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GLOBAL

Turning the tide on the ebbing of public trust in higher education

Michael Schill 20 July 2018



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Barely half of Americans responding to a survey administered by the Gallup Corporation earlier this year said that they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education. The proportion slipped below 50% when the question specifically addressed colleges and universities.



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Among members of our US Republican Party, the lack of faith was especially pronounced. Only 12% of Republicans had a great deal of confidence in colleges and universities, compared to 37% of Democrats and 22% of Independents.

A similar pattern was revealed in a recent Pew Research Center survey that reported that only 55% of Americans felt that colleges and universities had a positive effect on how things were going in the country. Among Republicans, 58% said that colleges and universities had a negative effect on the nation. However, 72% of Democrats had a positive view, relatively unchanged during recent years.

This does not seem to be a phenomenon that is confined to the United States. Empirical findings of a modest decline in overall confidence in colleges and universities and big increases in polarisation – at least in the US – lead university presidents to ask themselves at least three questions:

- Why are we seeing these dynamics?
- What are the consequences?
- If the consequences are negative, what can we do about the situation?

Anti-intellectualism and political imbalance

In the US there are any number of factors that have caused people to express scepticism about higher education. The US is in the midst of a populist moment with the election of President Donald Trump. One element that frequently accompanies populism is anti-intellectualism and what better institution to target anti-intellectualism at than institutions of higher education.

Anti-intellectualism mixes with politics with respect to the Trump administration's views on science. Consensus among university scientists, particularly with regard to climate change and environmental phenomena, is rejected by fiat rather than by the scientific method.

But there is something more than anti-intellectualism behind the growing antipathy of conservatives and some middle-of-the-road Americans toward our universities. Colleges and universities in the United States are increasingly seen as ideologically imbalanced, with

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insufficient representation of or respect for people from the political right.

Having been a faculty member or dean at five major universities, I think there is some truth to this accusation. Outside of economics departments and business schools (and sometimes even within these schools and departments), we lack ideological and political diversity.

No wonder parents worry about their children not being exposed to a diversity of viewpoints, at the least, and indoctrination, at the extreme.

Common interests

A second, related dynamic is the changing nature of identity politics in our universities. Our colleges and universities mirror our nation in the sense that we are becoming more and more diverse. It is unsurprising that this diversity is reflected in a multiplication of different identity interests.

Each American university and most schools within it have a large and growing number of affiliation groups, ranging from race to gender to sexual orientation and the various intersections among these groups. While the growth of diversity has had tremendous benefits for our schools and society, it has also contributed to less consensus about common and shared interests.

Each group (student and faculty) has its own set of legitimate concerns, which generates its own distinct agenda and demands. To an outsider, it might appear that all a president does is respond to one of a multitude of group interests with little attention being directed to common interests.

As universities have become more diverse, we have focused more and more on how to make them more welcoming and inclusive. Demands for inclusion on our campuses sometimes are also accompanied by demands that certain types of viewpoints should be off limits.

To many of us in university leadership and especially to folks outside the university these desires by some of our students and faculty members to limit what can and should be said on campus often seem to violate fundamental norms of free expression.

Added to this stew is the ever-increasing splintering of the academic enterprise into fields and subfields that are sometimes esoteric and frequently incomprehensible to people outside the academy.

Scientific breakthroughs often involve tiny steps: lay people may puzzle over the value of knowing the “charm” of a subatomic particle. Plus, the humanities’ turn toward postmodern exploration of subjectivity can be remote, confusing and even offensive to some of our constituencies.

In many ways such dynamics have made our universities much more alive and interesting. On the other hand, they have also made us more volatile and more prone to caricature.

Enter Fox News; enter advocacy groups with a primary mission to make us look silly. Enter right-wing activists like Milo Yiannopoulos or Ben Shapiro, who delight in using our commitment to free speech to hold extreme public events that bait students, and many faculty, on the left into aggressive counter demonstrations and censorship.

These spectacles are designed to cast universities in the least attractive light: hypocrites who only defend free speech we like; vassals of left ideological dogma; or inept managers of our own campus communities.

Is it any wonder that a polarised populace, led by a polarising leader, with a media of which a large share long ago gave up objectivity, would increasingly become sceptical about our universities?

Inequality

One last contributor to the lack of confidence in universities is that they are often seen as contributing to the growth of inequality in the United States rather than playing the role we celebrate as equalisers and generators of opportunity.

Our costs have gone up tremendously – particularly in the public sector as the state has retrenched. Increasingly students and parents, leery of debt after the Great Recession, have focused a critical eye on us and what we are doing.

Some believe that our administrative costs have spiralled out of control for no reason other than to feather our nests. Some believe that elite institutions' competition for the best and the brightest students and faculty members generates few benefits for them and their children.

Some complain that their children graduate into a changing economy without sufficient advising or direction. Taxpayers and parents increasingly question the value of research and the liberal arts in helping students get jobs (which they see as the overriding objective of a university).

Indeed, surveys show that the proportion of Americans who believe a college degree isn't necessary to survive in the workplace increased from 43% in 2009 to 57% in 2016.

And some believe that we educate more graduate students with more highly specialised degrees, especially in the humanities, than any job market can reasonably absorb.

Thus is it any wonder that universities are facing challenges in maintaining support among the public?

Social benefits

As university leaders we need to talk about what we can do to gain, regain or preserve the confidence of our various populations.

Is America an outlier? Can we learn something from Asia where university budgets continue to grow and where public trust remains, for now, fairly strong and tied to the benefits of economic growth and the expansion of the middle class?

If the problem is communication, what can we do better to show that what we are doing benefits society?

One of things we are beginning at the University of Oregon is a science communications centre to explore ways to get across complicated scientific information to various and diverse publics.

And, if the problem is not just communications, but substance, we can do more. At Oregon we are fundamentally re-thinking how we advise students by integrating our curricular and career advising. Parents love hearing this.

We are also adding a new unit – the Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact – with the sole purpose of moving discoveries into the market or into hospitals. Again, a way to show a direct connection between research and human life.

In any event, I am at heart an optimist. And my optimism about higher education is personal and knows no bounds. As a first-generation college graduate whose parents never had the good fortune to get an education, education has given me the opportunity to have a wonderfully fulfilling career and a good life.

As an academic, I believe that it is only through knowledge that our society will advance. Am I being too optimistic in my hope that we can get the public to understand and fall in love with us again? I hope not.

Michael Schill is president of the University of Oregon in the United States. This is taken from a talk he gave at the Association of Pacific Rim Universities' (APRU) presidential panel at the APRU conference on 'Our Digital Future in a Divided World', held from 24-26 June at National Taiwan University, Taipei.

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