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Is Higher Ed Ready to Change?

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INDIANAPOLIS -- One's perception of how widely colleges and universities have embraced the necessity and inevitability of fundamental transformative change -- in how the institutions educate students, how they finance themselves, etc. -- is likely to depend on which sorts of higher education conferences he or she attends.

Meetings like the [higher education productivity conference](#) sponsored here this week by the Lumina Foundation for Education are filled with true believers -- state legislators and governors' aides staring at massive budget deficits, higher education system officials charged with increasing the number of graduates their institutions produce, and the legions of policy analysts and foundation officials who beat the drum about college completion and efficiency.

Far more skepticism is in evidence at conferences [held by faculty groups](#), where professors are increasingly distressed by the (non-collaborative, they say) ways in which their institutions are going about making hard budget decisions, such as cutting academic programs or personnel benefits.

The more intriguing meetings to analyze, though -- and the ones where a subtle shift is afoot -- are those of institutional leaders, like the gathering in Dallas this week of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. For several years now, conferences for presidents and other top officials, in the public as well as private nonprofit sectors of higher education, have typically featured speakers offering dire warnings of coming economic doom and the need for colleges and universities to do more than just the same old things in response.

Yet by and large, despite those warnings, the institutional leaders themselves have tended to go about their business in largely the same way as always, engaging in what John R. Curry, a longtime university business officer and now a consultant, described to a group of attendees at the land-grant meeting as "the power of evasion, the power of wishful thinking, the power of hoping it will go away -- evading and trying to avoid the difficult decisions."

Even as budget deficits have mounted at both the federal and state levels, and governments have cut back to varying degrees on their spending on higher education, many college officials have held out hope that when the economy stabilizes, and eventually recovers, so too will the investment in colleges, allowing the institutions to go back to business as usual. The land-grant group went so far at [its meeting last year](#) as to float the idea of a new federal program that would provide direct institutional support to public research universities, which struck many people outside the association as unlikely, if not politically tone deaf.

A subtle change was in evidence at the group's meeting this year in Dallas. Even as officials in most states reported that this year looks brighter than last year -- [smaller state budget cuts, bigger enrollments](#) -- there were in most comments and conversations a clearer acknowledgment than before that the business model for many higher education institutions is unsustainable, and that fundamental changes in how most colleges operate will be necessary if the institutions are not only to meet the current and growing demands on them but continue to excel and progress.

"Most of us feel that historical change is happening right now," M. Peter McPherson, president of APLU, said in his opening comments to the group. "Most believe our universities will look different, maybe very different, in 10 years. To most it is a question of whether we will work to shape that future or the future will shape us."

"We've had a fantastic 70-year run" since the huge investment in higher education in the middle of the 20th century, added Michael Crow, Arizona State University's president. "But it has run its course.... We have to stop making the standard case."

Campus leaders shared some examples of institutions trying to shape the future, and doing so in fairly dramatic ways; one session highlighted [Carnegie Mellon University's distinctive approach](#) to using its open-learning software to improve the utility of classroom education, the University System of Maryland's course redesign effort, and [the University of California's fledgling initiative](#) to prove that elite institutions can deliver top-quality online programs as a way to ensure continued access without compromising excellence. (Christopher Edley Jr., the Berkeley law dean who is leading the California effort and evangelized about it at this week's meeting, aptly summed up the approach many college leaders take when he described his state's "business model" for higher education as "faith-based fund raising": "Everybody sits around and holds hands and says, 'We are so good; *surely* next year Sacramento will give us what we deserve.' ")

Lumina's National Productivity Conference here spotlighted plenty of other innovations, including Rio Salado College's [use of student learning data](#) to more quickly and accurately predict which students will succeed and which need help, Indiana's decision to essentially outsource its online education of adults to the nonprofit Western Governors University, and [the University of Akron's partnership with Lorain County Community College](#) to create an independent center to share human resources, payroll and other business services, which could lead to [a statewide sharing of services](#) among public and private colleges alike, potentially saving hundreds of millions of dollars that could be put to academic purposes.

Yet for all the recognition of the need for new ways of operating, and of the various innovations adopted so far, "we have not yet comprehensively grasped the transformation, and we need to see much more progress," Michael A. McRobbie, president of Indiana University, told his colleagues at the land-grant meeting.

Exactly why transformative change has been so hard to come by in higher education was a topic of much discussion at the meetings. As is often the case at meetings of senior administrators and policy analysts, faculty members and their unions came in for much of the blame, for failing to recognize that state and other financial support is unlikely to return to historical levels and for blocking curricular and pedagogical reforms. (Of course, as is often the case at such meetings, faculty leaders were generally unrepresented at both the APLU and Lumina conferences, and therefore unable to defend themselves.)

The search for scapegoats aside, the reality may be that for all the meaningful pain (furloughs and layoffs of employees, closure of a small number of institutions, etc.) that higher education has endured in the last few years, the discomfort has not been significant and widespread enough to compel state officials, board members, administrators and faculty leaders alike to undertake the strategic thinking, priority setting, and hard decisions that they widely acknowledge is necessary.

Reality may be slowly setting in that the outlook for higher education is irrevocably changed -- "different forever, or at least for the foreseeable future," as Lumina's Jamie Merisotis put it at the foundation's meeting Tuesday. Although leaders of the land-grant association continue to urge the federal government to increase the rate at which they reimburse research institutions for the indirect costs of the studies they do with government funds, McPherson, the group's leader, acknowledged Monday that its earlier call for additional federal money is unrealistic -- "at this time," at least.

— [Doug Lederman](#)