Fix Higher Education ... *Before It Breaks!*
Challenges and Opportunities for New England

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Brainpower really is New England’s only renewable natural energy resource. Yet New England has never been a generous public supporter of higher education. My wife Carolyn Thornberry’s doctoral work reveals that New England’s base political culture persists in seeing higher education as a *private* commodity. We are spared the crisis of states like California when the expectation of higher education entitlement crashes up against the demand for fiscal limits. Instead, our challenge is to even notice as the enterprise rusts.

In good times and bad, we expect and, therefore, accept relatively low levels of public support for and investment in higher education. And when we do invest, it is more likely to be in buildings than students and faculty. Meanwhile, our faith in the marketplace assures us that mounting disparities in college preparation, access, affordability, completion and indebtedness will all somehow sort themselves out. We New Englanders are afflicted by the corrupted maxim that “government which governs least governs best” and the wrongheaded advice, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

If it’s difficult to move our political culture, it’s next to impossible to move the ancient, institutional culture of higher education. Academe is complex, diffuse, prickly about prerogatives and reflexively suspicious of internal change and external engagement with its “organized anarchy.” For all our good intentions, higher education is deeply challenged in its capacity for change and action. And to be fair, asking higher education to change its mission or do what it is not traditionally prepared to do is risky. We must not sacrifice breadth and depth in teaching and scholarship, for example, to embrace ease in training and credentialing.

Colleges and universities must continue to serve Thomas Jefferson’s belief that education is the soul of citizenship. The learned and practiced skills of civic awareness, debate and consensus are all the more important at a time when so many of us, in Robert Putnam’s metaphor, are “bowling alone”—and doing so in our separate blue and red lanes. The virtual citizenship of web-based interactions is no substitute for the virtuous citizenship of actual contact.

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Higher education is a bridge to opportunity. It was when I was the first in my family to go to college. It’s more so in today’s knowledge-based global economy where every year of educational attainment is a proven multiplier of well-being.

Higher education is also a vital source of renewal. New England colleges and graduate schools are a vital national and international draw for those who come here to learn and help counter the demography of a region aging in place. As businesses and employers as well as centers of research and development, New England campuses are economic engines whose everyday decisions add to or subtract from the common good.

Higher education is, or can be, a tremendous force for engagement in and improvement of society. Among scholarship’s most important lessons is the ethic of thinking globally and acting locally. Colleges and universities can be powerful partners with their communities, especially in renewing cities and school systems. They can form more effective partnerships with other colleges, universities, businesses, associations and foundations to reduce our separate disadvantages and multiply our shared advantages. And we can all build on the partnership represented regionally by the New England Board of Higher Education. Indeed, while Red Sox and Yankees fans weep in their beer over their mutual fate this past season, it may be time to broaden the 50-year-old New England Higher Education Compact that created NEDHE into a reinvigorated Northeastern partnership including New York and New Jersey.

Finally, let us reach back to our New England collegiate roots and imagine again the city on the hill that was once our higher horizon. Getting there will require greater vision and investment. Both the College Board and the Committee for Economic Development this past fall warned of real and growing “cracks in the education pipeline.” Higher education costs continue to outpace family income and financial aid. Unacceptable levels of debt are a deterrent first impression for many would-be college graduates and an immediate negative return on investment for many more. With the shift to non-means-tested tuition tax credits and merit aid, students in the upper half of wealth distribution now benefit more than those in the lower
half. And the slowly narrowing gaps
in high school preparation between
whites and nonwhites and rich and
poor is unmatched by any less disparity
in access, retention, completion and
the added cost of delayed completion.
Moreover, colleges and universities
are still not leading by example with
good pay and benefits for non-profes-
sional staff. We continue to underesti-
mate the need for our own professional
development, believing instead that
some magical process turns good
professors into good managers. We
are still generationally mismatching
technology-savvy students with non-
technology-savvy campuses. Higher
education remains wholly unprepared
for another looming demographic tidal
wave: the aging that will drastically
reduce our traditional age cohort
and public priority. And the National
Center for Policy and Higher
Education’s 50-state report card
reminds us that higher education is
still not “measuring up” in terms of
providing the evidence of learning that
will be demanded by consumers. Will
we answer the center’s call to shape
these outcome standards ourselves or let
others make a Procrustean bed for us?
At the same time, colleges and
universities are too disconnected
from broader education policy. The
continuum of learning that begins in
early childhood should lead through
higher education seamlessly. In New
England, beyond the usual suspects,
we are not yet maximizing our potential
as research and development engines
of innovation, invention and job creation.
We are not partnering enough with
school systems or workplaces or the
communities where we are neighbors
but often far from neighborly. Higher
education also shrinks too much from
advocacy, lest someone take offense and
carve at our own little piece of the pie.

Connecticut and all New England
remain blessed with an extraordinary
array of colleges and universities. The
region’s campuses house enormous
caches of talent and continue to attract
students from around the world. By
refocusing our institutional missions
and the common mission of groups
like the New England Board of Higher
Education, we can create still more
world-class opportunities in teaching,
learning, scholarship and service. We
just might make ourselves greater
than the sum of our parts.

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