

## Chapter 12

# Higher education should embrace this liminal moment because there will be no “new normal”

*James T. Harris and Nicholas R. Santilli*

Colleges and universities face a liminal moment. Two significant forces, one new and one old, have emerged to challenge the status quo, namely, Covid-19 and the struggle for social justice. In the early days of the pandemic a new term to describe a desired future started to emerge, a term that has now become part of the lexicon in American culture: “the new normal”. The use of the word “new” itself acknowledges that it is unlikely we will return to the same state of affairs we had at the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year. When we consider the science behind the virus, and the possibility of at least another two years before we will fully relax restrictions, as well as the growing civil unrest in light of renewed violence against Black Americans, it is highly unlikely that we will return to “normal” any time soon (CNBC 2020).

On 11 June 2020, Scott Carlson of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Michael J. Sorrell, President of Paul Quinn College, hosted a virtual event focused on “the maladies of race and class in the United States”. *The Chronicle* published an article from the event on 15 June. We were struck by an opening comment by Sorrell:

We have to start by just acknowledging a very basic point, which is that we are where we are as a country because this is what higher education has produced. All of our leaders are products of our institutions. They sat in our classrooms, they walked our campuses, they absorbed what we taught them. (Carlson and Sorrell 2020: 2)

If this is an accurate portrayal of the role of higher education over the past years, then a “new normal” will simply not do. The normal that existed for decades prior to the pandemic did not serve everyone equitably. As the pandemic progressed, Covid-19 data demonstrated a disproportionate number of infections and deaths among the poor and Black, Indigenous, Persons of Colour (BIPOC), shining a bright light on unequal access to quality health care. According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), Non-Hispanic American Indian, Alaska Native and Non-Hispanic Black Americans were five times more likely to be hospitalised for the virus than their fellow White Americans.

These clear disparities within the health-care system, coupled with the continuing dehumanisation and unjust killings of Black Americans at the hands of police, have shed a light on the need for the United States of America to actually atone for institutionalised racism, to address the truth of its long-term impact on our democracy and meaningfully reconcile those damages. It is abundantly clear the United States must find a new path forward for a more democratic and just society, and that higher education must lead the way.

## A SHIFTED LANDSCAPE

Today, higher education is faced with a radically different societal environment that requires a radically different response. Unless we view this as a liminal moment in history and an opportunity to change, substantially, we will miss an opportunity to evolve and to be better prepared to meet the needs of society. Before the pandemic, the environment for higher education was volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. With decreasing government investment in higher education, soaring discount rates, and the public perception of higher education at an all-time low, any attempt by higher education leaders to return to old ways of thinking would both be irresponsible and ensure that their institution will no longer be relevant to the needs of society.

We all understand that there are few organisations in society as multifaceted as colleges and universities. As complex organisations we must evolve with society. We propose that the pandemic has presented universities with an existential choice: adapt or become irrelevant to the promotion of democratic ideals in the 21st century. Enlightened leaders will recognise that what we are facing is a liminal moment and that a modest reorganisation of existing practices is not enough. The present environment demands a more radical reformation if our institutions and our democracy are to survive. We must remember that higher education not only educates individuals for citizenship in a democracy but is also the engine for innovation and creativity that helps the US, and the globe, thrive. What, then, should higher education do?

A new way of proceeding is emerging in higher education. This new form is not a “new normal” but instead a movement towards an educational experience not bounded by limits such as seat time, a rigid calendar, bricks and mortar and stereotypic notions of learning. What is emerging is an educational experience that works to advance social equity, protects the rights of the poor and under-served and acts as a catalyst for meaningful societal change through democratic ideals.

While universities rose to the challenge of moving from classroom instruction to online teaching and learning when the pandemic hit, it is clear that engagement with community partners became difficult during the health crisis. As universities focused on delivering academic content, supporting local community partners became less of a priority. At the University of San Diego, where we had developed deep community partnerships over many years, we were able to pivot and find ways to serve the most urgent needs of the local community when the pandemic struck. For example, as it became clear that the low-income neighbourhoods near our campus did not have access to county Covid-19 testing sites due to a

lack of adequate transportation, the university worked closely with San Diego County health officials to bring a Covid-19 testing site to our campus. With the ability to serve over 150 local neighbours a day with direct access to Covid-19 tests, this site has been instrumental in helping health officials to quickly identify active cases and has kept the local community from developing into a Covid-19 hotspot.

## **A WAY FORWARD: RELEVANCE, COST, INNOVATION**

How should institutions of higher learning respond? By doing what the sector does best: embrace the opportunity that has emerged and find a new level of adaptation. Not just a “new normal” but a novel adaptation that sets up the sector for not just surviving but flourishing. The type of flourishing that is necessary to promote the enduring goals of a democratic society dedicated to social mobility, freedom and civil society.

The pandemic has revealed dark truths about American society. We are a country with a large percentage of citizens who are both scientifically illiterate and incapable of discerning fact from fiction, or unwilling to do so. We have leaders and a majority of Americans who cannot comprehend the science behind the spread of disease or who lack a basic knowledge of history to navigate current events. When large segments of our society lack access to the resources that reveal the noble truths that have comforted civilised society in times of uncertainty for over a millennium, we know this is a society that cannot endure. Higher education has an opportunity at this moment to evolve – as it has in the aftermath of previous “black swan” events: those rare, unexpected and unpredictable events that change the direction of history – and to help recapture its leadership role in society.

We propose that the advancement of democratic ideals and practices through higher education should occur in three ways: a greater focus on the relevance of the liberal arts and sciences in the US primary, secondary and post-secondary educational experience, a transformation of the financial model for higher education that reins in the cost of education and provides greater access, and the creation of innovative solutions to advance teaching, learning and scholarship that are tied to an institution’s role as a stable fixture or anchor institution in its own community. To do this it is not enough for an institution to prepare students for their roles as responsible citizens but the university itself must practise these ideals by building democratic and reciprocal partnerships with organisations outside the academy to enhance the long-term viability of the communities where they reside.

### **The evolution of our relevance**

We have a responsibility as a sector to evolve in the way we educate future leaders. Higher education must reclaim its core purpose: namely, to provide a public good that advances the well-being of all members of society. To accomplish this, we must accept that US institutions of higher education have played a role in the devaluation and dismantling of the liberal arts and sciences, which has left the United States

behind the knowledge curve globally. This is not a recommendation to return to some past era, but rather a clarion call that we must clearly demonstrate the relevance of the liberal arts and sciences for the 21st century for primary, secondary and post-secondary education in the US. For example, since higher education in the US produces the teachers for primary and secondary education, we must accept that it has to more firmly direct the way it prepares teachers and lead the charge for an educational renaissance in the United States.

To accomplish a renaissance in US education, a new level of adaptation is required, to ensure the delivery of higher education that reclaims this core purpose. We acknowledge that a number of institutions of higher education have formed strong partnerships with local school systems. However, these partnerships must become broader and deeper, and they must include a wider commitment to the expertise of a diverse set of scholars, especially in the areas of human learning and development, the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields, the humanities and civics. This commitment must be a standard way of proceeding, a compact between higher education and primary and secondary education; it must be a compact grounded in the pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion for students, faculty, staff and the curriculum delivered in our colleges and universities. At its core, this is a call for a renewal of higher education's commitment to the liberal arts and sciences.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has offered a vision for how liberal education might lead the way. In a recent publication (AAC&U 2020: 22-7) titled *What liberal education looks like*, AAC&U outlines five "frontline challenges" facing universities in delivering on the promise of liberal education:

- ▶ First, it will require advocacy, and a determined effort to rally the higher education community around the vision and carry it with confidence, integrity and persuasive force into the public square.
- ▶ Second, it will require renewed and reinvigorated commitment to the civic and democratic purposes of higher education.
- ▶ Third, it will be necessary to make equity a pervading focus of educational reform and innovation, moving beyond the goals of access and compositional diversity to design and deliver educational experiences that support the success of all students.
- ▶ Fourth, it will be necessary to take proactive steps to ensure that college and university campuses are places of welcome where all students are, and feel themselves to be, safe and places of belonging where no students are, or feel themselves to be, marginalised.
- ▶ Fifth, if the emerging vision of liberal education described here is to be fully realised, it will be necessary to address issues of affordability.

There must be no compromising by college and university leaders in the pursuit of these five challenges. If the leadership of our great American institutions of higher education back away from these actions they risk losing the moral authority to lead the social changes that will serve students now and society into the future. Ultimately, US education must produce graduates who are civically engaged, scientifically literate critical thinkers who know how to act with compassion, lead with integrity and live for justice.

## The evolution of our cost structure

Prior to the pandemic, the public and elected officials were laser-focused on the growing amount of debt that recent college graduates have accumulated and what needs to be done to address it. While myriad plans have been proposed to lower debt among future college graduates, there is no viable solution likely from the US Government in the aftermath of the pandemic. At the local level in San Diego, this belief that higher education is not accessible to students from low-income communities led to very few students from those neighbourhoods applying to the university for admission.

One solution, in the spirit of the fifth challenge above, is for US higher education to completely reset its financial model so students understand what it actually costs to attend and how long it will take to graduate. For the case of public higher education in the US, tuition and fees at public institutions are often differentiated by in-state and out-of-state pricing: namely, in-state residents pay a lower rate than individuals residing outside the state. This preferential pricing takes into account the fact that in-state residents help subsidise public education within the state. Although this pricing model exists, students from low-income families continue to struggle to afford the tuition and fees to cover in-state higher education (Education Trust 2020). We need to evolve a new model of access for low-income students that crosses sectors within higher education. Higher education needs to reconsider its fundamental mission and determine whether it is truly meeting its objectives of advancing knowledge and educating citizens, particularly those from low-income families. What does it say about the values of a state institution when a low-income student who is a resident of the state cannot be admitted or even afford the local state institution because its admissions standards and costs are too high, all in the name of chasing higher rankings?

Private, selective institutions, like the University of San Diego, have their own set of challenges. First, these institutions need to completely reset their pricing. With average discount rates at private institutions across the country well over 50%, and much of that money going to students from families who can afford to attend in the form of “merit” scholarships, private colleges and universities must reconsider their entire financial model and commitment to students from lower-income families, especially in neighbourhoods near their campuses. Private institutions need to take a hard look at the academic and administrative programmes they offer and establish priorities in alignment with their mission and vision for the future. Too many institutions have implemented programmes that add little value to the student experience and have led them to abandon their commitment to their local communities.

Mission creep has pushed institutions to stray from their core purpose of educating students for their roles as responsible citizens because too often the institution itself is no longer acting as a good citizen in its local community. Institutions should instead focus on delivering mission-critical programmes and services with quality and intention. As outlined by AAC&U, institutions need to implement rigorous academic and administrative programme review processes to cut costs and align strategy with resources to ensure the prosperity of the institution and the communities it serves.

At the University of San Diego, we created an integrated strategic planning process that included not only key university constituents but also local community partners as we determined our vision for the future. At one point we asked key community leaders, faculty and university board members to meet to discuss how the university could better fulfil its mission as an anchor institution. The conversation was difficult at times, as community leaders expressed their deep concerns that the university was not doing enough to support community partners. This led directly to specific university strategic goals to increase diversity at the university from local under-served populations.

One concrete step towards achieving that goal was to create the Torero Promise, a scholarship designed to meet the full financial need of students from low-income families locally. The university also developed a new scholarship programme through philanthropic support for local high school students covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy<sup>58</sup> who are ineligible for federal financial aid.

Three years later, in 2020, the number of students from under-represented communities in San Diego had grown 20% and the retention rates for first-year African American students at the university grew from 84% to 91%. The number of DACA students enrolled had tripled. When the pandemic hit, the university knew that direct outreach to students from local neighbourhoods would be difficult. So, the university worked directly with community partners to find different ways to identify qualified students for these scholarship programmes since the students enrolled in these high schools would no longer have access to school counsellors. In autumn 2020, the university anticipates an increase in both the number of DACA students enrolling and the number of students of colour from local neighbourhoods. Thankfully the university had developed strong democratic partnerships with community leaders prior to the pandemic or the university would have likely lost access to those student populations.

## **Innovation: is accreditation reform the key to the evolution of anchor institutions?**

The University of San Diego offers some guidance as to how an institution of higher learning may work collaboratively with its local community to be a force for good. An important question to ask relative to broadening the influence of an anchor institution among residents in its vicinity may be, "What is holding them back?" We suggest that few entities are holding institutions accountable for providing evidence of how they create more equitable educational outcomes for the under-served. One avenue left to encourage institutions to not just promote equity but actually provide evidence of equity outcomes may be through the vehicle of institutional accreditation. For this to work, however, the accreditation process needs some reformation to align equity outcomes with institutional review (Coleman 2020).

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58. DACA students were brought to the US as children but have no right of residence. See these resources on the University of San Diego website: [www.sandiego.edu/president/writings-addresses/immigration-and-DACA-follow-up.php](http://www.sandiego.edu/president/writings-addresses/immigration-and-DACA-follow-up.php) and [www.sandiego.edu/immigration-dialogue/undocumented/](http://www.sandiego.edu/immigration-dialogue/undocumented/), accessed 22 July 2020.

It is well reported that the relationship between institutions of higher education, accrediting bodies and the U.S. Department of Education is tense (Anguiano and Flores 2020; Kelchen 2017; U.S. Department of Education 2018). A rather calculated dance has been underway between higher education institutions, accreditors and the Department of Education regarding the accreditation process. There have been calls for reform, including the elimination of the present system, revising this system to allow more innovation on campuses and changing the system to incentivise institutions to quickly adjust to market forces. The recent decision to allow institutions to seek accreditation by any of the regional accrediting bodies only makes the process more complex and potentially threatens to accelerate a race to the bottom regarding institutional quality.

Why is the evolution of accreditation important? We certainly agree that some form of oversight is necessary to ensure quality and equity and to protect constituents. But is the present system really directed towards quality improvement and consumer protections, or is it simply promoting old ideas about quality and ultimately raising costs? The process of maintaining accreditation has added layers of administrative processes that occupy the attention of campus leaders and demand the commitment of institutional resources that should be directed towards the work of scholarship, teaching and learning. Reformation of the criteria for accreditation to amplify the work of equity, serving as an anchor to the local community, and civic engagement tied to the curriculum, may provide the needed incentive for institutions to prioritise accomplishing the outcomes that promote life and work in a democratic society.

We are reminded of a simple refrain that emerged during the 2008 recession: “Don’t waste a good crisis”. Our response should not simply rearrange the deck chairs on the ship known as higher education. We must view this as a liminal moment, not as a return to some glory days or a “new normal”. Rather, we must view this as a time of evolutionary change and use this as an opportunity to fulfil the full democratic promise of higher education in the 21st century.

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