Chapter 2
Towards Quality Higher Education: Barriers and Enablers

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Introduction and Background

Over the years, there has been increasing recognition of the need and the importance of education beyond childhood. While an attainment of basic literacies once sufficed, it is now widely acknowledged that individuals need and benefit from a number of more demanding abilities and understandings: the ways of thinking associated with the major disciplines and beyond, the assumptions and values of other cultures as well as their own, and the nature of many changes that are occurring rapidly all over the world. Such an education should enable individuals to find a suitable occupation and to secure a decent life for themselves and their family. If we are to have citizens who are informed and who comport themselves in an ethical manner, higher education should also go well beyond vocational preparation.

To understand the forms of higher education that are not purely vocational, we and our colleagues have recently completed an ambitious study of higher education in the United States. Often these forms have been called "liberal arts" or "liberal arts and sciences." As this phrase is often misunderstood, or not understood at all, we embrace the more neutral phrase with which this essay is titled.

Our research approach has been to conduct semi-structured interviews of about an hour with the various constituent groups in select institutions of higher education.[1] The ten campuses were quite different from one another. At each institution, we have

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spoken to approximately 50 incoming students, 50 students who were expected to receive their bachelor's degree, and a smaller number of faculty, senior administrators, alumni/ae, parents, trustees, and job recruiters (approximately 15–25 in each group). These interviews are wide-ranging; they touch on academic topics, campus issues and resources, social and extra-curricular activities, the overall purposes of higher education, as well as the factors that contribute to or impede the achievement of these goals (see section "Barriers to the Achievement of Goals"). All interview subjects received the same basic set of questions; however, small adjustments were made so that each question was appropriate for each of the several constituencies.

While participation in our study was voluntary, we endeavored to have a representative sample of each of these constituent groups. When we had smaller numbers than we would like from a given constituency (e.g., fewer athletes, fewer teachers of science), we usually succeeded in securing additional participants. All in all, we have conducted over 2000 interviews (approximately 200 per campus), recorded and transcribed these interviews, and are currently analyzing the accrued data in multiple ways.[2]

To provide an accurate representation of higher education, the campuses included in our study vary widely in terms of size, selectivity, location, and mission (Table 2.1). They are all located in the United States; most of them have a significant residential component, and all the campuses have a stated commitment to an education that is not purely vocational. We cannot assume, therefore, that our findings and recommendations will be applicable to institutions of higher education in Europe or in other regions of the world, nor are they necessarily applicable to institutions that are dedicated to vocational education. That said, we suspect that at least some of what we have learned and described in the following will prove applicable elsewhere. We hope that the picture of higher education that we are assembling will prove of use to the PLATO program, which, too, has adopted the ideal of academic education aimed at fostering holistic personal development (for a description of PLATO program, see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al. 2018a).

The "Three Cs" of Quality Higher Education

Were we the czars of higher education, we would focus on three issues (each described in some detail in an earlier essay for the PLATO project; Gardner 2018a):

- *Context*: Every institution of higher education should have a stated mission. That mission should be expressed succinctly: widely available, widely known, and

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[2]Some of the preliminary findings are reported on our blog "Life Long Learning"—see howardgardner.com. Our methodology is explicated in detail in three blogs (https://howardgardner.com/2018/08/13/the-method-in-our-madness-data-collection-and-analysis-for-our-study-of-higher-education-part-i/). Ultimately we expect to write further articles and books that document our findings and make concrete practical recommendations.

Table 2.1 Description of campuses in our study

University/college	Size of undergraduate student body	Type of Institution	Selectivity (based on SAT scores)	Location in the USA	Residential/non-residential	Special focus
1	Medium	Public	Selective	Suburban (Northeast)	Residential	
2	Small	Private	Very selective	Urban (Northeast)	Residential	Global citizenship
3	Small	Private	Very selective	Suburban (South)	Residential	
4	Small	Private	Very selective	Rural (Midwest)	Residential	Undergraduate liberal arts college
5	Small	Private	Very selective	Suburban (Northeast)	Residential	Undergraduate professional-orientation
6	Medium	Private	Selective	Urban (Midwest)	Mix of residential and non-residential	Religious identity
7	Large	Public	Less selective	Suburban (West)	Non-residential	
8	Large	Public	Selective	Urban (Midwest)	Residential	
9	Medium	Public	Selective	Urban (Northeast)	Non-residential	
10	Large	Public	Less selective	Urban (Northeast)	Non-residential	Community college (Associate's Degree)

exemplified in daily practices. Positive examples of "mission accomplished" should be highlighted. When the mission has not been realized, or has been realized imperfectly, or even undermined, that failure should be acknowledged and efforts should be undertaken to recalibrate course. With respect to the PLATO project, the achievement of positive learning within and across disciplines constitutes a laudable goal (for a definition of positive learning, see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al. 2018b).

- *Character*: As part of its mission, every institution should endeavor to form graduates who understand and seek to behave in desirable ways (Minnameier 2018). We use the term "moral" to denote how individuals treat one another in everyday life—we have termed this form "neighborly morality." We use the term "ethical" to denote how individuals behave in their roles as worker and their roles as citizen—we have termed this desideratum "the ethics of roles" (Weber 1922/1946). Some of this moral and ethical formation can take place through courses and regulation of acceptable behavior on campus, widely known and scrupulously enforced. However, by far the most important ingredient of character development is the daily behavior—and, importantly, the reasons for that behavior—of the older persons on the campus: faculty, administrators, staff, and even (or perhaps even especially) students who are more senior than their peers in age or status. When these older persons on campus embody good character, they can exert a beneficent effect on students. Conversely, if bad character is not recognized as such, and if it is not dealt with firmly, then the students cannot know, and therefore cannot appreciate the differences between exemplary, acceptable, and deplorable character.

- *Curriculum*: As noted, we believe that a central mission of every educational institution should be the creation and presentation of a high quality curriculum. We also believe that the creation and implementation of a curriculum should be the prerogative of the faculty—and particularly those faculty members who have a long-time association (and hence greater familiarity and identification) with the college or university.

Parts of the curriculum will presumably resemble the offerings of secondary school, particularly those secondary schools that explicitly prepare students for higher education; parts of the curriculum will presumably resemble the offerings of professional education, which will likely occur in conjunction with or after the completion of non-vocational higher education. As we have argued in our earlier PLATO paper (Gardner 2018a), the curriculum should be fashioned with an eye toward those cognitive capacities that emerge (or at least flourish) toward the end of adolescence.

In that vein, we urge that all students take at least one course that involves philosophical questions and modes of argumentation (Gardner 2018b); a course that highlights the various ways in which, and the media by which, individuals communicate with one another (this field of study is frequently called semiotics; see Klein et al. in this volume; for descriptions of various languages, media, and codes, see Wittum et al. 2018); courses that foreground interdisciplinary issues and models

of thinking (Meyer et al. 2018); and, relatedly, courses that call on syntheses of different types and kinds of knowledge (Ahrweiler 2017). Particularly in the era of "fake news" and "truthiness," we need to pay special attention to learning that is better described as mislearning (Gardner 2011; Hartig and Goldhammer 2018; Maurer et al. in this volume) or negative learning (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al. 2018b).

Barriers to the Achievement of Goals

When we began our study of higher education in 2012, we were certainly cognizant of the many challenges that faced higher education in the United States—indeed, those challenges constituted a primary reason for undertaking this study. However, only as the study proceeded, did we become aware of the nature and potency of these challenges and, as a result, of the necessity to address these challenges as expeditiously and effectively as possible.

In what follows, based on the findings from our study, we identify two challenges that we consider internal—challenges that, insofar as possible, arise and can (and should) be addressed on campus. As a complement, we identify two challenges that we deem external—challenges that will require mobilization beyond the walls, and outside the greens of individual campuses. In the cases of both internal and external challenges, we also offer suggestions about how these challenges might be approached.

Internal Challenge "Mental Health and Well-Being": As our study progressed, we were struck most powerfully by the incidence and the significance of mental health challenges across the range of campuses. On every campus that we studied, mental health was identified as the biggest problem. This identification occurred both with respect to open-ended questions "what are the biggest problems on campus?" and to a rank order request "please rank order five problems on campus" (the options were academic dishonesty, mental health, relationships with peers, substance abuse, and safety). Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, those individuals who spend considerable time on campus (students, faculty, administrators) were more struck by the mental health issues than were those who are not currently on campus (parents, alumni/ae, trustees).

These sheer quantitative results raise numerous questions, only some of which have been adequately investigated by researchers. How different is this pattern from earlier times? Are the mental health conditions, symptoms, and complaints that are voiced the same or different from periods in the past? If different, is that because individuals are more likely to seek help, or because more help is available, or because there is less stigma attached to seeking help? Do all individuals mean the same thing by "mental health problems"? (For example, does "stress" or "depression" denote similar or distinctive conditions? Is stress as a result of failure to gain admission to a club comparable to stress as a consequence of family or financial

hardship?), and, most hauntingly, are there many individuals in college now who would never have qualified, or even survived, in an earlier era?

While we are intrigued by these questions, the fact remains that mental health problems are widespread, and that they need to be addressed as adequately as possible in as timely a fashion as possible, if well-being is achieved. For if a significant proportion of students are suffering from stress, anxiety, depression, or some other mental health symptomatology, they will not be able to benefit from the educational purposes for which colleges have presumably been instituted (see also Dormann et al. 2018).

Needless to say, institutions of higher education have taken various approaches to dealing with mental health issues—and while the financial resources of the institution are clearly one factor, they are by no means the only one. Of those that we have encountered, we identify Peer Counselors at Kenyon College (Ohio) as especially promising. Formed in 2012, this network directly addresses students who need help, but are too nervous or afraid to seek it. Some students may not know where to go, others feel that walking into a mental health center will become a stigma—a mark of weakness, a sign of illness. While some institutions have a limited number of counseling sessions for students, Kenyon College offers an unlimited number of sessions, and yet some students are still reportedly reluctant to walk into the center.

Accordingly, the College has instituted a program of Peer Counselors. These fellow students first take an oath of confidentiality, then go through training, and are finally empowered to work both informally (casual conversations around campus) and formally (student-led discussion groups in residence halls). This procedure is effective in breaking the culture of silence (Jurney 2012) by letting students know that it is okay and wise to ask for help (Thompson 2012). In addition, Kenyon Peer Counselors strive to create awareness of and connection to other resources so that students can find the help they need.

Similarly, California State University, Northridge (CSUN) also utilizes students to "spread the word" about the prevalence of mental health issues on campus and the resources available to students. As this large university does not have sufficient staff to meet the demand for counseling sessions, the campus enlists support of students, and also of faculty and administrators. For example, through presentations in classes or at campus organizations, student peer educators help to educate students about various support groups and educational networks (e.g., ones that address eating disorders, depression and suicide, rape prevention). Students are also trained to work on "listening lines," in which peer counselors listen to students' struggles, and then make appropriate referrals.

In addition to student support at CSUN, faculty and administrator are also encouraged to help students feel more comfortable sharing problems and anxieties. For instance, a campus-wide survey indicated that students did not feel a sense of community at CSUN. Accordingly, faculty and administrators were given a variety of stickers to display, each with particular words and phrases that describe certain personal traits—such as "I am a first generation student," "I failed my first college exam," "I identify as transgender." The hope is that students will realize that even

faculty and administrators share vulnerabilities, and that these more senior individuals are available to talk about their own struggles and how they dealt with them.

Internal Challenge "Loneliness, Alienation, Failure to Belong": Clearly related to, but different from sheer mental health problems, are the widely reported feelings of alienation, estrangement, isolation, or "anomie" on the part of many students (as well as some faculty and some members of other constituents). Viewed externally, particularly as portrayed by the media, and also by the brochures and videos displayed at individual campuses, college is supposed to be a period of fun, enjoyment, pleasure, and indeed, among students whom we have termed "inertial" or "transactional," partying and playing around are seen as the principal reasons for going to college.

Yet, directly counter to that portrayed idyllic state, significant proportions of the college populace report that they feel they do not "belong" at the school in which they have enrolled. Again, the reasons for this "anomie" can be varied as are the proposed explanations: the rise of social media, which highlight the pleasures that others are presumably having (FOMO—fear of missing out—has become a powerful cry for help), the preoccupation of faculty members with their own professional careers to the detriment of initiating and maintaining meaningful relations with students, and the greater number of the so-called first gen (first generation) students, often from impoverished and/or minority backgrounds, who lack familiarity with the norms, expectations, and resources of college life today. The campus population is no longer restricted to prep school students enrobed in prep school clothing, and to "Mr. Chips" professors who have resided for their entire lives on campus and spend many hours each week interacting with students.

Colleges can and should deal directly with these feelings of alienation—whether such a lack of belonging derives from a felt distance from fellow students, from the course of study, or from the institutional mission writ large. We have identified several approaches that seem promising in that regard. In each case, these approaches should be launched as early and explicitly as possible, continue throughout the college experience, and constitute an important part of the explicit and implicit (hidden curriculum) of the institution (see section "The "Three Cs" of Quality Higher Education"; also Gardner 2018a).

As one example, the "La Verne Experience" at the University of La Verne (California) is a four-year curriculum designed to build community both within and beyond campus and to encourage civic engagement (Fischman 2018). The first year of the program (First Year Learning Experience) is the flagship initiative. From the first day of orientation, as students have just arrived on campus, they are grouped in small cohorts for the year (30 students and three faculty members). These "learning communities" consist of three academic classes as well as a service work component. This first year program helps each student identify not only as a member of a particular learning community, but also as a La Verne student, carrying out the university's core values of civic responsibility and care for others in need. Though the curriculum in each of the succeeding years shifts in focus, the first year program helps students to develop long-lasting connections to fellow students, to the professors in the learning community, and to the institutional mission.

A second example is the Second-year Transformational Experience Program (STEP) at The Ohio State University. This program is specifically designed to foster connections between students and professors in the second year of college. In view of the well-documented "sophomore slump," the University brought faculty and administrators together in a series of focus groups to discuss how to help students navigate the myriad of available resources. The resulting STEP program aims to bring students and faculty together in conversation to talk about things that matter outside of the classroom (e.g., personal finances, residential life, aspirations, challenges).

The program has three primary goals: (1) to create time and space for students and faculty to connect with one another, (2) to inform students about how the school's various offerings (e.g., research positions, study abroad programs, tutoring center) can help them achieve their goals, and (3) to remind faculty that helping students is their primary responsibility. Faculty members voluntarily sign up to be a "mentor" to students, committing to spending quality time with students; some faculty elect unstructured one-on-one meetings, other faculty may prefer structured small group discussions. As a secondary benefit of STEP, some faculty members report that participation in the program helps them to connect with other faculty across the university, whom they may have never had the chance to meet.

As one more example, at Queens College (New York), the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (CERRU) focuses on encouraging dialogue between and among students from different backgrounds—including Christian, Muslim, and Jewish groups—those who often "silo" on college campuses. Among many activities, the Center is well-known for its training of Fellows—students who take on the responsibility of forging connections between diverse student groups by encouraging in-person conversation, often involving contentious topics, such as the religious and political conflict between Palestine and Israel. Fellows become ambassadors for the school community by facilitating book club meetings and lunchtime events. CERRU is well-known by students at Queens as the organization that brings students together, even those who, on the surface, do not appear to have values and interests in common. The program aims to help *all* students understand that they belong to Queens College, as well as the larger New York and American community, through work at elementary schools, religious institutions (e.g., church, temple), and other local colleges. While the La Verne and Ohio State programs may be particularly appropriate for American students in residential colleges, the CERRU program—which takes place on a commuter campus—seems relevant for institutions of higher education around the world.

The twin challenges of mental health problems and feelings of alienation should constitute the highest priority issues for all institutions of higher education. Not only are these situations painful for the individuals involved (be they students, faculty, or administrators). Of equal importance, the colleges and universities are unlikely to be able to achieve, or even to address, their primary academic mission unless the members of their community feel reasonably healthy and can become meaningfully engaged with others in the community.

External Challenge "Cost of Education": Compared to many commodities and services in modern post-industrial society, the costs of higher education have risen and continue to rise significantly. In contrast, for much of American (and also Western) society, income has remained relatively stagnant. While authorities differ on whether the costs of higher education constitute a crisis, there is no doubt that many individuals and constituencies question the reasons for and the need for a higher education which seems expensive or even overly or prohibitively expensive.

Some qualifications should be stated. First of all, private education is far more expensive than public education (Gallup-Purdue 2015). (The average tuition at a 4 year public institution is $17,000, and the average tuition at a 4 year private institution is $38,589; College Board 2011.) The small number of well-endowed private colleges and universities in the United States can provide scholarship/fellowship support that the far larger number of less endowed institutions cannot possibly provide. Moreover, in most cases, the so-called sticker price differs from what higher education actually costs (Konrad 2011), and, most importantly, the support from the state for public education has declined steadily in recent decades with no signs of any reversal of this trend (Gallup-Purdue, 2015). Pundits have put it succinctly, "education used to be seen as a public good; now it is seen as a private good" (Baum and McPherson 2011). Indeed prestigious large state universities currently receive less than 10% of their operating budget from the state. If they could legally become private universities, these comparatively wealthy "big publics" might choose to do so; but often legal or financial barriers prohibit this course of action (Bacow 2017).

Without doubt, steps can be taken to make the cost of college less onerous. Institutions can drop expensive athletic programs and decline to build over-the-top facilities that are costly to construct and then costly to maintain. They can share facilities and even faculty members (and disciplinary programs) with one another. College could be shortened in length—say, to 3 years (with or without summer courses). Online education could become an effective supplement or replacement. (We do not endorse certain other cost-saving devices, like eliminating tenure or increasing the already high percentage of adjunct faculty.) One idea with promise is the commitment of future alums to "give back" to the school in proportion to the wealth that they will subsequently accumulate.

A perennially popular remedy is for the government (local, state, federal) to assume much of the cost of higher education—as is done in most of the developed world. Indeed, dating back to the immediate post WW II period, President Harry Truman's commission (1947) proposed that community colleges (often then called junior colleges) be free to students. This remedy does not seem feasible in the United States at present, and indeed, if the example of Britain is any indication, other developed countries may also begin to charge for higher education—and to increase the charges over time.

External Challenge "Antipathy to Higher Education": In the last few years, public opinion polling in the United States has documented a most disturbing trend: a significant proportion of the population (and a majority of those who describe

themselves as members of the Republican Party) question the value of higher education (Pew Research Center 2017).

Yet again, this finding needs to be unpacked. First off, there is questioning of whether higher education yields an adequate ROI—return on investment. Nearly all indices concur that, until now, higher education has been a good financial investment; however, it is significant that a growing proportion of the population does not believe that is the case (Pew Research Center 2017). Trends in the future may support this growing public perception: many more jobs will be automated or handled by artificial intelligence, and those jobs that remain whether high status (computer programmer) or craft like (plumber, electrician) may not require a traditional college degree.

Far more discomforting is the contention that higher education—and particularly education in the liberal arts and sciences—may be bad for the nation (Pew Research Center 2017). To be sure, some of these data are due to ignorance. Even in the target population of our study, many individuals do not know the meaning of the expression "liberal arts"—and some have not even heard the phrase! In an amazingly telling finding, matched groups of individuals rate a curriculum lower when the phrase "liberal arts" is used explicitly, than when exactly the same curriculum is presented without the telltale phrase being uttered (Busteed 2017).

The apparent—and perhaps growing—antipathy toward higher education may reflect another, even more insidious state of affairs. It may be that those in the population who lack higher education—or even lack contact with those who have higher education—may feel ignored or condescended to by those who have spent 4 years or more in an institution of higher education. Presumably, this is what then candidate Donald Trump meant when he declared at one of his rallies "I love the poorly educated" and when he ridiculed candidate Hillary Clinton's references to "the deplorables." It may also be the case that our institutions of higher education—whose faculty as a whole lean leftwards—encourage ways of thinking and acting that alienate them from that portion of the population who have not been exposed to those "liberal arts and sciences" ways of thinking (Mehler et al. 2017).

Clearly, this antipathy within the populace is deeply injurious to the status—and, indeed, to the plight—of institutions of higher education in the United States, and perhaps elsewhere as well. It is not helped when political leaders and other influential individuals who should know better embrace anti-intellectual attitudes. (Even President Obama was not immune from this trend when, during his presidency, he ridiculed a degree in art history—fortunately, he was rebuked for this thoughtless remark and apologized for it; Jaschik 2014; Madhani 2014).

Conclusion

In the end, as is the case with other institutions that have lost public respect in recent decades, we cannot simply look to others to counter critiques of higher education. To paraphrase a famous injunction borrowed from Greek culture and from the Bible:

"Institutions of higher education—heal thy-selves." If we are to gain, or regain, the financial and attitudinal support that institutions of higher education need, we must put our own epistemological, cultural, and financial houses in order. To the extent that the intrinsic and extrinsic challenges are related—for instance, if high costs cause psychological stress—we must attempt to ameliorate them. Above all, we must exemplify what we claim that we stand for—in terms of context, character, and curriculum—as enablers of top-quality higher education. As best we can, we must address the challenges outlined here—as well as those additional ones that may arise going forward, and we must make our actions known—making sure that we do so in a way that embodies our values, rather than cheapens or even undermines them.

Here, we encounter the principal reasons that the PLATO project is so important. It is a scholarly endeavor, involving scholars of several disciplines working together or in tandem, and making findings known in appropriate formats. We should not pretend to be something other than we are. Yet at the same time, we must always keep in the forefront the indispensable roles that we play in creating new knowledge that may be of use to the wider society and in communicating that knowledge as clearly and as widely as possible. Perhaps, indeed, the examples of positive learning being developed and probed can be used across the entire population, so that bridges can be built between scholars and their institutions, on the one hand, and the wider world, on the other.

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