Essay: Challenges and Opportunities for CU Boulder

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Over the next 25 years the continuation and intensification of already observable trends will create a new operating environment for higher education. Many of these trends are tactically negative, and challenging to business as usual, in higher educational generally, and at CU in particular. But the changing environment offers wonderful opportunities for a stronger CU.

Trends

High and increasing costs. Costs in higher education are rising much faster than inflation, or family income. See Ehrenberg (2000) for discussion.

Waning public support for higher education. Rising costs, coupled with deep ideological shifts, mean that taxpayers pay a decreasing share of the cost of higher education. Increasingly people feel that the individual beneficiaries of higher education, not the public, should pay the costs. CU faces the additional challenge that the relatively highly educated population in Colorado includes many people who were educated elsewhere, and feel no attachment to CU or other institutions in the state.

Economic burden of the research enterprise. The economics of research are not widely understood. While many people assume that research brings profit to an institution, and subsidizes other activities, the sad reality is the opposite. Overhead charges fall short of recovering all costs, at CU and everywhere else in higher education. Management practices associated with the cultivation of research channel resources into research from the educational enterprise. See the note "Overhead" for discussion.

Lack of institutional commitment by faculty. An unfortunate side effect of research-centric culture in higher education is lack of faculty commitment to critical institutional goals. Too many of us faculty reject the suggestion that we should contribute to the leadership needs of our institution, or that we should learn about and help respond to the challenges faced by the educational enterprise that employs us.

Changing information environment. As Eli Noam argued in his prescient 1995 essay, "Electronics and the dim future of the university," people are no longer reliant on university libraries and faculty as sources of knowledge. Faculty in many areas of scholarship are aware of how information technology has changed their professional lives, but they may be less aware of how the same technology is changing how their students, and people generally, learn things. What people need from faculty is less and

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less just to tell them things, give them things to read, and give them tests. More and more the need is for mentoring and inspiration.

Democratization of knowledge. The opening up of knowledge by information technology meshes with long-running trends identified by David John Frank (see Frank and Gabler, 2006). Whereas once the public allowed an intellectual elite (faculty) to define what knowledge was worth having (for example, knowledge of Latin and Greek), it now denies the elite that role. In the process, they have moved ever closer to applying a single, simple measure in valuing knowledge: expectation for money. Finally, whereas once people took it for granted that only a few people would acquire substantial knowledge, with the public at large remaining ignorant, it is now accepted, in principle at least, that everyone has a right to higher education.

Opportunities

Earn alumni support. In the long term, the resources needed for excellent higher education will come from its beneficiaries, the alumni. This has long been recognized by private institutions, because they don't have the alternative of hoping for public subsidies. A strong strategic focus on alumni support can greatly increase CU's resource base in a context in which no promising alternative is available.

In pursuing this strategy we have to recognize that increasing alumni support isn't a matter of "fundraising". Rather, the strategy requires our making as many students as possible feel that their experience at CU is such that they are eager to support the institution, when and as they can. Again, private institutions have long recognized this. Too often students at CU are made to feel like inconveniences, preventing faculty from spending their time on research. We can't afford this in the future, and we can eliminate it, as some leading private research institutions have. The key is that we as faculty have to understand that the resources we need are going to come from our students. Then we have to act on that understanding in our relationship with them.

In developing our relationship with our students, we will need to recognize and exploit the developing situation that Eli Noam describes, in which students have ready access to a wealth of information apart from what we give them. Increasingly, students will have access to participation, not just information, through online collaborative projects of global scope. These developments, if we support them, will ease the transition from university to professional life, and help realize of goal of making the student years just the first phase of lives of learning. The underlying technologies will also make it possible for us to maintain much more interactive connections with and within the community of our students and alumni.

Strive for contributions to human needs, not rankings. As Brewer and Gates document (2001), US institutions of higher learning have been remarkably inward looking in responding to the challenges they face. They find that institutions are preoccupied with "prestige", not delivering value to students or society, and that they pursue just three

major strategic directions in seeking prestige: big time athletics, big time research, and selective undergraduate education. Big time athletics clearly makes only a marginal contribution, if any positive contribution at all, to society. Big time research isn't supported by society even to the extent of covering its costs, as noted earlier. Only selective undergraduate education addresses the educational mission of higher education at all, but, notably, institutions seek prestige not by broadening their educational contributions, but by narrowing them, accepting only those students who need education least. Besides being a questionable response to public need, the emphasis on selective education runs directly counter to the trend toward democratization of knowledge articulated by Frank.

As Brewer and Gates point out, the competition for prestige, measured conveniently by institutional rankings, is a zero-sum game. There is only one institution ranked number one. On the other hand there is plainly no limit to the amount of educational or research benefit that institutions could generate. But institutions are not seeking to maximize these benefits, for example by finding innovative ways to contribute, but are instead measuring themselves competitively on an impoverished set of attributes (see note on "Rankings".)

CU can improve itself by choosing a different path. Instead of measuring ourselves against "competing" institutions, we can measure ourselves on the actual benefits we create for our students and for society.

Daring to chart our own course will help energize faculty, and promote more institutional commitment from us. Faculty will come here, and stay, because we offer them the chance to contribute to something unique.

Measure what we do. Because the environment in which we (and our students) operate is changing rapidly, and because we will have to innovate in breaking ranks with Brewer and Gates's "prestige seeking" institutions, we will have to measure the effectiveness of the things we try. Some of our initiatives will not work, or will need to be changed to adapt to new conditions as time goes on. This requires a culture of assessment.

We are already making progress on this thanks to the work of Wieman, Perkins, and many others, and our participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement. In addition to tactical work on student learning in our courses and on campus, we can also undertake more strategic assessment, such as the longitudinal work on the impact of college experiences on alumni undertaken by Alverno College (n.d.) There are exciting prospects for understanding much more deeply than we do now the impact of education on people and society.

Conclusion

Though most institutions, as Brewer and Gates document, aren't pursuing these opportunities, we won't be alone if we pursue them. Reed College has attracted very positive notice for its refusal to play the rankings game (Driver, 2005). Princeton University has been outstandingly successful in providing important service to the nation,

and great experiences for its students, developing enormously supportive alumni, and maintaining an outstanding research program. The resources for doing these things have come from doing them. If we earn alumni support, strive for contributions to human needs, not rankings, and measure what we do, we can be equally successful.

Notes

Overhead. A memo explaining the algebra of overhead recovery and its uses, and including pertinent references, is on my website at http://spot.colorado.edu/~clayton/MoneyPlumbing2007.pdf.

Rankings. Linear rankings of entities of more than trivial complexity necessarily impose distortions, because they cannot reflect different values associated with different aspects of the entities. If someone were to ask me, as a computer scientist, to choose the best programming language in the world, I would naturally ask, "What are you planning to do with it?" Given the response, "Come on, just tell me which one is best," I would dismiss the question as obviously silly. Yet somehow it's harder for me to recognize the question, "What's the best computer science department in the world?" as equally problematic.

References

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