

## Introduction



AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION HAS REACHED one of the rare moments in its history when major reforms may be close at hand. Although the quality of research in our universities is still without equal, and our leading professional schools continue to enjoy an enviable reputation, concerns have been mounting over the condition of the forty-five hundred two- and four-year colleges that are currently responsible for educating some nineteen million students.

After boasting the world's most highly educated population for more than a century, America has fallen behind one country after another in the percentage of young adults earning college degrees. Economists talk of looming skill shortages that could hamper our ability to compete in the global economy. Far from promoting opportunities for all Americans to achieve a better life, higher education is now being accused of becoming a system that maintains existing differences in income and preserves racial inequality.

Evidence has also come to light casting doubt on how much our undergraduates are learning during college. International tests of basic skills find Americans with college degrees lagging behind their counterparts in many other advanced countries, while surveys suggest that undergraduates are spending much less time at their studies than they did half a century ago. Employers complain about the competence of many of the recent graduates they hire. Families throughout the United States have grown increasingly upset over constantly rising tuitions, and a majority of Americans now believe that colleges care more about the bottom line than they do about their students. A significant fraction of recent graduates wonder whether their college degree was worth the cost. These concerns seem all the more worrisome now that a college education is generally considered to be a necessary step toward finding good jobs, living fulfilling lives, and becoming active, enlightened citizens.

Even as doubts about undergraduate education have continued to grow, however, advances in psychology and educational research have created a wealth of useful insights to enhance teaching and learning. Technology is producing a variety of intriguing methods for improving college teaching and student services. Online education has brought courses taught by leading scientists and scholars within easy reach of audiences throughout America and around the world.

The combination of mounting dissatisfaction with the status quo and the emergence of innovative ideas for improving education has persuaded many observers that reform is not only needed but all but certain to occur. Commentators are predicting fundamental changes in the way students are taught rather than modest incremental improvements. Politicians are asking for massive increases in undergraduate enrollments and graduation rates. To sense the current mood, one has only to read the titles of recent books on higher education, such as *The End of College*, *Remaking College*, *College Disrupted*, or *The Online Education Revolution*.

Twice before, American higher education has experienced mounting pressure for change in the face of new opportunities and needs. On both occasions, major transformations took place. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colleges became universities, and new institutions were established to meet the emerging demands of a rapidly industrializing society. Graduate programs were created to prepare scholars and scientists for careers of research and teaching. Professional schools were strengthened and new ones founded. College enrollments grew, and the traditional, heavily prescribed classical curriculum gave way to undergraduate programs with more practical courses and greater choice for students to pursue their own program of study.

Following World War II, higher education faced new challenges to enroll more students, strengthen basic research, and help America to play a more prominent role in world affairs. Once again, higher education responded. New colleges and community colleges opened their doors at a rate of one per week, as the number of undergraduates doubled, redoubled, and doubled yet again. American research expanded

rapidly and increased in quality to become preeminent in the world. Graduate programs appeared in scores of universities to examine international problems and learn more about other regions of the world.

In 2009, shortly after taking office, the president of the United States called for another great effort by the nation's colleges and universities. In a speech to Congress, he set a goal of regaining America's historic lead in the education of its workforce by raising the share of twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-old Americans possessing "quality" college degrees by a whopping 40 percent in only eleven years. Corporate executives applauded this initiative. Several of our largest foundations made the effort a major priority. College officials expressed their support.

Now that almost a decade has elapsed, what can we make of the president's challenge and higher education's response? How reliable were his assertions that the current level of educational attainment is unsatisfactory, and how concerned should we be by such findings? Is attainment the only major problem, or are changes needed to ensure that college graduates will receive "quality degrees"? Finally, what have colleges and universities accomplished in the last few years to achieve these goals, and how can they be helped to do better?

These are the questions discussed in the chapters that follow.