

Where Do We Go From Here?

Reducing inequities and today's changing demographic.

JAMIE P. MERISOTIS

At the Harvard commencement last year, Bill Gates gave a remarkable speech, one that you may have read about in the coverage that followed. It was a speech in which Gates made clear that his own sense of achievement is not clouded by the fact that he has become one of the wealthiest humans in history. He had this wonderful, powerful line in the speech: "Reducing inequity is the highest human achievement." Gates knows a lightning bolt struck him, that his experience is not the norm but the amazing exception. He recognizes that the problems of global health in this world, the challenges of alleviating poverty and despair, and the wide disparities in educational attainment require significant investment by those with the capacity to change lives—the philanthropic sector, government and private industry. In the speech, Gates made clear that despite his own unique experiences, he understands that higher education is critical to reducing inequities because we have clear evidence that it has enormous individual and public benefits that more than compensate for the up-front investment.

The simple fact remains that increasing educational opportunities for all Americans results in tremendous public, private, social and economic benefits. We know that workers who have gone to college tend to have higher salaries, higher savings, and more overall productivity professionally and personally, and better health and life expectancy. Higher earnings for college graduates result in more revenue for government expenditures through increased tax collections. Increasing the number of college graduates saves millions of dollars in avoided social costs as a result of improved health, lower crime, and reduced welfare and unemployment.

The social benefits from higher education range from higher voting rates to more charitable giving and volunteerism. In short, by investing in our fellow Americans who might not otherwise go to college, we are investing in our united future and well being. It's not simply that it's the right thing to do, but that it is in our collective economic and social self-interest to do so. These important public and private benefits of higher education represent critical pillars in the foundation of an innovative and qualified national workforce, a secure economy and a robust democracy.

Moving the needle on student access and success

For those who know the work of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, you are no doubt familiar with our deep experience in linking the public and private benefits of higher education to an array of policy work at the federal and state levels. That work is ongoing—but where do we go from here? At IHEP we are now engaged in two very specific dimensions that are focused on the context within which American higher education is operating, and what we might learn to both respond to the challenges of student access and success and turn them into opportunities. One is the changing demographic of the nation and what we might learn from those institutions that are already educating large numbers of historically underrepresented students; and the other is the global dimensions of higher education and what we might learn from the experiences of other nations as they seek to transform their higher education systems. My simple thesis is that if we really want to start grappling with the large scale issues of moving the needle on student access and success, we need to start looking in places where we have not looked before for answers and ideas that will result in measurable change.

As we gaze into the future, we can see clearly that our future workforce will require large numbers of college-educated workers, most of whom will come from families that currently do not participate in higher education at sufficient levels to meet that future workforce need. We've already seen tremendous demographic changes in our nation over the last two decades, with the juggernaut of the booming Latino population, continuing increases in the African American and Asian American/Pacific Islander populations, and even growth in the often marginalized Native American population. Of particular importance is the fact that the under-24 youth population, together with the early adult populations in the 25 to 44 year old age group, all will see real declines among whites by 2020, while Hispanics, African Americans and other populations—including Asian Americans and Native Americans—will increase significantly.

Another important trend is the changing geographic center of the nation. As the nation's population has expanded to just over 300 million people, the population has consistently shifted west and south over the course of the last century, with the highest population declines experienced in the northeast. Today, we see significant numbers of college students in the northeast and particularly the New England states in terms of total enrollments. But given these overall population trends, I think it's fair to say that the days are numbered for the continuing northeastern domination of the nation's higher education system. It's unlikely that the northeast will be able to maintain this share of the national higher education market without some substantial changes in marketing, recruitment and fundraising strategies.

Increasing numbers of students of color

In the New England states, current projections indicate a substantial decline in high school graduates between now and 2020. That decline is entirely driven by falling numbers of white high school graduates. But even for the fast-growing Hispanic and Asian American populations, the increase in high school graduates will be fairly modest compared to other parts of the nation. In short, there will plainly just be fewer students from the New England states in general whom we can draw from in terms of our potential future student cohorts.

Lessons learned from the BEAMS project

So in thinking about how we might find solutions to these looming challenges, it will be important to look in new and different places, to take a sort of 360 degree inquiry model approach to problem solving, rather than one that focuses on intriguing and sometimes spectacular examples that often cannot be brought to scale.

One way of doing this is to look at institutions that traditionally have not been our usual exemplars. For example, I have come to believe that no group of institutions does more to promote the dual goals of investing in students who might not otherwise go to college and ensuring accountability to those students than Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other predominantly black institutions, which collectively are referred to as MSIs, represent some of the nation's most important but underserved postsecondary education resources. Combined, more than 2.3 million students are educated by these institutions, or about one-third of all students of color. These numbers have been growing rapidly in recent years as increasing numbers of students of color seek opportunities for a college education.

Most MSIs provide postsecondary education opportunities specifically

tailored to low-income, educationally disadvantaged students. Forty-four percent of students enrolled at MSIs are from families in the lowest income quartile, compared to 24 percent enrolled at all institutions. The fact that nearly half of all full-time students enrolled at MSIs receive Pell Grants, compared to only 31 percent of all students enrolled in higher education, is evidence of the high financial need of MSI students and the critical importance of grant aid to their educational endeavors.

At the Institute for Higher Education Policy, we have had an interesting and informative experience with these issues as a result of our deep collaborations with a wide array of minority-serving institutions and organizations that serve their interests. One illustration of this work is what is known as the Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) initiative. BEAMS was structured as a five-year project intended to foster data-driven campus change initiatives at HBCUs, HSIs, and TCUs. The BEAMS project helps participating MSIs to

The Bologna Process

It's a process, not processed meat.

My IHEP colleague Clifford Adelman, known for his groundbreaking research work in his former life at the U.S. Department of Education, is heading up this new line of inquiry. Cliff's recent speech about Bologna around the country, titled "Bologna Is a Process, Not a Processed Meat," gives you some sense of his views about our current state of knowledge in the U.S. about these important changes taking place in Europe.

The Process, established originally by 29 education ministers in 1999, has many important dimensions. While the establishment of a European Higher Education Area that is globally competitive and influential lies at its core, the revolution seeks to develop a lifelong dynamic of certification, credentialing, and documentation of knowledge and skills that is sufficiently transparent to be recognized and linked to the labor market across borders. It involves at least ten different dimensions:

1. An 8-level "European Qualifications Framework" (EQF) that encompasses both higher education and occupational training;
2. The refinement of national qualifications frameworks to reference the EQF levels;
3. Common course and training credit systems (ECTS) based on student workload, a very different approach to time-on-task than that of the U.S. credit currency;
4. "Zones of Mutual Trust" that facilitate student mobility from institution-to-institution and from country-to-country;
5. Diploma Supplements that document the content of degrees;
6. "Europass" that combines standard curriculum vitae with a "language portfolio" and Diploma Supplements as a living, accessible individual record of lifelong learning;
7. A learning outcomes approach to all documentation of credentials;
8. The evolution of quality assurance processes to assure the comparability of credentials across borders;
9. A continent-wide supporting information system devoted to the assessment and recognition of qualifications; and
10. A supportive Tuning Educational Structures project that works with individual institutions of higher education to produce comparable curricula, a common course and training credit systems methodology and statements of student learning outcomes.

enhance their capacity to collect and use data for institutional decision-making and accountability, and to create a “culture of evidence” where research and data are key forces behind campus change. Early next year, IHEP will be publishing a monograph that details some of the many ways that MSIs have seen success, including increases in short-term retention and NSSE scores, changes in institutional decision-making either through the use of more data or through collaboration across campus, receiving additional external funding in part because BEAMS action plans help address pressing and pertinent needs, and regional and national recognition for the work undertaken through the BEAMS project.

Pressure from China

I think the key point here is that the lessons learned from BEAMS can be helpful for MSIs and non-MSIs alike, as they consider how to build their own institutional capacity for using data to improve student retention and degree attainment. This is an exciting and largely uncharted area where new and important lessons can be learned to improve student success.

Where else can we look for models and ideas? If you consider what our national needs are in the specific sense of human capital, it's clear that we are looking at an enormous shortage of skilled workers in the not-too-distant future. Already, we are seeing corporations recruiting heavily overseas in critical workforce sectors like technology, and by 2020 we will be looking at a gap of about 14 million people to fill jobs that require a college education. Unless we plan to radically alter our immigration policies—an unlikely scenario in the current political context—we will need to significantly increase the number of people who go to college. Just a decade ago, China educated less than one half of the total people enrolled in higher education compared to the U.S. Today, China has the largest higher education system in the world, having surpassed American enrollments sometime in the last two

years. The global economic marketplace for university-educated personnel will soon be exerting tremendous pressure on the past dominance of the U.S. system.

We can learn from Europe

Perhaps the best example of where we can learn from the experiences of other nations is the treasure trove of knowledge to be gleaned from what has happened in European higher education as a result of the Bologna Process, a revolution involving 45 countries, 16 million students, and 4,000 institutions that have all agreed to adopt common rules for degrees, credits, credentials and communication of student outcomes. In dimensions that cut across language and culture, and in ways that are turning some of the world's most change-averse higher education institutions in radically new directions, Bologna represents, in my view, the most important, coordinated strategy to create change in higher education anywhere in the last 50 years. (See sidebar, “*The Bologna Process*,” p. 28.)

IHEP has launched an initiative to create a new understanding of this rapidly changing global context for higher education learning and credentialing and the impact of these changes on U.S. higher education. “The Measuring Global Performance Initiative” is focusing on two key areas of inquiry: The first is better understanding and interpreting for an American audience what has been unfolding in Europe over the past decade under the Bologna Process, the details and challenges of which are largely unknown to U.S. policymakers or which have been caricatured as having something to do with three-year degrees. And the second is the nature of comparative educational attainment data for adult populations that are commonly cited by U.S. policymakers to steer both public opinion and the U.S. regulatory environment.

The Gates doctrine and beyond

Not all that is taking place in Europe or for that matter in any other part of the world is comparable or directly transferable to the U.S. context. But already, we are beginning to see some

important aspects of the work taking place under the Bologna Process that might drive new and innovative thinking here in the U.S. Among these possible changes are: developing detailed and public degree qualification frameworks in students' major fields; revising the reference points and terms of our credit system; introducing a new class of postsecondary learning credentials; refining our definition and treatment of part-time students; and developing a distinctive version of a diploma supplement that summarizes individual student achievement.

Bill Gates' simple declaration that our measure of success as human beings should be driven by a willingness to reduce inequity and thereby contribute to our collective well being is an important goal to achieve.

The two illustrations I have used—looking at the experiences of minority-serving colleges and universities, and examining the large-scale changes taking place in higher education in other parts of the world—are certainly not the only new areas for inquiry. For example, we might want to recognize that higher education is an industry that can learn from other industries. We might want to examine the experiences of the health care industry, the banking and finance sectors, and the other service sector industries to explore how they have addressed both pricing and cost issues and to learn from both their successes and failures. Similarly, we might look to the model of the U.S. military and its efforts to educate large numbers of highly mobile, part-time, diverse populations.

These and other new avenues may help to provide new ideas, motivation, and inspiration for our work in higher education at a time when so much is at stake for our national well being.

Jamie P. Merisotis is former president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy and was named president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation for Education in January 2008. This article is adapted from a keynote address delivered in Nov. 2007. Email: jmerisotis@luminafoundation.org