

# Fix Higher Education ... Before It Breaks!

## Challenges and Opportunities for New England

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**B**rainpower really is New England's only renewable natural energy resource. Yet New England has never been a generous public supporter of higher education. My wife Carolyn Thornberry's doctoral work reveals that New England's base political culture persists in seeing higher education as a *private* commodity. We are spared the crisis of states like California when the expectation of higher education entitlement crashes up against the demand for fiscal limits. Instead, our challenge is to even notice as the enterprise rusts.

In good times and bad, we expect and, therefore, accept relatively low levels of public support for and investment in higher education. And when we do invest, it is more likely to be in buildings than students and faculty. Meanwhile, our faith in the marketplace assures us that mounting disparities in college preparation, access, affordability, completion and indebtedness will all somehow sort themselves out. We New Englanders are afflicted by the corrupted maxim that "government which governs least governs best" and the wrongheaded advice, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

If it's difficult to move our political culture, it's next to impossible to move the ancient, institutional culture of higher education. Academe is complex, diffuse, prickly about prerogatives and reflexively suspicious of internal change and external engagement with its "organized anarchy." For all our good intentions, higher education is deeply challenged in its capacity for change and action. And to be fair, asking higher education to change its mission or do what it is not traditionally prepared to do is risky. We must not sacrifice

breadth and depth in teaching and scholarship, for example, to embrace ease in training and credentialing.

Colleges and universities must continue to serve Thomas Jefferson's belief that education is the soul of citizenship. The learned and practiced skills of civic awareness, debate and consensus are all the more important at a time when so many of us, in Robert Putnam's metaphor, are "bowling alone"—and doing so in our separate blue and red lanes. The virtual citizenship of web-based interactions is no substitute for the virtuous citizenship of actual contact.

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Higher education is a bridge to opportunity. It was when I was the first in my family to go to college. It's more so in today's knowledge-based global economy where every year of educational attainment is a proven multiplier of well-being.

Higher education is also a vital source of renewal. New England colleges and graduate schools are a vital national and international draw for those who come here to learn and help counter the demography of a region aging in place. As businesses and employers as well as centers of research and development, New England campuses are economic engines whose everyday decisions add to or subtract from the common good.

Higher education is, or can be, a tremendous force for engagement in and improvement of society. Among scholarship's most important lessons is the ethic of thinking globally and acting locally. Colleges and universities can be powerful partners with their communities, especially in renewing cities and school systems. They can form more effective partnerships with other colleges, universities, businesses, associations and foundations to reduce our separate disadvantages and multiply our shared advantages. And we can all build on the partnership represented regionally by the New England Board of Higher Education. Indeed, while Red Sox and Yankees fans weep in their beer over their mutual fate this past season, it may be time to broaden the 50-year-old New England Higher Education Compact that created NEBHE into a reinvigorated *Northeastern* partnership including New York and New Jersey.

Finally, let us reach back to our New England collegiate roots and imagine again the city on the hill that was once our higher horizon. Getting there will require greater vision and investment. Both the College Board and the Committee for Economic Development this past fall warned of real and growing "cracks in the education pipeline." Higher education costs continue to outpace family income and financial aid. Unacceptable levels of debt are a deterrent first impression for many would-be college graduates and an immediate negative return on investment for many more. With the shift to non-means-tested tuition tax credits and merit aid, students in the upper half of wealth distribution now benefit more than those in the lower

half. And the slowly narrowing gaps in high school preparation between whites and nonwhites and rich and poor is unmatched by any less disparity in access, retention, completion and the added cost of delayed completion.

Moreover, colleges and universities are still not leading by example with good pay and benefits for non-professional staff. We continue to underestimate the need for our own professional development, believing instead that some magical process turns good professors into good managers. We are still generationally mismatching technology-savvy students with non-technology-savvy campuses. Higher education remains wholly unprepared for another looming demographic tidal wave: the aging that will drastically reduce our traditional age cohort and public priority. And the National Center for Policy and Higher Education's 50-state report card

reminds us that higher education is still not "measuring up" in terms of providing the evidence of learning that will be demanded by consumers. Will we answer the center's call to shape these outcome standards ourselves or let others make a Procrustean bed for us?

At the same time, colleges and universities are too disconnected from broader education policy. The continuum of learning that begins in early childhood should lead through higher education seamlessly. In New England, beyond the usual suspects, we are not yet maximizing our potential as research and development engines of innovation, invention and job creation. We are not partnering enough with school systems or workplaces or the communities where we are neighbors but often far from neighborly. Higher education also shrinks too much from advocacy, lest someone take offense and carve at our own little piece of the pie.

Connecticut and all New England remain blessed with an extraordinary array of colleges and universities. The region's campuses house enormous caches of talent and continue to attract students from around the world. By refocusing our institutional missions and the common mission of groups like the New England Board of Higher Education, we can create still more world-class opportunities in teaching, learning, scholarship and service. We just might make ourselves greater than the sum of our parts.

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