

Is Higher Ed Omnivorous or Sucked Dry?

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August 3, 2018

The Chronicle Review



Jon Krause for The Chronicle
Review

By Cathy N. Davidson August 03, 2018

In a recent *Chronicle Review* [essay](#) with the clickbait headline (which the authors did not write) "Why the University's Insatiable Appetite Will Be Its Undoing," Adam Daniel and Chad Wellmon, respectively an administrator and a professor at the University of Virginia, argue that the university should be more focused on what it does best — teaching and research — and less responsive to broad social pressures: "To save itself and to better serve its democratic purpose, the university needs to be not more but less reactive to public demands."

There are serious problems with arguments like this, much in the air right now, that blame universities for everything: overbuilding, high tuition, teaching too many subjects, incurring too much debt. Universities, according to Daniel and Wellmon, are simply doing too much all around.

Maybe that's true for UVA, though I suspect not. It is certainly not true for the majority of the universities in the United States facing serious economic problems, problems which are not of their own making.

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Assaults like Daniel and Wellmon's are worryingly short on specifics, and therefore leave us with few means for finding a constructive solution. Instead, they all too readily echo the drumbeat — most common in conservative circles but not only there — that higher education costs too much and doesn't do its job. I agree that tuition is too high at many of our universities, and I am an ardent champion for higher-education redesign that better supports our students in a complex world. However, if we do not take seriously the reasons we are in the state we are in right now, we will come up with more spurious and wrong-headed "solutions" that exacerbate rather than remedy the problems in higher education today.

"Always historicize!" isn't a bad idea if you are looking to find a solution to a problem, rather than a scapegoat. What follows are some key assumptions made by policy makers and the public over the course of the last several decades, beginning with the reversal of the post-World War II investment in U.S. higher education during the governorship and then the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Each of these arguments for educational reform and retrenchment has contributed to the current crisis.

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No. 1: "Higher ed should be run like businesses." Colleges and universities, the thinking goes, need to be entrepreneurial. They need to hire CEOs as presidents, and their boards should be composed of business people. As a consequence, universities end up pursuing big grants and big donors. We know this favors science. We also know, from Christopher Newfield's work, that it incurs long-term costs — buildings, labs, staff — that persist after the initial massive investment and after the granting organizations or the private donors have moved on to other interests. And it leads to the escalation of administrative salaries, with universities competing with corporations for college presidencies. The move to external funding also requires increased administrative staff (not bloat) to manage the complexities of budget, intellectual property and copyright agreements, income and profit sharing, and many other contingencies.

No. 2: "The public should not need to fund higher education. Higher education should fund itself." In recent years, we have witnessed massive state cutbacks to higher ed, resulting in a roughly 20-percent-to-50-percent per capita reduction in public subsidy in some states. So tuition rises. Some states, such as Colorado, now subsidize under 5 percent of university costs. The rest comes from private or public funding sources (such as Pell Grants or grants from government research agencies) or, tragically, higher tuition.

No. 3: "Higher ed doesn't really train students for the future. It's out of date." Increasing numbers of Americans think higher education is no longer worth it (although, given the growth in Kaplan-style SAT cram schools and the escalation of applications to elite colleges and

universities, it is clear that the affluent are still working to ensure that their own kids go to college). However, many of the attempts to bring college "up to date" are badly misinformed wastes — for instance, MOOCs, which certainly won't do the trick. They enrich technology entrepreneurs without improving the quality of learning. Lots of bad policy is justified by this one, perhaps most notoriously the California State University system's hasty 2013 implementation (for an undisclosed sum) of the for-profit Udacity online courses in remedial math, algebra, and statistics at San Jose State. Supposedly these online courses were going to outperform actual classroom teachers. The retreat from that program in the face of poor results was as rapid as its adoption, yet the clarion call for "technology" to solve educational woes remains.

No. 4: "Higher ed costs too much." It absolutely does. You now need to be rich to afford many universities. But there is huge variation. Community college is still relatively inexpensive — but also lacks the resources to expend on those students facing the biggest challenges. Belt-tightening is hardly necessary in university and community-college systems where costs are already low and resources very scarce, where faculty with full-time jobs teach heavy loads, and where well over half of courses are taught by underpaid adjunct professors with no benefits or security. Belt-tightening? At many public universities (and private too), students are facing food insecurity. And so are adjunct faculty. Institutions are impoverished. They have been robbed.

No. 5: "Make international student visas more difficult to attain." The recent rise in xenophobia and difficulties in obtaining student visas have led to a diminishing number of students from all around the world coming to the U.S. American higher ed is valued everywhere, and we used to have the international student body to prove it. After a decade of inviting international students (for cultural, social, intellectual, and, one must acknowledge, financial reasons), now such students are going to ... Canada. Universities are feeling the effects everywhere, and so will our labor force.

Higher ed needs to change. But accusing it of insatiability will only justify more damaging cutbacks. Where will those be made? Who will make them? And will students and faculty, knowledge and teaching and research, be the winners? Or will this end up being another blame-the-victim assault on higher ed? If we aren't sufficiently explicit about the pressures that have brought us to this juncture, we undermine any chance for sane, reasoned, innovative reform.

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