

Tunnel Vision

New England Higher Education Ignores Demographic Peril

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American higher education has a remarkable ability to ignore about 90 percent of the environment in which it operates. Colleges change admissions requirements without even informing high schools in their service areas. Community college graduates are denied access to four-year programs because of policy changes made only after it was too late for the students to adjust their studies accordingly.

Most important, the enormous shifts in pre-K-12 education caused by the No Child Left Behind Act are totally unknown to higher education's leaders. Yet if President Bush wins re-election in 2004, the imperious orders for accountability, cost control and standards that have come to states and 15,000 local school districts from the federal government (with virtually no additional funding) will surely be turned on higher education. Just one example: in the name of higher standards, almost every state has adopted an exit exam, which must be passed before a high school diploma can be awarded. It is only a matter of time before the feds will propose the same thing at the state level for the awarding of the bachelor's degree.

There are other examples. Because higher education studies everything except itself, there is no awareness of the decline of males in the student body, either in the United States (now about 6 million males to 8 million females) or in other industrialized countries, except for Japan, where a male bias persists.

In some states, meanwhile, 60 percent of 19-year-olds have graduated from high school and been admitted to a college. In others, only 27 percent have. Why this huge difference? Are the kids from the states with 60 percent smarter than those from the states with 27 percent? Obviously not.

It's also clear, thanks to the work of Iowa-based higher education policy analyst and Pell Institute senior scholar Thomas G. Mortenson, that the elite institutions of higher education, both public and private, have almost ceased to admit students who are in poverty. Pell Grants are the only federal mechanism for funding the education of poor students, and today, far more than half of Pell Grants go to community college students, suggesting that

economic segregation is once again on the increase in higher education, as it is in the rest of society.

In admissions, we see more "legacy" admits, where an alumn, perhaps with a large check, gets a son or daughter admitted to his alma mater. We also see more tuition discounting, allowing extra student aid by simply saying that for everyone else, the tuition is \$12,000, while the coveted student is charged only \$10,000. Then there are the scandalous tactics used in recruiting future professional athletes, including the increased presence of major corporations as advertisers, donors and skybox owners, to the neglect of academic concerns.

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All the while, we dodge questions about one of higher education's most closely guarded secrets: we have no idea how long students maintain the wisdom that has been jammed into their heads at such pain and expense. With thousands of studies on learning, we have only a handful on forgetting. Where does knowledge go when we forget? How do we get it back? Is forgetting active or passive? Only Ralph Tyler, examiner for the University of Chicago, ever had the nerve to discuss it in the context of the value of college education. His work (never published) suggested that if you gave freshmen their end-of-term exams once again three months later, you would find they had forgotten more than half of what they learned earlier. What a comment on the award of the bachelor's degree at commencement! It's clear the degree does not mean all that knowledge is in graduates' heads; only that they have passed through the cathedral of learning. Further studies on the topic would be easy enough to do, but who wants to find out the truth?

New England migration

There are also several demographic factors that New Englanders keep ignoring. First and most important, three New England states do not have enough babies to maintain their current populations. Vermont records 48.6 births per 1,000 females in the childbearing years; Maine, 49.4; and New Hampshire, 52.2. Even Rhode

Island, with 58.1 births per 1,000, Massachusetts, with 59.2, and Connecticut, with 61.2, are way behind the national average of 67.5. Utah, on the other hand, has 94.5 births per 1,000 females in the childbearing years—almost twice the fertility rate of Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire. Unless young families of childbearing age start moving into New England in droves, the region’s population will get older and smaller very quickly.

A second factor is the “net” of people moving in and out of a state. During the 1990s, four New England states saw more people move out than in. In Massachusetts, the net loss was 244,000. In Connecticut, it was 226,000. Rhode Island lost 63,000 and Maine lost 7,000. Vermont was about even, with 6,000 more people moving in than moving out, while New Hampshire netted 30,000 new people.

If you focus more carefully on adults who possess a bachelor’s degree, you see a “brain drain” in five of the six states. Massachusetts ranked dead last nationally by this measure with a net loss of 16,093 bachelor’s degree-holders in 2000. Rhode Island ranked 41st, losing 3,674. Vermont ranked 36th, losing 2,276. Connecticut and Maine ranked only a little better with losses of nearly 2,000 a piece. Only New Hampshire took in more bachelor’s degree-holders than it lost—and only 836 more. By the way, No. 1 nationally was Florida with a net increase of 40,309 bachelor’s degree-holders in 2000. No. 2 was Georgia with 19,000.

While New England was experiencing these out-migrations of bachelor’s degree-holders, four of the six states had more students coming into the state than leaving to go to college. By this measure, Massachusetts ranked second nationally, with 7,886 more students coming in than leaving. Rhode Island ranked seventh with 5,310 more coming in for college than going out. Vermont ranked 20th with a net gain of 1,520, and New Hampshire, 30th, with a gain of 564. Two New England states, however, lost more students than they gained: Maine ranked 40th nationally with 945 more students going out than coming in, while Connecticut ranked 48th, with a net loss of 3,199.

Indicators of success?

How successful are New England’s young people in securing a college education? Nationally, only 37 percent of 19-year-olds have graduated from high school and been admitted to college. Massachusetts ranks third nationally by this measure, with 52 percent of 19-year-olds admitted to colleges. All the other New England states are in the 40 percent range, except for Vermont, which is way down at 34 percent.

Some indicators suggest a bright New England future. The new National Assessment of Educational Progress data from November 2003 show all the New England states except Rhode Island scored above national norms for fourth- and eighth-grade reading. Per-capita income is high in New England, except in Maine and Vermont. And the region’s percentage of

youths in poverty is low; five of the six states rank among the 10 with the lowest youth poverty nationally, while Rhode Island ranks 27th.

However, New England doesn’t do as well on the rating of children in “extreme poverty,” that is, children whose family income is half the federal poverty level or less. On this measure, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Vermont do fairly well with proportionately far fewer extremely poor children than the nation as a whole. But Maine is right at the national average of 7 percent, and Massachusetts and Rhode Island are not much better at 6 percent.

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Racial minorities, meanwhile, are very scarce in New England. While 75 percent of all Americans are classified as white, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine are over 90 percent white. Rhode Island is 85 percent white; Massachusetts, 84 percent; and Connecticut, 82 percent.

Because so many young people in New England are doing well, it’s easy to ignore the smaller numbers who are struggling. In Connecticut, the wealthiest state in terms of per-capita income, the pockets of severe poverty in New Haven, Bridgeport and Hartford never seem to get any better. From these places and Boston, a few successful minorities escape to the suburbs, but only certain suburbs, for example, Quincy, Mass., more likely than Lincoln, Mass. And when those individuals leave, they deprive the inner cities of role models. All through New England, it’s easy to ignore low-income and minority citizens (usually both in one person) because one seldom makes contact with them, and their numbers are too small to be politically important.

So New England is a region with very low birth rates and large numbers of people leaving. Many of New England’s low-income and minority citizens are not participating in the American Dream, and the number of college-goers in the region known around the world as a center of higher education is lower than one would expect, especially in Vermont. You might think that New England—and especially the leaders of its educational systems, preschool to graduate school—would be thinking of some major changes in plans. But they are not.

After speaking before an audience last year in northern New England, I was asked: “What are the major population trends in our state?”

“There aren’t any,” I replied.

That, apparently, was music to the ears of my audience. In fact, the prospect of no changes inspired a standing ovation.

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