the fundamental rethinking—of faculty roles, use of technology, student-learning measurement, even collaboration with for-profits—that should be the hallmark of serious campus reform efforts.

Obstacles to innovation in American higher education certainly remain formidable. Yet, on balance, there is reason for cautious optimism. New practices may not be ubiquitous, but enough efforts have emerged on traditional campuses, in start-up institutions, and in the burgeoning worlds of for-profit and online learning, to offer plenty of models for effective change. Moreover, the appetite for considering such models seems to be growing, thanks not only to budget pressures, but to public demand for expanded college opportunities and reduced costs, together with an increasing willingness among policy makers to confront the shortcomings of too many postsecondary institutions. These pressures are only likely to increase in the years to come.

As the analysts whose work is collected in this volume suggest, there is no single blueprint for reinventing American universities. Indeed, we can make a case that some of our very best institutions don't need major changes. In the many places where fundamental reforms are needed, however, the

best chances for innovation lie in taking a range of actions: developing and disseminating promising reforms more systematically; providing greater regulatory flexibility; improving institutional and financial incentives for raising academic productivity; making more creative use of fast-changing technology; and insisting on a much clearer focus on measuring what students really learn in college. Much will be lost if the United States squanders the opportunity provided by today's economic and political environment to rethink important aspects of U.S. higher education. And much will be gained if universities and policy makers seize on the promise educational innovation holds for students, institutions, and the nation.