

CHAPTER 1

A Crisis Is a Terrible Thing to Waste

The Benefits of a Postsecondary Education

From 1837 to 1842, Horace Mann, then-secretary of education for Massachusetts, gave a series of five lectures for common school conventions that were held throughout the state. Three years later, these lectures were published within a single volume, and in his fifth lecture, Mann made two significant points that had a critical impact on the US conscience. First, he argued for the importance of education, making the following claims: “In a land of liberty . . . there must be internal restraints; the reason, conscience, benevolence, and reverence for all that is sacred, must supply the place of force and fear; and, for this purpose, the very instincts of self-preservation admonish us to perfect our system of education, and to carry it on far more generally and vigorously than we have ever yet done.”¹ Second, he stressed that, because of education’s significance, schools should be public and open to everyone: “For this purpose, we must study the principles of education more profoundly; we must make ourselves acquainted with the art, or processes, by which those principles can be applied in practice; and, by establishing proper agencies and institutions, we must cause a knowledge both of the science and the art to be diffused throughout the entire mass of the people.”² At that time, education was neither widespread nor public. Most young people developed basic literacy due to efforts by their churches, private tutors, or family members. Approximately 90 percent of the country lived in rural areas, where children were compelled to balance informal education with work in family farms and businesses.³ Moreover, the United States was

an economic backwater that boasted no more than ninety municipalities with more than twenty-five hundred people in 1830.⁴ The majority of young people who were privileged to enjoy a formal education were predominantly white and male, hailing from an elite, urban area of New England. Mann reckoned that if the United States was to succeed, then the fledging nation needed to expand educational opportunities to its citizens. Educational reformers like Mann, such as Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Henry Barnard of Connecticut, advocated for school taxes and a formalized, public school system along the Eastern seaboard. By 1850, public schools were widespread in New England, even though opportunity for formal education remained limited to students in southeastern and midwestern states and territories. Over the next fifty years, public education in the United States extended into more rural areas, and from 1910 to 1940, a high school movement pushed the expectations of universal education beyond grammar school. When a new state was admitted into the Union, it had to have a provision for schooling. Areas that quickly embraced high school education saw their investment rewarded in the form of greater wealth, less social stratification, and a more diversified economy that was less dependent on manufacturing.⁵

Until the middle of the twentieth century, higher education, however, remained the preserve of a chosen few—largely white, middle- and upper-class men. Well-to-do individuals did not seek a vocation because their life's work was laid out for them. Large universities trained the elite for positions of authority in society. Small religious colleges came and went with rapidity in the nineteenth century, all with the same goal: to inculcate religious doctrine in the local population. By the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, however, the utility of a college education became more apparent. Congress created land-grant public colleges during the Civil War where tuition was nonexistent. Teacher-training schools were created. Women became participants in some institutions and attended single-sex institutions, and separate universities were created for African Americans.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the United States recognized the economic importance of a college degree to the individual and society, and its predominance took hold. Indeed, ever since Horace Mann spoke about the critical role of education in United States' progress, the country has agreed about the significance of education and extended it.

California stands as a useful example. In December 1846, Olive M. Isbell opened the first English-language school in California on the Santa

Clara Mission grounds.⁶ The first public school followed in 1848. The first private college opened in 1851, and a women's college was founded one year later. Although the state ranked eleventh in population in the early twentieth century, it had the largest enrollment in public education of any state. By the 1930s, 24 percent of California's college-age population matriculated to higher education, a figure well above the national average of 12 percent. California enacted what the rest of the country imagined: a belief in the importance of education and the will to provide it to as many people as possible.⁷

The value of a college degree has historically swung between two purposes: vocational training that leads to employment or a transformative experience that enables individuals to gain an understanding of the social fabric that binds humanity together. Some have argued that a degree must enable both purposes, whereas others lobby for one goal to the exclusion of the other.⁸ What is no longer in doubt, however, is the significance of a degree for many careers.

I shall not suggest here that everyone needs to go to college. About two-thirds of California's working-age adults, for example, need to have some training beyond high school if the state wants to meet its workforce needs. A community college, where one earns a certificate or two-year associate's degree in a specific vocational area intended to fill a workforce need, will suffice for many students. By 2030, for example, policymakers and stakeholders of higher education (such as those at the Public Policy Institute of California) estimate approximately 30 percent will do just fine with an associate's degree or simply a postsecondary certificate in a particular field of study. This estimation still leaves around one-third of the state's high school graduates who can find employment with a high school degree, which I shall discuss in a later chapter.⁹

Unfortunately, the United States now lags behind other industrialized countries with regard to college participation and attainment. According to 2016 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data, the United States ranked third worldwide in the percentage of the population aged fifty-five to sixty-four years that had completed higher education, but tenth among adults aged twenty-five to thirty-four years.¹⁰ The nation is falling behind in the global race for human capital development, and it places the country at risk. The Lumina Foundation and Gates Foundations, among others, have called for the United States to regain its competitiveness and to once again be the number one nation in the world in terms of college access and attainment.¹¹ Why?

For one, wage earners will earn more if they hold a bachelor's degree. Sure, Bill Gates ditched Harvard, and Peter Thiel awarded \$100,000 checks to twenty "uniquely talented" teenage dropouts who eschewed college to conceive and develop a "radical innovation that [would] benefit society."¹² Richard Vedder, a conservative economist, likes to point out that there are too many Domino's Pizza delivery drivers with bachelor's degrees in Washington, DC.¹³ In Los Angeles, we also have an awful lot of waiters who hold postsecondary degrees in theater arts and want to be actors. These anecdotes have less to do with the need for more college-educated citizens and more to do with the value and real-world application of various degrees. If I'm trained to be a pianist and end up driving for Uber, it does not negate the fact that the country needs more nurses. Learning to be a pianist also provides auxiliary skills and benefits. If I'm a trained historian who currently waits tables, it does not mean that we have enough individuals trained in STEM fields or that I will never land a job in music. All sorts of people make strategic choices so that they might pursue their dreams while they are young. Other individuals make decisions to work in fields that are less financially lucrative but fulfill important societal needs. Interestingly, several of Peter Thiel's fellows raised significant venture capital for budget hotels in India and topical energy sprays, yet none of them produced the radical innovation that an avoidance of college would purportedly inspire, leading one entrepreneur to caustically remark, "Peter Thiel promised flying cars; we got caffeine spray instead."¹⁴

Bill Gates and Peter Thiel notwithstanding, the Public Policy Institute of California, among many other groups, has pointed out that unemployment rates are much lower among college graduates, and wages are substantially higher.¹⁵ A college graduate earns roughly a million dollars more than a high school graduate over the course of a lifetime.¹⁶ Degree holders also are more likely to vote, volunteer, give to charity, engage in civic activities, and send their children to college.¹⁷ A college education makes good economic and civic sense.

We need more people participating in higher education not only because they will earn higher wages but also because the economy and our democracy need a better-educated workforce. In California, we need about one million more people participating in higher education if we are to have people fill the jobs that will be available in 2025. Indeed, we need them not just to participate but also to complete their degree, and in timely fashion.¹⁸ We also need more individuals participating in the democratic public sphere.

Deficits in higher education participation and college degree attainment are most stark among a state's racial and ethnic minorities. African American and Latinx students remain the most at-risk for dropping out of high school, not transitioning to college, and not completing a post-secondary degree. This deficit has little to do with individuals and more to do with structural inadequacies that our country has yet to fix. The implications of this concern are significant: these populations will be left out of the high wage economy, which in turn will exacerbate inequities, reduce state revenues, and inhibit economic productivity.

Although we frequently focus on the economic benefits of higher education, we cannot dismiss the social benefits of a college degree. Mann saw public schools as the great equalizer that enabled the poor to move into the working and middle class, but he also thought education was a way to civilize the uneducated. Mann's language would likely be attacked today for suggesting that too many students are not civilized, a term that has often been associated with racial and class-based values systems. Still, education should not just be about learning vocational skills. We want students to be participants, not passive bystanders, in this experiment called democracy. To be participants, we want students to learn how to engage with the critical issues of the day. I do not really care if students come to diametrically opposite conclusions to mine, as long as they come to their conclusions based on concrete evidence, and they are able to ask intelligent questions. I'll discuss that in a later essay, but I raise the point here because I do not want us to reduce education to merely a vocational task. The danger to democracy is not that people disagree with one another but that they have no opinion or voice in their own futures. If our colleges and universities are not fostering a sense of engagement in the democratic public sphere, then we are failing at what we are supposed to be doing.

In a celebrated essay entitled "A Talk to Teachers," James Baldwin spoke eloquently about the purpose of education a half century ago:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around.

What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.¹⁹

Let's recognize, however, that these twin purposes are no easy tasks. As I discuss in chapter 3, simply completing college in a timely manner sometimes seems beyond students' abilities. And what students learn (or do not learn) in college is under enormous scrutiny. Yet, it seems facetious to ignore the individual and societal benefits of a degree. Jobs increasingly call for advanced skills, or the know-how to learn new ones. A mature democracy—paraphrasing and updating Horace Mann—requires an educated electorate.

At the moment, however, we face a crisis on multiple levels. In 2020, we had a pandemic race through society and change higher education in unexpected and immediate ways. All of a sudden, everyone was teaching online. Unexpected costs ranged in the hundreds of millions of dollars for some universities and state systems. Colleges that already were struggling to meet their enrollment goals faced closure. At the same time, state tax revenues for the 2021 fiscal year were estimated to drop by more than 25 percent.²⁰ A general panic set in where the only certainty was the uncertainty of the future. I tend to think we are in for a rough few years, but doomsayers need a sense of history. Yes, this pandemic is different from other crises we have faced, but I write this book with the understanding that higher education is always in a state of change—sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes planned, and at other times unplanned. What we really need is a collective understanding of where we want to go as an industry, and then we can develop the plans to get us there.

Washington, DC, provides little guidance on how to improve educational outcomes and recently has done little to suggest that postsecondary degrees are important. Academic leaders have become more caretakers than visionaries. Faculty understandably concentrate on their own economic concerns, and they provide little guidance on how to enable universities to flourish again. It's easy to think an optimal strategy is to keep your head down and stay out of trouble. A crisis, however, is a terrible thing to waste. It's precisely because we are in crisis that we have the opportunity to create changes that tie our visionary past to a creative future. My purpose

here will be to outline the various issues that confront us and to suggest where I stand, but more importantly, to help readers think through where they stand on these often thorny and confusing issues. I am assuming if we can discuss and come to an agreement as to what we believe, then we can come together about how to put those beliefs into concrete actions and policies. Too often, however, we are not clear on what we believe.

The Worth of Universities to Society

One of the curiosities of US higher education is the value placed on research, even though so few faculty actually do research. Here's how it works. Faculty are first socialized to do research as graduate students. As of the 2016 to 2017 academic year, the United States had 4,360 degree-granting institutions of higher education, yet only 311 offer doctoral degrees that lead to faculty positions.²¹ Only a handful of those universities actually send a significant portion of their graduates to tenure-line positions in academia; one research study found that only one-quarter of doctoral degree-granting universities produce more than 75 percent of all tenure-track faculty.²² The same holds true across disciplines. Everyone who has earned a doctorate degree has gone through the drama of doing research during their coursework and their dissertation. Insofar as mimicry is part of socialization, graduates have learned to love doing research because they learned at the feet of their advisors that research is most rewarded. It's a curious system: the vast majority of faculty positions, tenure track and adjunct, do not require much, if any, research. It's as if we train people to be neurosurgeons when the jobs they will obtain are in nursing.

Nevertheless, some faculty learned to love research when they were graduate students, and they want to continue it even if it is unnecessary at their institution. Others recognize that, all things being equal, faculty who do research reap greater rewards than those who merely teach. The result is a crazy system where teaching is the handmaiden to research even though research is not necessary at most community colleges, public state universities, or for-profit institutions.

To say that research is not necessary everywhere is not to imply that it is unnecessary anywhere. The nation and the state benefit from both applied and theoretical research that have the potential to increase the social and economic well-being of the citizenry. After World War II,

the United States made a strategic decision to situate the bulk of research at its universities. We could have followed other models, such as establishing stand-alone institutes as in much of Europe. We could have said that spending federal and state dollars on research is not in the national interest. To the country's credit, we instead invested in a vast research infrastructure for our premier institutions that led to scientific and social breakthroughs. The research infrastructure of the United States, until recently, has been second to none, and it has contributed to the nation's prosperity. We have the bulk of the world's Nobel Prize winners, and a vast majority of innovations have occurred at research universities.

Throughout the rise of the US university, two forms of funded research have emerged. On the one hand, federal, state, and foundation leaders have commissioned work with specific outcomes in mind. Whether it was research funded by NASA to contribute to the space program or the scientific programs of the National Institutes of Health to find cures for disease, a great deal of public funding has been authorized toward very specific outcomes. On the other hand, universities have left faculty to their own devices to develop research projects that are more theoretical or suppositional, where the immediate benefit to society is less clear. Indeed, one might argue that we support research in the humanities because the historian who undertakes a study of a particular moment during the Renaissance, or the theoretical physics professor who undertakes research on quantum mechanics, enlarges our understanding of ourselves and the planet we inhabit.

These are two modes of research done for the public good, but in very different manners: studies conducted to aid us in reaching a solution to a vexing problem and research that has no clear usable outcome but advances our understanding of particular phenomena.

Both kinds of research are expensive. We know, for example, that research universities are costlier to operate than comprehensive universities and community colleges. The faculty teach less and do more research, the faculty are paid more, and many have expensive labs and buildings. The payoff can be esoteric in that it is very difficult to demonstrate the worth of all the research activities taking place. Other sorts of research have very clear outcomes that improve society, such as cancer research or a greater understanding of the causes of bullying in schools.

As a society, we need to come to grips with determining how much research is enough research. Surely, we do not need every individual and every institution engaged in research. If that is the case, then how many

research institutions do we need where a sizable number of its faculty are conducting research? When the University of California, for example, added its newest campus in Merced, California, there were arguments about the economic benefits to the region and why the university needed an additional campus for a variety of student-focused reasons, but those arguments had little to do with research. By overemphasizing research, we risk shortchanging the importance of teaching.

One of the ironies of academic life is that we like to claim that the board of trustees, the president, and the faculty are at odds. However, they are actually aligned together more often than not. Whenever institutions have morphed from a teacher's college to a state university or added a new campus, everyone agrees about the change, even if additional research will cost the state more money than a teaching institution. The more prestige an institution garners, the happier everyone is. Does the state benefit by adding another research university? That question is rarely asked.

We also do not differentiate our research universities in a manner that might enable some to focus on research and others to focus on teaching and community engagement. Instead, we have a one-size-fits-all mentality such that all research universities operate in lockstep. One by-product is that our research universities, by virtue of needing costly labs and so forth, cost more to operate. One way to keep costs down is to hire part-time adjunct labor for low wages to teach the classes that faculty would ordinarily teach.

Every advanced, industrialized nation has a coordinated set of research universities that aid in the economic and social development of the country. China recognized a generation ago that part of its economic advancement depended on expanding its research capacity; in turn, it has outspent the United States to catch up. India is slowly coming to the same realization. The social and economic benefits of research universities are vast. We need to affirm the import of research and then develop a plan at the state and federal levels to adequately support our public research universities but also recognize how much research needs to be done.

The Challenges That Exist

In an interview from 2013, Clayton Christensen, originator of the theory of disruptive innovation, predicted that “higher education is just on the edge of the crevasse”:

Generally, universities are doing very well financially, so they don't feel from the data that their world is going to collapse. But I think even five years from now these enterprises are going to be in real trouble. . . . [Online learning] will take root in its simplest applications, then just get better and better. You know, Harvard Business School doesn't teach accounting anymore, because there's a guy out of BYU whose online accounting course is so good. He is extraordinary, and our accounting faculty, on average, is average.²³

Obviously, Christensen had no idea that a pandemic would strike the world in 2020. His predictions had not come true prior to the pandemic, and there actually is evidence from the pandemic that his predictions are not entirely correct. Previous institutional investments in technology and support staff made it easier for faculty to teach online, but many students wanted interaction with one another and their professors. In fact, colleges and universities became concerned that a sizeable number of students would take a "gap year" if in-person classes did not resume in the fall of 2020.²⁴ As with any evolving medium, the technology will improve, but that improvement does not necessarily mean that face-to-face classes are an artifact of the past.

Similar doomsayers who suggest that "the end is near" for colleges and universities are not unlike their religious brethren who have regularly predicted the apocalypse for centuries. There is little evidence that higher education as a system is unsustainable. Institutional transformation has been relatively common—from teachers' colleges to state colleges, or perhaps a state college upping its game, in search of institutional prestige, to become a state university. In the nineteenth century, hundreds of small religious colleges existed throughout the United States; some have survived, most have not. We will also see market adjustments in the coming years. We are seeing it already with a handful of mostly small liberal arts colleges at death's doorstep. Small, tuition-driven campuses will find it increasingly difficult to attract students unless they are able to put forward a convincing argument about why they should have their students fork over several thousand dollars for a product that might be cheaper at a public institution.

Again, I appreciate the challenges we now face. State budgets have been decimated; precisely at a time when state postsecondary systems need more revenue, they will get less. And yet, in the last recession, dramatic

cutbacks occurred. We need to think of revenue and readjustments over a longer time horizon than the next week. We will climb out of the fiscal ditch we are currently in, but it may take a half decade. The question is where we want to be.

Nevertheless, I have been in academe long enough to recognize the slow pace of change and the difficulty involved in wholesale transformation. Not so long ago, conventional wisdom held that online education was going to swamp traditional teaching methods. And then came the rise of for-profit higher education, which purported to offer the secret for getting students through expeditiously, with employment as soon as they graduated.

We know how those predictions worked out. Online education is still a poor second when it comes to teaching and learning, even though we learned a great deal from the rapid transitions we had to make during the pandemic. For-profit higher education has been riddled with corrupt practices leading to enormous debt and crappy jobs for students. Some online classes are great, offering alternative learning environments for nontraditional students. Some for-profits are great insofar as they do what they claim: they train students for a distinct profession, and by the end of their training, the graduates are able to find gainful employment. Like so many other predictions that cautioned that the end is near, what seemed certain to our prophets a decade ago has not come to pass. Their prophecies were warning signs, however, and we should think of what those warnings are about, and who is most at risk.

Cost

The cost of something is the price incurred to produce the product. The price is what the consumer is charged. At one point, both the cost and the price of higher education were not that difficult to understand. Of consequence, more than a half century ago, the cost of college was not much of a conversation. A college-going culture did not exist in the vast majority of high schools in the United States. While higher education was not populated solely by the sons (and some daughters) of the wealthy, by and large, the poor and the working class did not attend college. However, during the 1950s, college enrollment grew by 49 percent, and during the 1960s, it grew by an astounding 120 percent.²⁵ Today, a significant number of college students come from working-class backgrounds and find it necessary to work while they attend college. From 1989 to 2008,

between 70 and 80 percent of all undergraduates were active in the labor market while they were attending college. Today, it is estimated that approximately 40 percent of undergraduates work at least thirty hours a week, and around 25 percent are simultaneously working full time while they attend classes full time. Sixty percent of all working students are women.²⁶ The point is not simply that we have greater fiscal needs because the consumers are poorer. The cost of higher education has risen precipitously, and of consequence, the price of a college education has risen, even after adjusting for inflation. Within a mere ten years (2005 to 2015), the price of undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board rose 34 percent at public institutions and 26 percent at private, nonprofit institutions.²⁷ From 1987 to 2017, the average tuition at four-year public and private colleges roughly tripled, while wages stayed roughly the same, making higher education expensive not merely for the poor but also for everyone except the wealthiest among us.²⁸

One reason that price has risen is that we have switched the burden of attending college from the state to the consumer. The consumer is covering a larger part of the costs of higher education. I will write more about this shift toward thinking about higher education as a private responsibility rather than as a public good, but we need to recognize that today's students graduate with much more of a debt burden than those of my generation. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, students were able to earn four-year degrees from public colleges and universities with only a modicum of debt, that is no longer the case. In 1970 to 1971, US students incurred \$7.6 billion of debt to fund higher education. In 2012 to 2013, US students borrowed \$110 billion in student loans.²⁹ Customers are searching for a cheaper alternative and cannot find any.

This spells trouble for one segment of higher education: the small, private liberal arts college. These institutions are historically susceptible to small-market pressures. At institutions where tuition counts for virtually all of the revenue, a drop of ten students in enrollment, especially if the slide is constant, can have serious consequences. Regional institutions of unexceptional standing that were once considered safe, relatively local spaces for parents to send their children, are now seen as a luxury. Public colleges may be expensive, but they still cost far less than the average private college or university. New York's recent free-tuition plan is a good example of a policy, if it becomes a trend, that could cause turbulence for those institutions most susceptible to market pressures.³⁰ We might see one hundred or so small private colleges collapse.

Time to Degree

When I buy a book on Amazon, it arrives in a matter of days. When I shop online for a new shirt, I am disappointed when I learn it could take as much as a week to arrive. If the Wi-Fi at the coffee shop is slow and takes a minute to transfer my message, I will find another place to drink my cappuccino. Writing letters today seems quaint. Speed has become a commodity that we all value in the twenty-first century.

Except in higher education. Students apply in the fall, and a year later, they set off on their academic career. Four years later, they only have two more to go! Graduation rates for the majority of undergraduates earning bachelor's degrees are closer to six years, for those who even graduate. Unless, of course, they are at a community college and have to transfer to another institution that won't take their credits. So, maybe they have a half decade—or more—after the first two years of community college to finally graduate. And then, of course, at institutions where more than half of the students are unprepared for academic work in writing and/or math, they have to spend some time—perhaps just five or six months—taking courses that prepare them for college since their high schools did not.

Acknowledging this reality, the National Center for Education Statistics calculates the graduation rate for first-time, full-time students at six years by default. Even then, only 60 percent of students who started college in 2010 finished by 2016.³¹ The average time to degree completion among the 60 percent of students who completed their bachelor's degrees was 5.1 years.³² For associate's degrees, which should take two years, the average time to degree completion was 3.3 years.³³

Students walk off the high school stage in June, then wait three months for college to begin. They make it through the first semester of college and have a nice two- or three-week holiday awaiting them, and then another week or so in the spring, and finally the end of the first year arrives and they get another summer break. How wonderful! Except it isn't. The leisurely academic pace exacerbates problems rather than solves them. Students need a speeded-up tempo for learning that more accurately reflects the twenty-first century rather than the agrarian nineteenth century.

The academic year is framed by the same tempo. On my campus, it is dangerous to walk down the main walkways on Monday through Thursday mornings around noon. Everyone is zipping hither and yon to grab something to eat before they go to their next class. On Fridays, I

could roll a bowling ball down those same walkways and not hit anyone. Faculty and students don't like those Friday classes!

It is useful to note that some institutions have attempted to embrace full-year academic calendars. Community colleges, especially in urban areas, frequently have active summer sessions, and the state of Florida has required every undergraduate enrolled in a public university to earn at least nine credit hours during a summer term, prior to graduation.³⁴ However, these policies are usually the product of an overburdened system where exponential increases in enrollment make summer semesters necessary to relieve capacity issues. Full-time faculty grumble about teaching during the summer, and the classes get handed off to graduate students or contingent faculty who are happy for additional income.

Imagine if other businesses operated in that manner. Would we want airlines to be more crowded because the airline has decided—without consumer agreement—that they are not going to fly on Fridays? Or how about if our local convenience store decided to close in the summer because the cashiers had better things to do? Or what if the auto repair shop told me that he would do the routine check-up on my car and I could get it back in a month or so? I do not think we would settle for those time frames in any of these examples, so why do we accept it in higher education?

Obviously, a classroom and an auto repair shop are different. The fellow who works at my local convenience store is different from my colleague who is in the office next to me. At the same time, our sense of time in the early decades of the twenty-first century is certainly different from the 1950s for all of us. Why wouldn't we adapt our academic schedules, just as other businesses do?

Teaching and Learning

I recently talked with a college junior whom I mentor at a local area college, and he told me about the PowerPoint presentations that his computer science professor puts online. He said the professor uploads them after every lecture. The PowerPoint slides were so good that nobody went to class. "Nobody?" I asked. He laughed because he knew I was referring to him, and he nodded. "Well, I make about half of the lectures, and I sit in the front just like you told me to do." I asked how many students were absent. In a class where eighty students are registered, no more than

twenty typically show up, except for exams. My mentee said he expected to get an A-minus in the class.

This sort of behavior has been the norm for years, particularly in large lecture classes. Another student told me that attendance in humanities classes on her campus were even worse. She was referring to the general education classes that students had to take. Everyone gets As and Bs, she told me, so students do not see the need to attend class.

What's going on? Clearly, the classroom experience is not particularly enjoyable to students—intellectually, socially, emotionally—if they feel attendance is unnecessary. It's unnecessary, presumably, because grades have not fallen in response to absenteeism, and students can still find their way to the finish line. What do they learn? We know that employers are unhappy with the lack of job skills of recent graduates. And we know that those who seek further degrees—master's and professional degrees and doctorates—encounter the same sort of pushback from their faculty as high school teachers hear when they send their charges off to college. Faculty feel students are unprepared. We are pushing the problems up the educational ladder rather than solving them when problems arise. We know from a raft of reports, articles, and books that what students learn in college is negligible. Those who arrive unprepared, depart unprepared—or drop out. Those who arrive prepared are not that much more prepared after they finish.

Our concern should not be simply that they have not learned vocational skills to make them more employable. When we return to the social learning component that I raised earlier, we also find that students are not substantially more engaged than when they arrived. Studies indicate that the development of critical thinking has been marginal, and the result is college graduates who are not ready to be socially engaged in a project to improve democracy.³⁵

Working Conditions

A variety of changes have occurred on United States' campuses that have made them decidedly better. Although we have a long way to go—and I do not wish to minimize the challenges of anyone who finds themselves marginalized—campuses are more diverse today and generally more welcoming for many students, faculty, and staff. Campuses in general are also more environmentally friendly today than they once were. Town-and-gown engagement has largely improved.

If we acknowledge improvements, then we also have to recognize where the working conditions have gotten worse. I'll elaborate in a later essay, but the discrepancy between a president's salary and that of a new assistant professor has never been greater. The perks and amenities that members of the board and senior administrators have with regard to health care and a whole host of sought-after goodies—from parking to football tickets—have never been greater. While senior administrators and board members travel business or first class with unlimited travel funds, faculty at many universities are forced to compete for miniscule institutional funding for the one conference that they may be fortunate enough to attend.

Colleges and universities have largely outsourced an array of services because they are able to remove individuals from the payroll and hire companies that will pay people less and give them fewer benefits. The result is that we have a cleaning staff who comes to work at 3:00 a.m. during the school year and then is laid off during the summer when the students and faculty leave. Institutions could not care less about the working conditions of those who are the poorest paid on campus. These cost-saving measures would be easier to take if, at the same time, we did not see the president's private limousine, the provost's dining budget, and the membership in exclusive clubs that the deans and other senior staff obtain to ostensibly run after wealthy donors.

The working conditions of faculty have also radically changed. Tenure was once the norm, and now it is the exception. In my own school of education, roughly 80 percent of the faculty were tenure track and 20 percent were part-time and adjunct faculty when I started. Now those figures are reversed. The result is that we no longer have a financially secure workforce able to weigh in on a variety of issues that confront us without fear of retribution, and the changing cast of characters creates for an unstable workplace culture. Without the protection of tenure, and without a full-time workforce, the ability to say that academic freedom exists, or that shared governance is healthy, is a canard. Workforces always have to change, but the movements we have seen over the last generation have largely been in response to perceived crises, and they have not improved the academic workplace for either the workers or society. Budget cuts, and costs in other areas, have led to fewer tenure track faculty, stingier health benefits, and less of a retirement package.

These issues are also related. Someone may write an article about the enrollment crisis and focus on a downturn in enrollment for small liberal

arts colleges, as if the downturn is an isolated issue. In actuality, though, it has a lot to do with faculty costs, online education, and for-profit higher education. What boards choose as important issues has a great deal to do with the seemingly inexorable rise in college costs. Consequently, I will move back and forth in these essays, trying to help you think through the multiple issues that face higher education.

Getting Higher Education's Groove Back

Many of us in higher education do not want to recognize the challenges that I've just enumerated. We continue to act like what worked yesterday will work tomorrow, even with the pandemic that hit all of us. It won't. In part, this book is to help us think through some of the most pressing problems that we confront and consider how to get our groove back. I am not saying that the end is near, but the status quo will not work either. My intent is to put forward the various challenges that exist to help you think through these issues and how they relate to one another and then come up with your own decision. Rather than compile a higher education cookbook with recipes for reform, I put forward the various ingredients that go into the entire menu of higher education so that we might then decide how to create a better postsecondary restaurant. I can't cover every single topic that confronts us or this would be an encyclopedia. I have, however, tried to cover the major issues, and hopefully the back and forth will help us think through them. There's no magic to having forty-nine essays—they are simply the most important topics that we face today, as we move forward, post-COVID-19. If I wrote the book ten years ago, we likely would not have discussed microaggressions; if I update the book in ten years, a few topics may drop off my list and others will pop up. Just as in real life, these topics are not linear; they occur in tandem, and their relationships frequently overlap.

Remember my young friend who skips his computer science class? His older brother does also. As he said to me one day, "The classes are boring, and they're all recorded, so I can watch them on my phone in my room." I countered that there was more to a class than simply learning the material and he agreed, saying, "I always go to office hours. I like to talk to the professor. I also like to listen to the questions other students have." He admitted that he could fast-forward through the material he found easy, and he could pause at parts that were difficult. What he did

not like was sitting in a class of three hundred students and having to cover material in two hours that he could do in one.

How should we think about my young friends' course-taking patterns? The bottom line is that they get good grades, so why make them sit in a large lecture class? Why not accommodate different learning styles? Why would we think making students sit in a class just like they did twenty years ago—jeez, fifty years ago—is good pedagogy? We've got to get with it: focus on learning outcomes and present material in a way that enables individuals to engage in a manner that meets their learning needs.

I have two quiz questions for you:

1. Name the three best football coaches in the United States.
2. Name the three best college presidents in the United States.

I'm betting readers will find an easier time naming three great football coaches than even coming up with the names of three college presidents. Therein lies the problem. We presently lack college presidents, regents, or faculty who can make the case for higher education in the public sphere. Instead, we have presidents of grounds and buildings or fundraisers; people who build buildings and raise money but fail to speak on the major issues of the day that confront our students and society. Bill Clinton once said, "There are objective reasons that huge numbers of Americans are confused, angry, frustrated, and afraid." He continued: "In that environment, the proper response is relentless explanation."³⁶

Relentless explanation. I like that phrase. People need to understand what we do in higher education and why our work is worthwhile. Instead, we usually come across as whiners trying to get some scraps from the legislature, or as condescending experts. No wonder our reputation is sinking. I once hoped that a group like the American Association of University Professors could make such a case, but they are more like shop stewards than intellectual leaders. Unions need folks to lobby for their interests, but lobbying for pension plans is entirely different from making the case for higher education in the public square. Before we make that case, I want readers to understand the panoply of issues that confronts academe. All of these issues can be overwhelming because we face so many—and that's precisely the way it is on our campuses. Topics come and go, they have competing analyses, and how to solve one problem will create issues in another area. What I'm trying to do, then, is enable us to think through the various topics so that we are better prepared to handle them.

We need to explain what we do, why we do it, and how we're changing to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Actions speak louder than words, but in the communication age, words are pretty darn important too. And right now we don't have a single spokesperson who is able to be relentless in explaining the critical significance of higher education for the future welfare of our democracy.

Nick Saban sure could make the case for 'Bama football, though.

Ok, so you flunked the quiz question. Here's an essay question for you: Make believe that we do not have a higher education system in this country but that we have just decided to create one. What should it look like?

Do you think we would create the crazy patchwork quilt that we have today? I hope not. I'd like us to consider the following topics as we create that new system.

Mastery of Knowledge

Let's eliminate *terms* and *credits*. Let's figure out what students need to learn. Whether they learn it in five weeks or fifteen weeks is irrelevant. If we can agree on a specific skill set that students need to have, then, when they have accumulated that skill set, they can move on to the next level, and eventually graduate. Academe has dipped its toes in the water on this matter. For example, Western Governor's University, a nonprofit university founded in 1997 by thirteen US governors who each committed \$100,000 in seed money, allows students to accelerate through programs if they can draw on previous work or educational experiences—or simply devote more time to the completion of their degrees.³⁷ In 2013, the University of Wisconsin created a Flex Option that has a similar philosophy. Under the Flex Option, students pay a fixed rate for an "all-you-can-learn term" that lasts a specified period of time (e.g., three months or an academic year).³⁸ Colleges and universities throughout the United States offer online degrees, but we do it begrudgingly and with a good deal of cynicism. It is that kind of foot-dragging that brings down traditional companies when new innovators (think the software industry) rise up to disrupt the status quo.

Eliminate Transfer

Students should move from twelfth to thirteenth grade much like they progress from eleventh to twelfth. I am betting this simple shift will create a significant increase in higher education. Similarly, all community colleges should be related to a four-year institution, or not at all. If students say

they want a four-year degree when they have finished two years, then they move on to the third year. They do not transfer from one place to another. If students simply want a certificate to gain a specific skill set, then they go to a community college.

Demand Transparency

We should clarify learning objectives and ensure that the prospective student knows how many individuals learn the material, graduate on time, understand how much debt has been incurred, and know whether students end up employed. Keep it simple. That's the knowledge consumers want to know.

Reduce Duplication

Let's acknowledge that distribution requirements are political trade-offs by faculties and departments and are not optimal for learning. Have the faculty determine what they believe their students need to know, and then offer a finite set of courses that provides various learning experiences. What students need to know can vary from institution to institution; I do not believe in some grand scheme (except when it comes to the mastery of basic skills). What I want to see eliminated is what we currently have: course-taking patterns based on how early a student was able to register for a class.

Reward Faculty

I mentioned earlier that faculty in all types of institutions are given greater rewards for research than for teaching, and we have fewer tenure track faculty. In some instances, part-time and adjunct faculty are superb hires. But hiring should adhere to a schema, rather than a lack of funding, to hire tenure-track faculty. Figure out what faculty need to do, and then reward them to do it. Some institutions will continue doing research. But I am betting that the vast majority of institutions would focus more intently on teaching and learning and figure out ways to reward individuals for teaching, rather than for writing an article or two.

Prepare Students for Life in a Democracy

Although job preparation and learning the skills necessary to attain a job is certainly important, so are the skills needed to participate in a democracy.