Against the Grain

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Back Talk – The Real Crisis in Higher Education

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Back Talk — The Real Crisis in Higher Education

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

The conversations that occur at the **Charleston Conference** are endlessly absorbing and it's always both exhilarating and exhausting to make my way through the airports on the way home. This year's plenaries — **Brewster Kahle**, **Patricia Brennan**, **Kumsal Bayazit**, and the evergreen **Long Arm of the Law** — were just wonderful. (However does **Katina** manage to get **Kenny Rogers** to come back and sing for us every year?)

One of the things I realized this time was that everything we talk about at **Charleston** having to do with libraries and collections has meaning in various larger contexts and one line of my conversations made me realize that from my former and present lives I tend to think about some things that other folks aren't as focused on, so I thought I'd muse here a little on one set of facts that define our academic world.

To hear the media tell it, of course, higher education is a shocking scandal, and nowhere more shocking than in the twin crises of competition and cost. The scandalous bribing of officials to get rich kids into "hot" schools spun all our heads around several times and is still on the front pages of the tabloids six months after the scandal erupted. And we all know that higher education is hugely expensive and driving people deeper and deeper into debt.

Now everything I just wrote in that last paragraph is true, but it's not the whole story. Start here: those hotly competitive schools turning away students in droves? Their business amounts to approximately one quarter of one percent of the whole "higher education industry" in the United States. Those lucky institutions (I used to have a lot of responsibility at one of them) don't need to worry about their revenue streams going south on them. The other 99.75% of students attend institutions that have no such assurances. That's the fundamental story of American higher education.

And the cost (debt)? This is trickier.

On the one hand, it's a beautiful thing that money is made available to students on favorable terms — favorable rates, delayed start of repayment, etc. It's made higher education possible for millions. But on the other hand, there are lots of students who struggle — and too often fail — to keep up with the payments. Yes, there are reforms possible that would ease that burden, both reducing default rates but, more importantly, making repayment less a burden on the early careers and family-making lives of graduates.

But let me ask you to ask yourself this question. Think of the public higher education institution you know best — you work at it, or it's in your city, or you went to it, or your family sends young people to it. What do their graduation rates look like? Standard numbers that people track are freshman retention, four-year graduation rate, and six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time first year students. The elite privates have great numbers: the last one I worked at has 96% freshman retention, 90% four-year graduation, and 95% six-year. Bearing in mind that some students transfer out to other institutions and still graduate in a timely way, the numbers from the students' point of view are actually somewhat better than that.

For comparison, the **California State University** system (all the "Cal State" institutions, not the flagships like **Berkeley** and **Santa Cruz**) has improved its systemwide four-year rate to 23%, up from 19% a couple of years earlier. Six-year rate is at 59%. So if you go to **Cal State Fullerton** or **San Francisco State**, on average you have a one in four chance of graduating in four years. Six years after setting out on the adventure of higher education, 40% of students haven't got a diploma to show for it. That's a huge investment of everybody's

time and effort — a huge amount of time those students have taken, when they could have gone straight to the workforce out of high school. Those numbers don't make the front pages of the tabloids.

What's this got to do with debt? Bear with me but: roughly speaking, the loan system is designed for the successful four-year graduate. Borrow the max, graduate in four years, have an average life career after that, and the system is designed so that your debt load will be repayable with modest stretching. Yes, even there, if you don't quite optimize your career — illness, family obligations, economic downturn, bad luck — you've got a problem. But by and large, that system can work.

But what if you go to college, borrow money, and *don't* graduate in four years — or at all? And borrow money along the way to keep the dream alive? And don't make the dream? Then you've got a real problem. Your economic value hasn't increased enough to make you a successful repayer of those loans — and you may have taken out more money over those six, or however many, years, in the hope of reaching the goal.

Now I know these things because I've been lucky enough to come to work at **Arizona State University**, where I am happy to say we have the best university president in the galaxy, **Michael Crow**. Our numbers could be better — 45% and 63% for 4 and 6 years respectively, and a freshman retention rate that is just touching 88%. But they are already vastly better than they were twenty years ago, and there's huge internal effort to bring those numbers up, with innovative pedagogy, strong student services, data-driven advising. **ASU's** university charter says that we measure our success "not by whom we exclude but by whom we include and by how they succeed" — and the internal management focus on supporting student success is intense and relentless.

Meanwhile, public higher education in particular has had billions of dollars of government funding taken away over the last couple of decades, in states that evidently don't care about their own economic and social futures. Hard to fathom. The idea of free higher education is a beautiful one, but it's obviously tough to achieve. But if states just *stopped cutting* and even, just maybe, *restored some* of what's been cut, we have it in our power to make things easier for students

Librarians: what's in this for us? Everything we know says that students who draw on library resources perform better and graduate sooner. What are we doing to support, encourage, and enable that student success? If that question isn't up near the top of your list of things that keep you awake, it should be. 🐼

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