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Will a Culture of Entitlement Bankrupt Higher Education?

By Hamid Shirvani

In the wake of our nation's economic crisis, previous levels of government support for colleges and universities can no longer be maintained—regardless of how much we in higher education may wish otherwise. States are appropriating less money to higher education not because legislators and the people whom they represent value us less, but because they can afford less. Practical realities will drive what is possible for colleges and universities in the coming years.

The economy has suffered changes so deep and fundamental that institutions cannot just hunker down to weather the storm. The time has come for creative reconstruction. We must summon the courage and will to re-engineer education in ways founded on shared responsibility, demanding hard work and a willingness on the part of everyone involved to let go of "the way it's always been."

Much has been written in recent months comparing the problems of higher education with those of the auto industry, and many of the comparisons are apt. Resistance to change in academe has helped create inflexible, unsustainable organizations, just as automobile manufacturers wedded to gas-guzzling models have been unprepared for the demand for smaller, more eco-friendly cars.

Yet American auto manufacturers are no more alone in creating their disastrous present than colleges are in attempting to stare down the budget cuts and dwindling revenues they now face. In both instances, inflated consumer demand has created an expectation of elements once considered "extras": MP3 players and GPS navigation systems in new cars, country-club-quality recreational facilities and multitudes of majors and minors, however narrow, at colleges. People feel entitled to things that were once considered luxuries. And that sense of entitlement—among students, parents, faculty members, and administrators—has driven expansion in higher education beyond what is reasonable or necessary.

Coupled with such growing demands has come an expectation that, as the costs of education rise, government should absorb them. That is no longer possible or desirable. We are moving into an era in which all participants must help bear the costs, direct and indirect, of the privilege of higher education.

As soon as the word "privilege" enters the conversation, people bring up the subject of access, with the implication that if something is a privilege, only privileged people will enjoy it. But in America, access to higher education is unparalleled. No other country has so many fully accredited colleges or has provided such widespread access to student financial aid.

Instead, we should view the privilege of a higher education much as we did the privileges that we enjoyed as children. We knew we couldn't get ice cream if we didn't help wash the dishes—we worked for the privileges that we enjoyed, and we shared in the responsibility of earning them. Those special activities were available to us, but we did not enjoy them as a "right." We were expected to contribute.

We can only hope that today's harsh economic realities have finally broken the stranglehold of the sense of entitlement about higher education and brought people back down to earth. The reality is that higher education is expensive, and students and their families will be asked to pay an ever-larger share of the costs. Although annual increases in tuition have diminished recently, tuition is still rising faster than inflation.

But the issues are complex and, again, the notion of shared responsibility comes sharply into focus. While students and their families will have to pay more, administrators and faculty members must also work together to offer affordable, effectively delivered educational products and services. With budgets being cut and staff members being laid off or facing a reduced number of workdays, employees in higher education must become more productive.

Cutting costs is not enough. We need to break down expectations based on entitlement and focus on educational productivity and outcomes. Institutions should review redundancies, rethink staffing models, and streamline business practices. Productivity measures should be applied in all areas. In the same way that secondary schools are being challenged to consider longer school days and an extended academic year, we in higher education need to revisit basic assumptions about how we deliver higher education to students. We should not be tied to any one model or structure.

For example, we should re-evaluate the notion that large classes are inherently pedagogically unsound. What both students and faculty members tend to prefer—small classes—is not the only educationally effective approach. Although no one would advocate for large classes in every discipline or instance, we should review what we do in light of new financial contingencies, while keeping an eye on what students learn.

Similarly, at many institutions, it may make more sense for professors to teach more and do less governance and committee work. Faculty members must make education more productive, even if it means sacrificing work in other areas, which, while important, are not central to our primary educational mission.

Colleges and universities should focus more on degree completion, not just on how many students enroll. That does not mean "teaching to the test," but rather paying more attention to student success and seeking more and better ways that faculty members can support and guide students inside and outside the classroom.

Indeed, in light of the growing demand for a better-prepared work force, we need to revisit undergraduate education as a whole. We should re-examine the teacher/scholar model, for instance. Is it appropriate for every institution? Does that model really produce what it is supposed to: thinkers and makers, learned and professionally skilled graduates?

In addition, we should re-evaluate the relationship and the balance between graduate and undergraduate education. It is too easy to overlook the ever-increasing specialization of graduate programs, in which professors happily replicate students in their own, often narrow, interests, focusing on limited knowledge. Particularly in the graduate arena, not every program is sacred.

We in higher education must determine what we do best and what is reasonable and possible. We should separate legitimate aspirations and a drive toward excellence from the costly and often fruitless pursuit of higher status—which may feed egos but is beyond the reasonable prospects of many institutions. Not every college can be on a top-20 list. Not every college or university can be a Research I institution. Not every regional institution should aspire to national status.

In an era when pragmatism must prevail, those of us in higher education must come to grips with the idea that we can opt out of college rankings and national recognition without doing damage to the fundamental value of the education that we offer to the students whom we serve.

Government, of course, needs to be a part of this process, and taxpayers must be reminded of their shared responsibility for public education. But the only way that we can persuade them to invest in higher education is to demonstrate our commitment to efficiency, openness, and accountability.

Every constituency involved in our educational enterprise bears responsibility for earning the privileges that access to higher education in this country offers. For students, that means the hard work of studying to be prepared for college. For faculty members, that means the hard work of teaching more to enjoy the benefits of the academic life. For administrators, that means the hard work of reconsidering our educational models and structures in order to enjoy the privileges of being engaged in our noble profession.

In an era of less government support and fewer family resources, colleges will emerge stronger and more nimble—ready to provide an accessible and excellent education to those who are prepared to take advantage of that privilege—only if we all embrace the notion of true transformation. Shared responsibility means that we must take a harder look at what education needs to accomplish for society as a whole and then rise above our own special interests for the greater good.

Hamid Shirvani is president of California State University-Stanislaus.