

Trends & Insights

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

JANUARY 2022

The Promise of Higher Education in the Contested Post-COVID Era

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The effect of the coronavirus pandemic was immediate, unprecedented, and dramatic, changing almost every aspect of our lives overnight. In fact, one of the most amazing aspects was the way in which people around the world responded so quickly and adapted.

Colleges and universities responded, swiftly shifting teaching and learning online and conducting university operations remotely. Global networks of researchers shared data and science-based information to identify a vaccine, create tests for antibodies, and test drugs useful for treating COVID-19. Universities developed educational and training opportunities to help people whose employment had ended or changed to reskill.

The emergency phase generated truly heroic responses from higher education. But as we emerge into a “new normal” phase, the future remains uncertain. Trends that were affecting our communities and economies around the world prior to the pandemic remain—and many are accelerating or mutating (to use a word commonly associated with the virus itself). Underlying competitive weaknesses and socioeconomic inequalities have been exposed. We have already seen evidence of all these effects.

CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS IN THE FIELD

Not for the first time, the role and responsibilities of higher education are coming under scrutiny. Responding to these dynamics brings the strategic capacity of college and university leadership to the fore.

In this contribution, I focus on two aspects—and in doing so, present some provocations. First, I briefly reflect on three issues and the resultant challenges and tensions that emerge and, second, I ruminate on some implications for colleges and universities, and for internationalization.

1. More people are participating in higher education *but* more people are “left behind.”

One of the big success stories of the past 50 years has been the massification of higher education. Worldwide participation has been increasing at a rate of approximately 4 percent a year since 1995. Across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, participation levels are projected to rise to 49 percent over the next few years. This growth is reflected also in the number of officially accredited and recognized universities—rising from around 12,000 in 1997 to more than 20,000 in 2021 (IAU and UNESCO 2021)—albeit the number is likely much higher because of how higher education institutions are defined and categorized in different countries.

The United States was one of the first countries to experience massification, followed by European countries. Despite growing in overall participation

rates and spending more than other countries on education, the United States is now falling behind other OECD countries, and inequalities are growing (OECD 2021b). When compared with other advanced countries, a greater portion of the U.S. adult population has obtained undergraduate degrees but a lower percentage have obtained postgraduate degrees (OECD 2018; Barshay 2019). Nationally, rising average participation rates over the past 2 decades hide the fact that the United States has one of the highest levels of regional disparities in undergraduate degree attainments across OECD countries, ranging from 32 percent in West Virginia to 67 percent in the District of Columbia (OECD 2021a, 2021b).

It is also important to consider that 60 percent of U.S. citizens do not have a college degree (Kelly 2015). And as older people retire, the U.S. domestic talent pool has, on average, poorer literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills than other countries (Barshay 2019; Fain 2021). Despite progress with some underrepresented groups, other subsets of the population are now falling behind. While the gender gap begins to close with respect to enrollment and completions, a new gap is opening with respect to male underperformance (Reeves and Smith 2021). Given that education is a human capital pipeline, these trends are occurring when more jobs require a minimum of 2 years of postsecondary education (Carnevale et al. 2019; Carnevale et al. 2017).

Sadly, in the United States, as in other developed countries, as more people participate in higher education, access to public goods and life chances are increasingly stratified. It is no longer simply a question of access to higher education—but access to which school, college, or university. Despite decades of initiatives, socioeconomic characteristics continue to track learners through the education system and into the labor market and, in the process, reinforce gender, ethnic, racial, and regional disparities.

Around the world, “income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half century” (OECD 2017). Educational attainment is a key factor affecting life chances and social status, especially as people with lower educational attainment levels find themselves increasingly left behind by a world rapidly changing due to globalization, demographics, technology, climate change, and new kinds of work (Edelman 2020; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021).

Furthermore, people with higher levels of education are more likely to trust scientists, their national government, and the World Health Organization (WHO) than people with lower levels (Zalc and Maillard 2020). While the pandemic has prompted many people to believe in experts and science, it has also triggered a rise in disbelief and distrust with hoaxes, QAnon, fake news, and misinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccine. These divisions are apparent also in sociopolitical unrest and urban-rural divisions in many countries and fuel a populist backlash and culture war. The post-war social contract has been ignored, leaving too many people caught in a cycle of rising inequality and poor opportunities (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

For too long, colleges and universities have been concerned simply with enrolling and graduating students as if their role or responsibility started and stopped at the campus gate.

2. The world seeing greater global integration, collaboration, and mobility *but* rising geopolitical tensions.

The spirit of internationalization and cultural and scientific exchange has been intrinsic to higher education and the spread of ideas since the earliest universities.

As knowledge and innovation processes have become more dispersed, accessible, and collaborative,

the cross-border movement of people and ideas has become indispensable, and a normal part of scholarly endeavors. Geographic, linguistic, and historical ties remain strong. Yet, universities are simultaneously collaborators and competitors.

The transformation of colleges and universities from being local institutions with strong links to specific cities or regions to having international—and geopolitical—significance for individuals and nations has been one of the most noteworthy features of the current phase of globalization. Research collaborations have tripled over the past 15 years (Crew 2019). Internationally coauthored papers, as a percentage of all scientific papers, have more than doubled over the past 20 years, accounting for a significant portion of the output growth by scientifically advanced countries. The search for vaccines and therapies against COVID-19 follows the triumph of the Human Genome Project (1990), which involved 20 universities and research centers. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed on in 2015 and now frame government and university goals almost everywhere. Their significance rests on formal recognition that societal problems are territorially blind; no country has the knowledge, research capacity, or capabilities to solve them on its own.

These developments reflect deeper shifts in the global landscape as new players and new mega-regions emerge. Global university rankings are highly criticized, but they confirm this move toward a multipolar world.

Most people look at the top 100 universities, but the more significant changes are found among the top 500. We see a pipeline of universities and countries emerging, and correspondingly the biggest decline of U.S. and European institutions. For example, China increased from having just 16 universities in the top 500 in 2004 to 82 in 2021—an increase of more than 400 percent. In comparison, the United Kingdom experienced

a decline from 42 universities in the top 500 in 2004 to 38 in 2021—a decline of 9.5 percent—while the United States experienced a 24 percent decrease from 170 in 2004 to 129 in 2021 (Hazelkorn and Mihut 2021a).

Higher education depends on, and has been both a promoter and beneficiary of, globalization. Today, more than 40 countries are involved in global science; more than 100 countries were actively engaged in research to develop effective COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

The rise of anti-immigration, racism, and xenophobia are the uglier side of this shift—from a world in which a few countries dominated the global economy, science, and politics to one that is increasingly multipolar, multicultural, and multiracial. Together these factors are contributing to the ongoing “shift away from the white middle-aged alpha male culture that has dominated” (Watson 2010) and altering the historic coherence between culture, ethnicity, and territorially-defined nations. These tensions at national and international levels tell a lot about both big power competition and geopolitics today as well as the rise of neonationalism and populism (Douglass 2021).

3. There is more focus on the public good, but colleges and universities are too often guilty of “insider trading.”

The millennium years have been dominated by pursuit of world-classness—often presented as an ambition and strategy to rise in the global university rankings (Hazelkorn 2015, 2016; Hazelkorn and Mihut 2021b). The race for individual or global reputation is pitted against service to society.

Remember, rankings measure the outcomes of historical advantage. Elite universities and nations benefit from accumulated public and private wealth and investment over decades if not centuries (Whitford 2021). They benefit also from

attracting high-achieving and -socioeconomic students who graduate on time and go on to have successful, high-paying careers. These factors are reproduced in the indicators which rankings use and popularize.

[US News and World Report rankings](#) emphasize pre-entry and other socioeconomic attributes (e.g., graduation rates/retention, performance and graduate indebtedness, resources, selectivity, alumni giving) as proxies for quality (Morse and Brooks 2021). The selectivity index (7 percent), in particular, measures excellence according to how effective a university is in keeping students out; in other words, being a gatekeeper rather than a gateway.

Also important, global rankings consider only about 5 percent of the world's universities. The top 100 universities listed by the global [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#) represents only 1.4 percent of total students worldwide—and only 6.5 percent of U.S. students. Most students do not attend these institutions.

So the public is justifiably asking if colleges and universities are serving its interests. Higher education is not an innocent victim.

Academic culture has focused too much on elite models and self-reflexive modes of accountability. Enrollment scandals have exposed an incredible industry of “exceptionalism” and “insider trading,” which colleges and universities have used to widen the gap between cost and price—capitalizing on the monetary value that rankings bring them.

We must broaden our concepts of quality and excellence—and adopt different approaches for assessing what universities do and how we enroll, recruit, and support our staff and students.

THREE ACTION POINTS

The relationship of the university to society is not new—but it has been given greater saliency as the challenges facing society have intensified. Three key points to address such challenges deserve further consideration, namely: the civic university agenda, internationalization beyond mobility, and strengthening multilateralism in higher education.

1. The Civic University Agenda

Beyond being simply a slogan or tagging the SDGs to a mission statement, civic engagement should be holistically embedded as a core pillar of higher education's mission. This goes beyond the concept of service, which usually refers to serving on academic committees—considered valuable to one's self or career rather than service to society. It also goes beyond the notion of “third mission,” which sets societal engagement apart from teaching and research.

Instead, civic engagement should become intrinsic to teaching and learning, research and innovation, student experience, and the culture of the university.

Societal problems are not the sole result or responsibility of higher education, but colleges and universities must rethink how quality and excellence are understood, pursued, and reinforced or recognized. What is the public value that they bring to citizens and their communities? Are we sufficiently focused on student success and our own effectiveness as teachers and responsibilities as scholars? Are we sufficiently concerned about the impacts and benefits on society and the environment of our scholarship rather than just publication and citation counts—or have we confused public interest with self-interest?

Universities have a responsibility to engage with the problems facing society. After all, we teach the doctors and health professionals, social scientists, linguists, and engineers, as well as teachers.

2. Internationalization Beyond Mobility

Internationalization has been a life-enhancing opportunity for many students and academics—but its importance has primarily benefited the higher education community. There are of course transactional benefits for businesses and society, but it is unclear whether the wider community understands or gains from internationalization. Keep in mind that only 1 percent of U.S. students are enrolled abroad—and mostly in English-speaking countries—and approximately 60 percent of U.S. citizens do not have a passport (Goldstein 2017).

This is a good time to bring the benefits of internationalization home, and not just to the campus. We should rethink internationalization by deepening civic engagement. We should think about how working with communities—urban and rural—can be made a core component of internationalization, increasing opportunities for students and faculty to contribute tangibly to society. How can the SDGs be linked directly with internationalization and aligned with teaching and research in concrete and visible ways (Brandenburg et al. 2019)?

3. Time to Strengthen Multilateralism in Higher Education

The current pandemic provides a good opportunity to take a fresh look at the key enablers of international higher education and global science. There has been lots of praise for scientific collaboration but there is growing concern about the scale of the challenge to vaccinate the world—and who benefits from publicly-funded research.

Internationalization and multilateralism may be back on the table under the Biden presidency (U.S. Departments of State, Education, and

Education USA 2021). Will the U.S. government's commitment to a positive role on the world stage help transform higher education from being either a passive or transactional participant?

The essential work behind mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications, quality assurance and accreditation, credit transfer facilities, student admissions and mobility protocols, intellectual property rights, and policy advocacy have been taken for granted or gone unacknowledged.

Open science—which promotes sharing practices of research and making the results of publicly-funded research publicly accessible—is at risk of being overtaken by nations and publishers intent on enhancing their own economic competitiveness.

History has shown us that collaboration works. Yet, there are no international fora that bring higher education together with ministers, senior civil servants, and other organizations to discuss key issues of global concern and identify common solutions. Now is the time to establish an international assembly for higher education and global science to promote and sustain international collaboration. NAFSA and the international education community could have a role here.

IN CONCLUSION...

Today, we sit at another historic junction—one in which higher education has the opportunity and responsibility to play a critical role in (re)building a shared sense of societal purpose and identity. Internationalization can play a major role in ensuring that colleges and universities recommit to the values of public service and social, cultural, and economic engagement. Societies' challenges are so complex they necessitate a well-informed, engaged, and internationalized student, academic, and citizenry.

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