

# Comments on Robert Scott's Essay: The Modern American University\*

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The State of American Higher Education  
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I am honored to be with you, and bring warm greetings from Stockton University President, Harvey Kesselman, and Provost/Executive Vice President, Susan Davenport, as well as William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy colleagues.

American higher education's "golden age" has not passed. We are resilient, changing, experimenting, growing and maturing. We are in a time of transition, seeking to redefine the means by which we fulfill the higher purposes that we serve for individual prosperity and the common good.

## **Characteristics of American Higher Education: Practical Learning in Support of Liberty and Equality**

Bruce Johnstone, a former university president and Chancellor of the State University of NY (SUNY) identifies six special characteristics of American higher education, contrasted to European counterparts (Sharing the Costs of Higher Education, 1986):

1. Enormous size and openness;
2. Diversity of students and types of institutions;
3. Strong private sector;
4. Delegation of regulation, certification, and coordination to states; weak federal (central) role;
5. Shared revenue responsibility, with relatively more from students and families;
6. Aggressive marketing and price competition.

Much of this still rings true, today.

American higher education, as Bob points out, has been shaped in large part by exogenous forces that relate to broader social and economic goals, rather than education as an intrinsic enterprise.

As Alexis de Tocqueville stated in Democracy in America, "In the United States politics are the end and aim of education." Whereas, the Greek philosophers attempted to answer the question, is education a means or an end in defining the state, I propose that education in America is closely tied to the purpose of democracy, that is to participate in the life of the state. Accordingly, it is both a means and end of civic responsibility.

Accordingly, American higher education is a mixed public- private good, which provides for both opportunity for individuals to prosper and the prospect for adding to the overall public welfare. It is a means of serving the values of both liberty and equality, which must serve practical as well as academic ends. In this respect, American higher education like American politics has been largely protected from ideology, and might be better described as by a healthy tension between realism and idealism in its development.

But the promise of equality of opportunity through education has not been achieved for all individuals. This is especially true for Native, non-white Americans and women and certain other groups who were

denied access to colleges, often as a matter of public policy in some states; and who created colleges with special missions to meet their needs. Many of these still exist today, such as America's public and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Furthermore, unlike some European countries, America developed a disjointed set of policies regarding vocational education, which is largely left up to the states to coordinate. This places a greater burden on traditional colleges, and especially America's newer diverse community and technical colleges, to include practical as well as academic experiences for college-bound students. A very open system, one driven more by student choice than by college selectivity, and one in which students may enter and change institutions many times, makes measuring outcomes of these multi-purpose institutions a difficult task.

Dr. Scott provides us with a vivid picture of the fundamental values supporting growth of colleges in the USA, especially with the explosive extension of the public sector following WWII. In my opinion, a unique aspect of this phenomenon is that defining the explicit educational outcomes of the new and expanded colleges was left to the future. The driving forces behind more and bigger public regional colleges and research universities, and new community colleges, were a commitment to broaden educational opportunity and to invest huge sums of money in institutions to serve more students. Specifically defining missions and outcomes were to follow.

So, creation of American higher education has not been accidental. It has been intentional, but at the same time incremental and developmental, and not always driven by educational goals alone. As Bob indicates, the search to rationalize such a large, decentralized and autonomous set of institutions came in the form on many state and federal government or foundation sponsored studies over decades, following the 1947 Truman Commission report outlining a vision for expansion of higher education; the 137 studies of the Carnegie Commission reports of the 1960's and 1970's; A Nation at Risk in 1983; and the more recent Spellings Commission study. Each in its own way attempted to define the purposes of great investment in higher learning through the lenses of access, excellence and outcomes.

We sometimes forget how new much of American higher education is. Many of the institutions that serve the bulk of our students have been created in our lifetime. For example, the college that Bob led in New Jersey, and the university in which I work are only about 45 years old. Many of our state coordinating agencies were created only since the 1970's. In this light, the renewed search for purpose and value is not surprising as many colleges reach early maturity.

### **Trends, Challenges and Change: Where We Are, Seeking Purpose and Value**

So, the search to define the ends of postsecondary education that justify the great investment of means to accomplish lofty ideals continues. A review of top policy issues facing American colleges prepared by leading national organizations, points to four overriding concerns:

1. How to finance colleges in an era of dramatic economic change;
2. How to keep college affordable for low and middle-income students;
3. How to assure equity and fairness, not only in admission, but also overall concerning racial, ethnic and gender tolerance;
4. Assessing academic and practical outcomes;
5. Working smarter to keep public trust.

As Bob indicates, the big questions of who goes to which college, where; who pays and how; and for what outcomes has come full circle. For example, American higher education is buffeted by:

- The paradox of high demand, yet low public policy priority; steady public sector disinvestment leading to students paying the biggest share of educational cost in many states;
- Sorting out the dilemma of the perception of high value on one hand (80-90 percent of graduates think that the value of the degree is worth the cost), yet deep concern and anger over rising cost and personal debt.
- The myth that the selectivity and reputation of some elite institutions is a proxy for quality and value added.
- Investment in unproven consumer- oriented, market approaches to college access and outcomes assessment, such as new “report card” schemes, including those pushed by the White House and others, based on questionable use of post- graduation earnings data as a measure of college value.

In a nutshell, most analysts agree that the financial model (driven by high public subsidy) that has sustained higher education for the past 50 years is broken, and needs reform. A significant transition since the Reagan presidential years, exacerbated by the global economic malaise is a “pay as you benefit,” model, which shifts the equation of a college’s value to one of private rather than public good, thereby opposing the idea of income redistribution through general taxation to help pay for college. This has led to colleges taking up more of the slack to serve access and affordability equity goals by redistributing student revenue (tuition), as Bob points out, and in some ways distorting the purpose of a common, shared baccalaureate experience. This approach leads instead to a focus on college as an entitlement to benefit those who pay the most, directly. It leads, too, to distortion of public subsidy and private benefit, as demonstrated by growing dissatisfaction with the performance of for- profit colleges, which are principally financed by public student financial aid funds- a huge public subsidy justified in the name of individual student choice.

In an era of dynamic change, highlighted by a rapidly changing student body, a search for new business models for financing college, and challenges of integrating new technology and competing with new providers, perhaps the greatest challenge facing us is redefining the fundamental purpose of a college education. Survey research makes clear that from the viewpoint of students and employers, the most important outcome of college is gaining the skills and abilities to get a good job and career, in order to prosper economically. Students and families understand and desire the intrinsic value of learning. But the economic benefit is the trump hand.

Some of the objectives needed to relieve Bob’s sense of “anguish” and to achieve his goals of “admiration” and “anticipation” of a bright future for American higher education include:

- Adopt new academic and financial models to sustain the core educational enterprise, and to increase degree productivity.
- Reform federal, state and campus student financial aid policy to help keep college affordable.
- Create more explicit accountability measures that fit new expectations about the purposes of college.
- Reform governance models at the state and campus levels to promote accountability and public trust.

To accomplish these broad objectives some of the specific steps required include:

- Work with schools to build and measure expected academic outcomes and workplace skills needed to succeed in college and beyond;

- Make it easier to transfer academic credits from community colleges; expand dual enrollment programs with schools and other colleges; and grant more academic credit for prior practical learning through credit-by-examination programs.
- Promote partnerships that provide for internships and practical experience tied to academic studies and real-world problem solving; and involve business and community leaders in creating and evaluating educational programs.
- Require intensive academic advising and career counseling for all students; add more content courses and fewer general education courses tied to essential learning outcomes; and closely monitor credits earned tied to an explicit plan for completing college.
- Monitor closely financial aid needs and debt accumulation tied to academic progress; and restructure student financial aid policy at the college and state levels, to meet the needs of a diverse student population and missions of different types of institutions.
- Build a more integrated rationale for state/federal funding of higher education that supports predictable revenue and outcomes tied to long-term public purpose and institutional needs.
- Refocus college trustee governance to reflect a changing business/financial model, and to provide greater transparency regarding educational and related business activities of affiliated organizations.

### **Back to the Future: Where We Are Headed**

As Dr. Scott concludes, there is much hope of the future even if some of the present seems uncertain. The fundamental values underpinning American higher education remain to be resilient. Just as in the beginning of the American educational saga, we seek to bridge the gap between academic and practical educational experiences. Students, parents, employers and policy makers are telling us to get on with providing the integration of “essential learning outcomes” and important workplace skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are asking us to make college more affordable, and more valuable for learning, earning and living for a lifetime.

In effect, we are in a new and exciting era of further rationalizing both structures and functions to redefine the value of the enterprise and its educational purposes. New measures of college value are developing, for example:

- **Measures of institutional quality**, based on student, faculty and administrative performance tied to delivery of specific academic core competencies, workplace skills and practical experiences, measured against mission-related goals, and compared to regional peers;
- **Measures of demonstrated abilities** of college graduates on essential learning outcomes, especially regarding writing, speaking and problem solving, as reported by colleges and employers;
- **Where college graduates are working** after one, three and five years, and the relationship between job, career choices and academic studies;
- **Number of graduates engaged in community and public service**, and enrolling in post-graduate/professional studies after one, three and five years;
- **Number of internships offered by academic field**, and number of students participating;
- **Extensiveness and intensity of academic advising and career counseling** for new and transfer students, based on college surveys;
- **Total degree credits earned**, compared to those required for graduation, and how long it takes to earn a degree; and

- **Credit awarded for prior learning** as a percentage of total credits earned required for graduation.

Bob's experience, analysis and insight bring us back to the future and the promise of American higher education achieving the lofty goals of equality of opportunity that benefits individuals and society. In a global society, we have much to learn from others as we develop.

I think this is what Bob means by the need to engage eagerly in "enterprise risk management." In the final analysis it's all about building and sustaining public trust. Educators, who have the privilege to guide American's colleges and universities, also, have the responsibility, in partnership with many others, to lead the conversation, in service of the public good.

Bob has done and continues to do his share.

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