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LIFESTYLE

The Three "I's" of Higher Ed Reform

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by Richard Vedder

For constructive change to happen anywhere, you need to know what needs changing, have the desire to make the needed reforms, and have the means to do so. In the context of higher education, that means you need *information* as to what works and what does not work, you need *incentives* to end things that do not work, and need *innovation* (new ways of doing things) to make it happen. Information, incentives, and innovation are the three vital "I's" of higher education reform.

With this in mind, I have been trying to identify a positive approach to making higher education qualitatively better, cheaper, and, therefore, more efficient. How can we raise productivity in a sector that almost certainly has had no productivity advance in decades, if not millennia? (I have often said that, with the possible exception of prostitution, teaching is the only profession that has had no productivity advance in the 2,400 years since Socrates taught the youth of Athens.)

Fortunately, often grudgingly, colleges and universities are coughing up more data that allows for analysis of what higher education does. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their great book *Academically Adrift* have taken data from a respectable indicator of critical thinking and problem

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solving skills, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, as well as the National Survey of Student Engagement and have concluded, roughly, that typically students neither work very hard nor learn very much.

Aided by my sidekicks Matt Denhart and Chris Matgouranis, I have been exploring data briefly released (and then apparently suppressed) by Texas A & M that sheds some interesting light on faculty work habits. There seems to be no correlation between student perception of the effectiveness of teaching (as measured by RateMyProfessor.com) and faculty compensation, for example, but professors who teach a lot get paid somewhat more than those that do not. This is based on very preliminary analysis of data, some of which is not of pristine quality. But more analysis of this type, using better data, is needed. Here are some questions we ought to be able to answer but cannot do so with much certainty now:

- Does class size matter in the amount of learning students do? Does on-line instruction, blended on-line/traditional classes or the traditional lecture-discussion form of teaching work the best, controlling for cost?
- Is there any justification for paying professors vastly more on tenure or tenure-track appointments as opposed to those holding temporary appointments as “adjuncts”? Does the additional research and/or teaching productivity (including the quality of instruction) of tenured faculty justify the huge cost differentials that exist?
- Graduates of “prestigious” schools earn a good deal more than graduates of less selective universities. Is this because the quality of the learning experience is higher in the elite schools, or because the students at those schools are innately brighter, more disciplined, etc.?
- Do graduates of schools with a strong liberal arts focus do worse in the job market than those going to schools with a strong vocational emphasis (e.g., business, communications, or even engineering?)
- The total cost to society of a credit hour of instruction at for-profit institutions is vastly lower than at not-for-profit schools. Are qualitative instructional or research advantages of the not-for-profits great enough to justify the vast cost differentials?
- Do students perform better or worse when they are paying a larger share of the bills themselves?
- Is the conventional wisdom that there are huge payoffs to more emphasis on the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and math) correct?
- Is there a trade-off between learning and partying? Students spend more time today on recreational pursuits (roughly, “partying”) than studying; has that contributed to declining learning on campuses? Is grade inflation an important factor in the decline in student work effort?

This list of questions is merely illustrative and far from exhaustive. While we have partial answers to some of these and related questions, the fact that we spend tens of billions researching all sorts of obscure things within universities but only have the foggiest ideas about the answers to questions such as I raised above is, I would submit, a scandal. Roughly 1,000 articles are published in scholarly journals of William Shakespeare

ABOUT ME

CCAP is dedicated to researching the rising costs and stagnant efficiency in higher education, with special emphasis on the United States. CCAP seeks to facilitate a broader dialogue on the issues and problems facing the institutions of higher education with the public, policy makers, and the higher education community.

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(the 400th anniversary of whose death is nearing) every year; why cannot we have at least half that number of articles annually that help us discern whether colleges are doing much productive, or whether approach A to learning is better than approach B?

The answer to the last question above is, I fear, that the colleges are fearful of this kind of research, because it shows that the “bang for the buck” in higher education is embarrassingly low. That is why the Arum and Roksa book has created a firestorm. Inadequate information and incentives lead to inadequate innovation and change, and it will take pressure from outside the academy to change this.

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