
Regional

Why so many are leaving higher education

In the last few months a significant number of college faculty and administrators have stated – some officially and some to colleagues and friends through social media – that they plan to leave higher education. This new trend is adding to the many challenges faced by colleges and universities, and is part of the changing environment in higher education in the United States. Unfortunately, most of the general public hears very little about those challenges beyond issues such as the cost of college and its impact on student debt. Why the exodus and why now? The reasons used to justify the decision to leave are many, but none are surprising.

Financial: Higher education institutions, particularly public ones, have seen increasing budget cuts that have hurt their ability to provide students with the quality education they deserve. These cuts have been the direct result of the anti-tax rhetoric by many politicians who see no political benefit in publicly appearing as supportive of higher education. Unfortunately, the response from college and university administrators has not always been one of forcefully defending their institutions or finding new sources of revenues through entrepreneurial initiatives or more effective fundraising. Instead we have too often seen resignation on their part, and the trickling down of those budget cuts to all the units of their institutions. Another response has been to increase tuition and fees. This route contributes directly to the high cost of college in the U.S., which, according to several sources, is the highest in the world.

Mental health: A significant number of mass shootings in the U.S. occur on campuses and by members

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of those very institutions. According to the data compiled in the book “Mental Health Issues & the University Student” by Doris Iarovic, most higher education institutions lack adequate mental health support services and most of their members are not trained to detect and take preventive measures to stop this kind of incident.

Leadership failures: Many university leaders are very insecure due to their lack of training in college administration and leadership (virtually all learn through a process of osmosis, and then not always from good role models). Therefore, they tend to “appease” vocal critics by lending their ears to what most people consider the “outcasts” of their institutions, i.e., some faculty members whose intellectual contributions have ceased to be significant and who always seem to have an ax to grind against administrators. This approach leads to the faculty who really contribute to the institution staying away from college politics, depriving the institution of the service from the best and brightest.

Sexism and racism: According to an article published this year in Science magazine, despite all the talk of political correctness in academia the fact of the matter is that women face discrimination when it comes to employment, promotion and tenure. Across the board, female faculty receive around 10 percent less in compensation than their male counterparts,

according to a study by the American Association of University Professors. Minorities are not faring much better. According to a study by the American Council on Education, every year fewer minorities are holding positions of leadership in higher education – even at primarily minority serving institutions.

Bad press: Misinformation about higher education is distressingly common in the U.S. According by a recent survey by Northeastern University in Boston, the American public supports funding for higher education, yet have become accustomed to hearing inaccurate and groundless assessments of the value of higher education. Unlike what many reports state about the employability and improvement in salary gains by graduates in non-professional careers, many politicians and talking heads are spreading the false impression that the pursuit of studies in areas such as the humanities is a waste of time. Never mind that such an education plays a vital role in areas such as ethics and critical thinking. Unfortunately, colleges and universities have not responded to clear the air on this misnomer. Rather, they keep emphasizing rankings that are sometimes carried out using questionable methodology and with an emphasis on marketing approaches more proper for toothpaste brands than for an educational institution.

Regulations: According to a congressional report, excessive regulation by federal agencies costs colleges and universities millions of dollars per year. And these costs are usually passed on to students. Coming on top of state and local laws, many of these regulations are an unnecessary exercise in micromanagement.

Preparation of high school graduates: According to ACT and SAT scores, every year for the past 10, high school graduates are less and less prepared for college. U.S. students rank in 20th place behind Iceland when their levels of literacy in the sciences are compared with other students worldwide. No wonder most faculty feel that they have to spend more and more time remedying the deficiencies in both content and skills of students. As the late journalist Joseph Sobran pointed out, “In 100 years we have gone from teaching Latin and Greek in high schools to teaching remedial English in college.”

Search committees: Because of a fear of change, search committees looking for every position from junior faculty to chief executive officers have a real problem understanding the difference between what they need and what they want. They usually end up not with the best candidate, one who will bring more competence and energy to move things forward or in a different direction. Instead they prefer someone who will keep the status quo. No wonder that many of those searches end up with an internal candidate chosen, even if not the most qualified.

Given the big challenges higher education is facing today, it is time for the members of those institutions to show the entrepreneurship, imagination and courage to carry out the necessary reforms to make colleges and universities really sustainable enterprises where students receive the education they deserve.

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