2016

Strengths Hidden in Plain Sight

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AMERICA HAS a complicated relationship with its colleges and universities. Love for those places is evident in the number of alumni who give back to their schools; in the millions of bumper and window stickers proclaiming a driver's loyalty; in the number of caps, shirts, shorts, sweatshirts, jackets, flags, mailbox covers, toilet seats, golf bags, and even caskets emblazoned with school logos and colors.

And yet many Americans are suspicious of, disdainful of, and even antagonistic to higher education in general. The press is filled with stories, features, and op-eds recounting a broad range of failures. Critics from inside and outside our colleges and universities bemoan their shortcomings; everyone from faculty and administrators to students come in for criticism and offer criticism of their own. Some of the critiques are accurate and useful, while others are ill informed and driven by agendas in which education is only incidental. Commencement speakers, alumni magazines, and college presidents, faced with such criticism, extol lofty purposes and timeless values. Everyone seems to be talking past one another.

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Whether in criticism or in defense, the language we use to talk about higher education misses most of what we do most of the time. It neglects the commonplace accomplishments of every day, the successes hidden in plain sight. After twenty years as a professor, six years as a dean of arts and sciences, and eight years as a university president, there is still much I do not understand about the vast and complex world of American higher education. What I have learned over the decades, though, makes me wish I could better convey the profound and prosaic accomplishments of American higher education.

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From student to president: My education in higher education

Like many Americans of my generation, I took it for granted that college was within my reach. The University of Tennessee, where I was an undergraduate, was a large, open-access school that provided everything I could have imagined wanting, needing, or deserving. It cost virtually nothing, and yet the professors invested heavily of themselves in their students. The University of Tennessee gave me every opportunity I've had since, including a fellowship to Yale.

Yale, in turn, gave me my calling and the confidence to pursue it. My job in graduate school was to absorb all that I could of my new discipline and to build an identity within it—an exhilarating and all-absorbing task. When I was fortunate enough to get a tenure-track job at the University of Virginia, my professional world expanded from my discipline to my department. Teaching was thrilling and so was working with colleagues, publishing books, giving talks, and advising graduate students. I did not want to spend any time doing anything else.

Along the way, however, I inadvertently learned about other parts of the university, often through appointments to committees outside my department. My eyes opened even more widely when I became chair of the faculty

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senate. In that role, I suggested that we hold a university-wide conversation about teaching, sure that the rest of the university would be enlightened by the excellent example of my department and of the humanities more generally. To my surprise, I learned that innovative and dedicated teaching was also taking place in the business and engineering and education and law schools. It turned out that parts of the university that had seemed antagonistic to the parts of the university I cared about were not so easily caricatured and dismissed.

When I became dean of arts and sciences at Virginia a few years later, I made other disconcerting discoveries. Reading hundreds of tenure files, I saw twenty-seven disciplines from the inside. I winced when I heard people in the humanities criticize scientists for not pulling their weight—and when I heard scientists patronize people who sought to understand medieval France or who produced plays. Every discipline bore its particular configuration of challenges, I saw, whether the incessant demand for grant proposals or the impossibility of

getting a grant in the first place. Reading honest and touching anonymous letters of evaluation from hundreds of students, I saw good teaching in many forms, from labs to large lectures, from all kinds of personalities using all kinds of strategies. After looking into the lives and work of my colleagues, I found it harder to look down upon entire fields of study and ways of sharing discovery.

When I went out on the road as dean to advocate for the college, I made other discoveries. Alumni, it turned out, were at least as smart as I was and, if they were talking to the dean, probably more philanthropic. They remembered faculty members who had changed their lives and asked me to pass on their memories and gratitude. After hundreds of those conversations, I found it harder to caricature alumni as engaged only by tailgating and reunion parties.

I knew from teaching that the lifeblood of education travels through capillaries, small vessels that reach into small classrooms, quiet conversations, silent reading. But when I became dean, I saw that those capillaries flow only because of the arteries and veins of admissions, finance, student affairs, and advancement. People far removed from the classroom make it possible for other people to be teachers and students. They minister to students when professors are not there in the middle of the night, call the parents when a terrible accident strikes, make sure the classrooms and offices work, balance the budgets and protect the benefits of everyone.

It is not surprising that higher education costs more when it finally begins to serve a vast, diverse, and often poorer student body, when it educates more people from more backgrounds in more ways

After seeing the work of the committed people behind the scenes, I knew that the demeaning talk of "administrators," from inside and outside the academy, was often profoundly misplaced. The tired jokes of faculty about their colleagues "going over to the dark side" of administration came to seem not merely clichéd but misguided and self-defeating, trivializing and diminishing dedication to the shared purpose of the institution.

Thus, after only a few years as chair of the senate and as dean, I was less fun when my faculty friends tossed out easy explanations for what was wrong with our institution and with higher education in general. I became intrigued by the possibilities of academic leadership and was grateful to be offered the presidency at the University of Richmond, in part because I had never been a faculty member at a private university, a smaller institution, or a school where teaching stood as an equal with research. At Richmond, the dedication to students and colleagues inspired me every day.


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My horizons broadened in new directions when I was asked to serve on the board of the American Council on Education and to cochair a committee charged with analyzing accreditation in higher education. In that work, I saw how all kinds of schools—ranging from the Ivy League to small for-profits, from vast regional and urban publics to tiny faith-based colleges—fulfilled their distinct missions. Those institutions shared little in common beyond a determination to do the right things for their students, a determination that naturally took many shapes and that succeeded in unique ways. I was struck by how hard people worked and how successful they often were.

I learned, too, from the presidents of other private colleges and universities in Virginia. I was humbled by the challenges many of them faced and inspired by their accomplishments. Nearly 50 percent of students in those schools receive Pell grants, meaning that they have great financial need and few resources. Those schools, often small and seldom wealthy, welcome students who might have stumbled in high school and help them learn how to succeed. With only small amounts of support from the state, with tiny endowments and no margin for error, these schools change lives decade after decade. I saw how historically black colleges and universities, generation after generation, make an outsized impact.

Along the way, speaking at many kinds of institutions in my work as a historian, I came to see how broadly distributed talent and passion are among faculty and students across our country. I saw the pride of people who teach students from over a hundred different countries, students proficient in English at various levels, students with only limited time to devote to a course because they are also working and raising families. I saw that those who teach in community colleges and in regional public schools do not buy into the notion, common inside and outside the academy, that the more thoroughly preselected the students are the smarter the professor or the more important the work is.

Rhetoric versus reality: The remarkable successes of American higher education

As I received this belated education in higher education, I became more frustrated with commonplace criticism of higher education. It bothered me mainly because it undermines the possibilities of higher education. Because mothers and fathers read about scary levels of debt among some students, they fail to explore the hundreds of millions of dollars of financial aid available to them. Because their sons and daughters read exaggerated articles about getting into a few colleges, they miss opportunities in their backyards. Because students are told that the only skills that matter are the skills employers want this minute, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to acquire tools for a lifetime.

Lazy and clichéd criticism creates cynicism and defeatism. It also ignores fundamental facts about the remarkable expansion of those benefited by American higher education over the last forty years. The range, depth, and diversity of Americans achieving higher education have increased exponentially. Between 1970 and 2010, the total number of students increased from 8.5 million to 20.6 million, and the numbers and rates are still increasing. Between 2002 and 2012, the percentage of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in higher education rose to 41 percent, the highest ever. The number of female students increased from 3.5 million to 11.7 million between 1970 and 2010. The percentage of students of color has doubled since 1976.

Evidence of the success of that ongoing transformation is everywhere before us. Demand for all kinds of education has never been stronger. Our community colleges are bulging at the seams; public universities of all sizes and kinds are flooded with applicants; for-profit and online enterprises have grown up to meet a demand that states and nonprofits cannot meet. We know from surveys that the great majority of college graduates are glad they went to their colleges, felt they got their money's worth, and would go there again.

American higher education, in other words, has never educated more people, it has never educated a broader array of people, it has never offered an education that embraces so many fields of learning, it has never offered degrees more valuable and more coveted, and it has never been more respected and appreciated by the people who benefit from it. The world admires and copies every aspect of America's diverse system of higher education, from our liberal arts colleges to our research universities.

Despite these remarkable successes, a rhetoric of systemic failure discourages us from confronting, in a pragmatic and urgent way, the challenges that remain. Common sense explains many of those challenges. It is not surprising that higher education costs more when it finally begins to serve a vast, diverse, and often poorer student body, when it educates more people from more backgrounds in more ways. Higher education is hard, intellectually and socially, and it is not surprising that those who are the first in their families to go to college or who speak English as a second language or have other work responsibilities may struggle and require more support. Student welfare, engagement, and protection have become institutional responsibilities, and those responsibilities bring costs as well as enormous benefits to people within and beyond our colleges and universities.

American institutions of higher education have embraced one new challenge after another over the last half century. Confronting those challenges, day in and day out for generations, has built the strength to confront the challenges before us now. □

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