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By Daniel de Vise

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Posted at 6:02 PM ET, 02/17/2011

How to fix higher education: Doug Bennett, Earlham College

By Daniel de Vise

In a forthcoming story for *The Washington Post Magazine*, I offer [eight suggestions](#) to "fix" higher education. That is not to say higher education is broken. Indeed, the sector is perceived as so successful in so many ways that it almost seems odd to talk of its "reform." I say this by way of contrast to the oft-criticized sector of K-12 education, which churns through seemingly perpetual cycles of reform.

I will host a brief online Q&A on the story at 11 a.m. Tuesday. Click [here](#) to pose a question.

Most of the ideas are not really my own. I sought help from several great leaders and thinkers -- college presidents, think-tank scholars, foundation heads, professors and students. Several submitted their own thoughts on how to fix (tweak, improve, perfect) higher education. I'll post them over the next several days. Here is the first of those submissions, from Doug Bennett, president of [Earlham College](#).

You have invited me to suggest a few good ideas for "fixing higher education." In making contributions, you've urged me (and others) to suggest specific solutions to well-defined problems.

While there are many things we can and should do to improve higher education, I believe the most important issues, by far, facing higher education today are issues of access and issues of learning outcomes assessment. With each, I'll briefly sketch how and why I think so below I sketch some ideas for addressing these. I also add (more briefly) a suggestion about athletics and a suggestion about library and information resources.

A. Fix the Broken Financing of Higher Education

With many others, I believe we should, as a nation, aspire to providing a real opportunity for a quality post-secondary education for virtually all young adults. Both our economy and our civic and social fabric would be better if succeeded at this. For many decades, we led the world in terms of the percentage of our population with post-secondary degrees, but no longer. Eight or nine countries have now passed us, and at least that many are also poised to pass us over the next few years. We need a national strategy to provide real access to higher education. President Obama has challenged us to find a way to reassert our global pre-eminence in this regard by 2020.

Certainly there are problems with K-12 education that undercut genuine



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access to higher education, but I take these issues to be outside the frame of what you are asking. (That is, I think it would be a dodge to propose "fixing K-12 education" to "fix higher education.") And I believe that focusing on problems in K-12 education divert attention from problems in the financing of higher education. Simply put, we have no adequate national strategy for financing a quality higher education for all of our young adults. We will struggle to improve access until we fix the broken financing of higher education.

Isn't the problem run-away college costs? Probably not, and certainly not as much as current public discussion makes it seem. Why? Because people keep focusing on sticker prices and not net prices to families. Colleges and universities (both public and private) have been dealing with the broken financing problem by raising tuition faster than inflation and recycling much of the added tuition income into financial aid: higher discount rates. Yes, it is hard to get trustworthy data on net prices, but net prices are not growing much faster than inflation if at all. And soaring health care costs make explain much of whatever increase in real net prices we have seen.

I am attaching [charts](#) that give four glimpses of the problem. All are the work, by the way, of Tom Mortenson of [Postsecondary Education Opportunity](#), a monthly newsletter that relentlessly documents the problems of access in higher education. All are derived from high quality federal data. The first chart shows that we plateaued on high school graduation rates in the mid-1970s. The second shows that poorer students are a rising share of total students in both K-12 (measured by free and reduced lunches) and in higher education (measured by Pell grants), and that we are trending slightly downward in the percentage of poorer students (bottom quartile of the family income distribution) receiving a bachelor's degree. The third shows that access to higher education is sharply stratified (and has been for decades) by family income. And the fourth shows that state government support for higher education has been declining since the late 1970s.

Taken together, these charts tell us that family income is a significant barrier to access, that the percentage of college-age students will be increasingly drawn from poorer segments of the population, and that we have been making no progress on improving access for several decades. That's the problem. What might be solutions?

1. We need to invest more public money in providing access to higher education. We are simply kidding ourselves if we think that something like the current strategy will improve the percentage of young adults with a college degree. I know: this seems like a dreamy what-can-he-be-thinking idea in the midst of serious deficit problems with both state and federal budgets. But we have been organizing public finance to remediate problems (buffers against unemployment, entitlements for lack of old age savings, warehousing of failures in prisons) rather to invest in positive futures that would prevent these problems from arising in the first place.

2. We need create strong incentives against merit aid. A smaller, easier-to-adopt strategy: tell colleges and universities they cannot award any federal financial aid (Title IV) if they award merit aid. That is, tell them they can award need-based federal financial aid only if they award only need-based aid. We need to be sure that as much financial aid as possible is being devoted to meet need. Every dollar of merit aid is a wasted dollar with regard to the national problem of access. Institutions would be free to continue awarding merit aid, but they would have to give up awarding federal financial aid if they want to continue doing that. (A smaller bore alternate: tell them they can only award merit aid if they are drawing real dollars for those awards from donor-restricted (not board-restricted) funds; no merit aid could be awarded on a discount basis.)

3. We need to create financial instruments which make a college education an investment for an individual, not a consumption item. There is a good deal of ugly evidence that the college loan process is a mess. Here, too, financial institutions have strip-mined a vulnerable population. But we are still approaching paying for college as if those payments that fall to students (or to their families) should come from current income, as if a college education were a consumable item, not a long-term investment. We need changes in federal policy that would allow the development of financial instruments that would have the

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student's share of paying for college be treated as a long term investment. We would probably want to have colleges that enroll students with loans have some skin in the game to put some portion of the burden for students successfully completing programs on the colleges themselves.

B. Strengthen the Focus on Assessment of Learning Outcomes

We know much little about whether and what students are actually learning. As a consequence, the higher education marketplace is much too dominated by considerations of prestige and much too little dominated by considerations of real value or effectiveness. (The rankings industry is only one face of this.) Higher education has a professional responsibility to develop and use trustworthy assessments of student learning, and to disclose publicly what we come to understand about student learning.

This argument is increasingly winning acceptance within higher education and in public policy circles. It is supported by regional accreditors who have steadily increased their insistence on institutions assessing of student learning outcomes.

So what's the problem? Simply these: (1) that we do not have nearly enough instruments for assessing student learning, and (2) that too few institutions are prepared to publicly disclose what they know about whether and what students are learning.

4. We need to develop more sophisticated, nationally normed instruments for assessing student learning outcomes. Over the past dozen years, higher education has seen the development of two quite different learning assessments: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). They are quite different -- and interestingly so: they complement one another. Both required significant investments by foundations to develop them -- several million dollars each. But these two are just the beginning of what we need to develop: we need many new instruments to assess the wide variety of things that colleges and universities want to teach students. But with the development of NSSE and CLA, no one seems to have an appetite to develop further instruments. Individual colleges and universities don't begin to have the resources to invest in the creation of new instruments. The funders will have to be either foundations or the federal government. If we are really going to make progress on assessment, we need more new instruments.

5. We need to push colleges and universities to feel an obligation to disclose what they know about student learning, or else we need to compel them to disclose. The better option would be the emergence of a shared professional sense of obligation to disclose what they know about whether students are learning.

If professional responsibility won't suffice, then the federal government should require accrediting agencies to insist that such disclosure be a condition of being accredited. Why would we need the accrediting agencies involved? Because during the accreditation process, the accrediting agency would verify -- like an audit -- that what is being disclosed is a full and accurate picture.

C. End Intercollegiate Athletics As We Know It

I'll be even briefer on this one: the enterprise of intercollegiate athletics has ceased to be justifiable within even the broadest understanding of the mission of a college or university. Athletics take resources away from genuine mission activities and regularly risk corrupting the integrity of every process within the academy. It is time to end intercollegiate athletics as we know it.

6. End the tax exemption of the National Intercollegiate Athletic Association. A place to start would be to insist that the NCAA be treated as a for-profit entity engaged in the entertainment business. I doubt this would be sufficient, but it might - just might - jump start a much-needed honest discussion about the incompatibility between intercollegiate athletics and the honest (learning, research, service) missions of universities.

D. Build a National Open Access Digital Library System

Digital networks are working a profound transformation in how colleges

and universities operate, but we are not making nearly enough progress towards one of the most astonishing possibilities. For as long as we have had universities, universities have each developed their own library and information collections. Those collections of resources are now increasingly in digital form, and we are increasingly funding ways to share resources across digital networks. We could and should go much farther, however. We could create a national (and de facto international) information commons in which all of the world's knowledge and information resources would be available to anyone at any college or university. And being available to those at colleges and universities could also make them available to teachers and students in k-12 schools, and even to the public at large.

The barriers are not technological. They involve, instead, issues of organizational self interest and unnecessary constraints in copyright law. A for-profit company is showing that these can be overcome through the Google Books project, but such an undertaking should not be in private hands. It should be undertaken by and in the name of democracy.

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By Daniel de Vise | February 17, 2011; 6:02 PM ET

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