

**PERFECT STORM:
HOW AN IMMINENT CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION CAN
STRENGTHEN LIBERAL EDUCATION**

By W. Robert Connor

Adapted from a lecture given at Boston College on April 5th 2011. I am indebted to Henry Braun of the Education School and Erik Owens of the Boisi Center for Religion & American Public Life.

I flunked Retirement 101. What followed turned out to be a great learning experience.

So great that I feared my new employer, the Teagle Foundation, would find out how much I was learning and start charging me tuition.

Much of what I learned involved thinking in new ways about what I had been doing for years as a teacher and scholar. When I retired from the National Humanities Center and began a new career at a foundation devoted to strengthening liberal education, I found I had to ask some hard questions about ideas and practices I had always taken for granted.

Some of what I learned came in the form of "Aha!" moments. For example, in a luncheon meeting with a group of exceptionally talented summer interns, undergraduates from a wide range of top flight universities, I realized their success in college was not simply the result of brain power combined with good instruction. They were self-starters, who had thought hard about what they wanted from their education and then took the initiative, by seeking out programs and courses of special interest to them, introduced themselves to faculty and staff

members. They had “knocked on a hundred doors.” The results were evident in their engagement, learning and commitment.

This perfect storm was the result of converging meteorological forces, -- a strong, high pressure system of Canadian air moving over the Appalachians, and converging with warm air over the Atlantic, with further turbulence caused by hurricane Grace's hairpin turn eastward. There had been nothing quite like this storm since the great hurricane of 1938.

At least three forces are converging right now in American higher education. They are all familiar ones – the economy, the skeptical mood of the American public, and what is sometimes called “a failed business model” A fresh look at them challenges conventional wisdom and points to an opportunity in this perfect storm for strengthening liberal education.

First, the economy. Great attention has been paid, and properly so, to the effects of the meltdown that started in 2008, and the agonizingly slow recovery that has followed. Higher education has not escaped the pain, and will surely feel more as the budget battles in Washington and in state capitals continue.

Even before 2008 college education was in an affordability crunch. The growth of family income stalled during the first decade of the new century, as the College Board has pointed out:

Over the entire income distribution in the United States, average family incomes in 2009 were equal to or lower than they had been a decade earlier after adjusting for inflation. The largest declines were for the lowest income families.

See

[http://trends.collegeboard.org/downloads/College Pricing 2010.pdf](http://trends.collegeboard.org/downloads/College_Pricing_2010.pdf)

The same report indicates that tuition and fees at private four year colleges increased on average 3% per year over the CPI. (At public four year institutions the annual rate was 5.6% over the CPI.)

Colleges struggle hard to have financial aid keep up with these increases, just as families scrambled to help their kids pay for college. It's getting harder and harder to make that happen.

The affordability crunch is bad enough but it should not obscure another phenomenon, one that I find even more frightening. Paul Krugman calls it the "hollowing out" of the

elsewhere in the U.S. economy. At this moment it is not clear that this is happening.

But computerization is not the only force eliminating positions that college graduates once held. In addition, as Krugman points out, globalization and outsourcing export jobs, and not just low wage manufacturing jobs.

One example: the pharmaceutical firm GlaxoSmithKline now has 470 research and development workers in China.

Consolidation within companies and mergers and acquisitions among them also contribute to this hollowing out. "It's no longer true", *Krugman* concludes, "that having a college degree guarantees that you'll get a good job, and it's becoming less true with each passing decade."

These shifts in the economy pull the rug out from under a familiar argument on which many leaders of American higher education have long relied – if you go to college you will earn much more than if you stay away.

See for example the ACT Student web site:
<http://www.actstudent.org/college/index.html>

That argument may hold up in the long run, but as many recent graduates will attest, "it ain't necessarily so."

"For college educated workers over age 25, unemployment is indeed lower than for other groups. But for college graduates under age 25, unemployment over the last year has averaged 9.7 percent and shows no sign of improvement." "The Economy Slows" editorial, [The New York Times, May 2, 2011.](#)

be sure, the American public is not, by and large skeptical about going to college – it's still part of the American Dream, but people today want to see results. They want to do the numbers.

Some of those numbers are tuition and fees, now exceeding \$40,000 at some institutions. Sticker shock is leading some good students to assume they couldn't possibly go to top quality institutions. They can also be frightened away by the debts students accumulate in college.

See Tamar Lewin, "College Loans Weigh Heavily on Graduates" The New York Times April 12, 2011 p. 1. "Two-thirds of bachelor's degree recipients graduated with debt in 2008, compared with less than half in 1993. Last year, graduates who took out loans left college with an average of \$24,000 in debt."

But another number is no less troubling: On average 55.9

That's part of the story. But there's more to it than that. Listen to one college drop-out:

I dropped out ... after the first 6 months So why did I drop out? ... all of my working-class parents' savings were being spent on my college tuition. After six months, I couldn't see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire life. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK. It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back it was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Care to guess who this drop-out was? It's one of these five drop-outs:

Paul Allen, dropped out of Washington State College

Michael Dell, dropped out of the Univ. of Texas at Austin

Bill Gates, dropped out of Harvard

Steve Jobs, dropped out of Reed College

Mark Zuckerberg, dropped out of Harvard

Other CEOs who dropped out of college or didn't go to college: www.davidtan.org/famous-ceos-without-college-degrees/

It is Steve Jobs, the most famous apple guy since Adam, in his 2005 commencement address at Stanford. His story reminds us that financial pressures become intolerable if one doesn't have a clear sense of what college is for.

So how well are colleges doing in responding to that question? Programs promising business success are clear and forthright.

Note, for example the publications of the former Trump University, now the Trump Entrepreneurial Institute which Amazon describes in these terms **“Trump University books are practical, straightforward primers on the basics of doing business the Trump way-successfully.”** On the fate of the Trump University see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/19/trump-university-no-longer_n_542469.html

For comparison I looked at the web sites of some colleges and universities well regarded for their commitment to the liberal arts.

For a study of what college web sites reveal about student learning and assessment on campuses see N. Jankowski and J.P. Makela, Exploring the landscape: What institutional websites reveal about student learning outcomes activities. Urbana, IL, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) (2010). <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/NILOAwebscanreport.pdf>

They tell all sorts of good things about the institution – athletic victories, alumni tours, financial aid, fabulous professors, the fun of student life, how to contribute money – everything except why what students will study is really important.

Words such as “vocation,” “success,” “satisfaction” and “human capital” are rarely used when liberal education is being presented. Why not reclaim such terms, problematize them, point to a deeper understanding of them as Socrates did for wealth or riches in his prayer to Pan at the end of Plato’s Phaedrus? It would be especially

appropriate for a college in the Christian tradition to reclaim the word "vocation."

To be sure, many colleges affirm learning goals similar to those promulgated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The AAC&U (www.aacu.org) has many valuable publications on liberal education and related topics, including The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers' Views (2011) and a brochure for students What is a Liberal Education? And Why Is It Important to My Future (2011).

It is not clear, however, that these ambitious and robust learning goals are well understood by students, their parents, the general public, or indeed by faculty.

There is now a move to encourage aspiring entrepreneurs to drop out of college. A program called "Twenty under Twenty" funded by Peter Thiel, (not a drop out himself but a B.A. in Philosophy from Stanford), is offering up to \$100,000 to "foster the next generation of tech visionaries".

See

http://www.thielfoundation.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14:the-thiel-fellowship-20-under-20&catid=1&Itemid=16 .

Without a strong sense of purpose, it's no surprise that many students are dropping out and many others are academically adrift. And here come some more numbers that skeptics from Missouri and elsewhere may find really troubling:

Academically Adrift is the title of a book by Richard Arum of NYU and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia, recently published by Chicago Press. It has been getting a lot of attention this spring. The Chronicle of Higher Education summarized the study by noting that the authors “*tracked more than 2,300 students at 24 different institutions, including selective liberal-arts colleges and big land-grant universities, as well as historically black and Hispanic institutions. Forty-five percent of students showed no significant gain on the Collegiate Learning Assessment between freshman and sophomore year. And 36 percent didn't improve in a statistically significant way between their freshman and senior years.*”

The data in the book come largely from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a test of critical thinking based on students' written responses to real world decision making situations. Students participating in CLA have to make or break a case for one decision rather than another or defend their own position in an essay written under time constraints.

No one claims that the Collegiate Learning Assessment provides a perfect or comprehensive assessment of student learning. But CLA, unlike some “fill in the bubbles” tests, has “high face value”, that is if you look at its questions you will probably say, “Yes, a college graduate ought to do well on such an exam, and a good college education should help them become better at it.”

Arum and Roksa also note another distressing number – that students report that they spend an average twelve hours a week studying (p. 69).

The decline in hours spent studying coincides with a period of grade inflation, and its consequence distrust of the college transcript. Cf. Arum and Roksa p. 77

This and other findings in their study are broadly consistent with other analyses of student learning, most significantly with one conducted by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. An article based on this study and soon to be published in *Change* magazine reports:

Our results with a different sample of institutions, a different sample of students, and a different standardized measure of critical thinking closely parallel those of Arum and Roksa. We conclude that the findings of Arum and Roksa are not the artifact of an anomalous sample or instrument and need to be taken seriously.

Ernest T. Pascarella, Charles Blaich, Georgianna L. Martin, and Jana M. Hanson, "How Robust Are the Findings of Academically Adrift? The authors go on to say, "At the same time we also point out important limitations in drawing causal inferences from change scores without a control group of individuals who do not attend college."

Some years ago the Wabash Center of began tracking the cognitive and personal growth of students at nineteen institutions, public and private, large and small, selective and not so selective. More than 17,000 students have been part of this study which uses a dozen well regarded instruments to look at such things as academic motivation, moral reasoning, and personal well-being. The study is ongoing but preliminary results, reported by the director of the Center, Charles Blaich, are now available.

[From Gathering to Using Assessment Results](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/Wabash_000.pdf) is available free of charge on the web site of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/Wabash_000.pdf

The findings point to modest gains in some areas and backsliding in others. The survey found that

- „ Moral Reasoning, Critical Thinking, Socially Responsible Leadership and Psychological Well-Being all showed gains over four years between 0.32 – 0.58 Standard Deviations (SDs). (It is not clear how much of these gains are attributable to college attendance and how much is due to maturation.)
- „ Slight gains or small declines were found in Diversity Awareness, Political and Social Involvement, and Openness to Diversity.

„

these assumptions have had powerful effects, but may now be reaching the limit of their effectiveness.

This theory of educational improvement is built on three primary assumptions:

First, that student learning will benefit from expanding the number of fields in which instruction is offered and the number of courses within each field

As a consequence student - faculty ratios must decrease, again with the expectation that good educational results will follow.

The results are not self evident. In the Boston area, for example, US News Best Colleges 2011 reports that the student faculty ratio is 13 to 1 at Boston College, 7 to 1 at Harvard and 3 to 1 at M.I.T. There is little relation, however, between these ratios and another figure US News emphasizes, "Overperformance/ Underperformance" when predicted and actual graduation rates are compared. Boston College "overperforms" by 4, Harvard by 3, and M.I.T. "underperforms" by four percentage points. "Overperformance" is, of course, only one indicator of educational quality but the example warns against the uncritical reliance on student faculty ratios.

This theory of educational improvement is not to be scorned. It reflects the vast growth of knowledge over the past century. It is compatible with other ways of improving undergraduate education, including the encouragement of diversity and the establishment of programs such as African-American and Women's studies. It is also compatible with another theory, that if an institution admits only very bright students they will more or less automatically educate one another, provided of course they interact in relatively small classes. In addition, the theory's emphasis on low teaching loads should make possible more active forms of learning than large lectures provide. It may have resulted in increasing levels of student engagement, though I do not know of any firm evidence that this is so. It has certainly made life more livable for faculty members.

But there are complications. For example, the proliferation of courses and majors, not to mention centers and special

educational improvement that seems to be reaching its limits of effectiveness. The combination is a perfect opportunity for those outside academia -- bureaucrats, politicians, and, yes, some foundation leaders as well -- to move in and demand that a new course for higher education be set. Ideas are already circulating about reducing the undergraduate course of study to three years, or providing a stripped-down, low cost alternative to the regular bachelor's degree. Many highly regarded private institutions will be able to resist such measures, but they may face renewed pressure to eliminate the tax exempt status of endowments and charitable contributions.

With these dangers in mind the leaders of many prominent organizations committed to the strengthening of higher education have formed the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability. See www.newleadershipalliance.org/ - The premise underlying the Alliance's work is that the any educationally valid form of accountability must be grounded in the demonstrable improvement of student learning.

The distinctively American form of higher education, liberal education, and its central component, the humanities, may be especially at risk.

See Geoffrey Harpham [The Humanities and the Dream of America](#) (Chicago 2011), especially Chapter Six, "Melancholy in the Midst of Abundance: How America Invented the Humanities."

A perfect storm doesn't sound like good news. Yet, some light can break through even when such a storm seems imminent. In fact, a perfect storm might turn out to be good news, provided of course everyone doesn't hunker down below decks and hope that things will soon return to "normal".

How a perfect storm can be good news:

If that strategy won't work, what is to be done? There are, I believe, two possibilities. One starts with budgets, the other with students.

In a time of financial pressure it is not surprising to find administrators and governing boards focused on budgets. While some amenities can reasonably be cut the extent of the financial problems facing many institutions demands stronger measures. This leads to policies increasingly under discussion -- cut the cost of college by offering less and calling it more; cut the undergraduate degree from four years to three; eliminate foreign language and writing intensive courses because they are labor intensive and hence costly; substitute technology for face to face instruction whether it works or not; forget about active learning since it creates pressure for smaller classes; increase reliance on adjuncts; market the institution to students who can pay the freight; eliminate all classes with low enrollments, etc. This approach will almost inevitably lead to sacrificing educational quality for the delusory hope of cost containment. No thanks.

The other approach is to start with students and their engagement and learning. This means one must find out how to improve the educational results, without increasing costs. That, inevitably means using evidence more systematically than in the past, to determine what works and what doesn't. How would such an approach work? The starting point has to be

then, does one turn to the budget and allocates resources where the evidence shows they will make the greatest contribution to strengthening student engagement and learning.

Such an approach entails a new theory of change and a new way of setting priorities at budget time. It deserves a fuller exposition than can be given here, but let's look at each of its components.

First, the purposes of educations: These will vary from institution to institution, from college to college, program to program. But, as we have seen, students need to have a clear sense of the purpose of what they are asked to do in college -- not vague generalities or high-minded platitudes, but specific goals. These will, of course, include understanding in some depth of one or more fields of knowledge. But any truly robust sense of purpose will also aim at the development of long-lasting cognitive and personal capacities. Many colleges have already done this, spurred on in many cases by the LEAP initiative of the Association of American Colleges and

See "Watching Charlotte Climb: Little Steps Towards Big Questions, *Liberal Education*

work, well-crafted comprehensive examinations, etc. as well as course grades – have long been available. Despite grade inflation, continue to have their utility. But until recently it has proved far more difficult to observe how students are developing the cognitive and personal capacities that are part of any robust undergraduate education.

In recent decades several promising forms of evidence have become available. Many institutions, for example, are now using electronic portfolios, which, when used systematically with carefully developed rubrics and criteria, can be very revealing about students' progress. Again, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has done much to assist colleges in designing and using such portfolios.

Since multiple forms of evidence are more reliable than any single form, portfolios can profitably be combined with nationally benchmarked tests and surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the instruments used in the Wabash national Study. These make it possible to see how students at one institution compare to those at peer institutions. The benefits reach far beyond having a well supported story to tell to accreditors, funders and others "from Missouri." They help focus energy and resources on areas where improvements in student learning are most likely to occur. Let us look more closely at this focusing.

Third, focus on what works, not what doesn't: Nationally benchmarked surveys have now produced large data bases, which make it possible to begin determining what educational practices are likely to produce the greatest benefits.

Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement have led to the identification of ten "high impact practices" that benefit students from many backgrounds and increase retention and graduation rates. They are:

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS AND EXPERIENCES

COMMON INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCES
LEARNING COMMUNITIES
WRITING-INTENSIVE COURSES
COLLABORATIVE ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
DIVERSITY/GLOBAL LEARNING
SERVICE LEARNING, COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING
INTERNSHIPS
CAPSTONE COURSES AND PROJECTS

See George D Kuh, [High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter](#) (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008)

-Check to see if students learned the material before moving on to new

division by division, correcting for entering SAT or ACT scores.
The largest gains were among majors in the foreign languages,

The differences among the fields are not great, but are not to be dismissed when the average gains for students over four years is in the 0.5 SD range.

At first this list seemed counter-intuitive. I had expected that rigorous fields such as engineering and the natural sciences would show large gains in critical thinking. As in the Kalamazoo data, these fields seemed to lag in the development of critical thinking and related capacities.

Here is one hypothesis that I believe deserves testing. The CLA is a test of post-formal reasoning that is, it does not seek to find

presented apply to only one cluster of outcomes (post-formal reasoning and expository writing) and are preliminary and in need of further refinement and analysis.

This example does, however, bring us to the nub of the matter since approach suggested here leads to the use of evidence about student engagement and learning as a major criterion for resource allocation.

See Jane V. Wellman, [Connecting the Dots Between Learning and Resources](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/Wellman.pdf), (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2010). This paper analyzes the relation between spending and student success, and examines existing research on this subject.

<http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/Wellman.pdf>

That is what differentiates this approach from older theories of change, where evidence of results was rarely sought and even more rarely used in any systematic way. The approach suggested here aims at iterative improvement based on the systematic use of evidence.

than anyone outside the academy how to use evidence to make educational judgments.

Now we are in a position to insist that evidence about student learning be used when staffing and budgetary decisions are being made. And surely as scholars they know it is better to have more evidence than less. That is especially the case when decisions about scarce resources are made, and when it is so important to demonstrating to a skeptical public that higher education is really doing its job.

And liberal education? At every stage the approach suggested here points to ways to strengthen liberal education. Robust goals for undergraduate education, attention to the practices that are most conducive to those goals, the use of evidence to better understand the progress student

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