

2016

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Recommended Citation

McClellan, George S. (2016) "Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 28: Iss. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol28/iss3/8>

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Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education

By William G. Bowen and Michael S. McPherson

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Higher education plays an important part in shaping American society, but exactly how that role is understood may vary. Higher education is a driver of democracy, economic development, and opportunity, and is designed to replicate and reinforce systems of power and privilege that serve to maintain the hegemony of a patriarchal oligarchy—and all points in between. Regardless of perspective, the degree to which the perceived strengths and weaknesses of American higher education are a part of public discourse in the country reflects the institution’s importance to the nation. Books, papers, op-ed columns, position statements, and speeches on the state of American higher education abound, and the current election cycle and the concomitant political positioning and pandering include attention to the many ideas on how to improve its condition.

In *Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education*, William Bowen, president emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton University, and Michael McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation and former president of Macalester College, argue for a greater alignment between the needs of the United States as related to higher education as well as the discussion about, and activity of American higher education. They write:

We have been motivated to write this short book because of our conviction that American higher education, for all of its accomplishments, needs to do much better than it is doing at present in meeting pressing national needs, especially achieving higher levels of educational attainment at the undergraduate level and reducing what are now marked disparities in outcomes related to socioeconomic status. (p. vii)

In the course of pursuing this goal, the authors point out a number of “so-called crises in higher education which are overblown” (p. viii). They go on to state, “Exaggerating these concerns, if not misstating the facts entirely, only complicates and confuses discussions of how to make progress in confronting the all-too-real challenges facing higher education” (p. viii).

The book, which opens with a brief introduction in which they outline their intentions for the work, includes two primary sections. In the first of these, Bowen and McPherson identify a set of pressing national needs and the role that American higher education can play in addressing those needs. The second of the major sections describes an agenda for change in higher education with some reference to specific action items.

Pressing Needs

Bowen and McPherson address six pressing national needs in this section. They include achieving higher levels of educational attainment; raising college completion rates; reducing time-to-degree; reducing disparities in outcomes by socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity; achieving affordability; and strengthening leadership capacities.

The authors cite data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in presenting what is best summarized as a good news/bad news story with regard to educational attainment. They point out that the United States remains at or near the top of the world's nations in post-secondary graduation rates for people aged from 25 to 64, but a review of trend data for the 2000-2013 period reveals that the nation does not fare nearly as well when focusing on the change in the rate of post-secondary attainment for this population. Put another way, other countries are gaining on the United States in this area. Beyond merely discussing credentialing, Bowen and McPherson also discuss cognitive attainment here. They reject the Arum and Roksa (2011) critique of how little of value students are learning in college and offer a brief word of support for liberal education, but they offer no specific claims with regard to cognitive gains or data to support any such claim.

Bowen and McPherson draw support from the considerable literature demonstrating the market and non-market benefits of degree completion in making the case that raising college completion rates is a pressing priority and a problem. The pair speak to a number of factors that may play a role in contributing to or inhibiting college completion: normal (and understandable) attrition due to changes in goals; finances; lack of high school counseling; and the baccalaureate gap—the variance in rate of degree attainment for students pursuing a bachelor's degree who enter a baccalaureate institution and those who enter a community college with intent to transfer (Dougherty, 1992). The authors pay the greatest attention to the phenomenon of “match” and the relationship between selectivity and preparedness when it comes to degree completion. Time-to-degree goes hand-in-hand with degree completion, and Bowen and McPherson identify decreasing time-to-degree as a pressing need. Rather than high school preparedness or other student demographic variables, they argue that declines in public per student support for higher education as well as increases in student employment are the two major factors in delaying completion.

The first order of business for the authors in discussing the reduction of disparities in outcomes by socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity is to address the hyperbolic information that sometimes accompanies the discourse around this issue. Nonetheless, as the authors starkly observe, “The evidence is striking—and very troubling” (p. 39). Bowen and McPherson point to data from the Department of Education indicating that while over half of students from families in the top income quartile earn bachelor's degrees, less than 15% of students from the bottom quartile and less than 30% from the middle two quartiles achieve the same goal. Why? The authors briefly discuss two hypotheses: differences in expectations and differences in qualifications. Bowen and McPherson conclude by noting that the gap in the disparities is growing wider over time and the impact of these disparities on the lives of individuals is becoming even more pronounced.

Another of the pressing issues is achieving affordability in higher education. The authors observe:

Important as it is to improve educational outcomes—and it is very important, indeed essential—this must be accomplished without unduly increasing

educational costs and, ideally, restraining the rate of increase in costs for institutions as well as for individuals. (p. 48)

They note that the costs of operation are a factor in rising tuition rates, as are declining levels of per student state support. They also point out there is considerable aid available for students interested in attending college, and they identify levels of aid beyond demonstrated need as a topic for further consideration. Bowen and McPherson also take issue with what they describe as an exaggeration of the extent to which student debt is a significant problem.

The final pressing need identified and explored is strengthening campus leadership capacities. Interestingly, the authors share that this was not among the list of needs they had identified as they began the book. It was added as a result of their conversations regarding the other needs they had intended to address. Simply put, they came to the conclusions that leadership will be essential to addressing the problems they were identifying, and that leadership in the current context of higher education is lacking. Bowen and McPherson assert, “The main problem today, as we perceive it, is that many sitting presidents are overly risk-averse. Too often they seem to be, for entirely understandable reasons, reluctant to take unpopular positions (with faculty, alumni, and legislators)” (p. 64). They go on to point to the financial challenges facing many institutions as a major test for leadership, and offer an extended discussion of the significant number of smaller institutions struggling financially, along with efforts by those institutions’ leaders to close these schools. They also list political pressures, racial tensions, labor issues related to increasing reliance on adjunct faculty, and the growing use and role of social media as challenges for university leaders. The need to rethink shared governance is the second major point of emphasis in their call to strengthen leadership. Bowen and McPherson suggest: Faculty responsibilities in key areas such as vetting the qualifications of colleagues and potential colleagues remain much the same (fortunately) as they have been for over a hundred years. But faculty roles in making resource allocation decisions, which have always been more limited, and in determining teaching methods, need to be re-thought. (p. 71). They go on to argue:

.... governance structures need to evolve away from vertical models, centered on departments, to horizontal models that focus on achieving a combination of education effectiveness and cost efficiencies. This requires even stronger leadership in key positions, combined with more real consultation, with faculty and others. (p. 71-72)

Agenda for Change

Having described what they see as pressing national needs as related to higher education, Bowen and McPherson next offer an agenda for change. Specifically, they identify the following areas for action: governmental funding (apart from student aid); payments by individuals (including student aid); increasing efficiency; putting high-profile college sports in proper perspective; rationalizing staffing patterns and supporting development of a teaching corps; improving teaching through technology; and enabling strong leadership.

The authors spend the balance of their time on discussing governmental funding on “cost shifting,” which they define as “reducing the payment burden on one group of citizens by increasing the burden on another” (p. 74). They offer a concise and thorough discussion of state and federal investment in higher education. Their conclusion is that the foreseeable future will bring no significant increases in per student support levels and that higher education will have to look elsewhere for any additional revenue needed.

One obvious place for higher education to turn would be to payments from individuals in the form of tuition and fees (including resources garnered through financial aid programs). The authors make several specific recommendations in this area. First, they sound a cautionary note about the “free” college proposals that have become popular, particularly those focused on free community colleges. Second, they suggest several reforms for state and federal aid, including a focus on need-based aid and better information for consumers, including the need to address the impact of recruiting consultants and the ratings game on institutional aid bidding wars for students. Third, while generally seeing government loan programs as useful, Bowen and McPherson argue that there have been several unintended consequences of these programs; for example, the growth of the for-profit higher education sector and the growth of non-governmental loans, which much be resolved. Finally, the authors encourage government, and particularly the federal government, to make greater use of the leverage derived from being the source of financial aid funds to both achieve policy goals related to outcomes and to confine mission creep.

Outcome measures receive greater attention in Bowen and McPherson’s comments on increasing efficiency. In defining efficiency, the authors state, “We take the simplified approach of identifying as desirable outcomes...greater education attainment overall, higher age-specific completion rates, shorter time-to-degree, and reduction in disparities in outcomes related to race or ethnicity and SES—all seen in relation to the cost of producing the outcomes in question” (p. 105). They go on to add, “Deeper measures of outcomes such as enhanced creativity, improved critical thinking, better social skills, and civic contributions are too complex for this short book and for the state of existing measurement capabilities—though they are hardly unimportant” (p. 105-106). Brushing aside “the distracting but ultimately unconvincing claim that a ballooning of the number of administrators in college—so-called administrative bloat—is what lies behind the rapid growth in public college tuition” (p. 106), Bowen and McPherson assert “the greatest single opportunity to reduce costs and inefficiencies in the university sector lies in rationalizing PhD programs” (p. 109) by reducing both the number and scope of current doctoral offerings in higher education. They also urge continued action in the area of improving student completion rates as a means of increasing efficiency.

Bowen and McPherson’s original intent was to include discussion of high profile college sports as part of their treatment of curbing college costs. On further reflection, they concluded that the issue was not so much the direct costs of sports as much as the indirect costs that merited attention. They write, “They [high-profile sports programs] are at odds with the integrity of the educational missions and undermine the confidence of many members of the public at large in the priorities of higher education, and in its capacity to enforce wise priorities” (p. 119). Interestingly, the authors believe that university presidents will not be able to bring about the

necessary change in this area; rather, this will only come about through legal or legislative action.

Two of the proposed action items directly relate to teaching. The first is the recommendation to rationalize staffing patterns and support the development of a teaching corps. Bowen and McPherson posit that the ongoing shift to greater use of adjunct or non-tenure track faculty is likely to continue and argue for training and support for these members of the faculty to help assure quality teaching and development of the university labor force. They also suggest the professionalization of this work force through “a well formulated set of titles plus compensation and benefits commensurate with contributions”; “a clear understanding of terms of appointment and opportunities for re-appointment . . . [not tenure]”; and “a well-defined evaluation process that spells out basic protections [including academic freedom]” (p. 125). The second of the two action items related directly to teaching is improving teaching through technology. The authors caution against overenthusiasm for whatever latest glittering object appears on the technology horizon, but they do see real promise in on-line learning opportunities for certain types of programs, hybrid and “flipped” courses, and exploration of adaptive learning models for foundation courses.

Enabling stronger leadership is the final agenda item for change proffered by Bowen and McPherson. They acknowledge having no simple or new ideas to contribute, but suggest “there is no substitute for two things: (1) a change in mindsets about presidential leadership and (2) a much sharper realization that the wrong kinds of external scrutiny and political intrusion can wreak havoc” (pp. 135-136). With regard to the former, the authors encourage selecting presidents who are able and willing to promote risk-taking in pursuit of desired improvements; support for those presidents when they engage in such behavior; and setting of expectations and providing feedback to help assure they are on course (and not merely chasing ratings or surface-level achievements). Bowen and McPherson lament the willingness of state attorney generals to interfere with institutional decisions, such as the decision by some institutional leaders and boards to shut down (or merge) small colleges that are struggling financially, as well as what the authors see as the failure of journalists to offer appropriate and thoughtful coverage of higher education.

Thoughts on the Work

The book, while not without its problems, is one that may be useful reading for colleagues, students, or others who would benefit from a chance to consider the information, analysis, and recommendations offered by two distinguished scholars. Those familiar with other work by Bowen or McPherson will not find much new here, but they will find it in a tidy package. The authors promise a concise discussion, and they deliver, making their arguments in a mere 184 pages. While there are risks of oversimplification when pursuing brevity, the authors have on the whole avoided those risks and done a nice job of paring down the discussion without cutting corners on thorough coverage of a particular point. Bowen and McPherson make good use of assessment and research to inform and support their positions in much of the book, but it is precisely this strength in some sections that makes its absence in others somewhat noticeable. In addition to brevity and clarity, another strength of the book is its skewering of exaggerated discussions of distracting topics in higher education. Examples include the hype that occasioned

the rapid development and deployment of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) or the red herring of administrative bloat.

As will likely be the case for other readers, there are elements of the analysis or recommendations with which I take issue. The book, like so much of higher education, puts its full focus on outcomes and gives scant attention to process. There is more to the journey than just the destination. Recognizing the potential challenges associated with greater time to degree, it is important to note that the life circumstances of many students do not afford them the luxury of a four- or six-year clock. It would be helpful to acknowledge this reality rather than to further reify the notion of a race to graduation. The calls for further government involvement in assuring quality overlook the considerable costs associated with such intervention, and those calls come with encouragement to governments that they exercise caution and humility—traits that are too often lacking. The critique of the argument about administrative bloat is robust and much needed, but it is worth pointing out that it is helpful for institutions to continuously review their staffing.

Any discussion of reducing costs in higher education that does not at least briefly mention costs associated with benefits (particularly healthcare benefits) and technology is somewhat lacking. The authors appear to overlook the possibility that athletics do in fact contribute to institutional mission but have simply failed to live up to their obligation to be purposeful in that effort and active in assessment and evaluation of their contribution. Finally, it is deeply unfortunate that the authors did not offer more in the way of recommendations for cost cutting to non-doctoral granting institutions, perhaps a reflection of their own professional experiences and expertise.

Author Notes

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