Facing the Facts in Higher Education
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One of the recurring themes making the higher education circuit these days is that "Paris is burning . . . and higher education's leadership, including trustees, faculty, and most presidents - is pretending that nothing is happening."

There is truth to this argument. The facts support the claims by many thoughtful educators that better economic times will not return higher education to the good old days, even if these lazy, hazy times are different than we remember them.

Indeed, it goes beyond the debate about how to create a climate for leaders who have the courage to lead. This crisis runs deeper than turning to the latest management hypothesis in vogue to "disrupt" the status quo. And it is certainly supported by shifting demographics, weakening admission numbers, soft admission yields, stratospheric tuition sticker prices, negative bond ratings, state and federal regulatory intrusion and a lingering recession to paint a dismal picture for American colleges and universities.

What are the options open to American higher education?

The first approach is to duck and cover. Its supporters argue that eventually the recession will end, the number of applicants will increase, endowments - for those institutions that have them - will exceed pre-recession levels, and donors will return to their philanthropic levels of pre-recession support. This plays well with staff and faculty, especially if these groups are willing to accept flat or modest salary increases over the short term until the good times roll.

However, the fact is that this is a dangerous and cowardly strategy to pursue. This group of higher education leaders may be able to move the pieces around on the chess board to advance the game. But there is a difference between advancing the game and shaping a sustainable agenda for the future. It is unforgivable behavior among those charged to lead.

It may depend in part on where you are in the higher education pecking order. For most colleges and universities, however, a decision to "wait it out" postpones the inevitable and significantly weakens their ability to invest and create opportunity for faculty and students. The first symptoms will be weakening demand, rising tuition discounts, delayed deferred maintenance, growing faculty dissatisfaction, and the changing out of presidents and senior leadership by boards asleep at the stewardship switch.

A second approach is to "do more with less." On the surface, this makes sense, particularly if the concept centers on ways to look for administrative efficiencies, greater program specialization, re-allocation of internal investments, and common institutional partnerships across higher education. It's a good start and an intelligent way to support faculty and staff.

It may also be a form of duck and cover, especially if this strategy limits the kind of planning and investments that put off the hard choices. Facing the facts in American higher education means more than delaying the construction of the new science building. And, reworking internal numbers turns a deaf ear to the drumbeat of consumer demand, state and federal regulators, technology impacts, and other external forces that shape higher education beyond the college gates.

A third approach is to recognize the inevitable.

Consumers are now voting with their feet with 50 percent of the college-going population attending community colleges. Federal solutions propose to "score" colleges and universities something like March Madness, effectively taking a "paint by numbers" approach to a complex higher education system. The media spends too much time on rock climbing walls and "most beautiful" campuses, dorms and students rather than developing thoughtful analysis on college readiness, access, skills development, and post-graduate employment.

Is it really good reporting when the anecdote over liberal arts majors flipping hamburgers at fast food restaurants becomes the story of how companies fail to find graduates to work for them?

The reality is, of course, that the colleges and universities that survive will do so because they thought about their future rather than simply managed their present. Let's hope that the next wave of management solutions for higher education attacks the status quo by recognizing the strength of what underpins it. Let's pray that colleges and universities do more with less but also ask themselves the tough questions that strengthen them.
Five questions come immediately to mind.

First, what is the core enterprise and mission and how do we support faculty and staff to prepare students for a changing world?

Second, what should we stop doing? Should colleges be in the food service, hotel, security, and technology business? What can we do in common?

Third, where do we make the next critical investments separately and in partnership?

Fourth, how can colleges and universities become economic engines, scaled by size, for their region?

And finally, how can they support creativity by being nimble and adapting to the world around them?

Soon, the recession will end and the aftermath will demonstrate that the place of higher education in a global economy will be different. Higher education must stake out its turf, add value, differentiate and admit that external forces washing over it represent unprecedented opportunity.

Perhaps the best way to adjust to this crisis is to embrace it.

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