

# Regional

# Academia is now facing a lot of gray rhinos

There are many ways of labeling things, some more appropriate than others. In this column I have written on with many issues affecting higher education, ranging from financial wows to enrollments to ethnic strives and many others. Along with many others, I have been labeling these issues “challenges,” “threats,” “risks” and the like.

Now a new term has come up which seems to better describe these situations: “gray rhino.” That is a title of a new book authored by Michele Wucker, a writer and college teacher who has published other high profiles books on international politics and policies.

She defines a “gray rhino” as a highly probable, high impact yet neglected threat, kin to both the elephant in the room and the improbable and unforeseeable black swan. It’s an unlikely event with complex causes – some understood, some overlooked – that came together in unexpected ways to produce a result that no one could have reasonably anticipated. She argues that gray rhinos are not random surprises, but occur after a series of warnings and visible evidence. The bursting of the housing bubble in 2008, the devastating aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Sandy and climate change are some of the most notable examples. The analogy of this term is that a “gray rhino” (an animal that really does not exist in nature) is like other rhinos: a large, dangerous animal, heading straight for us. Yet, because of their improbable color, they are too often missed.

The main question Wucker poses is, “Why are we so bad at confronting obvious dangers before they spiral out of control?” This is an excellent but also

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a complex question because it has to do not only with issues of policy but also with human nature.

She divides the human response to these “gray rhinos” into five stages: denial, muddling (recognition of the problem but finding reasons not to deal with it promptly), diagnosing (understanding the causes and finding the right solutions), panic and action (many times too late or inadequate). How are we dealing with the “gray rhinos” affecting higher education? Not very well.

Part of the problem is that we have a great diversity of institutions of higher education in this country. There are more than 5,000 colleges and universities, including about 200 research universities, 700 comprehensive universities, 2,000 four-year colleges, 1,000 community and or technical colleges and more than 1,300 for profit ones. They are also highly diverse in terms of nature, geographic distribution, mission, structure, resources, etc. That makes a very complex picture that defies stereotyping. Therefore, problems that affect some institutions are not affecting others, which make it virtually impossible to identify a single and clear threat to the whole system.

Yet, this is not an excuse for lack of action. Look what happened with the 2007-2008 financial crisis. What began with Lehman Brothers going bankrupt ended up not only affecting the whole financial

system in the U.S., but also large corporations such as General Electric and the world financial system while generating fertile ground for populist political movements that became attractive among many voters. While popular, they were not providing good solutions for a problem originated, among others, by the lack of regulation of the financial markets in the midst of a real state bubble and subprime lending.

Many public institutions of higher education are facing severe survivability issues because of depleting state and federal funding. Yet, they maintain the illusion (first stage: denial) that things will get well in the long run. After all, who can envision a society without public colleges and universities? The answer is very simple: politicians intoxicated with anti-tax rhetoric, who scorn any kind of intellectualism can. And they are the ones deciding budgets. Wealthy private institutions may feel immunized from these kinds of threats, but as recent events have shown they have been severely challenged by issues of diversity, access and endowment management.

But can we identify what has been at the root of these problems, as we identified lack of regulations and the subprime lending as the root of the 2007-2008 financial crisis? The answer is very simple: leadership at all levels. Although many institutions of higher education have good leaders, that is not the rule. Many leaders still live in a state of denial. Many more know that there is a problem but feel there are reasons for not dealing with them (muddling). Some have been able to diagnose the problem, suggesting plausible solutions, while a few

are in a state of panic and even fewer taking appropriate action by making the appropriate structural changes in their institutions.

The faculty also has a responsibility in this matter and need to show more leadership since, at the end of the day, they will pay a high price for inaction: loss of academic freedom and even their jobs. Instead of finger-pointing, chasing ghosts, or getting involved in conspiracy theories, they should learn how their institutions operate and the external transformations bringing in all those “gray rhinos.”

As for students and their parents, they should escape the state of mind of entitlement regarding grades, easy paths to diplomas, and an obsession with being treated as costumers instead in insisting that colleges and universities provide an education for life and that elected officials take education seriously. The only way to do that is to vote in every election and vote for candidates who have a substantive and well-founded program regarding education policies. As one politician once told me when I asked him why he did not pay more attention to issues on education, “That does not give me any votes.”

As Wucker wrote, “It is an inconvenient truth: one where the solutions are clear, the costs of solving the problem are high, and the costs of ignoring it are higher.”

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