

Higher Education Trends and Opportunities

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Most people in higher education believe in continuity, in respecting traditions. That makes it easy to miss the startling changes and compelling opportunities that confront the academic enterprise. Here are a few trends that are dramatically altering higher education in New England:

More women than men attend college. Women began outnumbering men on U.S. college campuses in 1979. Over the past decade, the number of women seeking and completing degrees has increased steadily to the point where women now account for 60 percent of college enrollment in New England. By 2003 New England colleges enrolled 498,000 women to 365,000 men. Title IX, the 1972 federal law prohibiting sex discrimination, has encouraged women athletes, and welfare reform has sent adult women to college. Where are the men? More than a million serve in the military and another million are in prison. A million more feel unprepared or not persuaded that college would serve them well.

What can colleges and universities do about this? We need men in public education, including more male teachers of color. We need men in health and human service careers, at all levels. We need more engineers and scientists. We need colleges and universities to keep in touch with National Guard and Army Reserve units, and the recently retired military people who have accumulated funds to attend college.

Hispanics are the most rapidly growing ethnic and racial minority in New England. The number of Hispanic students attending New England colleges has grown by more than 50 percent over the past 20 years. By 2015, they will outnumber African-Americans on the region's college campuses. Many come from countries where they suffered from poverty and inferior education or experienced political upheaval. They need summer programs, outreach to high schools, Spanish-speaking advisers and Hispanic faculty role models, as well as administrators and trustees willing to advocate for their needs. Reading lists should include great Latin American and Spanish literature. College dining halls should offer more culturally diverse food choices. (See "Does the Cafeteria Serve Rice and Beans?" CONNECTION, Fall 2002.)

The number of college students taking at least one course online jumped from 1.6 million nationally in 2000 to 2.6 million in 2004. And the number will keep rising. An entrepreneurial New England college, Endicott, is considering requiring all students to take one course online to prepare them to be lifelong

learners. Are the region's campuses ready? Personal computers are as essential as pen and paper once were. But only 7 percent of four-year universities require students to own computers and less than half explicitly recommend that students bring their laptops to college. And community colleges are much less likely than their four-year counterparts to require or recommend that students have computers.

U.S. students shun science and engineering. America's leaders from corporate employers to U.S. senators, including Ted Kennedy, voice great alarm over the recent increases in Chinese and Indian students in science and engineering. Sixty percent of GI Bill recipients earned science or engineering degrees. Just 20 percent of today's college students do, and the engineering percentages declined from 13 percent in 1980 to under 10 percent in 2004. Perhaps the role models of presidents Susan Hockfield at MIT, Shirley Ann Jackson at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Zorica Pantic-Tanner at Wentworth Institute will attract more women, as well as more men, to these demanding and important fields.

For-profits are gaining market share. Today, the University of Phoenix is showing New England how large the untapped higher education markets in the United States really are, online and on the ground. That's another megatrend: aggressive for-profit universities now claim 5 percent of the academic marketplace, up from 2 percent, while traditional public and nonprofit colleges seek more selectivity and pursue higher rankings.

Who needs to be discussing these significant trends? First of all, faculty members through their departments, academic senates and planning committees. Also, every New England college or university should be tuning up its strategic plan, not just for accrediting agencies who will look for it, but also to encourage growth in quality and relevance. Finally, trustees need to know where higher education is going and how their institution will respond to these megatrends.

Academics are expert at thinking about and debating priorities. It is time to look closely at the obvious opportunities presented by these trends and develop distinctive strategies for the future.

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