

Regional

2016 can be a year of opportunity for higher ed

2015 will be remembered as a pretty bad year for higher education in this country. Erosion of funding for public colleges has continued, and has resulted in a poor response by college and university leaders. Instead of changing the business models of their institutions, they have resorted to the myopic reaction of just cutting their budgets. These cuts have affected the quality of their quality while increasing what they are charging students for their education – an obviously unsustainable strategy.

Then we have witnessed pretty ugly racial incidents across campuses, revealing both societal ills and lingering racism that has characterized the sector since its inception. Yet, attacks on affirmative action policies continue to mount. But these problems have not been the only bad news for higher education. Campus shootings, narrow-minded approaches to issues of mental health, continuous obsession with meaningless college rankings, blind support for athletics over academics, lack of preparedness of higher school graduates, almost religious adherence to technological fixes proposed by false prophets and their acolytes, and failure by the federal government to live up to its promise to provide an unbiased and simple way for people to assess the performance of colleges and universities all contributed to the bad year for higher education.

Probably what has been even worse for higher education has been misinformation about it and its role in society. From totally inaccurate “truths” disguised as facts being broadcast in different media to just plain disparaging of the whole postsecondary enterprise based on a wave of anti-intellectualism,

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the sector has been given a bad name in the last few years. No wonder that a pronounced number of good people are leaving academia and coming out very vocally about it.

Not that we have lacked any good news to share. There has been significant improvement in the job market, new and more statistics reaffirming that a college degree is a worthwhile financial proposition and an increase in enrollment numbers by international students. Yet, the higher education marketing departments seem to keep concentrating on giving prominence to athletics and “feel good” news instead of helping the public in general and the powers-that-be to understand the societal benefits brought in by investing in higher education.

The question is, what kind of news can we anticipate for higher education in 2016? Probably it won't be much better. Funding in general is expected to worsen and cases of institutional failure propelled by bad leadership will continue. Boards of trustees and college leaders do not seem to envision what is coming or to have learned from past experiences. Case in point is the number of colleges and universities that have announced closing or severe restructuring.

Also, expect a lot of nonsense to be thrown at higher education during the political campaign of 2016, with more falsehoods being disseminated, more demagoguery, and expect the real issues not

being discussed. The political season will result in a climate of fear toward factors – real or imaginary – that professional politicians know they can bank on when it comes to electoral dividends. As I heard once from a professional politician in private, “Talking about education in a political campaign is not a worthwhile investment, unless you blame the opposition for its current situation.”

Yet, I think that the political campaigns represent an opportunity for higher education to come out stronger, but only if we grasp the opportunity. For example, the two major candidates of the Democratic Party have promised to make public higher education free (or at least to make it more affordable) while their Republican counterparts have remained mostly silent or have objected to those proposals. I think that such a discussion in 2016 can be highly beneficial, but only if we take advantage of the opportunity. And the opportunity resides in reinstating the benefits of a strong higher education sector, the presentation of facts about higher education and to bring back to the American consciousness how investments in colleges and universities have made (and can continue to make) a tremendous difference in the well being of the nation.

All what we need to do is to recapture the narrative about how support for higher education and innovative policies changed for the better the course of the country. From the establishment of the first colleges in colonial America, to the unequivocal support given to the idea of postsecondary education by the nation's founders, to the development of

the land-grant institutions during the Civil War, to the renewed investments made in the aftermath of Sputnik, they all changed the country for the better.

Higher education leaders need to learn from politicians on how to improve their message to reap the benefits of a complicated political situation even if that means broadcasting messages that seem simplistic in nature, but that will resonate with the general population. We need to reassert that the basis of the American dream is high quality and affordable education, that the only way to maintain global leadership in different areas is through a well-funded and innovative system of colleges and universities and that the best way to combat threats is by making the population better educated, eradicating the worst of our panic-stricken fears.

We have much to learn from the politicians' playbooks. Of course that means that we, in higher education, need to develop an insight in to how the system works. After all, most of the funding and support for education depends not only on public backing, but also the support of people in power. We have to learn what works and to model our message accordingly. That requires courage and imagination.

Where can we start? Let's summarize what we are trying to do with a simple message that will resonate everywhere: “Support for higher education will make America great again.”

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