

WHAT MATTERS MOST

Recent books on higher education typically begin by playing a variation on a familiar tune. Students are adrift. Institutions are underperforming and are also turning students into smart but soulless sheep. Colleges are in need of fundamental redesign. Financial models are in disarray. Technological disruptions are on the horizon, or perhaps the revolution is already here. Two recent book titles frame the situation simply: *Is American Higher Education in Crisis?* (Blumenstyk, 2015). No, things are worse than that because we are witnessing *The End of College* (Carey, 2015).

Although the problems facing higher education are serious, this narrative of peril and constraint obscures something crucial: Excellence abounds at colleges and universities, and not just at the most elite institutions. Looking across the landscape of higher education, we see many instances of effective practices and powerful outcomes. Undergraduates are learning, faculty and staff are working together toward aspirational goals, programs are meeting evolving needs, institutional fundamentals are stable, and the future looks bright. Although the headlines may tell a different story, in many places higher education is flourishing.

This book analyzes the common characteristics of diverse programs and institutions that are successfully navigating the challenges facing higher education. A close look at such schools

highlights the promise of college while it also raises fundamental questions about the practices and purposes of undergraduate education today and tomorrow:

- The Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, the newest collegiate part of the City University of New York (CUNY), was created to enact the best research-based practices on student learning and success. Although Guttman's aim is appealing, it must pursue that goal in an environment layered with complex regulations, funding restrictions, strict labor practices, and other factors that have derailed many well-intended educational initiatives. Guttman raises the question of whether excellent undergraduate education for all students can be the central organizing principle today. Are we in higher education capable of significantly changing our practices and our institutions to meet this goal?
- Georgetown University, a global research university in Washington, D.C., that differs in nearly every way from Guttman, since 2013 has been systematically exploring a surprisingly similar question: Is it possible to design a research university "that would have liberal education values at its center but be appropriate for the world of 2030 and beyond" (Georgetown University, 2015)? In other words, how can today's undergraduate education evolve to meet the needs of students and communities in the future?
- The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) graduates more African-American

undergraduates who go on to earn PhDs in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields than any other predominantly white university in the country. UMBC's Meyerhoff Scholars Program is central to those results. For nearly three decades, this program has provided a comprehensive set of challenges to and supports for its students (Summers & Hrabowski, 2006). The results are unparalleled. The consistent success of Meyerhoff students raises a disquieting question for other higher education institutions: If UMBC can prepare traditionally underserved students for academic success, why are so many other institutions struggling to reach that same goal?

- The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a comprehensive university of more than 23,000 students, has returned to the roots of U.S. public colleges and universities to focus on enhancing students' social mobility through its high-quality programs. UTEP's story prompts us to ask whether all higher education institutions can and should address persistent social, economic, environmental, and other challenges in our communities and across our world. What is the role of undergraduate education in addressing the most pressing concerns of our students and our planet?
- Elon University in North Carolina is a private, primarily undergraduate institution of 6,500 students that over the past three decades has grown from a regional institution of fewer than 4,000 students to one that

attracts 80% of its students from out of state and has dramatically enhanced its academic profile. Elon's story raises challenging questions for leaders in higher education: If this institution was able to transform itself profoundly, why have so many other colleges and universities not changed in meaningful ways? What does it take to transform a college and then to sustain and build even further on that transformation?

- Arizona State University, the largest research university in the nation, is exploring the boundaries of time and place in undergraduate education by simultaneously rooting some academic programs in specific local communities and environments while launching others online to enable students from anywhere to learn at their own convenience. Arizona State is asking important questions about when and where excellent education can happen. How do time and place matter in undergraduate education?
- Governors State University (GSU), a 5,500-student public institution in Illinois, began by offering only upper-division courses and programs. Now GSU has launched a new model for the first two years of the collegiate experience by building a curriculum and learning spaces that are linked to three central themes: civic engagement, global citizenship, and sustainability. GSU aims toward a truly integrated undergraduate education. Can higher education be more than a collection of individual credits and experiences? Is the value of a degree more than the sum of its parts?

Core Themes

Although these institutions differ in many ways, they share a common set of commitments to what matters most in the undergraduate experience. We have grouped these into six core themes.

Learning matters

The preeminent purpose of undergraduate education is student learning. Learning must be at the heart of an institution's work and at the top of its priorities. However, at the most effective colleges and universities, students are not the only ones learning—the institution itself is a learning organization. Individuals and groups in all roles at the institution, from students and front-line staff members to faculty and administrators, see themselves as active learners. They strive to question assumptions, inquire into the effectiveness of their work, partner with peers to solve problems, and make evidence-informed decisions. Effective institutions have practices and policies deliberately designed to foster learning by everyone on campus, recognizing that faculty and staff must continually learn so that they can help students to learn. More than anything else in higher education, learning matters.

Relationships matter

Student–faculty, student–staff, and student–student relationships are essential to the undergraduate experience. For a college or university to sustain excellence, however, other structural relationships also matter a

great deal, such as those between academic affairs and student affairs, between student success initiatives and the faculty, between the governing board and senior administrators, and between alumni and the college. A vibrant and inclusive community emerges from the quality of the relationships that undergird it. Strong institutions value strong relationships, and they do not leave these to chance. Relationships are cultivated and nurtured intentionally at all levels.

Expectations matter

Clear and high expectations are central to the value and impact of an institution. Not only is this the case for student learning in academic courses, but it also holds true beyond the classroom. Thriving institutions have a sharp focus on the excellence of the entire student experience, including everything from admissions and financial aid processes to graduation and alumni affairs. These expectations are communicated clearly and consistently, touching everyone from prospective students and employees to experienced staff and faculty. Since such expectations both create and sustain a college or university's culture, it is especially critical to intentionally set expectations as new students, faculty, staff, and board members join the institution.

Alignment matters

Strong institutions align their resources, policies, and practices with their educational purposes and student characteristics, just as well designed courses align goals and assessments. While this may sound self-evident,

it can be vexing because higher education institutions often operate as collections of strong but separate programs. Thriving institutions transform silos into systems by supporting cross-unit coordination and by paying more attention to the student experience than to how the organizational chart divides up the campus.

Improvement matters

Excellent institutions critically assess student progress and their own effectiveness on specific, relevant measures, and then use the results of that process to help students deepen their learning and faculty and staff to make improvements in their programs. The nature and quality of those outcomes should be directly connected to an institution's mission and a student's goals.

Leadership matters

In strong institutions, leaders at all levels share a sense of vision and purpose. Those at the top of the organizational chart are crucial actors, but colleges and universities cannot thrive over the long term when a single person or a small group carries a disproportionate share of the load. Instead, people throughout the organization need to see themselves as part of the leadership team. This requires everyone to work together to nurture an institutional culture of inclusion, intentionality, and purpose.

We believe that these six themes provide a heuristic, a flexible framework, for focusing both individual and institutional

attention on what matters most in undergraduate education. A heuristic like this is intended not to be perfect but rather to be a tool that is useful and provocative in many contexts.

As you read, we invite and encourage you to use these themes to analyze your own and your institution's success at focusing on what matters most, adapting the framework and the examples to fit your situation. To help you in this process, we have created action principles and questions for you to consider for each of the themes. These are part of each chapter and also appear together in Appendices A and B. We hope you will use these for both personal reflection and discussions with colleagues. Doing so will enable you to come up with ideas that will work for you and your institution and enable you to move closer to your goals.

We Already Have Most of What We Need

Colleges and universities have many assets they can employ to confront the challenges facing higher education. Two particularly important factors prime colleges and universities for positive change:

First, our institutions are full of creative and smart people, and we are surrounded by many alumni, trustees, parents, and others who support our missions and who can help us see both our assets and our weaknesses. On our campuses, faculty and staff not only have expertise in their areas of specialization but also bring analytical mindsets and, often, deep experiences in problem solving, communication, and systematic action. Students also regularly refresh our institutions with new perspectives and passions. More than perhaps any other type

of organization, higher education institutions have within them the human capital necessary to navigate complex challenges.

Second, although research on learning in college continues to evolve, we now know quite a lot about what contributes most to positive student outcomes. This emerging research suggests that not only are certain pedagogies and practices effective with traditional college students but also that they often are even more effective with students who have been historically disadvantaged on college campuses. And, conversely, scholars have shown that educational practices designed to support struggling undergraduates have strongly positive results for all students. In other words, despite the diversity of higher education institutions, evidence is increasingly clear about the central characteristics of effective undergraduate education. Our challenge is no longer simply to ascertain what it is we need to do; our challenge now is to do it, to create and sustain excellent undergraduate education for all of our students. That can happen only if we deliberately plan and act in ways that leverage both human capital and the research on higher education.

Building on these and other assets, we can meet our students' evolving needs by using our resources in service of what matters most. Sometimes that will involve doing new things; sometimes it will require us to stop doing something that has become our custom but is no longer effective. Sometimes it will mean doing more with less, what Schroeder (2013) calls "doing less with less—but well" (p. 46). And sometimes we will need to hang on to vital and effective parts of our work, even if they seem to be out of fashion. The path ahead does not necessarily require a radical change of course but individuals and institutions will

need to make hard choices to focus limited time and resources on what matters most to the undergraduate experience.

Isolated actions, no matter how effective or purposeful, are not enough. Instead, a college needs a shared, aspirational vision for both student learning and for the institution's future. Schools have mission statements and strategic plans, but too often these do not animate the work of individuals or groups across campus. To thrive, everyone at the institution needs to be asking, how does my work contribute positively to our students' learning?

That may seem a straightforward question for faculty and staff, yet it often goes unspoken on many campuses. And for some at our institutions, such as employees in the accounting office or in the building and grounds department, that question might seem bewildering. Colleagues might ask, how could I contribute to the educational mission of the institution if I only talk to students about their tuition bills or take care of campus facilities? From a student's perspective, however, *everyone* at the institution matters. If a student is worried about whether her tuition check has cleared or if the leak in her residence hall room is fixed, she may struggle to concentrate in the classroom. Our students' education is a shared responsibility for all of us on campus.

Higher education institutions have the basic resources and the human capital necessary to be successful. Too often people within our institutions lack an aspirational vision of the possible, the will to act in purposeful yet sometimes difficult ways, and the skills to partner with others to create and fulfill that common vision. This book aims to help you and your colleagues develop the shared vision, focused will, and nimble

skills necessary to do the transformational work of higher education.

Visions of the Possible

Change is hard. Sometimes it seems impossible. Individuals and institutions may have well-worn defenses to resist reform: We tried something like that before, and it didn't work; we don't have the money or the people to bring about change; we need more information before we can act; none of our peer institutions is doing something like that. The list of time-tested conversation stoppers goes on and on. As you read this book, we encourage you to focus on what is possible for you, your students, and your institution—to ask what if rather than to immediately conclude that you can't or that your institution won't because

Constraints are real, of course. Funding is a profound challenge at many colleges and universities. When adjusted for inflation, state appropriations for higher education have been essentially flat since 1990 and have actually declined by more than 15% since 2007 (Baum & Ma, 2014). This has shifted much of the cost of higher education from states to students, contributing to real concerns about college affordability. Private institutions also have struggled as the rate of tuition increases slowed while endowments plunged during the Great Recession (Bowen, 2013). With no end to financial limits in sight, institutions have been forced to rethink priorities and practices. Although this is not easy, a scarcity of resources can provoke a new urgency and clarity of vision, prompting institutions to be more imaginative and creative in making

programmatic investments (Radjou & Prabhu, 2014). In a nutshell, money matters, but it isn't everything.

Performance metrics also are an increasingly important factor in higher education decision making, particularly at public institutions. Thirty-two states currently allocate a portion of higher education funding based on indicators such as course completion rates and time to degree. Close attention to the investment of public and private funds, including tuition dollars, is essential; however, incomplete or inappropriate metrics direct students and institutions away from the most important academic, civic, and, yes, economic purposes of the academy (Delbanco, 2012). Retention rates and time to degree, for instance, are important means when evaluating an institution, but surely they are not the proper ends of undergraduate education.

Decades ago, Alexander Astin (1984) provided a useful framework for understanding the relationship among important student and institutional factors in his I-E-O theory of involvement. The outcomes (O) of a college are produced by the interaction between the inputs (I) and the environment (E). An institution typically cannot significantly change its inputs, such as the characteristics of its incoming students or the financial resources available. However, the faculty, staff and administrators, board members, and others can influence the environment the students experience at the institution. A college can enhance its programs, offer new opportunities, and otherwise shape the E that ultimately contributes to student outcomes. Because E is the key variable in Astin's equation, we will focus on it throughout the book. No matter the external

constraints, from performance metrics and funding to student demographics and technological changes, all institutions have the capacity to create environments where students can learn and succeed.

Claims like that might cause you to wonder if the authors of this book are naively hopeful. Admittedly we are profoundly optimistic about the potential within colleges and universities. Yet we do know that resources and time are scarce, campus climates are less than ideal, and change is never easy. We are emphasizing possibilities not because we are wearing rose-colored glasses but rather because we have seen countless examples across the country of institutional and programmatic excellence. Often this quality is not widely acknowledged because it happens on campuses without high profiles or large endowments. And sometimes all of us are too busy doing the work to take the time to tell others about it. Yet these stories have a great deal to teach us about what is possible—and what is necessary.

Our world faces profound challenges in the years ahead: Social and environmental upheaval, economic inequality and stagnation, cultural and religious conflict, racial and ethnic oppression, personal and communal violence, and more. Not only do our students need and deserve high-quality educations, but our world also needs more people with the knowledge, skills, capacities, and commitments to make positive differences in their professions and communities. Higher education is one of the fundamental levers necessary to create a more sustainable, just, and humane future. Indeed, the mission of higher education is so important that we must act to make

sure that we are successful in delivering what matters most in a student's education—and our actions must be guided by our values and aspirations, not short-term expediency or passing fads.

Using This Book

We have deliberately written a relatively brief and, we hope, engaging book that is relevant and accessible for a wide range of readers—from faculty, staff, and administrators to trustees, policymakers, philanthropists, alumni, parents, and students.

Our analysis throughout the book is based on our reading of the literature and our deep and diverse experiences in higher education. We aim to translate what we have seen in the scholarship and on the ground into an accessible and practical book. Too often, we believe, excellent higher education research does not yield the institutional change that it could because disciplinary conventions keep it from reaching a broad audience. At the same time, individual college or university success stories are dismissed because they are too idiosyncratic. By synthesizing the best scholarship and practice, and complementing that with insights gained throughout our careers, we hope to provide a useful framework and practical advice for a wide range of people who are interested in higher education.

The book aims to help you articulate and enact a concrete, aspirational vision for undergraduate education that will have a positive impact on your students, your institutions, and our world. To do that, each chapter explores one of the six core themes outlined earlier. The chapters begin with brief vignettes that illustrate the central issues, then analyze

important action principles, and close with questions for reflection and discussion.

We suggest you approach the book from your own perspective, considering how the principles and practices we address connect to your work and role at your institution. Presidents and members of governing boards may focus more on large strategic questions; faculty and student affairs staff may think more about day-to-day interactions with students and colleagues. People in service roles on campus may reflect on the potential for their work to enhance the students' environment and educational mission of the institution. We urge you to think critically and creatively about how the ideas and examples in this book connect to, and challenge, your current practices. We hope the myriad examples will offer you visions of the possible, even though the particulars of a case might differ from yours.

Although you might be reading today on your own, we hope groups and institutions will use the book as a catalyst for discussions about what matters most for undergraduate education in your particular context. The questions at the end of each chapter may be useful prompts for deliberations about policies and practices within a department, school, or institution.

The future of undergraduate education will hinge on the questions that you ask and the decisions you make to act on what matters most. To thrive in the future, institutional leaders at all levels will need to question assumptions, critically inquire into the effectiveness of their work, and inventively approach new and persistent problems: Do you have a guiding vision to shape your work, and how do you systematically yet creatively enact that vision? What is the impact of the education you offer your students, and how can you enhance

that impact for all of your students? What is the real value of an undergraduate education, not only to an individual but also to our communities and to our world?

We believe that questions like these need to guide all of our work in higher education. The coming chapters will explore what is possible when they do.