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Sorting Through the Critiques

By [John B. Simpson](#)

We have just finished the year of the higher education critique. Beginning with the influential National Academies jeremiad, [“Rising Above the Gathering Storm,”](#) and leading up to December’s National Center on Education and the Economy’s call to arms, [“Tough Choices or Tough Times,”](#) no fewer than six major commissions last year published recommendations for reinventing American education.

Within this blizzard of reports, higher education — and especially public higher education — has faced considerable criticism. Add in politicians decrying rising tuition, and editorial writers charging public universities with elitism, and education officials and policymakers can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed by (often conflicting) advice.

The rough treatment for higher education began with the release in September of [the final report by the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#), which characterized American universities as “increasingly risk-averse, at times self-satisfied, and unduly expensive.”

More recent reports by the [Education Trust](#) and [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) were particularly critical of public universities, the former charging that state flagships have abandoned their historic mission of increasing social mobility for all, with the latter scolding state legislators for weak leadership and schools for lax accountability.

Last month a *New York Times* editorial went even further, accusing public universities of “choking off” college access to poor and minority students. The *Times* claimed that the “compact,” in which public universities offer broad access in exchange for taxpayer subsidies, has been “pretty much discarded.”

The Need for a Wider Angle View

The increased public attention to education is understandable given the growing nationwide anxiety over issues such as the achievement gap between white and minority students; poor science and math performance among primary and secondary students; the outsourcing of jobs to China, India, and other developing nations; and rapid increases in the cost of college.

But when assigning blame for these problems, the recent critiques may well focus too narrowly, using a

telephoto lens when what is needed is a wide angle one.

Look at a few examples. As the National Conference of State Legislatures and Spellings Commission reports acknowledge, funding and financial aid mechanisms for higher education are in need of serious reform. The Manhattan Institute's [reports on high dropout rates in urban high schools](#) have lifted the veil on a critical issue. And the National Academies report sparked a dialogue on economic competitiveness that even found voice in President Bush's 2006 State of the Union address.

To be sure, each of these topics is important. But these critiques isolate troublesome segments of the pre-K-16 continuum rather than assessing the whole. (One exception is the National Center on Education and the Economy's report — the most radical of the bunch — which, among other things, calls for an overhaul of the American K-12 system along the lines of the European model of college preparation.)

The most narrowly focused is the searing Education Trust report and subsequent *Times* editorial that focus, by and large, on the issue of who is admitted to public flagship universities, and then how that education is financed. No doubt these are topics worthy of debate. However, singling out the admissions and financial aid practices of 50 or so flagship universities is to treat a symptom of a broader problem, not a root cause.

When students arrive at the doorstep of the University at Buffalo, or any other major university, we see the results of nearly two decades of prior experience, from families, society, and, of course, schools — circumstances over which we currently have only minimal control. The reports, though, do not sufficiently appreciate that readiness is a precondition for success in college, and is an element of the education pipeline that actually begins in childhood. But in many urban and poor districts — where dropout rates often top 50 percent for minority students — the education pipeline simply is broken.

Indeed, the issue of diversity and access to higher education is a complex one, and can only be partially understood – or rectified – by looking at the end of the education pipeline. We must therefore focus on the entire spectrum of potential students' experiences that lead to the characteristics they arrive with at admissions time.

For that reason, the notion that public universities deserve most of the blame for enrolling too few students from minority and low-income backgrounds is a gross oversimplification, as well as highly misleading. Virtually every month state systems announce new financial aid, college preparation, and advising programs to help low-income families send their children to college with little or no debt.

These hardly sound like the efforts of universities that have abandoned their mission to educate a diverse cross-section of qualified students. In truth, addressing the very real problems the reports describe is a long-range and collaborative process that will occur not just in college admissions and financial aid offices, but in the pre-kindergarten classroom, and many other stops in between.

What to Do

Higher education is not without problems, nor the reports without merit. Saying there are too few graduates from minority groups and low-income families only begins to touch on broader issues of race, class, and mobility in American society. Training and retaining enough graduates in the STEM fields is a growing, if poorly understood, national concern. And students and their families are under tremendous strain to make sense of a multitude of educational offerings, finance their choice, and, ultimately, graduate within a reasonable amount of time.

In my experience, however, many leaders in higher education are working every day to find solutions to these problems. Far from a lack of desire, the failure of our education system to make faster progress stems, in large measure, from the complexity of the challenge. This is why it is imperative that any collective solutions to these problems be undergirded by a recognition that the social forces behind them are broader and more historically-rooted than the reports acknowledge.

Unlike private institutions, publics have an obligation to try to reflect society at large. Though many private colleges have made sincere efforts to become less economically elite, these institutions ultimately bear neither the public's expectation nor the statutory responsibility to educate a broadly representative population.

Indeed, our public colleges and universities, which educate more than three-quarters of all college students nationwide, serve communities of all racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds as a fundamental part of their missions. Many public research universities, like mine, are today working diligently and creatively to increase the number of qualified minority and low-income students we educate.

For example, the Buffalo-Area Engineering Awareness for Minorities ([BEAM](#)) program in the UB School of Engineering and Applied Sciences offers free pre-college classes to middle school and high school students who want to explore the wonders of science and technology. Since BEAM's inception in 1982, 90 percent of its students have gone on to attend four-year colleges. Here, and elsewhere in major public universities, this hardly is a new endeavor.

But these efforts, by themselves, will lead to only incremental improvements. Success will come only when public higher education works in lock-step with primary and secondary education systems to ensure that students have the intellectual and emotional preparation for success, and the financial support to achieve it.

State and local officials therefore need to strengthen the education pipeline by supporting changes that will make the system a seamless whole rather than a series of disjointed parts. As a critical part of that strategy, public higher education must do more to help primary and secondary schools improve educational outcomes.

For example, my university is building on its years of engagement with the Buffalo Public Schools to create [a strong partnership](#) that will help students gain the education and skills needed to succeed in the 21st century economy. This partnership would include, for instance, early childhood experts sharing the latest insights on cognitive development, or addiction researchers working to break generational cycles of dependence.

Finally, states must re-commit themselves to providing the financial support necessary for public colleges and universities to thrive. At a time when America risks falling further behind other countries in educational achievement, the state share of public colleges' budgets is in decline — and has been so for more than three decades. If states reversed this trend it would send a clear signal to Washington that investment in higher education should be our first national economic priority.

Far from being isolated ivory towers, our public institutions of higher education are actually more relevant today than ever before. If fully embraced, and more engaged in strengthening the education pipeline, these institutions have both the potential and the intention to do far more than they already do to offer solutions to the serious issues raised in this year's reports.

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