Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Whatever Happened to Undergraduate Reform?

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Abstract: The author asks whether higher education reform—once so vigorous and far-reaching—has run out of new things to say.

Essay:

In 2000 I left my post at the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and the *Change* editorship to become a search consultant. This year, hoping to catch up with the issues of undergraduate reform I've cared deeply about throughout my career, I signed up for several higher education conferences. I heard smart presenters talk about the importance of general education, the necessity of assessment, the imperatives of diversity, the need for civic education. What I seldom heard was anything I hadn't heard back in the '90s. It felt as though time had stood still. Since then, I've been asking colleagues: Whatever happened to undergraduate reform? Has that effort, once so vigorous and far-reaching, run out of new things to say? Has it stalled? Did it die?

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The final two decades of the last century—the '80s and '90s—were a remarkable period for innovation in undergraduate education. In the prior two decades, huge gains in access to higher education spawned institutions swollen in size, often with less well prepared student bodies. A new generation of faculty and administrators saw that old routines of "tell 'em and test 'em" just didn't work anymore. Many of our newest entrants were being "chilled" out of the system; completion rates stalled; the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed how underprepared college *graduates* were.

The search for better ways was fueled by a series of reports that came out in the mid-'80s, notably those from the National Governors Association (*Time for Results*) and the

National Institute of Education *(Involvement in Learning*), buttressed by Ernest Boyer's widely read book, *College*. "Accountability for results" became an issue, and by 1988 several states and all accreditors were insisting on assessment.

Many of higher education's earlier waves of reform had focused on curricular issues, on *what* should be taught. But the new reformers by and large ignored curriculum and went to what they considered the heart of the matter, the *how* of teaching and learning. A host of pedagogies, new and old, sprang to the fore, including collaborative learning, problem-based learning, case-method teaching, classroom assessment, competency-based education, service learning, and undergraduate research. Capstone courses, freshman-year programs, living-learning units, leadership learning, peer tutoring and supplemental instruction, writing and math across the curriculum, and technology-assisted instruction all flourished. To prompt reflection and metacognition, student journals and portfolios were introduced. Teaching for "critical thinking" and "problem-solving" became a mantra. Half the universities in the country set up teaching and learning centers. Important new ideas—the scholarship of teaching, the ethic of continuous improvement—emerged. New tools like the National Survey of Student Engagement and the electronic portfolio were introduced. In 2000, the National Academy of Sciences published a landmark report, *How People Learn*, lending support to those who would make learning the centerpiece of teaching. There were so many mini-movements that their partisans were all but in competition with one another for faculty time and administrative support.

Fueling these movements was a massive infusion of foundation dollars, especially from Pew, Kellogg, and Atlantic Philanthropies. By the late '90s, these foundations were pumping tens of millions of dollars into various projects designed to improve undergraduate education. Every innovation seemed to garner foundation support or a FIPSE grant, which meant that it had champions funded to spread its message, newsletters and Web sites, demonstration campuses, workshops and retreats, even now and then some research. Organizations like AAHE and the Association of American Colleges and Universities played important roles in spreading the word through their publications and conferences. In short, there was almost no way *not* to hear about portfolios and capstones and service learning—and, of course, assessment. The improvement of undergraduate education seemed on a roll, bursting with energy and new ideas.

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So, what happened? The short version is that the sponsoring foundations withdrew from higher education grantmaking (and FIPSE got overwhelmed by earmarks). Compounding that, AAHE—it, too, had been a major recipient of foundation monies—lost those monies, entertained other agendas, and eventually went out of business, wiping out a major platform for undergraduate reform. The events of 9/11 certainly had a chilling effect on optimism for reform. Or perhaps you believe (I don't) that all these innovations went through an inevitable cycle of rise and fall and, in the end, were fads.

This is not to say that important work on undergraduate reform has ceased—far from it. Those teaching and learning centers are still there, technology continues to drive course redesign, the Freshman Year Experience people just attracted 1,700 to a 25th anniversary conference in Atlanta, FIPSE is back in business, and assessment is more rooted than ever. The point, again, is *not* that good things are not happening but that, for whatever combination of reasons, new ideas now seem in short supply. Take assessment, for example. Go to a conference session on the topic these days or listen to the buzz around the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, and you'll hear people announcing insights that were old news a decade ago. The education press reports as ever on legislative battles, policy proposals, campus scandals—but seldom these days does it find anything to report about developments in the classroom. For many readers, out of sight becomes out of mind and the imperatives for undergraduate reform fade from view.

What's at stake? Does this matter? Does it matter that university completion rates are 44 percent and slipping? That just 10 percent from the lowest economic quartile attain a degree? That figures released this past winter show huge chunks of our graduates who cannot comprehend a *New York Times* editorial or their own checkbook? That frustrated public officials edge closer and closer to imposing a standardized test of college outcomes? Does it matter that we look to our publics like an enterprise more eager for status and funding than self-inquiry and improvement?

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All of this may have a bit of the elephant about it—the one the blind men see so differently depending on where they lay their hands. The fact is, it's hard to know for sure where we are with undergraduate reform, hard even to know what evidence would assess our progress. But of this I'm sure: Any industry—be it computer chips or potato chips, airlines or banking or healthcare—needs a constant bubble of questioning and innovation to stay fresh and move ahead. When our absolute core function—undergraduate teaching and learning—runs on yesterday's ideas, it runs on empty. Good as yesterday's ideas may be, I fear we are not asking hard, new questions about that function, producing new intellectual capital, and hatching new idea champions.

So I present the reader with these questions: Is the hypothesis correct? Are we indeed lacking new ideas? Have undergraduate reform efforts stalled? If so, what would it take to change that?

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