

OECD Conference

Higher Education in a World Changed Utterly: Doing More with Less

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Panel on "Social Engagement and Higher Education: New Imperatives"

Two and a half years ago, just as the impact of the financial crisis was beginning to be felt by leaders of American higher education, I attended a conference of 500 presidents of independent universities and colleges in the US. The keynote speaker was, tellingly, Paul O'Neill, former Secretary of the US Treasury and former activist CEO of Alcoa. Brought in to lead a discussion on how universities were going to have to do more with less, he quickly moved beyond explanation of financial events. This will pass slowly, he said, and with terrible consequences, but it shall pass. And he gave us this wise advice: In grim times as in good, said he, lead your universities with authenticity and belief, cleave to mission, continue to labor for the public good, create a vision that enlivens everyone in your institution to honor your community's values. Produce students who will use their critical faculties and follow their better angels. While that might be familiar language coming from the humanities faculty, it was extraordinary talk from an economic leader. The world has never needed, apparently, our kind of institution, more.

I speak to you today as the president of a small, American, but hybrid institution located in Paris, an institution of remarkable demographic diversity, that counts 100 different nationalities in the student body, 30 in the faculty body. Over the last decade our entering class has brought over 86 different languages and dialects into our community. If you add the faculty, the count goes to 97. This cultural, linguistic, educational and ideological diversity inflects all learning on our campus. Even our staff and faculty meetings toggle amongst several languages. Such diversity forces us daily to confront difference and to find learning experiences to deal with it. It puts front and center the kinds of global awareness and engagement which it is the special focus of this panel to discuss.

First, a bit of context. In the field of American higher education, the sector I know best, the financial crisis is just the last in a series of wake up calls that will, I feel certain, transform the way colleges and universities educate the next generation. Yes, we will all have to do more with less. But we will also have to transform radically the way we have done our business, returning to mission with a new eye. Higher education has always been the mirror of American society, and we're getting a good look at it now. Huge gaps between college experiences for the rich and the poor. Declining access to public education for the middle and working classes. State retrenchment on appropriations to the public colleges that educate 80% of the college-going public. So long as the children of the baby boomers were going to college in droves, so long as states were supporting public universities, and

the so long as the endowments of the private ones were growing by leaps and bounds, the academy, frankly, was not very motivated to make changes.

Several events came together over the past three years, amounting to a kind of perfect storm:

First, there was the demographic crisis. 2010 marks the end of the baby boomer's baby bulge—beginning this year, the number of college-going students in the US has begun to slide, making it increasingly difficult for the nation's majority of tuition-driven institutions.

Then, there was the financial crisis itself. Either universities faced endowment crises or they faced enrollment crises of one sort or another. Both amounted to a budget crisis. Rather than retrace a history all too familiar at this point, suffice it to say that the impact was so thoroughgoing as to have called into question every aspect of university functioning. Although stories about Harvard's loss of 8 billion filled the news, the truth is that only 20% of the US's college-going population is educated in private institutions. The crisis in public higher education is infinitely more worrying. 80% of American students are educated in public institutions which guarantee access and affordability. These institutions have the scale and the transformative power to help the nation out of the financial mess we are in by creating jobs, graduating more students, enhancing the quality and skills of the workforce, and assisting in national goals through research. Yet, last year 31 of 50 states were underfunded in their budgets. Only 8% of UVA's operating budget came from state subsidy. At the same time, 57% of students polled by Moody's said that they were considering public universities. A rise in enrollments with a shortfall in state support is a fatal combination—overworked, underpaid staffs struggle to meet demand, some public universities simply can't take as many students as apply, and inevitably they are forced to raise tuition, turning even more students away. In short, there was no institution of higher learning in the US unaffected. Harvard, representatively, relies on payout from its endowment to cover more than a third of its annual operating budget and has faced losses in the hundreds of millions; private tuition-driven colleges saw dramatic falls in tuition revenue as students sought more affordable alternatives; and public institutions suffered as state appropriations shrank. All institutions experienced downturns in alumni contributions, as charitable giving took a hit. The only good thing that can be said for the financial crisis was that it was a bit like cutting back a garden in winter—one can see the essential structure of the garden and if one prunes wisely and thinks carefully about a sustainable future form for the garden, it should flourish anew when resources flow once more.

Even before the financial crisis hit, American higher ed had also been slammed by what I'll call the accreditation crisis. Traditionally, US universities are peer-reviewed in a process owned by regional accrediting agencies, that is, they were more or less self-regulating, with a rich process of self-study and review by one's colleagues, until, under

Bush, Margaret Spellings' famous report on the future of American higher education came out and pointed the finger at American higher education for its lack of accountability to its stakeholders. Although the report alienated practically everyone who could have benefited from it—it called American universities risk averse, self-satisfied, and unduly expensive—it was an important wakeup call. It registered just how out of synch institutions were with the changing needs of employers, with our increasingly mobile culture, and in their cost structures. Regional, independent, accreditation is one of the hallmarks of American higher education and it should not be taken over by the federal government—we all know the costs of programs such as No Child Left Behind—but then institutions have to be willing to assume responsibility for critical changes in the way we have traditionally accomplish our work. The shakedown from the Spellings report amounted to a crisis in legitimacy.

How do colleges know they are achieving what they claim? How can they hold themselves accountable to their stakeholders, and demonstrate that students are actually learning what we say we are teaching them? And how, with the financial pressures and legitimacy charges, can they continue to advance missions of social engagement and public service?

These three imbricated crises have revealed the need for a renewal of our educational project, one which will be hastened and inevitably helped by the financial crisis. We have no choice now but to answer to our stakeholders, the students we teach, and the parents who fund their educations, on issues of access and affordability, and on issues of appropriate pedagogy for this generation of learners. While it has been very compelling for college presidents to focus on new revenue streams and short-term budget management during the crisis, I believe it is essential for us to focus on the longer term project of delivering on mission, of offering learning experiences that will lead to a sense of global belonging and engagement, of staging debate on the social issues every country on the globe faces: immigration, integration, innovation and economic renewal, global warming, climate change, sustainable development, to name just a few salient ones.

How must universities position themselves in a post-crisis climate? To reclaim public confidence and advance a world-critical agenda of informed citizenship and social engagement, to what should we be aspiring? Let me leave you with a few proposals.

1. We need to examine and review regularly the relevance of our educational programs to a students who were born into the Information Age. The rise of the information society has created a fourth crisis for higher education, a challenge coming from within which I will call the pedagogical crisis. A host of recent books and articles have solicited enormous controversy. "The Universities in Trouble" (review article by Andrew DelBanco), "The End of the University as we Know it" (Mark Taylor, Chair of Religion, Columbia U), and "The Impending Demise of the University" (Don Tapscott). To summarize these articles briefly, it should be said that universities are, in fact, losing their monopoly on teaching and learning—technology and the web make the traditional classroom lecturer less and less

important. Students can increasingly access information “just in time” (when they need it). They need help culling it, evaluating its authority, and synthesizing and analyzing it; they need help developing their critical judgment in a world where information flows are overwhelming; they need to learn to collaborate and to communicate information, not to master it—in an information society, mastery is no longer relevant. Consequently, we’ve seen a shift from a teaching model to a learning model, in which students work alone and in groups on problem-based learning, on inquiry, and where the professor plays the role of a coach or guide on the side. Interestingly, the more we provide such learning experiences for students, the more likely they are to work collaboratively and to manifest social engagement. Traditional academic approaches centering around mastery of materials in a competition for grades produces exactly that : competition.

2. We also need to move to new ground in the debate between a liberal arts or pre-professional approach to education. Personally, I find this a dangerous and false dichotomy. This is no easy either/or choice. Without both—without the deep learning that is characteristic of a broad, disciplinarily rich college education AND the hands-on, problem-based learning, or applied knowledge of pre-professional formation, our graduates will not be prepared for a changing job market which will require them to retool or transfer skills over five times in their lifetimes. And they will not develop the capacity for critical judgment, the openness to the complexity of claims and counterclaims, the sense of curiosity about and concern for others that is essential to the mature development of citizenship. I have exhorted my own faculty in the traditional liberal arts disciplines to learn from their colleagues on the pre-professional side of the house to give students opportunities to model and to make ; and I have exhorted my faculty in business and in communications to teach those disciplines as liberal arts. We have, already, empirical evidence that this chiasmus works. In a single year, the number of majors in Comparative Literature doubled, after the department renovated the major, adding in the third year production seminars in publishing, translating, and creative writing. The Communications major became the most in-demand major on campus when it began building a core of courses on communication for humanitarian purposes and paired students up with local NGOs in need of new communications strategies and tools.

3. We need to invest in increased networking, partnerships, and consortial arrangements. Universities worldwide will be forced beyond competition with one another to survive. A good scenario might be something like that envisioned by the Bologna Accords here in Europe—increased student and faculty mobility, transferability of credits, international legibility of diplomas and degrees, quality assurance. An excellent scenario might be a kind of “global university,” facilitated and convened by technologies such as videoconferencing” that brings together the best of the best worldwide and creates superdepartments of the highest possible quality, whose work, whose teaching is made available and affordable to all. The work of Johns Hopkins and MIT in creating open, on-line curricula is to be lauded in this domain. So is the work of 14 campuses in the Associated Colleges of the South

consortium who collaborated to create a topnotch virtual classics department. Universities are going to have to face the fact that they no longer have a monopoly on knowledge—not in the information society. They are also going to have to face the fact that to produce students who can find dignified solutions to the problems facing the world they are inheriting, we will have to teach and research across boundaries and encourage our students to do the same. This is inevitably having an impact on disciplinary boundaries, notions of authorship, and even standards for tenure and promotion, all of which require re-scripting. We also need to forge new academic and innovative academic partnerships that bridge the academy, civil society, and industry. All universities are currently engaged in articulating such partnerships, but let me tell you about just one. Twenty-two American universities abroad have created a consortium of universities and technology providers to share staff training, pool our Anglophone library resources electronically, and bring together faculty at all of our institutions to collaborate via technology. What began as a cost-saving measure—pooled resources, consortial pricing—has become a lever for the social engagement of faculty and students across Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. Many schools in the consortium have begun to articulate shared programs, joint degrees, and new curricular vehicles. Those of us who meet on one of our campuses yearly like to joke that our mission is « peace on earth » so varied and extensive has our web of collaborations become.

4. We need to have the courage to abandon traditional disciplinary approaches that no longer serve in favor of new courses of study that bring multiple disciplines into interplay. Just a few examples of these new fields would be neuroscience and sustainable development studies or climate science. On our campuses we need to offer such courses of study that focus on issues of social engagement, but we need to do so in a social context in which everyone—faculty, students, and staff—walks the talk. AUP recently opened a Masters in Sustainable Business Management, is planning to open a Masters in Sustainable Development Practice, and recently began a full recycling program and a double-sided printing initiative as a result of a partnership amongst the Student Government Association, the Environmental Committee, Faculty and the Administration. These initiatives tend to produce synergies that go far beyond the classroom and call the whole soul of our students into activity, indeed the whole soul of an institution. I am consciously using O’Neil’s language here.

5. We need to have the courage to supplement or even supplant the traditional lecture with new opportunities for active student learning. In a team-taught course with a colleague some years ago, we learned that students who study social injustice by reading about examples of it worldwide rapidly lapse into guilty apathy, whereas those who are given opportunities to model real-life alternatives with their peers leave the course infinitely more engaged. In a course on conflict resolution, they commit to the process when invited to simulate peace talks or think through democratic processes. In a community as diverse as ours, we have learned that tolerance—the « it’s a small world after all » anthem of college

catalogs—is way overrated. As any one who has ever been in a bicultural marriage can attest, it takes excellent negotiating skills to deal with difference, especially what we call the differences within cultures or religious faiths. Only by giving students opportunities to work in cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary teams, such that they work through their differences in pursuit of commonly articulated goals, are we equipping them for a world held in common. This isn't always easy to manage, and it makes for a less disciplined and easily controlled classroom, for sure, but it also opens possibilities for learning and engagement that traditional methods cannot match.

6. We need to think carefully about our traditional approaches to student mobility and what we call in the US study abroad. Moving cohorts of students together into a host culture usually produces the opposite effect of that which we are seeking, reinforcing cultural stereotypes and increasing an enclave resistance to a new culture. It is also available only to those with the means to travel. We need to find richer ways to use the naturally occurring ethnic and cultural and religious diversity on our own campuses as a laboratory for self-discovery and development, as a petri dish for engagement with and commitment to others. Four alumni of AUP founded Global Nomads ten years ago to put schoolchildren, via the school curriculum, into dialog with their peers across the globe. Using highly sophisticated technology, partnering with teachers within national curricula, this NGO has provided over the past decade « study abroad » to over 1.5 million school children, exposing them to cultural differences and exchanges in novel ways.

7. We need to pay more attention to educational outcomes than inputs. Universities are being forced, salutarily I believe, to demonstrate that they deliver what they promised, that students are leaving with the skills, the discerning capacities, the critical judgment, and the knowledge base that they are promised in college viewbooks. It's no longer the richness of the facilities, the wellness centers, the olympic pools and fitness centers that will count, but a university's demonstrated capacity to train and place intelligent, thoughtful, and reflective citizens in a workforce that has need of them. Here most colleges and universities have begun some of the most interesting and important assessment research in their histories, measuring student development longitudinally and showing evidence of progress toward mission. It is too easy to produce the results of standardized testing ; it is imperative to design subtle instruments, both qualitative and quantitative, to capture the gradual attainment—across a curricular trajectory--of a student's civic conscience and social engagement. This, once codified by new forms of faculty research, may turn out to be the most compelling story our colleges and universities have to tell.

8. And finally, and perhaps most optimistically of all, we need to retreat from associating a college degree with an increased paycheck—despite economic hard times—and the college major as mere vocational training. It is time to remind our students that a college degree entails a commitment to service and to the public good which requires both broad cultural and intellectual reach AND the capacity to apply it deftly to the most pressing social issues

of our age. Ironically, the two may be coming together as a result of the financial crisis. The hottest growth area for curriculum development on college campuses is currently sustainable development in its richest imbrication of the social, the economic, and the environmental, largely because the green sector is targeted for expansion. Finance Master's and traditional business degrees have languished somewhat in favor of green MBAs and Master's in Sustainable Business Management. Students are clamoring for courses on environmental science, urban issues, humanitarian concerns, with an eye to doing what I would call "world work." On my campus, at least, the financial crisis has produced a palpable shift in student choices and we're talking about things that weren't on the radar screen over the past decade, as students fled the traditional humanities and social science majors in favor of pre-professional degrees: leadership, social entrepreneurship, global interdependence, environmental sustainability, civil society, civic engagement, in short, choices that reflect our students' fundamental commitment to a better life for all.