The Coming Crisis in Higher Education, 1636-2036
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Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences and Professor of Political Science

Higher education is in crisis. We are at a turning point. We are in the middle of great disruption, creative destruction. We're facing an hour of decision, a moment of truth, a crossroads, a point of no return. We will never be the same – this institution will look completely different in the decades to come. Education as we know it is a thing of the past. We're in big trouble. We're facing a great opportunity and a great challenge.

I used a thesaurus to come up with all of those phrases. It was fun. But in fact, almost all of those phrases have been used recently to describe the state of higher education in the United States -- and for that matter, around the world. They've said everything but, "We're gonna die! We're gonna die!" And I bet if I searched far enough, I'd find someone who said that.

Janet Napolitano, the former governor of Arizona, Secretary of Homeland Security and current President of the University of California, wrote, "This diagnosis [of crisis] comes mainly from three groups: those who believe that technology inevitably, and radically, will transform how education is delivered, whether the traditionalists want it to or not; others who cite rising tuition prices and foresee an escalation of the divide between the privileged and the disadvantaged; and … advocates for public higher education who are raising alarms about a retreat from the commonwealth ideal that gave rise to this nation's great public universities in the first place."[i]

Those three claims – about the impact of technology, the sorting of access through the cost of higher education, and the retreat from public commitment to supporting higher education do pose deep challenges to those of us responsible for colleges and universities and our future. But they are not our only bases for concern and debate. We hear many others on and off college campuses. In no particular order, these include:

- The struggle over internal versus external governance represented, for example, by burdensome regulation and the heavy strings attached to public and private financial support.
- Struggles over internal governance, especially between faculty and the growing numbers of administrators in universities.
- Concern about the irrelevance of the education we provide to all but our wealthiest and best connected students if the curriculum does not seem to prepare them specifically for the job market they will enter, balanced with
- …fears about increasing vocationalism embedded in the goals of major research universities and liberal arts colleges that trump some of the most important values of a liberal education such as academic breadth, intellectual risk, and a love of learning.

- The balkanization of universities and colleges into self-interested departments within schools and schools within universities, especially in institutions with revenue-based budgeting, rendering them more inefficient and capable of harnessing institutional potential than they might be balanced with
- …fears about homogenizing forces that might leave universities chasing the latest academic flavor and less competitive than we might be in core disciplines.
- Decreasing support and respect for the humanities among those who regard them as luxuries and unconnected to job prospects in many direct ways.
- Insufficient support for the natural sciences at the federal level and in institutions that cannot keep up with the resources needed for facilities, instruments, and support personnel.
- Competition in levels of support for doctoral students across institutions that leaves most research universities behind.
- The burnout faced by faculty at research universities due to the demand for simultaneous excellence in undergraduate education, graduate education, and research, not to mention demands for professional service inside and outside the university.
- The sheer unbelievable expense of providing excellent education and pursuing first rate research, especially in the face of arms races across universities that are always happy to cherry-pick each others best talent with promises of riches, and
- …the demands of faculty who have many motivations for feeding that beast.
- The corporatization of the university complete with devotion to the jargon of commerce and management and branding and logos as a higher language – all that balanced with
- …the almost religious belief on the part of some faculty that any notion that the university is a business and must follow good business practices to survive and flourish is the work of the devil.
- The increasingly obvious divide between what at most universities (although not this one, certainly not in CAS) is a shrinking number of relatively privileged tenured faculty who continually seek higher compensation and lower teaching loads in contrast to an increasing core of adjunct faculty who are responsible for teaching large parts of the curriculum with low pay, few or no benefits, no job security, and often little in the way of support for their works.
- A concern with attracting students, reputation, and resources that leads to a strategy of using the criteria of national and international rankings to structure the investments and practices of colleges and universities, balanced with
- …a concern that rankings of questionable methodology and real meaning have replaced real academic decision-making inside of colleges and universities.
- You know what? We're gonna die! We're gonna die!

These are some of the major tensions of higher education today. They *are* the challenges and opportunities we face. It is absolutely true, that we – this institution and every other institution of higher education *and* the collective associations of higher education – have to make choices on a continuous basis to deal with and respond to these tensions. To do nothing, to make no decisions with regard to any one of these issues *is* to

make a consequential choice. And I couldn't agree more that higher education, colleges and universities, will not look in 10 years or 20 or 30 the way they do now.

But the questions that underlie these concerns – almost every one of them – have been at the heart of controversies, debates, struggles, decisions throughout the history of American higher education. You can begin to see them arise with the earliest formation of higher education, all the way back to the founding of the first American college in 1636.

And let's be clear about this: Colleges and universities have *never* have looked the same in 10 or 20 or 30 years "the way they do now," whenever that now was. Yes, we are in crisis. But higher education has been in crisis regularly throughout most of our history. And it likely always will be. During the rest of this talk I will pick up just a couple of these threads to play with them in light of both our history and contemporary situation.

Let me begin by emphasizing that I am using the word "crisis" precisely, in its root sense, and that sense is important. A *crisis*, at its root, lodged in the original Greek, is about the need to make a decision. A crisis is a decisive, critical turning point likely to shape the course of future events for better or worse. It is the point at which we must make a decision if we want to affect the course of events. Our friends at the Oxford English Dictionary found the earliest use of this word in English in 1543, concerning the turning point in the progress of a disease, when either recovery or death might ensue. The history of American higher education is a story of major turning points that came about because of changes in the development of the American state or religion or economy, demographic changes, changes in technology, wars, and shifts in American cultural values, among other things.

It is simply not true, as too many people have implied, that American higher education has been fundamentally unchanged, altered only by evolution, until today, when suddenly the world is turning upside down. I believe that understanding something of that history may help us deal with today's crisis with more thoughtfulness and, I hope, more skill.

Note well: My message is not "plus ça change, plus ça même chose," because we are talking about human history. As the great philosophers Heraclitus[ii], John Fogerty[iii] and Tina Turner[iv] said, that river keeps rolling, rolling, rolling. To lob a couple more metaphors into view: Even if, as I believe, we return repeatedly to similar fundamental challenges and value conflicts over time, history neither swings like a pendulum nor revolves like a wheel in a mouse cage.

One of the most distinctive characteristics about American higher education is how diversified it is, how diversified it has long been, but at the same time how common are some of the threads of the tensions that mark our higher education system. Our higher education system is not just composed of better and worse, as our contemporary ranking obsession has pushed some to believe thanks to a particular popular magazine innovation in 1983. Our higher education system is composed of different kinds of institutions that

serve somewhat different missions and clientele, different sectors of higher education that developed historically at different periods of American history because of the kinds of forces I mentioned earlier.

You may have noticed – and questioned – my use of the phrase, *higher education system*. After all, we are talking about what seems to be a big gangly mess of institutions of all sizes and shapes – public ones, private ones, residential, commuter, online, nonprofits and profit-seeking; two years, four years; institutions offering associate degrees, bachelors, masters, doctorates; those that offer one degree and those that offer many; those with a single campus and those with many, sometimes around the world; those whose degrees train for a specific job and those that don't; those aiming at a local clientele or a state or regional clientele or national or international; those for which research is central, or included, or not part of the picture at all; those framed by serving specific religious communities, or the military; those welcoming only the most academically and socially prepared students and those with virtually open admissions; those aimed largely at students who have just completed high school and those aimed largely at people who have spent some post-high school time doing other things…. I could go on and on.

These different institutions are not a system in the sense of being commonly coordinated and purposefully linked together, although soon after the founding of the Republic there were serious debates about founding a national university.[v] That didn't happen, and we would presumably look very different if we had done so. But American colleges and universities do form an *ecology* of institutions.[vi] Our past and our fates are linked in interesting ways.

It is all too easy, especially in an aspirational top research university located on the Charles River and living in the shadow of Harvard or MIT like this one to understand higher education through a narrow lens of the contemporary major research university, and the private ones at that. I have long been concerned about the myopia of private university leaders and faculty who misjudge the nature of education and life at their peer publics in a way that keeps the privates from learning from the publics.

This short-sightedness is even dangerous. My political science colleague, Nan Keohane, once warned, while she was president of Duke, that private universities must understand that the publics are the canary in the coal mine, because the publics are not as buffered by the whims and reach of public opinion and politics. She argued that the faculty and leadership of the privates must understand their kinship and stand by their colleagues or they would be next. So when we consider one of the great tensions of higher education, the retreat from public commitments to its support, we see that they did come for the publics first, with the reduction of state funding for the basic operations of higher education since 1980, especially at the flagships. Analysis by the American Council of Education estimates that given the pattern we have witnessed, more than 20 states are on track to zero out their operational funding of higher education by the end of the 2030s.[vii] That may not strike at the heart of faculty and leaders at private institutions, but next up to bat: funding for research, funding for families who cannot afford college tuition. That does strike at our hearts, in more ways than one.

The historic tensions about support for higher education are not just about budget appropriations. There are deep questions about what purposes and value of higher education. We are party to these debates today, and they have been going on in various forms since colonial times.

Is a college education even necessary? You see the debates in the news. For some reason, the more that solid data analysis shows that a college education makes a real difference in lifetime employment and income, health outcomes, and a host of other things, the more some people seem committed to the idea that college education doesn't matter – at least for other people's kids.

Many strands of US culture suggest that a college education is not necessarily valuable. Almost all of this country's original colonial colleges and a very large number of the later ones were founded by religious communities; one of the last of the original 9 colonial colleges – what eventually became Brown University – was founded by the Baptists. But both the Baptist and Methodist communities were slower than many other Christian denominations to support college education because they preferred ministerial to collegiate education for their leaders, and college education has always been for elites and leaders first, the rest of society after.[viii] As we at BU know, that preference changed in the 19th century.

There has always been a strand in this country's culture that claims that all I really need to know I learned in kindergarten. For a deeper discussion, let us recall Richard Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in America*.[ix] Of course, there's also long been a strand in the culture of academics that says that they have nothing to learn from people without advanced degrees. That's not only ignorant, but when academics express this view in their words and actions, we do ourselves and our institutions no favors.

But while we see much in contemporary culture, and among many politicians of the right a profound anti-intellectualism that extends to undermining colleges and universities, the sciences and the humanities, there has also been a remarkable commitment to higher education in this country, including by people who have not themselves reaped those benefits. Just as our eastern settlements established colleges long before they formed an independent polity or states, so did communities across the country establish colleges well before they achieved statehood, even if most were pretty sad affairs at first, given scarce resources and the lack of adequately prepared faculty or students. Actually, they were rather like Harvard and the other now-elite Ivies in their first decades in that regard.

If college, for what purposes? You know the debates, and many of you have taken part in them. There are those who say that higher education is not worth either public support or privately paid tuition if it does not clearly prepare a student for a job, and quickly. At the far other end are some people, likely all of them academics in liberal arts and sciences colleges -- perhaps some in this room -- who believe that almost any assessment of a college education, its curriculum, or pedagogies in terms of preparation for employment is crass vocationalism. The question, "college for what" is profoundly

important, especially because it is so expensive. It requires real thought on all of our parts, because the answers are *not* easy or self-evident, and the implications of our answers for our actions are challenging to implement. This, after all, is what the initiatives on assessment of the past two decades are about: If we claim that there is a purpose to the particularities of our curricula or pedagogy, shouldn't we make sure they are having the effects we desire? Or are we just making it all up?

The debates about "college for what" are as old as the history of American higher education. Conflict over how the answer to this question should shape our pedagogical and curricular practices have played out from those earliest days. The curricula of our founding colleges were devoted largely to the medieval trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, through which they studied matters of importance to good Christians, plus other subjects. The students largely spent their days in Latin and Greek drills and presentations interspersed with disputations.[x] They were expected to prepare for two hours before each recitation – the same amount of time that is still thought to be the appropriate prep time for one hour, one credit of classroom time. (plus ça change, indeed.) These institutions served a preindustrial elite, and the object of this education had mostly to do with culture and social relations and their station in particular Christian societies.

It took about a century after the founding of the first American college for some colleges begin to make significant room for new knowledge (meaning not just drill to learn old material) and a wider range of subjects. This happened as colleges began to diversify as different ones did or didn't respond to the Enlightenment or to the idea of professional education. These developments were marked by crisis – turning points through deliberation and often conflict, sometimes presidents thrown out on their robed behinds. Soon, the original colonial colleges set out on different paths, although these paths were to turn and turn again through time.

The proliferation of colleges in the 19th century provided more scope and variation for these debates. Was it appropriate to integrate the study of literature in English into the curriculum? Was it still necessary to require Latin or Greek? How much science should be integrated into the curriculum, or was that merely a matter of mechanics that did not belong in an institution of higher learning? Is political science and other social sciences proper fields of study in a college? Beside teaching, should instructors be engaged in the development of new knowledge through research and if so, how should those efforts be related to education. Once the study of law, theology, and medicine broke into college, and ultimately, university curricula, were there other professions that ought to be included? The two most obvious, that did enter the field were agriculture, architecture, engineering, and of course business and commerce, beginning with the Wharton School in the 1880s. Many of these moves to professionalism were framed not specifically or only by vocationalism, as we might think of it now – education for the purpose of preparing students for jobs, but from a will to promote the best of industry in America by upgrading skills, knowledge, and practices to an advanced level.

We still need to think about that. We generate a lot of discussion about the necessity of the liberal arts and sciences base for professional education within universities – and I believe in that passionately. But what can we, in the liberal arts and

sciences core fields, learn from the professional fields of study? What can our students learn from them? I'm not referring here to training for specific jobs. Rather, can the professional fields offer our students more of what we define as the core of a liberal education: building a wide and deep platform of skills, knowledge, ways of knowing, and ability to learn in different modes

Think about the principles of design essential to the field of engineering, or entrepreneurship in management, or the ability to attend to the often unspoken needs of others wisely that might come from theology, social work or other clinical fields. Surely participation in bringing creative visions to form and substance, understanding aesthetics as an active endeavor, not just something we observe -- could benefit our students as they would learn it from conservatory values could be an important part of that strong, wide, and deep platform that is a liberal education. Hey – I would love to see our privileged urban students – and maybe some of their professors – spending some time working on a farm so they know where their food comes from and get some respect for those who grow it. OK, I know. That's going too far. We're not about to start the BU kibbutz.

Let me turn to two other issues quickly before I close: technology and access.

Everyone is talking about technology and how, for the first time, it will disrupt higher education and change it forever. Yes, that's probably true. Of course, we've see that before. The shift from the scroll to the codex (that's "book" to you) in the 4th and 5th centuries CE made a large difference in the spread of knowledge, as did, even more, the extraordinary technological change of the 15th century – the printing press – which changed learning forever.[xi] We all learned about the revolution in the spread of ideas it created – what many people have labeled the "democratization of knowledge," and its massive impact on education at all levels.

Except a lot of human decision-making and action intervened between that technological change and actual transformation of education. Technology is just stuff. The invention and spread of new technologies does not transform education and learning automatically, deus ex machina, as it were, but through the workings of human thought, decisions and behavior, both collectively and individually. Technology opens up possibilities, but only if we *see* those possibilities, and become actively creative and play and experiment, and discover. The existence of the "democratic technology" of printing didn't keep a lot of people to work systematically to keep other people from being able to read, whether because of their race or gender or some other feature of their existence.

Our current new technologies didn't create our contemporary ideas about the democratization of knowledge and education for which some information technologists are taking credit. More than 40 years ago a significant portion of today's generation of higher education leaders – a lot of us old folks – were excitedly discussing Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[xii], and trying new techniques in our women's studies classrooms to break down the old hierarchies of knowledge and learning. But that was considered radical and very offbeat. Theories of education that go back early in the history developmental psychology (Did any of you send your kid to a Montessori School? Maria Montessori has been dead for 63 years!) prepared the way for how people

are thinking now about the possibilities of today's information technologies. Those seeds provided a lexicon and a readiness, today's technologies offer major opportunities for nurturing and implementing those ideas further.

What amazing possibilities there are for how we teach our students and how we ourselves learn using technologies that can learn and can use that learning in ways that are beyond the capacity of our brains to imitate. Of course our first may not amount to much. The early generation of MOOCs is a good example – expensive things, and but most folks who try them don't complete the course, and those who engage with them are predominantly college- educated already and male.[xiii] Using these technologies well, inclusively, and democratically is, I believe, beyond the capacity of most of our educational institutions and beyond the public's willingness to invest today if we were all truthful about it. And I don't for a moment think it will replace the residential college or, in most educational setting, face-to-face teaching and learning. There's something about eye contact that aids teaching and learning. Maybe the rush of endorphins when human beings look each other in the eye. Can a biologist in the room tell me whether that aids learning?

Finally, let me talk about access. It's all well and good to talk about the democratization of knowledge and education, but our forebears chose to exclude women from that democratization, and not too long ago. They chose to exclude some class groups, religious groups, racial groups from this democratization, and not too long ago. The legacy of our exclusion does not disappear quickly. These cultural legacies become embedded in the minds and choices not just of those who are in a position to exclude others, these days probably more often nonconsciously than purposely, but are also embedded in the minds and choices of those who, in effect, limit their own possibilities. And structural discrimination and roadblocks remain.

We have had to make the choice again and again: Who should be included? How should access work? Different kinds of institutions have different opportunities to lower and ultimately eliminate these roadblocks. Community colleges, comprehensives, research universities…. We have sometimes complementary roles to play, but we have to do this cooperatively. That will require, for example, more major research universities to develop workable articulation agreements and other cooperative arrangements to make sure that we do not create – or should I say maintain – a multi-tiered system of structural inequality. Here again, it should matter profoundly if the states withdraw their support from so-called public institutions, if the federal government reduces funding for impoverished students, and if the for-profit institutions that graduate very few people continue to capture such a huge proportion of Pell grants.

But if we do a better job of access, college and universities will not look the same in the future – they will not be the same as they were. They never have been when new groups enter the system. When the GI Bill assured that the college population would not again be limited to the elite and wealthy, colleges never again looked the same. When colleges and universities no longer kept strict and low limits on the number of Jewish students, and stopped barring Jews from faculty positions, universities were never the same. And in the 1960s, when many faculty and university leaders worried that if African

Americans and women took their place in universities as they were demanding to do, especially on faculties, universities would never be the same. And they are not. Thank goodness.

Because people do change institutions. They often bring with them different perspectives, different questions, different approaches or styles. Universities do not just absorb new groups of students or faculty, they are ultimately changed by them, often in subtle and unpredictable ways. When I was a young feminist activist, I knew why they didn't necessarily want me in: it was not just that lots of faculty did not think women were serious or good enough. It was because we didn't want this institution to be exactly the same as it was.

So that's my story for today. We have been in crisis since the first. Many of the fundamental themes and concerns have threaded throughout our history, but each time it is different. Each time, our challenges demand thinking we have not done before, solutions we have not found before. And at all times, we must think about those challenges on two tracks. We must continue thinking about and acting on these fundamental problems today so we are always in process of creating the best university and higher education system we can. And we must continue thinking about and acting on these fundamental problems today so that the students we are send out into the world this or next year are positioned and prepared to live a good and productive life, say, in 2036, when they are in midlife, 20 years out of college, four centuries after the founding of the first American college.

It has been an honor and a privilege to be in a position to help lead that thinking and acting. I thank you for that opportunity, and your participation in that work.

Notes

[i] Janet Napolitano, "Higher Education Isn't in Crisis," *Washington Post*, March 12, 2015.
[ii] Cited by Plato, *Cratylus*, 402a
[iii] John Fogerty, "Proud Mary," lyrics, http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnfogerty/proudmary.html .
[iv] Tina Turner, "Proud Mary," 1982, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqIpkMDRjYw .
[v] Roger G. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, p.106.
[vi] Martin Ruef and Manish Nag, "The Classification of Organizational Forms: Theory and Application to the Field of Higher Education. In Michael W. Kirst and Mitchell L. Stevens, eds., *Remaking College: The Changing Ecology of Higher Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp.84-109.
[vii] Thomas Mortenson, "State Funding: A Race to the Bottom," American Council on Education, http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/state-funding-a-race-to-the-bottom.aspx .
[viii] Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education.*

[ix] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. NY: Alfred Knopf, 1963.

[x] Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*; James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[xi] Turner, *Philology*.

[xii] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (NY: Herder and Herder, 1970).

[xiii] Ho, A. D., Reich, J., Nesterko, S., Seaton, D. T., Mullaney, T., Waldo, J., & Chuang, I. (2014). *HarvardX and MITx: The First Year of Open Online Courses* (HarvardX and MITx Working Paper No. 1), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2381263 .