

Chapter 1

The Future of Accessibility in Higher Education: Making College Skills and Degrees More Accessible

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ABSTRACT

Higher education worldwide is facing unprecedented challenges - the dramatic rise of college tuition, rapidly increasing demands for accountability, and a complex society that demands college graduates with even more skills and capacities. To understand how higher education can effectively address these challenges, this chapter investigates the economic and social benefits of higher education and what it means for the future of accessibility in higher education. Utilizing Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) and signaling theory, a comprehensive search of the literature selected 60 peer-reviewed journal articles and twenty-five books published between 2000 and 2016. The findings suggest that student expectations for a college degree tends to be very instrumental and personal, while higher education purpose of undergraduate education tend towards highly ideal life- and society-changing consequences. Eight recommendations for teacher-scholars, policymakers, and campus leaders are proposed. The ultimate goal is to help make colleges skills and degrees more accessible for students.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last half-century, new pressures have challenged the traditional purpose and accessibility of higher education (The National Task Force, 2012). On one hand, one would argue that the purpose and civic mission of higher education is to acquire new knowledge and skills to prepare one for the work-force (Checkoway, 2001). On the other hand, one would also argue that colleges and universities should be aiming for more ideal contributions in a democratic society. That conundrum has posed persistent dilemmas about the public purpose of higher education and the future of accessibility in postsecondary

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education (Abowitz, 2008; Brighthouse & Mcpherson, 2015; Chambers & Gopaul, 2008; Dungy, 2012; Levine, 2014; Shapiro, 2005).

To enumerate, higher education in the United States and abroad is facing unprecedented challenges on a wide number of issues including support for financial aid, rapidly increasing tuition rates, diminishing appropriations, modified governance relationships, and a complex and global society that demands college graduates to acquire more skills and capacities (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumpert, 2016; Goodchild, Jonsen, Limerick, & Longanecker, 2014). Notably, both public and private universities worldwide are in a marketplace shift where they need to constantly prove their value and worth in contemporary society (Bok, 2003; Suspitsyna, 2012). Historically, institutions of higher education exist to educate students for lives of public service, to advance knowledge through research, and to develop leaders for various areas of the public service (American Council on Education, 1949). Today's universities, however, are required to prepare graduates with the knowledge, skills, and ethical responsibility to meet the future workforce needs of society and to participate fully in the new global economy (Spellings Commission, 2006). These profound changes, in turn, have begun to shift higher education from once a public good to now a private benefit (Filippakou & Williams, 2014; Pusser, 2006), whereby colleges and universities have begun to operate as a corporate industry with predominant economic goals and market-oriented values (Gumpert, 2000; Kerr, 1994; Thompson, 2014), which has reduced higher education to a transactional process rather than maintaining its transformative potential (Bylsma, 2015). This dual role has resulted in the rise of the new industrial model of privatization, commercialization, and corporatization and has altered higher education's traditional mission, and has also increased the mission differentiation in higher education systems in preparing all graduates for democratic participation, active citizenship, and personal development (Kezar, 2004; Lambert, 2014). In other words, colleges and universities are not only under pressure to promote college access, affordability, and completion in today's uncertain future, but also enhance individuals' core competencies and dispositions (i.e., "non-economic" benefits) such as, the ability to think logically, the capacity to challenge the status quo, and the desire to develop sophisticated values for entry into the highly competitive global labor market (Brennan, Durazii, & Sene, 2013; Selingo, 2016; Tilak, 2008; Washburn, 2005).

Today's labor market requires highly skilled personnel at all levels to deal with rapid industrialization in rapidly changing environments (Ramley, 2014b). To meet current societal needs, higher education institutions must redefine and reinvent college curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment policies to ensure that all students have the desired attributes and competencies to contribute to the global economy and engage effectively in democracy (Fein, 2014; Kirst & Stevens, 2015). Statistically speaking, Hart Research Associates (2015) concluded that 91 percent of employers think that critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving abilities are more important than a potential employee's undergraduate major. At the same time, 87 percent of employers give hiring preference to college graduates who have completed a senior project. While 97 percent of good jobs created since 2010 have gone to college graduates (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2015), more than half of employers still report having difficulty finding qualified candidates for job openings, and over one-third say that recent graduates are very unprepared for their job searches (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Repnikov, 2014; Carnevale, Hanson, & Gulish, 2013; Fischer, 2014; McKinsey & Company, 2015). Accordingly, new research that investigates the public and personal or private purpose of higher education is needed to understand the extent that students develop the discipline-specific competencies and higher-level learning outcomes that are needed to live responsibly in an increasingly diverse democracy and in an interconnected global community (Roksa & Arum, 2015).

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