



## Is There a Future for Public Higher Education?

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**P**lace yourself in the position of the president of a well-established, large New England business. Your company has existed for more than 100 years, serving five generations of local consumers. In some cases, you know them personally. They depend on you and you on them. But now your board of directors has ordered you to take a thorough, critical look at the business. You make the following stunning revelations:

- Between 1990 and 2000, you lost over 4 percent of your customers while your competitors gained 9 percent.
- Your facilities are old, in need of major repair or replacement, not just cosmetic improvements.
- Your competitors are eating into your market with less expensive, more convenient offerings via the Internet.
- Your board increased your funding over the past 10 years, but the increases don't match those of your competitors, who have also raised more outside capital to upgrade their services.
- Your workforce is aging. Some refuse to adapt to the changing marketplace. Some have left for greener pastures.

After a difficult analysis, you summarize the situation: fewer customers, costly repairs, reduced revenue, staffing problems and stiff competition.

Your board says that until you fix the problems, you will not get a dime more. You say the company is pursuing a worthy mission that has done tremendous good for the community and economy. Board members look at you with glazed eyes. You think they

may be pondering whether it is time for a new president.

This could be a typical scenario in today's retail stores, software or technology businesses. But it is also a scenario played out at New England's public colleges and universities.

The public higher education marketplace is much different in New England than in other parts of the country. It is true that some New England public universities have lured very dedicated and talented faculty. Some have invested millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements, launched innovative distance learning programs and responded quickly to workforce demands.

But here are some more troubling facts:

- Between 1990 and 2000, while America's 18-24-year-old population grew by nearly 2 percent, New England's shrank by 17 percent.
- During the same period, enrollment at public colleges and universities grew by 9 percent nationally, but dropped by 4 percent in New England.
- Americans devote \$216 per capita in state tax dollars to higher education; New Englanders devote just \$168 per capita. In addition, Americans direct nearly \$8 of every \$1,000 in personal income to state support for higher education; the New England figure is under \$5.
- New England's tuitions and mandatory fees are America's highest—\$4,892 on average for state residents at public four-year campuses, compared with \$3,754 nationally.
- States across the nation increased their grant aid during the 1990s by 100 percent. But New England nudged up state aid funds by just 17 percent.

These trends have a dramatic impact upon educational opportunity for the many New England students who are not served by the region's

private colleges. Higher education policy analyst Thomas G. Mortenson has noted that inadequate public funding of higher education damages opportunity in three ways: by limiting enrollment, reducing faculty or course offerings and or raising tuition and fees. Underfunding also compromises the quality of facilities available to students.

New England is the birthplace of education in America, steeped in a great tradition of public and private schools. But now some are wondering whether our public colleges will fall victim to problems that plague many urban elementary and secondary schools. There are now calls for charter colleges, vouchers and alternative certification.

Over the past 130 years, when American education reached similar crossroads, policymakers with great foresight gave us the Morrill Act, which created land-grant universities, the G.I. Bill, Pell Grants and student loans, which provided access to those who were previously denied. We are overdue for a technology-focused, federal initiative aimed at public institutions—a 21st century Morrill Act.

But more funding is not the whole answer. Our economy has changed dramatically with new technology and innovation. So too must higher education. We need to develop offerings that fit customers' lifestyles, explore more effective technology-based instruction, focus on public centers of excellence and meet the critical workforce needs of our economy—all this while we continue to meet the primary mission of our public institutions: providing access to quality education for all.

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