

1

Introduction

AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION is widely praised for its accessibility, scale, and diversity. In recent years this acclaim has been tempered by concerns over rising costs, cutbacks in support of public education, low degree completion rates, and skepticism about higher education's ability to contribute to the clear need for upward mobility in America, all of which raise troubling questions about the nation's capacity to lead a global economy. Almost every contemporary issue facing higher education—from broadening student access, to achieving better learning outcomes (especially higher completion rates and reduced time-to-degree), to increasing productivity and lowering costs—is impeded and frustrated by a hundred-year-old system of governance practices that desperately needs modification. Perhaps most worrisome is the uncertainty one senses about higher education's resolve to reform from within.

The question of why anyone should care about a subject as arcane as the practices governing colleges and universities is a reasonable one. Contrary to the adage that academic politics is so vicious because the stakes are so low, today there is little doubt that the societal consequences of not addressing college and university governance are greater and more serious than

they have ever been. Our country faces the transcendent challenges of raising the overall level of educational attainment and reestablishing the principle that higher education is the pathway to social mobility. This latter principle, which began to be enunciated forcefully only in the postwar years, is much more fragile and impermanent than we care to admit. If we are going to increase the fraction of the population with college degrees to as much as 60 or 70 percent (as President Obama has urged us to do), and provide meaningful opportunities for upward mobility, the heaviest lifting will have to be done by the less privileged and less well-resourced institutions that serve so many of our students.

Obviously, the *quality* of the education delivered is of great importance, but we do not deal with that tricky issue in this study because of its complexity. We concentrate instead on three other crucial aspects of educational outcomes—attainment, degree completion, and disparities in outcomes related to socioeconomic status—that are, in at least some respects, more amenable to analysis.¹

First, as is well known, overall completion rates (measured for present purposes by the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds with BAs) had been stuck on a plateau since the late 1970s.² More recently, there has been an uptick in educa-

1. For a fuller discussion of the current “state of play” in each of these areas, complete with figures, data sources, and references, see William G. Bowen, “Technology: Its Potential Impact on the National Need to Improve Educational Outcomes and Control Costs,” talk given at Rice University, October 13, 2014, available at the ITHAKA website, www.ithaka.org.

2. The start of this plateau followed a long period of steady increases in attainment dating back to the “high school movement” of the early 1900s, which was responsible for producing the base of college-ready students that made possible this country’s remarkably high level of degree completion at the college level. See figure 1.2 and associated commentary in William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Goldin and Katz deserve the credit for explicating both the long record of increasing educational attainment in the United States and the subsequent plateau (Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The*

tional attainment, with the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds holding BAs or higher degrees increasing from 30 percent in 2007 to 34 percent in 2013. But the changing demographics of America warn us that elements of the population with below-average attainment rates (especially Hispanics) are growing relative to the main group with above-average rates (the white population). A second reason for caution in extrapolating progress is that we do not know how much of the recent uptick in attainment rates is due to the timing of the 2007 recession—or to what extent more recent improvements in labor markets will lead to decreases in enrollment and attainment (full-time undergraduate enrollment was 3 percent lower in 2012 than in 2010).³ Moreover, the absolute level of the current educational attainment rate remains unacceptably low if the United States is to compete effectively in an increasingly knowledge-driven world—a world in which other countries have been improving their attainment rates much more rapidly than we have.

Second, overall time-to-degree is long and has increased rapidly. The percentage of students completing their studies in four years fell from 58 percent for the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1972 (NELS-72) cohort to 44 percent for the NELS-88 cohort—the putative high school class of 1992.

Third, another very troubling “fact of life” is that in America today there are serious disparities in both completion rates and time-to-degree associated with socioeconomic status—and that, once again, the problem appears to be getting worse.

Race between Education and Technology [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008]).

3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey” (IPEDS-EF:90–99); IPEDS Spring 2001–Spring 2013, enrollment component. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2013*, tables 105.20 and 303.70. See also Bowen (2014).

Disparities in completion rates between those in the top and bottom income quintiles are appreciably greater in the 1979–83 birth cohort than they were in the 1961–64 birth cohort.⁴ Compounding the problem of growing differences in graduation rates are increased disparities in time-to-degree.⁵

Fourth, there is widespread concern about the affordability of higher education (some of it exaggerated and misplaced, to be sure, but these concerns are real, and perceptions matter almost as much as realities). Worries about the rising net costs of higher education for many students and their families are exacerbated by what David Leonhardt calls “the great wage slowdown of the 21st century”—the fact that “the typical American family [today] makes less than the typical family did 15 years ago, a statement that hadn’t been true since the Great Depression.”⁶

We must ask whether it is reasonable to expect a century-old structure of faculty governance to enable colleges and universities of all kinds to respond to new demands for more cost-effective student learning. Will institutions that educate growing numbers of students from first-generation, under-represented, and disadvantaged backgrounds be able to make the organizational and pedagogical changes that preserve higher education as an engine of social progress? And can those institutions regarded as pacesetters in both the public and private sectors do more than maintain their positions in the higher education hierarchy? Can they provide both examples

4. Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, “Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 17633, December 2011, figure 3.

5. See John Bound, Michael F. Lovenheim, and Sarah Turner, “Why Have College Completion Rates Declined? An Analysis of Changing Student Preparation and Collegiate Resources,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2, no. 3 (July 2010): 129–57.

6. David Leonhardt, “The Great Wage Slowdown of the 21st Century,” “The Upshot,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2014.

of successful uses of new approaches and leadership for higher education generally?

We believe it would be wise to heed the cautions of Clark Kerr, one of the twentieth century's wisest, most thoughtful, and innovative higher education leaders:

The professoriate is not well organized to consider issues of efficient use of resources. Many decisions with heavy cost consequences, including faculty teaching loads and size of classes, are made at levels far removed from direct contact with the necessity to secure resources. Departments usually operate on the basis of consensus and it is difficult to get a consensus to cut costs.⁷

At this point in time, we are dealing with deeply entrenched cultural expectations that are a century old and system-wide and cannot be changed easily. As Kerr presciently observed in 1963:

Faculty members are properly partners in the [higher education] enterprise with areas reserved for their exclusive control. Yet when change comes it is rarely at the instigation of this group of partners as a collective body. The group is more likely to accept or reject or comment, than to devise and propose.⁸

Both of these observations by Kerr were made years ago, but they certainly continue to ring true—perhaps more so today than even Kerr could have anticipated. Most college and university presidents would probably agree that governance falls near the bottom of an imposing list of financial, demographic, technological, and cultural concerns that occupy their

7. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (the Godkin Lectures on the Essentials of Free Government and the Duties of the Citizen) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 180.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

days. In private moments, however, we suspect that many presidents recognize that the unpredictable pace and nature of change repeatedly expose longstanding flaws in institutional governance. A growing number of trustees are frustrated by the slow, deliberative nature of institutional decision-making. They want clearer boundaries between decisions that affect the curriculum (narrowly defined) and those that involve the institutional mission and budget. Many faculty members categorically reject the values, vocabulary, theories, and methods of “corporate” approaches. Faculty nominally endorse the concept of “shared governance,” a concept we interpret as presuming the absence of an inherently adversarial relationship between faculty and administrators/trustees and the embrace of a collaborative approach to achieving common goals. But even within the faculty ranks, cherished traditions of debate, consultation, deliberation, and the search for consensus have been diminished by the compartmentalized nature of the academy and by faculty members’ loyalties to their disciplines rather than to their institutions.⁹

Yet, as our colleague Lawrence Bacow astutely observes, context is important: “People assume that the way things are

9. Recent publications suggest a growing interest in college and university governance. Larry Gerber, a historian and longtime national leader of the American Association of University Professors, provides an elegant historical overview (*The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014]). Unfortunately, in our opinion, his argument that corporate-driven market practices have eroded the faculty’s historic role as professionals and as equal participants in shared governance is oversimplified and a misreading of his own scholarly analysis. We sense an equally narrow and polarizing perspective in an August 2014 report issued by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. This report (“Governance for a New Era: A Blueprint for Higher Education Trustees”) identifies several contemporary challenges that deserve consideration, but we are skeptical of the wisdom of recommendations that encourage trustees to involve themselves in curricular decisions and in acting to protect the academic freedom of students by redefining the boundaries of dissent. See www.goacta.org/publications/governance_for_a_new_era and Scott Jaschik, “Call for Trustee Activism,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 19, 2014.

today is the way they have always been and will always be [even though] things have evolved over time as institutions have confronted different challenges and opportunities.”¹⁰ “Governance” (by which we mean, as we have already said in the preface, “where authority is located and how it is exercised”) is far from any pre-ordained set of abstract concepts, much less an established set of rules and regulations—and far from the static creature that some may assume it to be. Governance has always been a product of the times, and it has evolved in response to the pressing needs of new days. The current governance system needs to continue to evolve, we believe, and perhaps to change in quite fundamental ways. Accordingly, we think it is important to track historically the evolution of governance practices—and especially to identify the forces that have driven changes in the authority granted to faculty in different areas and within different sectors.

Although we hope that this volume will be informative across a wide range of higher education institutions, our focus is primarily on faculties of arts and science at four-year colleges and universities. This focus reflects the limits of our personal and professional experiences, the constraints of time, and an overriding interest in improving the overall level of the nation’s educational attainment, which will be determined in no small part by what happens in BA-granting programs. We recognize that both professional schools and community colleges serve absolutely essential purposes in the structure of higher education. Moreover, these institutions represent a valuable source of insights about governance policies, functions, and cultures. Certainly the experiences of schools of law, medicine, and business differ markedly from those of schools focused on the arts and sciences, particularly in terms of autonomy, dependency,

10. Lawrence S. Bacow to William G. Bowen, March 17, 2014, private correspondence.

and responsiveness to demands for university-wide centralization. Community colleges also function in distinctive ways. We trust that other scholars will complement what we have done by examining closely these other sets of institutions, and the roles of their faculties in shaping policies and practices. We are also conscious of the fact that we do not deal with the for-profit sector of higher education, which provides yet another set of governance issues.

Studies of governance in higher education often focus on boards of trustees and presidents. Both are important actors in the governance drama, and there is no lack of books about them.¹¹ Legislators, alumni, and students matter, too. But, of course, so do faculty, especially when it comes to decisions about staffing, curricula, and teaching methods, all areas of growing concern.

We certainly do not believe that governance is ever an end in itself. In colleges and universities it is a means to the fundamental educational ends of teaching, learning, scholarship, and service. An institution can have an impeccable governing structure and still do badly in serving its core mission. Errors of judgment, and errors of both commission and omission, can have harmful consequences even when all processes are in excellent order. A good governance structure is no substitute for having excellent leadership in key positions—and at least a modicum of good luck! It is also true, however, that even the best leadership can be thwarted by poor governance.

For reasons mentioned earlier and explained in some detail later in this study, we are persuaded that faculty roles are of prime importance at this juncture—both positively, in terms of the ability of faculty to drive badly needed substantive change, and negatively, in terms of the ability of fac-

11. Bowen has written about both presidents (in *Lessons Learned: Reflections of a University President* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011]) and boards (in *The Board Book* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1994, 2008]).

ulty to stand in the way of that change. We start, then, with the twin premises (1) that the governance challenges facing American higher education today—as it copes with pressures to adapt to a new world marked by a lethal combination of high expectations concerning educational outcomes, severe fiscal constraints, and rapid technological change—are of absolutely central importance, and (2) that these challenges have to be addressed on the basis of a deep understanding of faculty roles, and how they have evolved over time. In our view, the ability of American higher education to take full advantage of, among other things, the opportunities that emerging technologies offer, depends critically on the continuing adaptation of governance structures to new circumstances. Successful adaptation requires a clear understanding of faculty roles today—how we got where we are and what we must preserve—and of why a more capacious interpretation of *shared* governance need not be either solely consensual or adversarial.¹²

This study has five chapters and a separate section containing the full versions of our case studies:

- This introduction is chapter 1.
- Chapter 2 sketches in broad strokes the major factors that have shaped American higher education from its colonial origins to the end of World War II. Our big-picture account is, we recognize, a highly impressionistic one, and a “highlight” film at that. It is in no sense original work, and we want to record our debt to major scholars of the unfolding panorama, including Richard Hofstadter, Walter Metzger,

12. For a thoughtful reminder of the faculty’s central role in any future reform of American higher education, see Norman M. Bradburn and Robert Townsend, “Higher Education’s Missing Faculty Voices,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 2, 2014, available at http://chronicle.com/article/Higher-Educations-Missing/146871?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en.

Lawrence Cremin, Laurence Veysey, Frederick Rudolph, Jurgen Herbst, Roger Geiger, John Thelin, and John Aubrey Douglass, among many others.¹³

- Chapter 3 takes this story forward from the end of World War II to the present day. In this more contemporaneous presentation of a historical overview, we have supplemented rich secondary sources by preparing four case studies of the evolution of faculty roles. This effort has focused on the experiences of several specific educational institutions that, taken together, provide insights into how at least some present-day features have developed in response to changing circumstances. In seeking in this way to “put some flesh on the bones,” we have worked especially closely with colleagues from The City University of New York (CUNY), Princeton University, the University of California, and Macalester College. The highly varied experiences of these quite different institutions are referenced in chapter 3 (and, to a more limited extent, in chapter 2).
- Chapter 4 is a topical analysis of how governance practices are and are not effective in addressing specific challenges facing higher education today, including who makes

13. See Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education*, vols. 1–3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1970–88); Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990; reprint of 1962 ed.); Jurgen Herbst, *From Crisis to Crisis: American College Government, 1636–1819* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); and John Aubrey Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education: 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) and *The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

staffing decisions and the locus of authority over online learning.

- Chapter 5 is an avowedly normative discussion of what needs to stay as it is, and what needs to change. Key overarching questions include whether departments are the right way to organize some kinds of decision-making. Is there a need for more horizontal and less vertical organization of efforts to address certain questions, but not others? A closely related issue is whether the core concepts of “academic freedom” and “shared governance” need to be sharpened and even redefined. Our overriding objective, we should make clear, is *not* to diminish faculty roles but rather to facilitate the most effective contribution of faculty to university life in a new day.

At the back of the book are our four case studies. These constitute a kind of appendix, but they are really more than that because they contain some original material that we reference in the main text. As we have explained in the preface, we make no claim that our case studies are “representative” of the large and incredibly varied set of institutions that comprise higher education in this country. Even so, we believe that these studies, along with the special report on Arizona State University that we reference in the preface, provide powerful illustrative examples (“teaching moments”) that might otherwise remain abstract and difficult to communicate. We acknowledge that ultimately this study relies on our own considered judgments, and we do not claim anything like scientific validity for our claims and assertions. Our views are influenced by our own experiences in ways we understand and surely in ways we do not. We have tried to propose a useful set of “opinions” for our readers to ponder and, we hope, take to another level. Others will have to judge how well we have succeeded in meeting this objective.