



Reframing decision making in the current crisis

For some critics, the pandemic is highlighting higher education's problematic business model. Tuition levels are too high, the argument goes, especially as institutions shift to online offerings. Further, critics say, institutions are spending too much on people and amenities that aren't critical for producing graduates. In this vein, one prominent commentator recently concluded that U.S. higher education, along with U.S. healthcare, is now one of the two most "disruptable" industries in the world.

These arguments have some appeal if one views universities through an industrial lens. From that perspective, institutions' task is to produce graduates cost effectively at an acceptable price. Students are inputs, faculty and instructional infrastructure drive production processes, and graduates are outputs. In response to today's financial challenges, the argument goes, leaders should remove unnecessary elements and focus simply on producing graduates with skills the economy demands. After all, shouldn't institutions that embrace online programming, remove unneeded administrators, and curtail commitments to well-paid, immovable tenured faculty be able to move more nimbly and effectively in the marketplace?

In adopting this lens, however, critics may be slipping into a metaphorical trap. In reality, tuition charges don't usually cover per-student costs, and shifting to online programming can add to those costs, at least in the short run. Further, institutions pursue other goals that can potentially work against producing graduates as efficiently as possible: increasing access for students from lower-income backgrounds, allowing students freedom to explore different paths as they mature, serving society's needs, building knowledge, and so forth. Stakeholders can disagree about the relative importance of these varied goals, making universities rife with ambiguities, varied priorities, and debatable lines of authority. Straightforward models of efficiency and quality control may work well in industry, but they don't always fit in universities.

Instead, some additional metaphors merit consideration. In classes on college management and organization, my colleagues and I introduce students to portrayals of institutions not only as factory-like enterprises, but also as cultural institutions, political arenas, vehicles for social mobility, and agencies chartered by society to develop engaged democratic citizens. Seeing institutions through such different lenses can help leaders address organizational challenges and avoid traps.

In his new book, Derek Bok argues that focusing on colleges mainly as venues for transmitting practical knowledge underestimates and underemploys their broader powers. Colleges also facilitate intellectual, social, and personal development. As 19th-century educational leader Cardinal Newman observed, "A university is...an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a factory, or a mint, or a treadmill."



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Allowing students ample opportunities for exploration and even for “failing” may not seem obviously efficient, but it can help them develop their broader sense of self and their political, religious, ethnic, and gender identities. In fact, allowing students ample freedom to adapt mid-flight (for example, by abandoning a pre-med program and majoring instead in psychology) may ultimately be more efficient and effective, in both an individual and a societal sense, than incentivizing unswerving, vocation-centered academic persistence. That is, students may best be seen as agents in their own “production” rather than as raw materials for speedy processing.

Of course, the prescriptive factory metaphor is not always wrong—after all, resources aren’t unlimited. But that framing isn’t always optimal, either. Viewing institutions as agencies for fostering social mobility and individual development means moving away from incentivizing lockstep degree persistence toward welcoming “inefficient” exploration and growth. In short, policymakers and institutional leaders may want to avoid singular framings and instead cultivate in themselves the same openness to new perspectives that we seek in our students.

Facing an unprecedented pandemic, institutions’ organizational resilience is paramount. Maintaining and improving that resilience, however, need not always mean becoming more “business like.” What, after all, is a higher education for?

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Read more:

Bok, Derek (2020). *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?* Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.

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