



Seeking New Measures of Higher Education's Health

EVAN S. DOBELLE

How do you measure the health of New England higher education? Each year, CONNECTION's "Trends and Indicators" issue tracks statistics like college enrollment and graduation rates, average tuition, demographic trends, and research funding, reflecting—and indeed shaping—a consensus on the important criteria for institutional and regional success.

As the economic and civic demands on higher education grow, however, we need new ways to measure our effectiveness. We need to promote how well our colleges and universities fulfill their obligations to their students, their graduates and their communities over the long term.

We know, for instance, that the average college graduate can expect to earn 80 percent more per year than the average high school graduate. She will also live longer and have a better overall quality of life.

That fact tells us little though about how well today's college graduates are doing compared with graduates 10, 20, or 30 years ago. Thanks to stagnant wages and exploding personal debt—much of it acquired to finance their education—more and more young New Englanders cannot afford to buy homes or start families. Many must forgo dream jobs in lower-paying fields like public service and the arts in order to meet loan payments. The burden falls especially hard on students from low- and middle-income families, threatening college's traditional role as a path to a better life.

We must get a better grasp on how the return-on-investment in a college education is changing over time. We should develop new indicators to move beyond popular college ranking systems,

which focus on admissions "inputs" data like SATs, and instead emphasize "outputs," like whether an institution's graduates find success and contribute to society in later life. Neither families nor policymakers and funders will continue to accept claims of higher education's benefits on good faith alone. But new, meaningful metrics could provide an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of our higher education system.

We need to know not only if graduates get their money's worth, but also if communities and employers do. How well are students learning, and how long do they retain what they have learned? When they accept their diplomas, are they ready to step into the world of work and civic responsibility? More to the point, which graduates are ready, which are not, and what accounts for the differences?

We should look at the benefits higher education brings to our local communities and to our region as a whole. How engaged are students with the towns and neighborhoods around them? What about with the world beyond our borders? Are spare hours filled with volunteering? What balance of civic and academic life do faculties model for their students?

Who is going to sustain a vibrant democratic society? Some colleges have begun to boast rightfully about how many of their students join the Peace Corps. Why not develop an indicator to measure community service locally and globally on every campus?

How well are we measuring demographic aspects of higher education? When graduates leave campus, do they stay in New England, or are they taking their skills and energy elsewhere? If

they stay in the region, how long do they remain? How many start families? We know that New England's future demands a well-educated workforce, but do we know how well the region's colleges and universities are supplying that needed talent?

Research and development (R&D) is another area that we know instinctively has an impact on the condition of New England higher education. But is every R&D dollar spent as good as the next? Which research is leading to new medical breakthroughs or creating new companies or enriching undergraduate experiences? It is one thing to track funding levels or the number of patents, but new indices are needed to gauge how well university research improves lives.

None of these measurements will be simple to develop. Most of the relevant information exists, but it is scattered among alumni relations and registrars' offices, department records and public sources. By identifying meaningful outcomes and applying the latest analytical tools, we will gain much needed understanding of not only the health of our higher education system, but also of the condition of our changing public mission.

The idea here is not to propose more onerous requirements for colleges and universities. Rather, by quantifying our effectiveness in these areas, we can better articulate our contributions, better understand our challenges and enhance the perception of higher education's economic impact.

Evan S. Dobelle is president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and publisher of CONNECTION. Email: edobelle@nebhe.org.