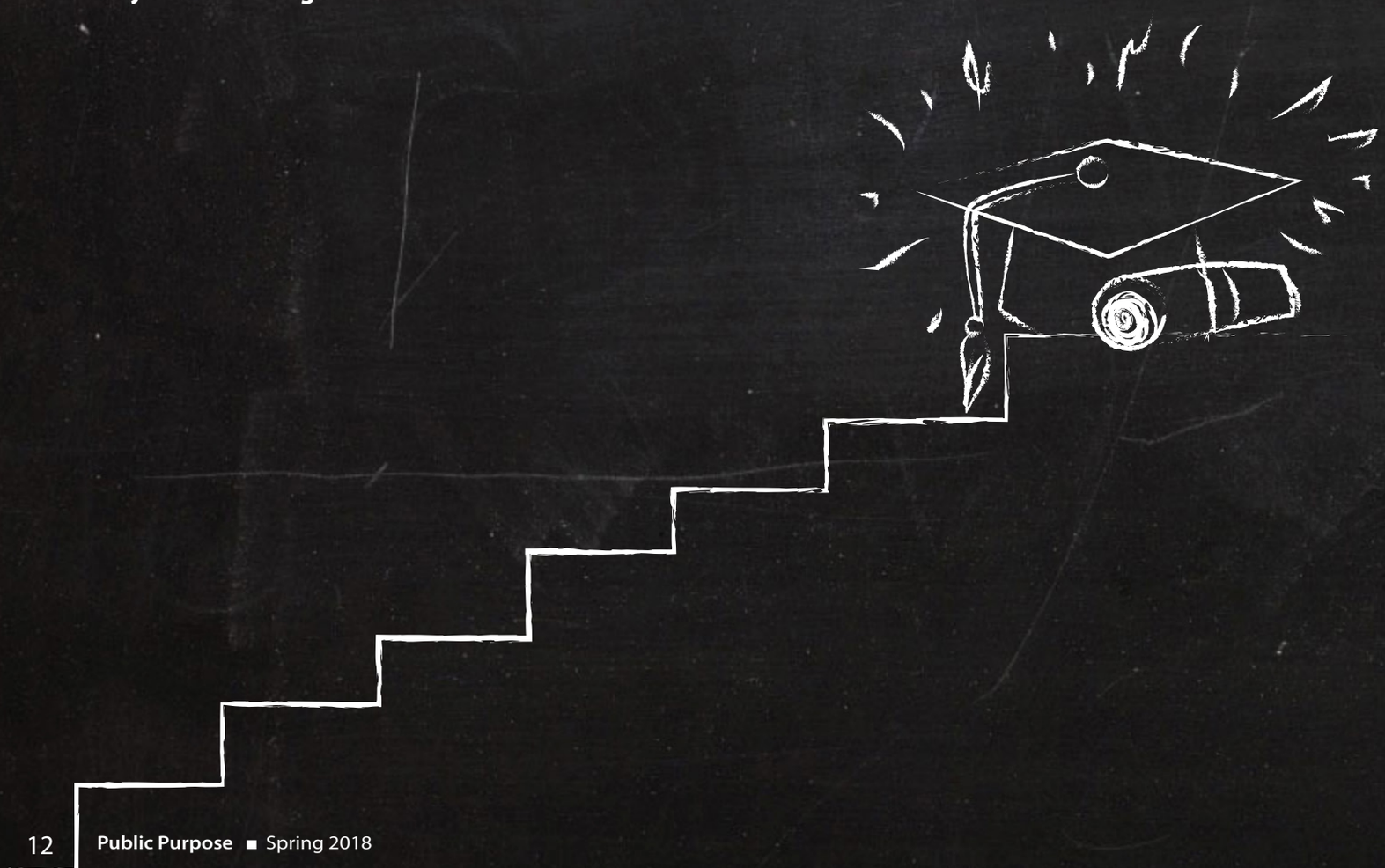
The Challenges Ahead for Higher Education

By Dr. John Haeger



After more than four decades in higher education and 20 years as an administrator, I cannot help but conclude that higher education needs transformational change to propel state colleges and universities (SCUs) into the future. The status quo is unacceptable to the public, the federal government, countless boards of regents and students.

Is American higher education really as good as we tend to think? There are a shocking number of students who fail courses in the first two years of college, contributing to six-year graduation rates around 50 percent. Also indefensible is that fewer than 25 percent of students finish in four years. Few businesses could sustain their existence with statistics as dismal as those in higher education.

The crisis is particularly acute in the institutions I know best. In the Carnegie Classification, they are SCUs offering master's and limited doctoral degrees, often with a research focus. There are over 250 such institutions in the United States, educating over 400,000 students annually. The overall student body is less academically qualified, and their faculty contain fewer research stars than premier state universities. Students are typically first generation college-goers, and academic training often leaves them with critical shortcomings, particularly in math and science. The retention and graduation rates in these institutions are substantially lower than in the premiere land-grant institutions, and their double-digit failure rates in key freshman courses are the best-kept secrets across the campus and the state.

Nearly 15 years ago at Northern Arizona University, this inability to educate the students who came to study with us was a central issue. We struggled with enrollment shortfalls, and the number of bachelor degrees in our state was far below the national average. But national policymakers realized that America's position in the world in terms of its educated populace had fallen dramatically, and this fact exacerbated our decline as a nation in the world's economy. It did not take any particular genius to realize the counter steps that needed to be taken, which would benefit both the university and the students.

Every freshman needed to receive as much help as possible to make them successful, and the institution's mission had to be redirected toward greater student success. If the retention rate could improve, the enrollment would increase, as would the university budget. No one benefits from student failure; certainly not the student, the state nor the university. Almost overnight, through the work of AASCU, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Council on Education (ACE), "student success" was now a national priority, even though some faculty leaders remained skeptical. SCUs redirected their missions back to the fundamentals of excellent undergraduate education. AASCU institutions were suddenly at the very center of a national agenda that squared with their historic missions. Academically excellent and highly motivated students learn on their own or with limited faculty intervention; average students do not, and they should command our attention.

Why have institutions with an undergraduate mission and limited research for so long neglected the "average" students who came to learn? There are several villains in this piece. Most culpable is academic culture—all about who is on top. It begins with the best graduate schools, which only take the best students and turn out Ph.D.s who will then populate the best universities. The reason for the upcoming careers of these Ph.D.s is to become part of a disciplinary culture that credits research as the coin of the realm and seeks to educate the "best" students.

I doubt that my generation of faculty ever thought much about the "success of their students," except those few students who excelled and went on to graduate school. Graduate schools were educating scholars, not teachers, so until recently, student success was never mentioned in graduate school, and not often mentioned at the universities where graduate students were then employed. Faculty knew very little about the students seated in the classroom and about how student backgrounds affected their learning skills and ability. We had this naïve belief that if we lectured to students three times a week, there was a magical process of learning that occurred that would be revealed later on in the final examination. I hesitate to say that these teaching years, roughly 1970 to 1985, were part of the "golden age" for faculty. Public acceptance of our mission and role in society was rarely questioned. Academic culture insisted that everyone control their own classroom—both in terms of

content and evaluation—and that students succeeded and/or failed largely on their own. Even though I lived and worked in a state university with far fewer resources, we were part of the same profession and culture that drove the premiere institutions and thus were entitled to the same benefits.

A second concept of the academy and, ultimately a major reason why higher education has been tone deaf to public criticism and slow to change, was the near total dependence on other academics. In nearly every division of the university, academic credentials were essential to be hired and critical to advancement in rank, whether in student affairs, academic affairs, or business and finance. Stated differently, for generations we have believed that only academics could hold leadership positions because only they really understood the true nature of the university. Even today, when the crisis in higher education is considerably more pressing, the inability of academics to hire people from outside the university helps explain the glacial pace of change.

But this tendency is really damaging in the academic division. There, the belief in the ability of faculty members to take up leadership positions from chair to provost or president goes without challenge. But why is this the case? For at least 200 years, the university has been organized and led by academic disciplines from history to chemistry. Faculty members within disciplines are educated to serve only one master, the discipline, and those views cut across every campus in higher education. Tenure aids this culture and protects the status quo, thus weakening an administrative and academic structure that should embrace change. The net effect is that a change agenda is nearly impossible to put into place. If one thinks about the direction of higher education today, why would an academic division not seek out a technology leader from the private sector or a business leader from a major corporation? After all, the issues for top leadership are related to budgets, buildings, technology and finance.

Another fundamental issue affecting nearly all institutions is that SCUs were all designed in the same fashion, including faculty rank structure, curriculum design and the organization of administrative functions. These basic structures are equally resistant to change. For example, nearly all institutions fund faculty research, but most do not give the same attention to quality teaching skills. No institution wants to lose its standing in the Carnegie research rankings. Consequently, research still drives promotion and tenure at nearly all universities. This belief harms most SCUs in fundamental ways. SCUs have students most in need of one-on-one counseling and special instruction, and many faculty face a delicate balancing act between teaching and research. It still seems to me the academic success of individual students should be as important as research in determining whether faculty are tenured and advanced in the profession.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I think research, as well as doctoral programs, are critical to a whole range of universities—but on a selective basis. A focus on research should not affect faculty teaching loads in every department, but only in some highly productive areas, and should not make research the primary path to a tenured full professorship. Making those careful distinctions is difficult, but an important hallmark for successful SCUs. Today we have an opportunity to make good on the mission of the SCU. We can and do hire faculty whose principal task is to educate the "average" student, and for whom research is not a requirement for continuing appointment. But at most institutions, we appoint these faculty in an adjunct status, even if full-time, and make clear that they will be paid less, never tenured and have no role in governance.

But there is today an equally compelling reason for changing our views of research within SCUs. At a time when faculty engagement with students is critical, the research agenda as an expectation of most tenured faculty is simply too expensive and should not be a burden that either the public or the students should be expected to carry. SCUs could completely change the nature of faculty work, advance the student success agenda, and give their institutions a distinction that clearly separates them from premiere land-grant institutions.

A few faculty and administrators have suggested an obvious solution: Why not develop tenured appointments for teaching faculty (along with the existing pathway through research), and then promote and tenure faculty based on the success of their students? With far more attention today devoted to learning objectives and competency-based curricula, the time is now. If we fail to change, the current dismal condition of faculty rank and the decline in tenured positions will continue threatening both undergraduate education and the research agenda.

But a further defining issue remains: the cost of higher education. Both public and private higher education have so overpriced tuition that higher education is out of the reach of many citizens. And even if financial aid provides a buffer, there is now a whole generation of students with massive debt that will affect their lives for a generation. We should have known better and should have driven solutions to these problems and contained the escalating costs. But with federal financial aid flowing freely across higher education institutions, there was simply no incentive to change. Now there is a reason to rethink the tuition issue as several states move to limit and reduce tuition increases.

SCUs now also face declining public support. State budgets are being squeezed by healthcare costs, the need for prisons, and a crumbling infrastructure of roads and bridges. Few states are investing in higher education. SCUs, though, now face a perfect storm where both of their traditional financial supports are constrained. It is abundantly clear that universities in the future will have fewer faculty per student, fewer staff and more students. Essentially, the only direction for the future is that universities will have to offer a lower cost education by fundamentally changing their business models. In several states, the agent of this change will be the community college, where lower tuition or even free tuition for the first two years can dramatically alter the flow of students to four-year universities. Without substantive change, campuses will be forced to end tenure, close athletic programs and shed academic degrees.

There is a way out for higher education, but it requires changing the basic structure of the university and the learning process. Technology will become ever more important to running every aspect of the university, but especially the academic division. Many scholars have noted that most universities operate like a cottage industry in delivering their courses. Individual faculty offer unique courses in separate sections and at multiple times within a department. The majority are offered with lecture as the dominant mode of instruction. Teamwork is not valued among the faculty, so efficiencies in the delivery system have been difficult to embrace. But faculty at some universities have moved to the edge of transformative change. Most of the introductory-level courses could be developed by teams of faculty and offered in a hybrid fashion online, thus allowing faculty to spend more time with individual students and in highly interactive discussions with groups of students. And finally, the lecture as the dominant mode of teaching and learning will disappear. The entire construct that we have come to understand as university life no longer needs to exist in its current fashion. The notion of semesters, credit hours and class time can all be rethought in a new learning environment that better uses the time of the faculty and adapts to the learning styles of the technology generation. If faculty make use of technology to transform and redefine the learning process, the future can be extremely bright. P

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