INSIDE HIGHER ED

Views

So What Do They Want From Us, Anyway?

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When I was a kid growing up in Washington Heights at the northern end of Manhattan, a common rhetorical question indicating frustrated annoyance was: “So whadya wan’ frumme?”

Those of us who work in higher education sometimes evince that same attitude when we feel besieged by increasingly insistent stakeholders — students, parents, alumni, trustees, sports boosters, business leaders, and donors, as well as local, state, and federal elected and appointed officials — about what we have done for them lately.

We have some ideas about what people want, and we can *answer* this rhetorical question if we choose. We have flippant responses at the ready, such as, sports for the alumni, parties for the students, and parking for faculty. I would argue that we do not take the question seriously enough, and therefore are often surprised — and truth be told a bit hurt — that our audiences do not always sufficiently appreciate what we provide.

The joking answer to what “they” want makes a serious point. Different clients want different things, so providing serious answers can be difficult. When I hone the answer down to its fundamental parts, I identify four essential items that America wants and needs from its public universities in today’s globally competitive knowledge economy. I call them higher education’s “Four Pillars of Promise.”

Better Preparation

Unlike most major American industries, higher education has paid relatively little attention to preparing potential customers to desire and use its product. While importing the language of the marketplace into academic discourse unsettles some, colleges and universities constitute a large national enterprise with its own set of potential clients who regularly make decisions to pay for services rendered. We know that higher per capita incomes correlate strongly with higher levels of educational attainment, so we all have a stake in urging more young people to engage in some form of postsecondary education that advances their goals. Whether it takes the form of a technical certificate in computer programming, an associate degree in an allied health field, or a baccalaureate degree in history or engineering, we all have a stake in seeing that students come to these experiences ready to succeed, and earn the credential emblematic of that success.

To have more secondary students graduate, and do so better prepared for postsecondary success, colleges and universities will need to redouble longstanding partnerships with the schools. This also includes changing the higher education culture so that we act as a compelling magnet for talent earlier in students’ lives, even if that requires that we cross some well established boundaries that we have grown all too comfortable respecting. Beyond traditional approaches, we need to reach pre-college students directly through their families, computer screens, cell phones, and iPods. We also will need to create thoroughgoing relationships with local community and religious organizations that serve as trusted interlocutors for many first generation and minority Americans and their children.

Ramping up investments in these outreach activities will stress further our already stressed out budgets, but success in this area may reduce ever larger amounts now devoted to remedial costs in a wasteful cycle of “repeat” instruction. Furthermore, we will have more students coming to our campuses, paying tuition, persisting through graduation, and supporting our institutions as generous alumni.

Better preparation for college is about a number of things – raising families' *aspiration*, demanding students' *perspiration,* and assuring help with *subsidization* of tuition costs.

More Graduates

In his first address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama set a stretch goal for higher education and the nation, asking every American to commit to at least one year of higher education. "Dropping out of high school is no longer an option," the President said, "It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American."

In President Obama's vision, America will once again have the highest proportion of college educated citizens by 2020. Sadly, many of our fellow citizens do not realize how ambitious a goal that may be. In just about one decade, the U.S. has relinquished the top spot, falling all the way to 10th place in the education race. China and India have not yet surpassed us, but will if current trends continue.

In the world's most educated nations — Canada and Japan — about 55 percent of the young adult population (25-34) have associate or baccalaureate degrees. To push beyond the U.S. plateau of 39 percent will require serious rethinking and restructuring in such areas as audience, retention, and financial aid.

The traditional *audience* for higher education in the United States is shifting. Our students are increasingly first generation college-goers of color, older, from disadvantaged and underserved backgrounds. A larger group of racially and ethnically diverse military veterans is arriving at our campuses with the new GI Bill in hand. Given the demographics of the country, we know we need to enable still more of this broader, deeper slice of American youngsters and young adults to pursue and succeed at higher education if we are to have any hope of meeting the president's challenge.

When it comes to *retention* of college students, the United States does a worse job than many other nations. There likely are a number of reasons for this poor performance, ranging from inadequate preparation for college in some K-12 schools, to data systems that do not account for students who leave to complete desired majors elsewhere, to apples-to-oranges comparisons with credentialing protocols in other nations.

Nonetheless, when our national six-year graduation rate is 59 percent, we need to acknowledge a postsecondary pipeline leak that approaches gusher status.

Innovative approaches to *financial aid* are essential. At the University of Wisconsin System, we are working to double the amount of private, need-based financial aid. Focusing more fundraising on need-based aid will require a shift in culture and strategy for advancement offices, where need-blind merit scholarships and building naming opportunities have long held sway.

More Research

In the years since World War II, more and more of the nation's research and development has taken place at universities. The major corporate and industrial research labs have waned, while companies have increasingly turned to universities to enhance their product lines or create entirely new ones. In today's innovation economy, success requires a critical mass of interdisciplinary subject matter experts who are experienced in research design and methodology, with free access to each other, the latest equipment, and large federal grants. In that environment, universities are positioned for R & D success.

The public/private and nonprofit/for-profit collaborations now necessary for "big science" raise complex issues for the academy, relating to freedom of inquiry, basic vs. applied research, and conflicts of interest. We simply must work through them, however, if the United States is to burnish its reputation in the 21st century as the home of discoveries that make a difference in the lives of millions across the globe. Given our demographics, the standard of living we have come to expect, and wage structures in this country, we must compete internationally at this high end of new knowledge and the new industries that grow out of it, or we will not be competitive.

Universities both public and private need to ramp up further their research enterprise.

Indeed, we have to start thinking of university research as an expanding *industry* in its own right. In a report released earlier this year, the Wisconsin Technology Council, an independent 501(c)(3), asserts that *academic* research and development is a $1.1 billion industry in the state. The spending by that industry translates into more than 38,000 direct and indirect jobs. That's more people than employed by the plastics and rubber products industry (32,380), or by wood product manufacturing (23,790) in Wisconsin.

As we build robust research cultures on all university campuses nationwide, what of the much heralded conflict between faculty research and undergraduate education? There can of course be tension between a faculty member's need to push the envelope of

her discipline and publish the results, and a freshman's need to learn how to craft a compelling paragraph and master "the elements of style." We need to ensure that the basics are well taught and fully learned, to be sure. Once they are, we should recognize that an undergraduate's engagement is deepened immensely by becoming part of a larger research project. There is simply no substitute in education – no greater learning tool – than adding to what is known in your discipline as well as merely studying it.

Better Dissemination and Commercialization

If the university research engine runs out of steam at the campus border, long-term economic success is at high risk. Much of the generation of whole new industries and new greener, higher paying jobs "with legs" will have to come out of the university in an information age, where knowledge is capital and technology puts capital to work. Ramping up university jobs generation will require greater focus in two areas.

First, we must find ways to remove barriers and accelerate the process for moving intellectual property down the chain from discovery to patenting to licensure to commercialization. This could include freeing up a faculty member's teaching time or engaging help for writing grant proposals. Second, we need to develop more of an entrepreneurial culture on our regional comprehensive campuses so that faculty who may not now think in terms of the commercial potential inherent in their work start to do so.

Flagship Research I universities will continue to provide much of the academic R&D activity. Other campuses clearly have a role that can and should be expanded. That's why the UW System formed the WiSys Technology Foundation, to build up the entrepreneurial culture on our comprehensive campuses and help faculty navigate the unfamiliar shoals of patenting, licensing, and startups.

Since its inception, WiSys has worked with 146 UW inventors, including 15 students, and obtained 57 foreign and domestic patents. Just as important for the long haul, WiSys has pulled together a research consortium for our comprehensive campuses.

In effect, we are forming a virtual research faculty that often cuts across not only the old disciplinary lines, but campus and geographical borders, collaborating with each other and colleagues at the two research campuses in Madison and Milwaukee as well. No state that intends to be as competitive as it can be can afford to ignore the largely untapped R&D possibilities on its state college campuses.

Conclusion

Taken together, the four pillars of *better* preparation, *more* graduates, *more* research, and *better* dissemination and commercialization constitute my "More Better" prescription for American higher education to address our society's most pressing challenges.

The two pillars in the middle are at the traditional core of higher education's mission. Educating and credentialing our students, and carrying out cutting-edge research, define who we are. On either side of these central functions stand two others that we have not embraced as fully as we now must. What we do to shore up the two "bookend" pillars – preparing youth for postsecondary achievement and leveraging the results of our research – will increasingly define our success as 21st century institutions of higher learning.

The quest for international competitiveness requires American colleges and universities to ramp up productivity in our core functions. To do that, we will have to get much more effective at positively influencing these "bookend" pillars. More in the core, better at the intake and output. I believe *that's* what they want, and need, from us.

Kevin P. Reilly has been president of the University of Wisconsin System since 2004. The system's 2 doctoral universities, 11 comprehensive universities, 13 freshman-sophomore colleges, and statewide UW-Extension annually serve more than 175,000 students.