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Review



The Road Ahead for America's Colleges and Universities

Robert B. Archibald & David H. Feldman
(Oxford University Press, 2017, 296 pages)

Change is inevitable for America's universities and colleges. According to Robert Archibald and David Feldman, ahead are internal, external, and technology-related challenges that will have varied impacts; the most dramatic will result from demographic shifts, income inequality, and changes in government support. These challenges often spawn dire predictions of a collapse of the American higher education system.

In their book, *The Road Ahead for America's Colleges and Universities*, Robert Archibald and David Feldman step back from such predictions to provide a careful analysis of five challenges/threats that are facing higher education:

- rising tuition
- falling state support
- growing income equality
- changing labor markets
- evolving educational technology

As economists, they offer a data-supported examination of the issues to provide a better understanding of the challenges confronting modern American universities and colleges. The result is a thoughtful, interesting, and very readable book that should appeal to university and college administrators at all levels, including summer session deans and administrators whose units, by all accounts, are already experiencing considerable organizational change.

Given that summer session units pride themselves on being innovators and trailblazers, this changing landscape gives summer session deans and administrators a chance to use their skills as leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and innovators to help their institutions remain relevant and successful into the future.

Interestingly, the introduction of the book opens with a glimpse into the ways changes may impact universities and colleges. The authors sketch three scenarios from the perspective of alumni who return to their alma mater 25 years after graduation:

- One found the campus void of both students and staff because the university switched its entire curriculum to online delivery in order to cope with loss of state support, rising tuition, and a resulting decline in student numbers.

- In the second scenario, the returning graduate was surprised to find the university now emphasized STEM subjects with programs in the liberal arts being relegated to a service role because student demand shifted to programs that were more highly valued in the job market.
- The alumna in the third scenario experienced “sticker shock” when she realized how much tuition had risen at her alma mater due to increased costs and nominal increases in the university’s endowment with limited student aid and scholarships.

In creating the scenarios, the authors are clear that American higher education is diverse and warn against issuing general statements of cause and effect relating to changing conditions. They recognize that the effects of change (and appropriate reactions) will vary by institution (institutional type). Still, the focus of the book is primarily on four-year nonprofit institutions offering traditional four-year degrees.

Archibald and Feldman claim that much of the discourse on the demise of higher education is flawed because of oversimplification and the default talk about a typical university or college. At the same time, in Chapter 3, the authors talk about the “college bundle,” the package of services offered by all universities and colleges, and the reason why the package of services has, and will continue to have, staying power because it provides value through a reduction of transactional cost.

Part 2 of the book goes to the heart of the matter—the threats to higher education in America. Divided into five chapters, the authors label the threats as

- internal (rising costs of higher education and the perceived value of a university or college education),
- external (stagnating family income and public disinvestment), and
- technological (the online revolution in higher education).

Each chapter carefully examines the threat by bringing data to bear and exposing the complexity of the issue. The book explodes myths often trumpeted in news headlines and replaces them with fact-based explanations of each issue. In other words, the authors provide a measured assurance that the “sky isn’t falling” on American higher education. Rather, they recognize a changing landscape with varying impacts on universities and colleges.

For example, the authors suggest the claim that students are being priced out of a college or university education is a myth that is largely based on a preoccupation with list prices (tuition) that the majority of students do not pay. The authors proceed to offer a more realistic account of the ability-to-pay issue, including discussing implications of enrollment management decisions, tuition discounting, family income shifts, and student debt.

In the final three chapters that make up the third part of the book, Archibald and Feldman remind us that one size does not fit all when it comes to examining “the road ahead for America’s colleges and universities.” They stress that particular circumstances will, to a great extent, determine

whether institutions thrive, simply survive, or fail going forward. They emphasize that predictions of dire consequences (failed system) for higher education are not true; rather, change will continue to happen as it has in the past, although at an expected accelerated pace. Overall, one of their concerns about changes to higher education is the development of an increased gap between the “have and have-not” institutions.

In Chapter 10, the authors answer two questions: Which threats will be most daunting, and which types of institutions will fare better or worse as a result of the threats? In addition to commenting on institutions by type, they provide some general answers to these questions. Claiming there are no simple solutions, Archibald and Feldman assert that institutions have decisions to make as they move forward.

In my view, summer session units also have decisions to make in terms of the role they want to play in supporting institutional decisions. For example, summer session units could

- increase access opportunities for underserved student populations through pre-college and preparatory programs,
- offer programs designed to increase retention and graduation rates,
- experiment with alternative teaching formats (including online and blended learning), and
- incubate programs to try out new ideas and options.

In the final chapter, the authors present options to policy makers on ways higher education institutions can better contribute to inclusion and social mobility goals. The policy recommendations are divided into what to do and what not to do, with focused suggestions on issues related to student loans, public investment in higher education, and information resources to improve decision-making by students (and their parents).

I recommend this book to anyone interested in the future of higher education. Specifically, it provides food for thought to summer session deans and administrators about the role summer sessions might play in shaping the way universities and colleges operate in the future and how summer sessions could be instrumental in the transition processes to get them there.

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