Empty Enthusiasm? American University Leaders Assess Their Institutions

Article · July 2017

3 authors, including:

Stjepan Oreskovic
Harvard Medical School

123 PUBLICATIONS 415 CITATIONS

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

A Global Analysis of the Quality of Guideliness for HIV Surveillance: Bioethical Analysis View project

“Universities' Roles and Moral Responsibilities in the Contemporary Era View project
Good news! American universities are the best, or among the best, universities in the world – according to American university leaders.

Such are the findings of a recent survey conducted by Georgetown University Academy for Innovative Higher Education Leadership. Specifically, a quarter of the 119 college and university deans surveyed believe that the U.S. higher education system is still the “best in the world” and another 58% believe it is one of the best. In addition, a great majority of survey respondents indicated that a college education remains a high-value investment and a ticket to economic and social advancement.

According to 65% of deans responding to a questionnaire, the present is great and the future will be bright - they believe their institutions will undergo significant change over the next decade. 67% of the deans surveyed rated American higher education as “excellent” or “very good” for promoting and implementing academic innovation, with optimism about the future of online education featuring as a prominent example. According to another interesting survey – this time carried out by the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2014 – 60% of university presidents argue that the industry is in fact heading in the right direction.

This sunny assessment contrasts sharply with the view of higher education presented in both the popular and industry media. Those outlets features stories about high costs, souring debt rates, conflicts over free speech, racial tensions, ill-prepared graduates and dropping public confidence predominate. What explains this
disconnect? Certainly, university leaders want to spin a positive narrative about the future of their institutions. Public trust is an important precondition of their success.

But even with this strong motives to answer surveys hopefully, it is clear that doubts have infiltrated even the leadership of university and colleges. Only 25% of the Deans surveyed by Georgetown thought higher education is headed in the right direction. By contrast, an astonishing 44% of their colleagues believe we are moving backwards, and the remaining 31% declined to guess.

What’s going on here? The deans point to too few new dollars for investments, resource constraints on faculty and staff, and resistance or aversion to change within institutions. Although these are real restraints, another problem – lack of intellectual leadership – is make these problems crippling. In related research by Deloitte and Georgia Tech, university presidents accentuated strategy, fund-raising, and effective story-telling as the most important responsibilities of their job. They place academic and intellectual leadership at the end of the list. Clarity about the higher aims of higher education is lost in these conditions, The university today has become a “thoroughly rationalized, bureaucratized, disenchanted (in the Weberian sense)” institution that is losing legitimacy, writes Rakesh Khurana in his book “From Higher Aims to Hired Hands.” Instead of developing leadership and foresight, universities are looking to management for guidance on how to handle the complex power equations that govern their relations to government power, corporations, media, and reactive professors and students.

The Georgetown research demonstrates rather clearly that university leaders are uncertain about the direction that higher education is heading in. But interestingly, none of the surveys asked the obvious follow-up question: what is the right direction? And what would it take to get us there? Will raising more funds really help hit the target when we are not sure what we are meant to be aiming at? In the early 80’s, Alvin Toffler, an American writer, futurist and author of the legendary book “Future Shock” wrote: "You’ve got to think about big things while you’re doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.”

Answers to questions such as the relative performance of American higher education compared to higher education in other countries require value judgments. They require a sense of what academic excellence means – the kinds of things that are
required for a university to perform its roles well. These are the things that are important to the role of the university, things that students are seeking and that professors would be proud to provide. Fundamentally, these things constitute the functions of our universities – the contributions that universities make to their stakeholders and to society at large, that justify their existence and the efforts of countless students, administrators, staff, and faculty.

We all have some idea of what these things are. The purpose of universities includes, at a minimum, the production and dissemination of knowledge. Universities provide an invaluable service in educating the next generation of professionals, humanists, scientists, civil servants and, more broadly, citizens of all kinds. They provide a forum for discussion of important political and societal events. But these hardly exhaust the important questions we might aim at universities. Should universities focus on serving the needs of employers and donors, or should they focus on developing character and reasoning faculties of students? Should universities advise governments in policy-making or remain silent on politically sensitive topics? Should universities seek to promote justice, conduct themselves ethically, contribute to causes such as reducing hunger and inequality, or are these worthy endeavors best left to others? More generally, what are the values that universities ought to pursue?

These are important questions. If we do not ask them, and if we do not attempt to answer them, we can hardly make heads or tails of questions such as the ones that deans and presidents were asked. How can we know that higher education is heading in the right direction without engaging in discussions of this kind? How can we know which systems of higher education are the best, when we do not even know what they are meant to achieve?

Presumably, the 25% of deans who think that higher education is heading in the right direction – and the 44% who think it is heading the opposite way – have considered these and similar questions, at least implicitly. Perhaps the 31% who have no clue about the direction of their industry have also had similar thoughts, but simply do not know whether the things they value in their profession are being adequately targeted. But these questions are so important that they need to be discussed openly. And they matter for us all, whether we are employed or educated by universities or not, because so many of the thing we take for granted – sound policies, informed media, capable doctors and judges, economic growth and stability, to name just a few – rely on the education, knowledge, and influence of our universities. The important question is not which higher education system is among the best in the world – but what we need
from higher education in the this century and do those important aims guide its operations.