Chapter 21

Students and Subjects

The first critical dimension of choice for universities is the range of students to serve and the credentials to offer them. The new university Charles Eliot created served both undergraduate and graduate students, an apparently broad choice that has been widely emulated. Harvard undergraduates, though, are unusual. They are more capable than typical college students. They are also more likely to pursue graduate education; that allows them to be more satisfied with a liberal education rather than technical preparation for a career.

This system worked well at Harvard, thanks largely to A. Lawrence Lowell's special investments in the college. James Conant's predicating tenure on research put the undergraduates at an inherent disadvantage relative to graduate students, but Harvard compensated for diminished faculty attention by feeding Lowell's expensive system of undergraduate houses and tutors. Harvard also benefited from Conant's use of the SAT, which soon produced an average admitted freshman so bright and motivated as to be able to transcend almost any weakness in the educational program.

Harvard, in other words, succeeds not only because of its wealth, but because it has limited its choice of students to serve to only the most elite graduate and undergraduate students. In its professional schools, the choice is narrower still—graduate students only. That may partly explain their greater immunity to economic downturn and public criticism than the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), which has responsibility for both graduate programs and Harvard College. Given

its commitment to these fundamentally different types of student, the FAS would be in truly financial dire straights were it not for the relatively small size and elite quality of the college.

The challenge for nearly all other universities, in addition to having less to spend than Harvard, is that their undergraduates are much more diverse in both educational objectives and academic abilities. Many of these students will not attend graduate school, so their college experience must include practical career preparation. Some also need remedial education to be ready for college courses. With the research university's additional commitments to graduate programs and faculty scholarship, even Harvard could not fund all of the degree programs and special tutoring necessary to serve such a broad range of undergraduate students.

A Focused Choice of Students

That is why the most successful schools make careful choices about the types of students they serve. Focused liberal arts colleges, for example, differentiate themselves by granting only bachelor's degrees. Students at these schools do not get the kind of head start on graduate coursework that Harvard College students can through courses for both undergraduates and graduates. Nor can they finish after two years with an associate's degree or take bachelor's degrees in applied fields, as they might at public universities. But students at the best liberal arts colleges receive unusually focused faculty attention and intellectual stimulation. They also get the full attention of the school's career placement officers, who at large universities often give disproportionate support to professional school students.These liberal arts colleges have made tradeoffs that give them a unique competitive advantage relative to a particular kind of student, one who places high value on intimate undergraduate instruction and will pay a high price for it. In a world of growing demand for higher education, there is likely to be a

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place for these institutions, particularly as they make innovative use of online technology to enhance instruction and keep costs from escalating.

BYU-Idaho has chosen a broader but similarly differentiated range of students to serve. Like the liberal arts colleges, it eschews graduate education. But while serving typical graduate school-bound college students, it has also reemphasized associate's degrees and technical certificates. It meets the needs of students of diverse abilities and interests by helping them teach one another; the college-ready are enlisted in teaching those who are not, a valuable educational experience that is less common at elite universities. BYU-Idaho also reaches out via low-cost online learning technology to students constrained by finances or geography. These distance learners, who would otherwise be higher education nonconsumers, meet periodically with one another and interact daily, online, with their Rexburg peers. The combination of low-cost and relatively high-quality learning fills a heretofore unmet need for this group of students.

Community colleges are more focused still, serving only two-year degree seekers. This focus helps them meet the needs of students burdened by poor academic preparation and bearing work and family responsibilities. It is for their focus and resulting low cost that community colleges are seen as attractive public investments relative to traditional universities. Even so, their future success depends on reducing their instructional costs via online learning and providing the student support necessary to increase their graduation rates.

Institutions granting only certificates have shown the power of focus in helping students persist to graduation. Nationwide, only 43 percent of students who enter a two-year public institution seeking a certificate achieve that goal within five years. However, institutions that focus solely on certificates, rather than both associate's degrees and certificates, achieve a 72 percent graduation rate.[1] That is approximately the average rate for the twenty-six free-standing Tennessee Technology Centers, which McKinsey highlighted in *Winning By Degrees.*[2] Tennessee legislation separates the production of certificates and associate's degree, foreclosing any consideration of a ladder climb. Instead,

Tennessee Technology Centers distinguish themselves through superior service to certificate seekers; six of these centers achieve graduation rates in excess of 80 percent. Students can earn certificates in areas such as architecture and construction, business management, health science, and information technology. The McKinsey team observed, "A focused mission allows these institutions to improve their execution while allowing their delivery model and processes to be tailored to meet the objectives of their student population."[3]

The Student as Primary Constituent

In addition to choosing which students to serve, the university community must recognize students as primary constituents and the job of mentoring them as being equally or more important than any other, including discovery research. Except in the case of the most elite research institutions, the university that does not view serving students as its primary mission is doomed to decline. The problem is not just the lower instructional costs of the for-profit educators. It is also the rise of focused research enterprises. Employees of purely discovery-focused corporate R&D groups and government research institutes are inherently more cost effective than university scholars, who must split their time between research and instruction and whose explorations are not market driven. Given these lower-cost alternatives, the knowledge discovery function of the university has become comparatively too expensive to justify public and private subsidies absent a compelling educational purpose. Lowell's test of the university's social usefulness can only be met as it was in his day—with an emphasis on mentoring students and educating society in uniquely valuable ways. Otherwise, the university cannot justify the inevitable expense of combining research and instruction under one roof.

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As university professors know well, students have new tools for demanding attention to their preferences. The online technology that allows them to learn at lower cost also allows them to express their opinions as never before. Popular websites such as Ratemyprofessors .com and Facebook, the latter created in a Harvard dorm room, portend a social network-driven world in which third-party rankings and even accreditation may become irrelevant. A university's fate is more likely to be determined by the balance of its constituents who consider it benevolent rather than self-interested. Today's elite universities are likely to be academically well regarded one hundred years from now. The question, though, is whether some of them will have been acquired as the premier label in the portfolio of a for-profit education company. Their independence will depend on whether their constituents—the faculty, the alumni, and especially the students who consume their services rather than merely admire them from a distance—love them or abandon them.[4]

The students in particular will be crucial. None can be considered a customer; as with the doctor's patient and the lawyer's client, the wise student trusts the professor to know his or her best interest. However, if traditional universities do not treat students as their most critical constituents, the for-profits will have the advantage in winning them over, particularly those students considering less prestigious institutions. Many of the for-profits have found great success in catering to working adults. This market segment offers better profit margins than do the younger ones served by traditional universities. But as the overall market matures and competition at the top end intensifies, the for-profits will seek new opportunities among younger learners, including those with the academic preparation and financial means necessary to attend traditional institutions. The for-profits' low marginal cost of instruction allows them to drop their prices far below those of even public universities and colleges. It is only a matter of time before this market segment becomes their primary target for growth. Even prestigious universities will be affected by competitors, for-profit and otherwise, that put the needs of students first. The student-centered

university is the exception today. In the future, no other kind is likely to succeed.

Helping Students "Achieve the Dream"

Though universities have a broader educational mission, they can benefit from practices such as those being applied by the 130 community colleges participating in Achieving the Dream (ATD): Community Colleges Count, a Lumina Foundation-funded initiative.[5] Achieving the Dream institutions use student achievement data to focus their efforts on student success. One ATD school, Valencia Community College, achieves a graduation rate of 35 percent, 15 percentage points higher than its peers nationwide. It does so with a 32:1 student–teacher ratio, almost 50 percent higher than the peer average of 22:1. The combination of a higher graduation rate and lower costs of instruction and other student services allows Valencia to confer an associate's degree for $22,311, compared to an average of $56,289.[6]

Valencia's success flows from innovations that include a cohort model and a for-credit "student success" course for freshmen in which they learn study skills. They also use an academic and career planning tool called "LifeMap," which helps them connect their personal goals with the Valencia resources vital to achieving them.[7] LifeMap recognizes and serves students differentially, based on their particular points on the path to graduation.[8]

Valencia's staff are also committed to "seeing the college through the eyes of the student." That means streamlining and automating processes that affect students; in many cases, students can serve themselves, completing transactions such as accepting financial aid online. The result is faster service at lower institutional cost. Cost efficiencies in some student services allow Valencia to make greater than average investments in others, such as academic counseling and career services. The efficiencies inherent in the higher student–teacher ratio similarly allow for greater investment in measuring and maintaining the quality of instruction.[9]

The State of Florida likewise does its part in seeing the college experience through the eyes of students. Florida policies encourage dual high school and college enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, and generous acceptance of transfer credits. For example, associate's degree graduates are guaranteed admission to a state four-year institution and the transferability of at least 60 credits.[10]

Subject Matter Focus

To survive increasing competition, most universities need to be both more student focused and more narrowly focused in their academic offerings. Eliot's ideal of having all subjects at their best was always expensive. Now, with for-profit educators focused on the subjects in greatest demand, it is competitively untenable. Undergraduate majors in particular must be rationalized from a cost standpoint. Majors that are chronically under-enrolled and fail to place graduates in careers or graduate programs are candidates for elimination or combination. The number of elective courses offered even in many highly enrolled majors must be reduced. This process has already begun in earnest at many universities.[11]

> *Colleges need to move away from the more and better approach and position themselves for the new economic reality by focusing on what they can do best.*[12]
>
> —Len Schlesinger, President of Babson College

The culling should be undertaken with care. Breadth of study options differentiates traditional universities from the for-profits and facilitates performing the jobs of memory and mentoring. Outright elimination of too many majors and courses could be damaging to the institution not only intellectually but also competitively. The typical university major, though, needs to be trimmed back and modularized to allow students to combine the most essential major courses with

offerings from other fields and still graduate in four years. The upshot in many majors is likely to be a reduction in the number of advanced, specialized courses or at least a decrease in the frequency with which they are taught.[13]

Most of the schools cited by McKinsey in *Winning by Degree* make focused choices of subjects as well as students, creating benefits of both low cost and high completion rates. For example, Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) serves roughly one-third of its 15,000 total students via a Center for Adult and Professional Studies, or CAPS, that specializes in college education for working adults. Unlike many adult degree seekers, who tend to study at their own pace, often independently, IWU's CAPS students pursue bachelor's degrees as part of an assigned cohort. Cohort members take three-credit courses lasting six weeks each, and the majority of courses taken are required rather than elective. Because of the importance of cohort collaboration, only one absence is allowed per course. According to McKinsey:

> Initial assignments serve the double purpose of having students get to know each other on a personal level while getting students accustomed to the learning environment either on campus or online. University leaders cite the cohort model and clear structured degree pathways with few electives as an important factor driving their graduation rate—65 percent compared to a peer average of 46 percent.[14]

In addition to achieving high completion rates, IWU-CAPS spends just $40,851 per degree granted—one-third less than average—even while investing 10 percent more in student support.

Beyond the Rational Curriculum and the Formal Classroom

In at least one respect, though, the university must consider broadening its subject matter. For the sake of both its own survival and society's good, the traditional university needs to reengage on the subject of

values and renew its commitment to character development. The moral void created by the secularization of higher education is a critical weakness. As Derek Bok noted in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, "Two-thirds of all freshmen consider it 'essential' or 'very important' that college help them develop their personal values."[15] But because of "the reluctance of the faculty to teach material in which the methods of analysis and validation are so subjective," he observed, many undergraduates "gain more in developing their values and principles from bull sessions with friends than from the classes they attend. To this extent, they fail to gain as much enlightenment as they might about subjects that deservedly form a vital part of their development."[16]

Bok is right. Students go to college for more than narrow academic training. In addition to cross-disciplinary general education, they need access to mentors who can speak both from academic training and also from personal experience to what makes for long-term welfare, what is right and what is wrong not only for societies but for individuals. Introducing moral views into higher education requires a delicate balancing act.[17] It is an act of intellectual asymmetry: How does one decide to introduce some ideas not subject to scholarly methods of analysis while omitting others? Yet it is precisely that kind of judgment that separates the university graduate who is merely technically competent from one trusted to make the most important decisions. Society pays outsized rewards to those who can make high-stakes judgments not subject to purely analytical methods.

Tenured university professors are implicitly expected to make such judgment calls, as manifested in their being paid many times more per student taught than their untenured counterparts in the for-profit world who can produce, on average, the same cognitive outcomes. If they continue to be paid that premium in the future it will be not just for bringing new discoveries into the classroom but also for transmitting cultural memory and for mentoring. Their ability to perform those jobs will be vital to the traditional university as it increases its percentage of courses taught online; as that occurs, it will be all the more important to have face-to-face offerings rich in the value-laden

and concern-manifesting conversations that are more difficult to have at a distance.

The expectation that a professor make delicate decisions in teaching moral values and cultivating character in students is not unreasonable. As Derek Bok has declared, "It is perfectly possible to teach moral reasoning or prepare students to be enlightened citizens without having instructors impose their personal ideologies or policy views on their students."[18] One of the most important values for students to be taught is one that university faculty members embody by their choice of profession: the value of imparting knowledge to others for the sake of lifting them. The Harvard Business School's C. Roland Christensen, master of discussion-based instruction, described teaching as a "moral act." He expressed supreme confidence in its efficacy. His confidence rested in a noble view of student potential and a dedicated teacher's ability to develop it:

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—Derek Bok

> I believe in the unlimited potential of every student. At first glance they range, like instructors, from mediocre to magnificent. But potential is invisible to the superficial gaze. It takes faith to discern it, but I have witnessed too many academic miracles to doubt its existence. I now view each student as "material for a work of art." If I have faith, deep faith, in students' capacities for creativity and growth, how very much we can accomplish together. If, on the other hand, I fail to believe in that potential, my failure sows seeds of doubt. Students read our negative signals, however carefully cloaked, and retreat from creative risk to the "just possible." When this happens, everyone loses.[19]

Christensen reserved the final hour of his landmark Business Policy course for a rare lecture. He lectured his class of future managers and executives on the most powerful motivating force in business: genuine concern for employees and customers. He had research to support the point, but his students had felt the real proof in the way he treated them throughout the semester.

In addition to moral authority and personal concern, students need a measure of guidance *in loco parentis.* Though they may not appreciate it fully in the moment, they often look back gratefully on the professors who held them accountable not only for their academic performance but for their conduct and demeanor and ambitions. They appreciate mentoring in personal matters, as a Hal Eyring did Georges Doriot's unsolicited approval of his marriage. The would-be life-changing professor cannot be value neutral or laissez faire. The university community that expects parents to pay the high cost of its expansive campus cannot entirely refuse to act *in loco parentis.*

Few institutions are likely to choose the kinds of strictures accepted by BYU-Idaho students or those that applied to residents of the Harvard houses in the 1950s. Yet each campus should make a conscious choice about the ethical and social environment it intends to promote. Students and their parents are interested in the differences among schools, as evidenced by the popularity of "party school" rankings. Given the relatively high cost of attending a traditional university, it cannot afford to let the quality of its campus social environment be determined randomly. Schools that set and meet an expectation, whatever that may be, will have an advantage over those that do not.