

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

CONNECTION, THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, is published five times a year by the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111-1325
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Vol. XVI, No. 4 Spring 2002
ISSN 0895-6405
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Publisher: Robert A. Weygand
Executive Editor: John O. Harney
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Charlotte Stratton
NEBHE/CONNECTION Interns:
Ried Artis, Albert Neal
Design and Production: The Publication Group

Director of Advertising Sales and Marketing: Myha Nguyen

Subscription Information: \$20 per year (5 issues); regular issues \$3.95 each; annual directory issue \$14.95.

Advertising rates are available upon request.

CONNECTION is printed in New England. CONNECTION is indexed in PAIS International and in ERIC's *Current Index to Journals in Education*. CONNECTION is available in microform and electronically from University Microfilms, 800 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. A cumulative index of CONNECTION articles and abstracts of recent articles are accessible on the World Wide Web at www.nebhe.org.

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EDITOR'S MEMO

This issue of CONNECTION is data-packed, brimming with numbers and trends that are tracked (along with the expert commentary our earlier data issues lacked).

Some of these data have much to say, like a batting average or an ERA.

Come to think of it, some higher education numbers have created a whole new sport, like those in the rankings by *U.S. News and World Report*.

(One object of that game is to reject not fewer students, but more. A Hartford college accepted just 29 percent of those who applied and, among all liberal arts colleges, was ranked 24. No wonder the validity, though not the gravity, of the rankings is typically disavowed by all but the very best-endowed.)

To be sure, some trends in higher education elude quantification—like levels of grade inflation, undeserved graduation, student imagination, societal expectation and tuition-paying parent frustration (to say nothing of dissent strangulation and grad student unionization).

We focus on things that we can measure more easily—things like enrollment and R&D, college finance and demography.

Demography, they say, is destiny—from low birth rates to diversity.

Migration data change with the weather and move with people, from brain drain to brain gain, maybe even brain melt so many move to the Sunbelt. To deal with this, some colleges base aid not on need but on merit—the better to attract students with both brains and good credit.

As always, the data tell how New England's R&D numbers are no longer the nation's best—how shifts in population and government policies spread the research wealth to the South and to the West.

But numbers do lie. Some are too low; some are too high. Some are optimistic; some are grimly realistic. Some are not data at all, but just old-fashioned statistic.

Also remember that a lot of higher education data lag by a year or two or sometimes more. Usually, this matters little in determining what's in store. But this year, one senses, it matters a lot because of what September 11 has wrought.

For example, in the months following the attacks, one national survey found long-distance applicants grew a bit more rare, while local ones offered plenty to pare—*U.S. News*, are you listening there?

A Clark University official told me that post-9/11 campus visits surged. Sure, a lot of factors had merged. But none so clearly as the stay-close-to-home in a medium-sized-city urge. Indeed, the Worcestersters of the world that once frightened families of the college-bound, now seemed strangely safe and sound. But of course, data have a way of twisting the truth around.

By year's end, even many anxious international students changed their minds and stayed, some spurred on by new financial aid, as campuses made forward-looking decisions to grant foreign students need-blind admissions.

And by 2002, the question facing New England higher education was not how far students would fly from the nest, but rather where would land Professor Cornel West. The Harvard prof was under fire for, among other things, too much rap. Uh oh, hate to see an editor fall into that trap.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.