

## ShockWave II: The 21st Century In American Higher Education

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Over three and one-half centuries, American higher education has met many challenges and adapted to many powerful forces, mostly one at a time. But in the mid-20th century several of these challenges arrived all at once. They included acceptance of national responsibility for scientific research and development, universal access for all high school graduates, and the demands of politically restless students. This was the period of “Shock Wave I,” and in spite of its difficulties and casualties, it turned out to be a period of unprecedented success for American higher education.

#### *Multiple Challenges*

Now we face Shock Wave II, as a new and even more numerous set of powerful forces washes over us. Over the next 30 years (2000–2030) and perhaps beyond, they may lead to extensive changes in higher education. These forces include the new electronic technology; the DNA revolution, and the public’s hopes and fears that accompany it; new demographic realities, including the rise in the proportion of historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups; competition for public-sector resources, partly stemming from a decline in the long-term rate of productivity growth per man hour in the economy; competition for students from the for-profit sector; responsibility for improving primary and secondary education; globalization of the economy; and contention over models of the university—Enlightenment versus postmodern.

These and other developments will create a new period of destabilization, promising much conflict and impressive changes as well as making it much more difficult to plan for the future than Shock Wave I did.

Higher education leaders worked out solutions to Shock Wave I in large measure through the differentiation of missions and functions among institutions. One result was the rise to prominence of community colleges and research universities. The new realities will differentially affect the higher education segments, with what have been known as “comprehensive” institutions becoming the most vulnerable and perhaps most changed in the coming period. These institutions, above all, will need to respond to two new increasingly important markets for higher education. One is preparation for midcareer promotions, and this market for adult reentry students is bound to become more

important as advanced training is required for every move up the career ladder. It is in this arena that traditional institutions will face the heaviest competition from for-profit institutions and corporate classrooms.

The other new market is for retired persons wanting further education for consumption purposes. These two markets may also be particularly subject to service by electronic means. Additionally, schools of education will change substantially as they are placed under enormous pressure from state governments to take more responsibility for the performance of primary and secondary education.

Research universities and selective liberal arts colleges will remain the segments most assured of a vibrant future by the new developments, although for quite different reasons. And the research university will undergo substantial change, perhaps particularly as a result of the biological revolution.

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Higher education responded effectively to Shock Wave I mainly because the powerful forces were few in number and fairly well understood and because the nation’s economy provided sufficient resources to more than triple the size of the sector and to increase many times over support for university research. Leaders were confident that progress would continue and felt comfortable making plans for up to 40 years ahead.

Today, for several reasons, it is more difficult than it was in 1960 to develop an assured vision of the future. There are no three so dominating, so compatible, and so welcome forces at work as universal access, responsibility for scientific progress, and unprecedented prosperity. As competition increases for public resources—from prisons, the healthcare system, retirees’ income, and elsewhere—the effective use of resources will become a more dominant concern within higher education. In addition, authority within the university is now more circumscribed than ever before. There are more checks and balances by the courts, by faculty members, and by students. In sum, there are more contradictory variables, more uncertainties, more checks and balances, and more possibly unwelcome developments, making successful adjustment much less certain. Above all, a period of fundamental but uncertain technological change

makes advance planning difficult and, possibly, unwise. It could create rigidities in responses where flexibility is needed.

In the 1960s, many of us had a clear—and correct—view of the big forces at work. We moved straight ahead to meet the challenges, but with blinders on. We too often ignored the pathologies of the institutions we were building. Few of us foresaw the rise of the student rebellion, and when it came we treated it too often as an interference with the urgent pursuit of our visions.

Academic leaders now may not be able to identify any great visions to guide them nor great and compatible forces to dominate them. They may need to look in more directions, to be sensitive to many diverse opportunities and to many threats. They will be more concerned with survival than with great visions, survival for themselves and for their institutions.

#### *The Need for Strengthened Governance*

Not all segments of higher education will face the full range of challenges, but all will face serious and continuing conflicts over resources, exacerbating tensions on campus and between campuses and the larger society. To meet these conflicts, higher education will need to find ways to strengthen the capacity for effective action on the part of three key sets of actors involved in governance: boards of trustees, presidents, and faculties.

Many of the new and intensified problems will come to rest particularly on the trustees' shoulders. These include (1) ensuring that cooperation with industry does not intrude on the basic science activities and the integrity of research universities, (2) developing admissions and tuition policies to serve the vastly expanded numbers of potential students, (3) improving the performance of schools of education in training teachers and in recommending educational policies for primary and secondary education, (4) finding sufficient resources and monitoring their efficient use, and (5) selecting and supporting able presidents. In light of these increasing demands, the time has come to strengthen boards of trustees, through longer terms and more sources of appointment for trustees of public institutions, thus lessening gubernatorial control.

Shock Wave II will require presidents to make more and harder decisions while, at the same time, they face a more formidable array of external interests and internal critics. Changes will be necessary to enhance these presidential positions, such as lengthening terms and providing sufficient rewards to compensate for the efforts involved.

Faculty governance is the third stress point. It is now too often centered on internal issues and moves too slowly. I suggest that faculty senates elect executive committees to exercise ongoing total institutional oversight and to act quickly in an emergency. I also suggest estab-

lishing faculty external affairs committees to consider academic relations with government and industry.

External guidelines could also improve faculty participation in governance. The American Association of University Professors, for example, might work on a new code of trustee and faculty ethics, one perhaps more oriented to external concerns, in particular on how to protect the university's function as an independent critic of society as it becomes more enmeshed in that society.

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#### *Missions Threatened*

The new era threatens some long-standing purposes of the university in American society. In 1973, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education identified five purposes that historically have been served by higher education. They included providing opportunities for individual student development, the advancement of human capability in society at large, enlargement of educational justice, the transmission and advancement of learning and wisdom, and the critical evaluation of society for the sake of society's self-renewal. It is the last of these that may be most threatened in the new era as outside entities, especially industry, attempt to encourage diversion of university resources to projects that have a prospective payoff and could provide, through patents, capture of the ownership of the new knowledge. A new code of academic ethics should include control of selection of scholarly endeavors by scholars alone. ■

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