

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25, 2013

Politics, Money and Public Higher Education: A Perfect Storm

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The Rising Costs of Higher Education

According to the United States Census Bureau, between 1980 and 2010, mean household income when adjusted for inflation has risen only a few percentage points for all but the top quintile. The cost of higher education, however, has increased by more than 600 percent. There are many reasons for this: decreased state funding, rapid growth in the size and quality of campus facilities, competition over rankings that spur spending on research, “star” faculty, expensive programs and more.

There is much debate about the value of these increases, but the bottom line is this: the costs of providing higher education have risen rapidly, while state support has declined as percentage of total operating expenses.[1] As a consequence, tuition has risen dramatically — often in double-digit annual increments. Shifting costs to students through tuition is not a viable solution for public higher education, because its core mission is to provide education for the public good.

Until the 2008 recession, there were grumblings about the costs of higher education, but many people felt as though they were

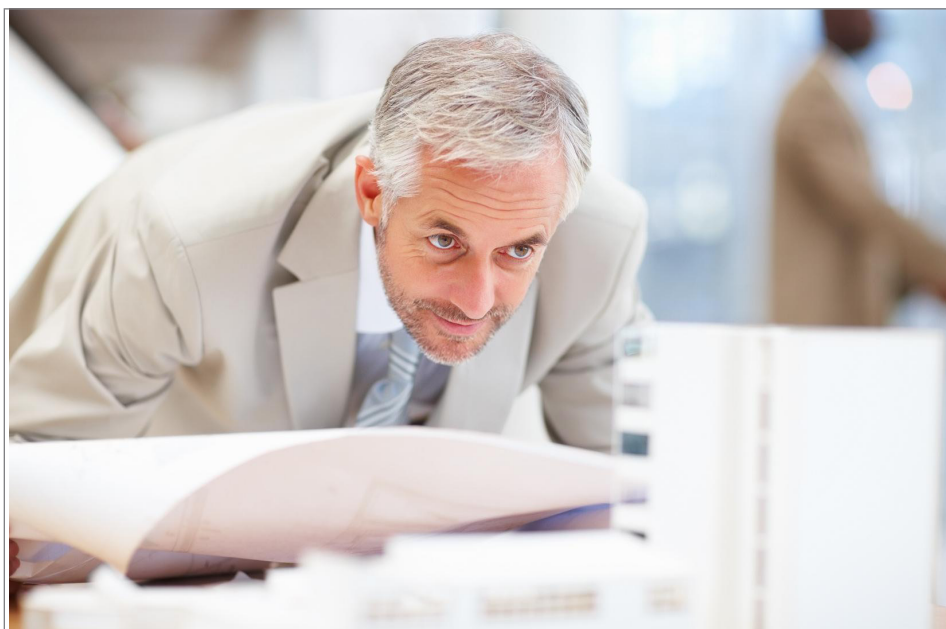


PHOTO BY YURI ARCURS

Against the backdrop of rising costs for higher education and increasing criticism regarding the value of a degree, higher education institutions must be innovative in using their reduced funding to produce greater outcomes than ever before.

still able to afford it. Once the recession hit, however, and financial and real estate markets underwent significant adjustments, many people became acutely aware of their own restricted resources.

Changing Moods and Expectations for Higher Education

By the 2010 midterm election, the mood of the public had turned strongly against government because government was seen as a primary contributor to the recession. Government employees — including public educators — were vilified. Rush Limbaugh called educators “free-loaders,” and other conservative talk show hosts heightened the insults with labels like “blood-suckers” and “parasites.” The public was in no mood to support public employees or programs, and many newly elected political leaders understood their mandates to

be to reduce government spending. Public education at all levels took a significant hit.

While public support for public education has continued to decline, expectations for its performance have continued to rise. An increasingly larger and more diverse segment of the population now enters higher education — from less than 40 percent of the college-eligible population a generation ago to now well over 70 percent. Concurrent are calls across the country to produce more graduates with flexible and adaptable skills to fill the so-called “skills gaps” in fast-changing industries and to find new solutions to complex problems facing the country and the world.

Technologies Create Opportunities

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Financial challenges and public and political pressures are one part of the explanation for why higher education is changing so rapidly today. Technology and industrialization is the other.

As a society, we have come to expect technology and industrialization to both reduce the costs of production and to improve the products. This expectation is affirmed every time we purchase a computer, toaster or television. The ease with which we can surf the 'Net, and in quite nuanced ways, affirms these expectations when we seek information. Yet, while distance education, which has been with us since the 1970s with video and audio transmission, has become commonplace since the late 1990s, technology-assisted education has not reduced the costs of college. To the contrary, many online programs cost more than their face-to-face counterparts because schools add technology costs to the other costs of instructional delivery. These additional costs have contributed to higher tuition or additional fees.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other open educational resources may change this equation. The technology is readily available to provide quality information for free and many universities use free educational offerings as ways to advertise their institutions. What is missing with open educational resources, how-

ever, is any assurance of student learning. By design, open educational resources are open to all; students do not have to prove mastery or even finish courses.

MOOCs are only one part of the technological revolution in education. Beyond the promise of MOOCs providing free, quality content, other technologies now allow education to shift from a focus on information transfer to knowledge utilization. Social media, Web 2.0 interactivity, learning analytics, nuanced search capabilities and access to mega-powered analytic capabilities all help students and faculty alike realize John Dewey's dream that, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."

The University of Wisconsin Flexible Option

It is against this national and global backdrop of financial, technological and demographic imperatives that the University of Wisconsin System is developing a new, competency-based option for degree attainment, designed for a large and underserved population of adult learners. The University of Wisconsin Flexible Option (UW Flex; flex.wisconsin.edu) is built around educational best practices and optimally uses technology in the service of student learning in cost-efficient ways. Students can take full advantage of a broad spectrum of educational opportunities by focusing on program competencies and

high-quality assessments. They learn and access information in whatever formats work best for them, and then demonstrate their mastery through assessments designed and reviewed by University of Wisconsin faculty. This allows higher education costs to be lowered, because students only pay for the education activities they need, and it allows the university to maintain quality control by putting faculty at the forefront of program competencies and assessments.

The "perfect storm" is propelling educational change with both threats and opportunities; UW Flex represents how the University of Wisconsin System is meeting this storm in proactive and student-centered ways. And it is doing so systemically, where the unit of change and innovation is not just a single institution but an entire state system.

Notes

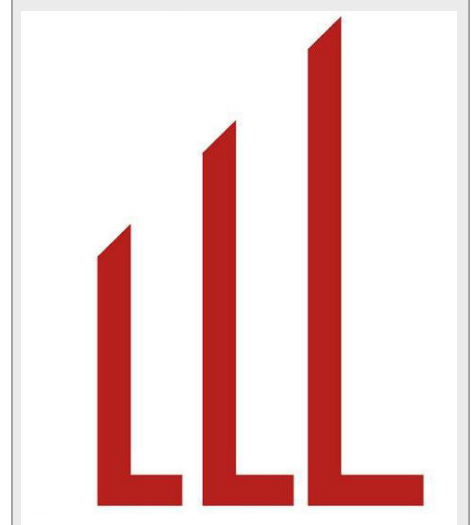
[1] State support has declined continuously for more than 30 years, from providing more than half of the operating budgets of public colleges and universities through the 1970s to roughly 20 percent now, and as low as 5 percent at some state institutions. This decline has occurred through Democratic- and Republican-controlled legislatures and whether the country was in good or bad economic shape. It is a reality, not an aberration.



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