

Reform and Innovation in the Changing Ecology of U.S. Higher Education

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What is this “ecology”?

e•col•o•gy (n): “The science of the relationships between organisms and their environments”
(thefreedictionary.com).

We offer “ecology” as a useful heuristic, to help us imagine the whole of US higher education, and to model relationships...

...relationships...

...among schools, competing and/or collaborating for students, revenue, legitimacy, prestige;

...among kinds of schools (e.g., research universities, community colleges, proprietary schools);

...among institutional sectors (e.g., government, business, philanthropy);

...among cultural ideas (e.g., “welfare” and “education” and “economic development”)

This imagery is important...

...*intellectually*, because it has consequences for our units of analysis and conceptions of causation;

...*substantively*, because it helps us see how the purposes, funding, and relevant parties of US higher education are undergoing profound change

Chronic deficits: A fundamental shift in the resource environment of US higher education

- The basic legitimacy of higher education + stable and/or growing state government meant that more higher education was always better, and possible, from 1945 – 1980
- Today all state services are subject to chronic budget reductions, and higher education is no longer a privileged interest in legislatures

The second academic revolution

- Chronic contractions in state higher education budgets; structural deficits in states throughout the US (*vs. rhetoric of scarcity at federal level*)
- Little capacity expansion in 4 Year public postsecondary
- Ambitious new providers: for-profits
- New delivery media and data analytics
- Accountability imperative on all public services
- New philanthropies seeking to architect a new higher education
- Context of long-term globalization of manufacturing

New entrants: The growing complexity of US higher education

- New clients: Time-starved workers, less academically prepared students
- “Consumers”—a freshly salient category of actor
- Investors
- Advocates of new delivery technologies
- Advocates of new assessments

What should social scientists do?

- Do not presume the fundamental purposes, essential quality, or current organization of US higher education will persist.
- Be skeptical of the extent to which social-science-of-higher-education-as-usual is up to the job of predicting or planning the future
- Talk about it

Emerging Themes of Research Review

- Replace the current dominant higher education imagery predicated on selectivity
- Access institutions are mostly framed by what they lack—research, student residences, etc.
- Use a horizontal imagery predicated on access institutions as a positive value with various types of forms
- Most policy research focuses on student flows and economic demand—access, aid, graduation, etc.
- Focus more research on the organizational and supply side of institutions

Emerging themes of research review

- More research emphasis on market, field, and organizational decision making
- Higher education research mostly has the institutional decision making and internal financial allocations as a black box
- Very little known about the connection between policy and teaching/learning
- Research on politics and policy levers much deeper for K-12
- Can major new higher education policy take place until politicians perceive more popular discontent?

Next Steps

- Commission several papers from a roster of top researchers to refocus social science attention on the broad-access sector along several dimensions:
 - Variation in organizational forms
 - The ecology of control (e.g., governance/regulatory structures)
 - Personnel (e.g., training, labor markets)
 - Student trajectories through broad-access schools
 - New conceptions of student diversity that are appropriate to the sector
- Assemble a panel of policy makers, practitioners, and leaders in the broad-access sector to help guide our research
- Train/recruit new researchers to study the broad-access sector

Our policy agenda...

- Focuses on the earliest stages of the policy process
 - Reframes policy problems and the assumptions about how to address them
 - Raises awareness and concern so that problems have priority in policy agendas
- Focuses on multiple audiences in the policy system:
 - Organizations that fund or research higher education
 - Governance structures (e.g., federal and stated governments, trustees, faculty members)
 - Networks and brokers that reach multiple audiences (e.g., WICHE, American Association of Community Colleges)
- Uses both direct and indirect means of dissemination—recognizing that knowledge seeps, percolates, and creeps through the policy system

More information is available at: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/ecology>