HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2021

Institutions and the Public:
A Troubled Relationship

Articles

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

> I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. *The Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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ISSN 2469-6293 (print)
ISSN 2471-2280 (online)

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TOWARD THE COMMUNITY-CENTRIC UNIVERSITY

Byron P. White

Having spent about half my career as a higher education administrator, the telltale signs that universities and colleges are undergoing a radical transformation are familiar to me. I first recognized them about 20 years ago, before my first job at a university. That's when rumblings began that the *Chicago Tribune* might file for bankruptcy.

At the time, I was senior manager for community relations for what was then the nation's fifth largest newspaper. Having begun my career as a newspaper journalist, I had served as the *Tribune*'s urban affairs editor and an editorial writer before switching over to the "business side" of the company. There, I was exposed to many of the realities that were hidden from or largely ignored by those producing news content.

Three trends were shifting the newspaper industry. Similar trends are now asserting pressure on higher education.

First, the public's value proposition toward newspapers was changing. For centuries, newspapers were built on the premise that since citizens could not be everywhere, professional journalists would go in their stead, serving as eyewitnesses to important events, talking to critical actors only they could access, and chronicling the news on the public's behalf. However, technology was making it possible for everyone to see news in the making for themselves, often in a much more timely fashion than journalists could relay it.

Second, the business model was broken. Newspapers make their money not so much from reader subscriptions as from advertising. And advertising was shifting to digital platforms, which were both cheaper and much more precise at targeting specific demographic audiences than mass media were. It is hard to believe that classified ads were once the big money-maker for newspapers. Today, who could imagine selling a car or finding an apartment through any medium other than the internet?

Finally, technology changed the very notion of what constitutes news. This went way beyond the reality that consumers could access news online in real time. The internet meant readers no longer had to peruse a common collection of information, curated by a single organization, to find that which interested them. They could create their own customized selection of the type of information they wanted, solely from the sources they trusted.

That powerful confluence of shifting values, financial turmoil, and technological disruption was too much for even the fabled *Chicago Tribune*, founded in 1847. In 2000, the Tribune Company purchased the Times Mirror Company in the largest newspaper acquisition in history, giving it a triumvirate of powerhouse properties: the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Newsday*. Just eight years later, the company filed for bankruptcy.

Those same forces—shifting values, financial strain, and technological disruption—are knocking up against higher education. And while an institution so rooted in the foundation of America's democracy might seem too formidable to crumble, it is worth noting the lessons from the newspaper industry, whose historic civic footings seemed just as secure.

While an institution so rooted in the foundation of America's democracy might seem too formidable to crumble, it is worth noting the lessons from the newspaper industry, whose historic civic footings seemed just as secure.

That said, I have more faith that higher education will recover and thrive. Even though there are trends that are disrupting higher education's long-standing practices, they can be overcome if universities and colleges become more democratic and community-centric in their mission and operations.

Many institutions have gradually moved in this direction in recent years. Yet this incremental progress is not what gives me confidence in higher education's prospects of survival. It is the fact that such progress has not been truly essential to their success until now.

Engagement as an Operational Imperative

More than a decade ago, higher education historian Ira Harkavy, founding director of the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, encouraged universities to assert their position as "anchor institutions." Referencing Benjamin Franklin, Harkavy wrote:

> By focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities, institutions of higher learning will be better able to reduce the "ancient customs and habitudes" impeding college and university community engagement, advance research, teaching, learning, and service.[1]

Today, what Harkavy posed as an optional endeavor, dependent upon the preferences of academic leadership and the drive of innovative faculty and students, is increasingly a necessity for the survival of most.

The value proposition toward higher education has shifted. A recent survey of 3,000 adults found that only a slim majority of parents—54 percent—prefer a four-year college for their children.[2] The results reflect a 2012 Carnegie survey of 1,000 American adults and 540 senior-level administrators. It found that while 62 percent of college administrators included "to learn to think critically" as either the most important or second most important reason people should go to college, only 26 percent of the public ranked it as such.[3]

It is partly for this reason that higher education's business model is in disarray. Universities are funded largely from three sources of revenue: student tuition and fees; public funding, primarily from state legislatures; and private donors. The mix varies based on the type of institution. However, all these revenue sources are strained.

Public funding as a percentage of university revenues has been declining for several years, which means all institutions are increasingly dependent on tuition. However, the formula of raising tuition to match rising costs is not sustainable. About two-thirds of college students have to borrow money to pay tuition, according to the Institute for College Access & Success.[4] Often, the ensuing debt after graduation brings more economic burden than the economic payoff of having a college degree, at least in the short run. The 2012 Carnegie survey found that 80 percent of adults said that at many colleges the education students receive is not worth what they pay for it. Some 41 percent of the administrators agreed with them.[5]

Perilous trends for higher education can be addressed by establishing a deeper, tighter interdependence between the purpose of higher education institutions and the economic, social, and cultural well-being of the places where those institutions are located.

The disruption of technology in higher education goes far deeper than whether classes should be in person or online. The reality is that students have access to learning in formal and informal forms—many of them digital—and they are eager to tap into those multiple sources.

While all these trends are more perilous than many in higher education want to admit, all is not lost. The weakening value proposition, the need to reestablish consistent revenue, and the disruption caused by technology can all be addressed by establishing a deeper, tighter interdependence between the purpose of higher education institutions and the economic, social, and cultural well-being of the places where those institutions are located.

From a mission standpoint, this objective is not new for higher education. For decades, colleges and universities have espoused deeper community engagement both in terms of their institutional outreach and their academic scholarship. The challenge now is to elevate such practices from desirable to essential.

Emergence of Engaged Scholarship and Outreach

For years, researchers have tracked higher education's progression toward a restoration of its historic mission to advance democracy and the public good. For its 30th anniversary in 2015, Campus Compact released an action statement from presidents and chancellors across the country reminiscent of the collective will that launched the organization and accelerated the service learning movement. It stated:

> In the mid-1980s, a group of higher education leaders came together based on a shared concern about the future of American democracy. Motivated by their conviction that amidst the pressures toward personal acquisition and personal advancement, their students were not learning to think, speak, and act in the service of the public good, they resolved that higher education must reclaim its historic mission of preparing the next generation of citizens to achieve public goals and solve public problems.[6]

That conviction has fueled several iterations of the so-called community engagement movement. By the 2000s, the principle championed by Campus Compact of aligning academic discipline with public service, largely through curriculum, or service learning, had become embellished with a more deliberate recognition of the value of partnering with community organizations and agents as peers in academic endeavors. The "service" approach of higher education as the dominant driver of solving public problems gave way to inviting communities to bring their assets and join in the university's civic pursuits.

The recent push for inclusion has illuminated the power imbalance between communities and universities, which can dominate even in their efforts to partner. In this latest iteration of engaged scholarship, institutions seek greater parity in the integration of community and institutional expertise.

In a truly equal partnership, solutions must be codesigned whether they are initiated by the university or within the community.

The progression might be viewed as universities moving from setting the tables from which they addressed community issues, to inviting community participants to join their tables, to recognizing the need to earn a seat at the tables that others in the community have set.

While less documented by higher education scholars, a similar progression from a service orientation to a more democratic approach arguably has taken place beyond academic study. Universities possess many assets beyond scholarship, such as land, facilities, political clout, employees, and purchasing power that have been leveraged as part of their civic mission.

Increasingly, expressions of more democratic practices are being embedded into the infrastructure of universities and not just developed as programmatic add-ons.

For many years, these assets were deployed to benefit the institution with little regard for its community impact beyond the general assumption that what was good for the university was good for the region. Many urban universities, in particular, are located in older areas of cities that saw significant out-migration and economic disinvestment during the 1970s and 1980s. During that time, many urban institutions, including hospitals, adopted a bunker mentality to protect their assets—and students and employees—from the social turmoil of the central city, which was disproportionately populated by Black and Latinx residents. Starting in the 1980s, many of these institutions began to make amends by adopting a strategy of volunteerism and charitable outreach that placed the university in the role of rescuing the community through service, much like the academic counterpart of service learning.

Heading into the 2000s, institutions began to coordinate their own economic and physical development strategies more intentionally around the broader improvement of neighboring communities, seeking mutual benefit with their less affluent neighbors and often softening boundaries that had cordoned off campus from community. This approach, while more collaborative than purely volunteer service, still largely placed the university's interests as the driver, even as it sought to ensure that benefits were realized beyond the campus.

More recently, the notion of an "anchor institution," much like engaged scholarship, has promoted calls for the university to go beyond its own master

plan to leverage its assets to pursue broader community-defined objectives. Purchasing products from local businesses, deliberately hiring nearby residents, and creating housing that benefits employees as well as long-standing residents are examples of these strategies.

Converging on the Community-Centric University

The convergence of these trends has driven an institutional profile that is better integrated into the well-being of community. As a result, increasingly, expressions of more democratic practices are being embedded into the infrastructure of universities and not just developed as programmatic add-ons. Some practitioners have begun to call this approach "full participation."[7]

For instance, some of the hottest academic programs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where I am an associate provost, are in the College of Computing and Informatics. That is not surprising. Academic programs that are directly aligned to industry and commerce, especially in technology fields, have become more popular among students and parents who want assurance of an economic return on their investment.

But it is the college's prominent Mission and Values statement that suggests a more democratic aspiration for its influence and purpose than that which attaches to its role as an economic engine alone. In its statement, the college commits to:

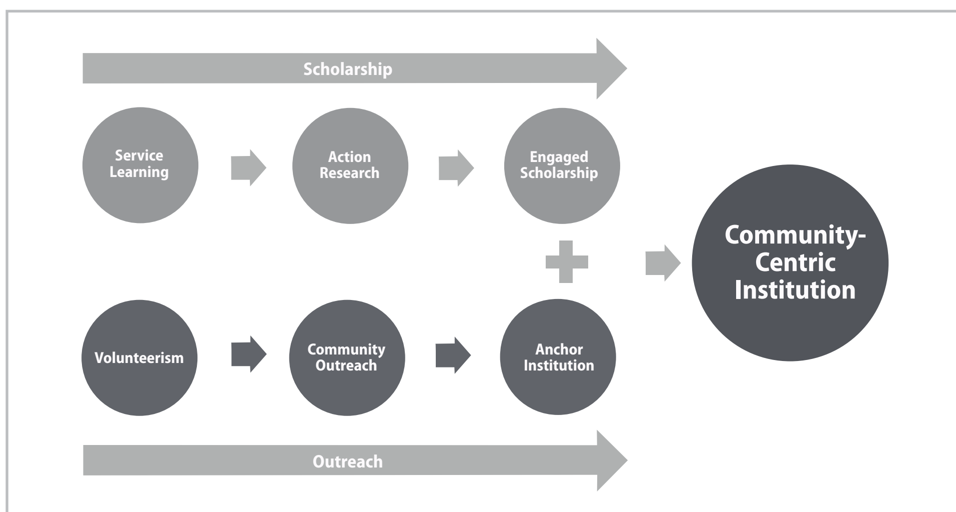
- Cultivating an inclusive culture dedicated to student success and equity in education
- Stimulating innovative high-risk, high-impact research and development
- Maintaining a resilient and ethical society of educated, caring citizens

And, the college states, this mission is driven by the following values:

- To acknowledge inequity and do everything in our power to address it
- To take responsibility for the ethical implications of technology in everything we do
- To value community and to value the well-being and sense of worth of all its members[8]

Of course, expression of a more democratic purpose does not guarantee it will be consistently pursued or achieved. Mission statements do not ensure

practice, especially when the forces of tradition weigh against systemic change. Self-interest tends to rule out in the end.



Nevertheless, this mission statement is the reason I am hopeful about higher education's trajectory. Currently, the values of the College of Computing and Informatics projects promote the very behaviors it needs to succeed. The currents of self-interest and democratic purpose are starting to move in the same direction, making the momentum for systemic transformation far more likely than it was 40 years ago, when maverick leaders were seeking to reclaim the democratic purpose of higher education from what the Campus Compact authors called "the pressures toward personal acquisition and personal advancement."[9]

During a recent webinar on anchor institutions, hosted by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, Melanie Perreault, provost at Towson University, stressed this current reality:

> If you just want to get down to the bottom line, if you want to strip away all those niceties, you are a smart institution if during times of economic stress, you double down on the investment locally. And that's just flat-out economics. So, in times of stress, where you want to put this investment is in the local economy . . . because it's the right thing to do but it also just happens to be self-serving. . . . You can't separate out the higher education institution from its local environment. . . . That's a mistake that a lot of institutions may have made in the past. . . . What's different about being an anchor institution is that we're much more deliberate about those relationships and understanding of how we are part and parcel of each other. So, if your community is suffering, you as an institution are going to suffer as well.[10]

My position as associate provost for Urban Research and Community Engagement was established to drive engaged scholarship as a core strategy for institutional success. A few years ago, such tasks were cordoned off as community relations features within the advancement apparatus. Faculty who were serious about engagement as a serious scholarly undertaking were exceptions within their departments. Pursuing engaged scholarship still requires a bit of swimming against the current. But the water is smoother largely because of institutional recognition that a more community-centric approach is necessary for prosperity. Arguably, universities' most critical strategic priorities—student enrollment, academic relevance, and revenue generation—are tied to the degree to which the institution aligns itself to the civic priorities of the community.

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Student Enrollment

In nearly every part of the country, demographic shifts are leading to a reduction in the population of what had previously been considered the prototypical college student: a White, affluent, recent high school graduate from a high-achieving school, whose parents attended college. This is the student that most universities and colleges are most successful at graduating—and their ranks are declining.

That means if predominantly White institutions of higher education are going to maintain their current enrollments, they will have to recruit and attract students from groups that are underrepresented within their student populations. These include students of color, low-income students, first-generation college students, and adult learners, many of whom may have started college years ago but never finished.

Most higher education institutions tend to be far less successful with these students. While the long-held rationale has been that these students are less "college-ready," the real problem that is becoming apparent is that colleges are not ready for them. In other words, higher education has been successful with the students it was designed to educate.

So, what will it take to not only attract so-called underrepresented students but also, and perhaps more important, to ensure they persist to degree completion?

Some research suggests that college students from less affluent backgrounds tend to tie their education more closely to how it will benefit their families and communities than do more affluent students, who tend to be more motivated by the individual benefits of their education.[11]

For first-generation students, community-engaged learning may be less an adventure into unfamiliar communities to complement the *real* academic work happening in the classroom than it is often portrayed. These experiences are not opportunities to pad their resumes or alleviate societal guilt. In many cases, for these students, community-engaged learning represents the familiar terrain where learning is applied and put to the test—a true extension of the classroom. This suggests that the more closely college experiences are tied to community well-being, the more motivated these students will be to see learning as relevant to their values. The latest state-of-the-art equipment in the student recreation center may be less critical than whether the university's presence has helped improve conditions in their neighborhoods. This may be even more true as students increasingly choose to go to school near the places they grew up.[12]

The more closely college experiences are tied to community well-being, the more motivated first-generation and other nontraditional students will be to see learning as relevant to their values.

Moreover, given the power that community has as a motivation for these students, we would be wise to more deliberately enlist its participation. This may be especially true for Black and Latinx students, whose parents are more likely to see the value in higher education than White parents.[13] Currently, the strategy for students perceived as not quite college ready is to extract them from their communities and influencers and to surround them with mentors, peers, and services that are more knowledgeable about the college experience. However, whenever I've listened to the testimonies of these "at-risk" students who persist and graduate, they tend to credit intimate influences—parents, siblings, relatives, coaches, clergy—as much as, if not more than, the services they received.

Rather than ignoring these influencers, we would be wise to aggressively engage them in the life of our campuses and equip them with tools and information that would allow them to be even more effective advocates. We should see them as cochampions rather than hindrances. For underrepresented students, recruiting their network may be more important than personal mailings and college fairs focused on the aspirations of individual students.

Academic Relevance

The disruption of technology has impacted higher education far more deeply than many faculty and academic administrators care to admit. I witnessed this same denial in the newspaper industry. There was no doubt that the notion of people waiting a day to get their news delivered in an ink-and-paper format when it was accessible instantaneously online was unsustainable. And yet it was almost impossible for those of us invested in the sector to imagine a world without the printed paper.

Similarly, I often ask faculty how long they believe people will continue to pay tens of thousands of dollars to pursue a credential that requires them to take specific courses, at specific times, sitting in specific rooms, in specific sequences, especially when most of the information being transmitted can be found on their smart phones almost as instantaneously as the professor can share it.

This does not mean all learning will be virtual. We learned during the pandemic how critical in-person exchange and interaction is to learning and engagement. The larger question is not trying to figure out the right mix of in-person and virtual instruction. It is the realization that learning must be tied to the world outside the classroom to be relevant. Technology helps to enable this connection. In other words, expertise and knowledge exist beyond what the professor knows and is readily accessible. Faculty members increasingly need to be coaches in helping students

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sort through this diverse knowledge and make sense of it, rather than dictators of what is worth learning.

A priority for this assistance must be helping students to explicitly align the competencies they gain from their academic experience with the competencies that employers are asking for in the workforce. Except in a few select fields, the match between expertise gained through academic majors and ever-changing and emerging job descriptions is imprecise. Higher education must do a better job translating between the two.

Revenue Generation

Much has been made of the fact that state funding for higher education has been declining for decades. This has caused many institutions, even public ones, to become more tuition-dependent for their revenues. Shifting the burden to individuals has positioned college as more of a private transaction, which means students, and their parents, have assessed the return on investment more in those terms. Chief among payoffs is the likelihood of students getting a job. Meanwhile, universities have become much more dependent on philanthropy, including local and regional support, to fund operations.

This shift in the business model of higher education, too, leans toward the necessity of a more community-centric organization. First of all, more young people are thinking of "getting jobs" that are socially oriented. Many view their vocations and civic purposes as more intertwined than their parents did. They do not see themselves as working stiffs from 9-5 to pay the bills and then participating in PTA meetings at night as part of their civic duty. Employers are fully aware of this and are reexamining how to weave together business and social impact to attract young people.

Add to this fact the reality that higher education's revenues are mostly tied to instruction and it becomes clear that colleges and universities will need to demonstrate tighter integration between curricula and social impact in order to attract tuition-paying students and support community engagement at scale. This may be particularly true for populations such as students of color and low-income students, who are least represented in higher education and are most available.

Similarly, local foundations and philanthropists, while motivated to enhance the status of nearby universities, are more keenly interested in making investments that lead to measurable community social and economic improvement. And this no longer means making sure colleges simply graduate enough skilled labor to fill employer demand. Many funders are just as conscious of the

need for colleges to address issues such as racial equity and economic mobility for low-income people, pursuits that are codesigned with community expertise and innovation and that require a much more comprehensive focus.

Exposing the Democratic Magic

Of course, while the trajectory toward deeper community engagement bodes well for higher education, it does not guarantee success. The institutions that truly thrive and distinguish themselves will find it necessary to push beyond creating programs. They will need to make systemic changes to operate in more democratic ways.

In many ways, the newspaper industry was aware of what it needed to do as well. It chose to tinker around the edges—to try to mitigate the effects of imminent change rather than restructure to adapt to it. The response generally was along the lines of putting the newspaper online rather than fundamentally reimagining how news is generated and presented.

In hindsight, I have imagined an innovation that might have saved my old industry and wondered what its higher education equivalent might look like. One of the most dynamic occurrences in the daily production of the newspaper was not reporting or even editing stories. It was the Page One meeting. There, behind closed doors, senior editors would offer up the news of the day and debate its importance and appropriate placement in the paper. They would hammer out what should be on the front page, which photo best illustrated the story, and what story lead best balanced interest and fairness.

In many ways, this was the part of the newspaper that could not be duplicated. Other entities could gather the news and distribute it in multiple ways. But the active deliberation of what was news, what mattered each day and why—that is when the impact of events was given context and meaning. Ironically, this most democratic aspect of the business was the least visible to the public. Exposing it, even to reporters in the newsroom, was seen as tainting the objectivity of the news decisions made in the Page One meeting. Of course, there was nothing objective about the proceedings. Rather, its magic was the collective exchange of a group of subjective individuals.

I've often wondered what would have happened if we had opened up the Page One meeting. What if we had live-streamed it to anyone who wanted to watch? What if we had created a way for the public to contribute to the discussion, and determine—as a community—what the most important news of the day was? This process might have found an audience. In many ways, it would have looked a lot like the panels of commentators who provide entertainment

on cable news networks today. The most popular edition of *Charlotte Talks* on my local public radio station is the *Friday News Roundup*, when local journalists discuss the week's news. The difference is that the community-enriched Page One meeting deliberation would have produced a public asset: the community's collective expression of the news.

I am not sure if my novel approach would have saved newspapers. It might have failed miserably. Just restructuring newsroom routines to accommodate such a dramatic innovation might have proven far too daunting. But I have noticed that innovations in citizen-centered journalism, which have emerged in recent years, provide a more active role for the general public in the framing and production of news than serving its readers as merely passive recipients.

What if we asked students to declare a "mission" rather than a "major" upon entering college, and we spent their first years helping them identify a major in service to that mission?

Regardless of the merits of my fantasy, I am convinced there is a lesson in it for higher education. Perhaps it is in the collective reflection and consideration of values and evidence—in a word, deliberation—where true democratic purpose is hidden. Exposing it will require higher education to move from seeing its central role as that of *knowledge generator* to that of *knowledge navigator*. This does not mean universities should cease generating knowledge. That, of course, is their core competency. Nor does it mean all knowledge must have practical application. But higher education can no longer be insulated from accountability for solving public problems.

The true drivers of this pursuit of problem solving, of course, are students, which brings me to my Page-One-meeting vision for higher education: What if we asked students to declare a "mission" rather than a "major" upon entering college, and we spent their first years helping them identify a major in service to that mission? After all, like the Page One meeting, the deliberation behind the choice of major is where the magic really happens. That is where students try to find that mix of purpose, passion, and curiosity that will determine their academic and professional pursuits for years to come.

Currently, it is somewhat of a mystery how that decision is made. It might be honed through years of consideration. It might occur on a whim. It could be influenced by a teacher or parent, a mentor or counselor, a friend or a social

media post. And yet, it is a critical decision that reverberates throughout the university. Not only does it dictate the outline of each student's academic roadmap, it impacts course offerings, faculty lines, and university revenue. It is higher education's Page One meeting.

So, what if we treated it with similar purpose? Upon entering college, students would declare the mission they want to pursue, driven by civic purpose, career aspirations, or intellectual interest or, more likely, a mix of all that. They would spend their first year or two engaged in a deliberate exploration culminating in selection of a major—or mix of majors—tied to those objectives. This exploration would be navigated by knowledgeable faculty in concert with community experiences and guides. The result likely would better position students for short-term and long-term personal success, and social impact. It would also force the institution to orient its focus outward, beyond the academy, to facilitate a truly meaningful exploration.

The institutions of higher education that thrive over the next decade or two will find it necessary to distinguish themselves not so much by edging toward deeper community connection, but rather by making systemic changes to operate in more democratic ways.

Of course, such a venture would be so disruptive as to seem nonsensical to many. The tradition of entering college with a major in hand is critical to the entire post-secondary apparatus, determining everything from class schedules to departmental funding. To see that largely mysterious exercise as the central catalyst for redefining the intersection between the academy and the community would be as institutionally disruptive as exposing the Page One meeting to the world.

In the meantime, experiments in deeper community engagement are under way at urban universities to improve democratic practices. At UNC Charlotte, we are developing faculty to conduct community-oriented research, providing tools to incentivize students' civic competence, creating data dashboards that measure social impact and reflect community ways of knowing, and developing innovation labs where community residents join researchers to codesign solutions to "wicked" problems.

Still, the institutions of higher education that thrive over the next decade or two will find it necessary to distinguish themselves not so much by edging toward deeper community connection, but rather by making systemic changes to operate in more democratic ways. Local leaders are demanding solutions from their institutions of higher education. Addressing fundamental operational challenges of securing enrollment, maintaining academic relevance, and generating revenue requires that we respond.

Who knows? Maybe one day my scheme to declare a mission upon entering college may not seem so bizarre. Certainly, no more so than the demise of newspapers seemed 20 years ago.

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