Colleges Are Underproducing

By Richard Vedder

Ask them to stop wasting resources and become more efficient.

Few of the donors pouring additional funds into higher education today pay attention to a very problematic fact: Campus resources are often gravely underutilized or misallocated.

To begin, the faculty at U.S. universities have light workloads—especially compared to other Americans, but also versus previous generations of academics. These days, a typical professor is in class about one-third fewer hours than a 1965 counterpart would have been. Senior faculty at prestigious research institutions now often only teach one course per semester.

Why the reduction? Supposedly because the professors are doing more “research.” Yet much university research is now published in obscure journals or books that hardly anybody reads or cites. Most academic publishing today is not a means of extending the frontiers of useful knowledge, but merely a mechanism of the tenure system for entrenching the job security of faculty members.

Workloads have fallen sharply for students as well. Researchers Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks have shown that in 1960 the typical student spent about 40 hours per week in class, studying, writing papers, or completing other work. Today that total has fallen to around 27 hours. Students now spend more time on recreation and partying than on academics, government time-use surveys show.

With most students attending school for 32 weeks annually, today’s average college kid devotes under 900 hours per year to academics. That’s less time than middle-school students put in. It’s roughly half as long as parents labor in a given year to pay tuition.

Many students have concluded there’s no reason for them to work harder. With grade inflation, few are now given grades below “B.” It has become common for half or more of all seniors to be awarded “honors”—at a place like Johns Hopkins fully 59 percent are given that gold star.
Another egregious problem on campuses is administrative bloat. There has been an explosion in non-teaching staff: diversity promoters, counselors, people to run environmental initiatives, social-activity coordinators, media handlers, marketing staff. At many universities, there are now more administrators than faculty—in marked contrast to when I started my career. If the professor-to-administrator ratio were simply made the same today as it was in the mid-1970s, tuition at my employer (Ohio University) could be reduced around 20 percent.

Buildings are another source of waste. The use of a typical academic building is far lower than a comparable commercially owned facility. Classrooms and faculty offices are rarely occupied in June, July, most of August, and large parts of May and December. They are generally deserted on weekends. They are empty late in the day. They are not used on Fridays.

Yet recent years have brought a soaring “edifice complex” on many campuses. New buildings are everywhere. And they are often given elaborate atriums, large public areas, expensive media rooms, and other elements that do little to advance learning or research. Many universities are notoriously bad about maintaining these facilities once constructed.

This is part of a wider arms race in accoutrements that now permeates academia. Lush gyms, fancy food, foreign travel, cushy dorms—these are becoming norms. Some colleges now offer “conierge” services to help their students book vacation travel, make restaurant reservations, find someone to do their laundry, place phone calls, or score concert tickets.

Donors steer vast sums annually to colleges and universities—$47 billion in 2018. That total is five times higher than the level of 30 years ago. (And it’s on top of more than $150 billion of annual government spending to support higher ed.) Yet college administrators are rarely asked to account for their spending, or even asked questions about today’s serious underutilization of resources. Donors need to confront those soliciting their funds. Just over the last ten years, college tuition and fees jumped up 44 percent at private four-year institutions, while CPI inflation rose only 20 percent. No sector can outstrip inflation 2.2 times over for very long without bankrupting somebody.

A few sterling examples show there is nothing inevitable about runaway college costs. Purdue president Mitch Daniels recently announced that his university would once again keep its tuition frozen for the coming academic season. That marks the eighth year in a row with zero tuition increase at the university. Yet during that same period Purdue’s academic reputation and success at attracting excellent students have soared.

Ask the colleges who are soliciting your funds exactly how their administrative staff have grown. Exactly what level of weekly use do their buildings get? Find out what their normal faculty teaching load is. What is the overall grade-point average given to their students? How many of their students complete all of the courses they start? How many graduate on time? How many of their undergrads pursue rigorous degrees like engineering? What salaries do their graduates command on average? How do organizations like U.S. News or Forbes grade changes in their academics over the past decade?

Universities do some valuable things, and can be very worthy of philanthropic support. But give intelligently. And be cautious. The typical university is quite wasteful—and even less productive than it was 50 years ago.

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In 1960 the typical student spent about 40 hours per week in class, studying, or writing. Today that total has fallen to around 27 hours.
Students Are In Short Supply

By Jacqueline Pfeffer Merrill

Thanks to birth declines, we have too many college seats. Leaders must make hard choices in response.

Though there is no hint of it in glossy alumni magazines, or news stories about campus expansions and new buildings, in just a few years we will be in the midst of a 15 percent drop in the number of four-year college students. This projection is based on the number of children currently in our elementary- and middle-school pipelines. Lifetime births per American woman have been tumbling since the Great Recession, from 2.12 in 2007 (enough to replace the mother and father) to 1.77 in 2017.

Among many other consequences, this means we won't require as many colleges and instructors in the future. In *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, economist Nathan Gruseck projects that tens of thousands of professors will soon be unneeded due to declining enrollments.

Different regions and different schools will feel these tectonic shifts in varying ways. New England and the Northeast will be hit hardest—because they are home to many colleges, a particularly serious birth dearth, and modest numbers of immigrants. College and university leaders will face different issues in states such as Texas, where immigration and a higher birth rate among Hispanics are moderating the decline in young people but yielding high levels of first-generation college attendees, who may need additional support.

Already, half of all four-year colleges are missing their admission goals. More than 80 percent of admissions directors now say they are concerned they won't be able to fill classes. In 2017, a quarter of private colleges ran an operating deficit, and Moody's estimates that around 15 institutions will permanently close their doors every year for the foreseeable future.

To succeed in this shrinking pool, Gruseck suggests that schools will need to offer distinctive educational experiences. Colleges and universities should focus on their mission, know exactly what kind of student they serve best, prune areas where they are not strong, and innovate in remaining sectors to sharpen their services to match changing times. Donors should speed them down those paths and encourage them to be entrepreneurial in navigating market shifts—as campuses like Arizona State under president Michael Crow or Purdue under Mitch Daniels have been.

Alas, instead of focusing, pruning, and becoming more business-like and inventive, most colleges are trying to be all things to all students. In just the last six years, U.S. colleges and universities have added an astonishing 41,000 new majors and programs. That's a 21 percent increase, pitched to a declining number of customers. And don't think that those are all new programs in the natural sciences, history, or literature: colleges are offering new degrees in beer-making and peace education (one private liberal-arts college recently cut its math major while keeping its peace-studies major). It's an expensive and wrong-headed response, what Robert Zemsky of the Alliance for Higher Education calls “a panic reaction. . .just spreading a thin broth even thinner.”

As our birth dearth unfolds across higher ed, one fundraising favorite that should become a tougher sell is new construction and campus expansion. Donors asked to fund fresh building should demand proof that new structures are needed and will be heavily utilized. Sometimes it may be smarter to invest in renovations that repurpose halls, or transform them to deepen the comparative advantages of that campus.

Colleges are going to find it harder to attract students in the future. This will often require bold change, letting go of weak programs, redoubled concentration on successful undertakings, or all of the above. Academic leaders who ignore these demands will be punished by merciless demographic realities. Donors can be influential in supporting the right kind of far-sighted approach at this moment of risk and opportunity.

Jacqueline Pfeffer Merrill served on the faculties of the College of William & Mary and St. John’s College.
More College ≠ More Prosperity

By Nassim Taleb

Formal education is oversold. More productive forms of learning should be encouraged at least as much.

Is it true that lots of college education, formal learning, and lecture-driven knowledge leads to prosperity? Professors, pundits, politicians, and many philanthropists would have you think so. They blithely assume that education leads to economic growth and wealth, while actually the empirical evidence says the opposite: economic growth and wealth lead to education.

People are mistaking mere associations for causes. Because most rich countries are educated, they infer that education makes a country rich. This wishful thinking is easy to fall into because we consider education “good” for many reasons.

I am not saying that education is useless. It can serve noble aims like reducing inequality in a population, or allowing poor people to read good literature, or increasing the freedom of women. But one cannot accurately say it leads to economic growth or national wealth.

Economist Alison Wolf is among those who have debunked that claim. “The simple one-way relationship which so entrances our politicians and commentators—education spending in, economic growth out—simply doesn’t exist,” she reports after much study. Looking at countries like Egypt, she shows how giant leaps in education did not translate into productivity and GDP growth.

At the other end of the economic spectrum consider Switzerland. It is a place with a comparatively low level of formal education. Yet it enjoys a very high income and quality of life.

This is not to say that knowledge is unimportant. Practical knowledge is closely connected to economic progress. But the record shows that formal education is a poor transmitter of practical knowledge—which is much more often accumulated by doing things, on the job, out in the real world. It is academic, commoditized, organized education that needs to be viewed skeptically.

The illusion that formal lecture-style college instruction provides great contributions to national prosperity and success is a dire problem today. And it is directly connected to a corresponding depreciation of vocational training, traditional wisdom, trial-and-error learning, common sense, and the instincts of experienced practitioners and tinkerers. Those things really do translate directly into success and wealth, as I have shown in my books.

A false college mystique has allowed Ivy League universities to become the ultimate status symbol and desired good among the new U.S. and Asian upper classes. Harvard is like a Vuitton bag or Cartier watch. This produces a huge drag on middle-class parents, who have been shoveling an increased share of their labor and savings into fancy campuses and the hands of administrators, professors, counselors, real-estate developers, and other agents of higher ed. Government student loans and private gifts to colleges are also direct transfers to these rent extractors.

In a way it is a kind of racketeering. One needs a decent university “name” to get ahead in life. Yet we know that collectively, there is no evidence that mass university attendance advances society.

This is adapted by the editors from Nassim Taleb’s bestseller Antifragile: Things that Gain From Disorder.

Confusing Education and Success

More entries from “The New 95” manifesto—published by donor Peter Thiel to encourage a reformation in higher education:

#43. A third of billionaires have no college degree.

#3. Higher education has become America’s national religion, complete with heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. You’re a winner or a sinner. It’s Yale or jail.

#16. Harvard is the oldest and most powerful hedge fund in the world (average under management = $39 billion) with a nonprofit real-estate company full of kids attached for tax purposes.

SUMMER 2019
College Should Be More Useful

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

Education for career success (and life happiness) is what young people want. Too many now say college does little for them on either front.

The goal of higher education should be to train people for careers and practical day-to-day success.

Can you hear the squeals? Entrenched advocates in higher ed have long insisted that liberal education should be pursued for its own sake, without the distractions of grubby occupational needs or other utilitarian concerns.

That, however, is not the conclusion of most people with experience as students. In 2014, Purdue University and Gallup teamed up to study tens of thousands of college alumni—tracking their happiness, their physical health, their income, whether they like what they do every day at work, their connections to friends and family, whether they live in a place they enjoy, and so forth. Then their undergraduate experiences were explored by the pollster. And connections were drawn between college years and well-being down the road.

After several more surveys, these queries became an annual report. In what is now called the Strada-Gallup Survey, hundreds of phone interviews are conducted daily with a representative sample of U.S. adults. The respondents have every type of educational background and subsequent experience.

One interesting finding is that people with a general bachelor’s degree are less satisfied with their education. Those with vocational or technical degrees, and those with graduate degrees, are more satisfied. Because, they say, those tracks left them better prepared for their careers, and gave their life a more controllable trajectory.

We know that students today want their degrees to be relevant to their employment and promotion path. Many fault colleges for doing this poorly. They say there is a big disconnect between what college trains them to do and what they actually take up after graduation. When Gallup asked working respondents to imagine that their job was eliminated tomorrow, then inquired where they would seek the education and training to garner another job, the most common answer was at an employer, not an institution of higher ed.

Evidence of this kind may be softening some of the resistance in academe to making usefulness a more explicit goal. Ted Mitchell is president of the American Council on Education, the major association for colleges and universities. He says there is no doubt that training for a career is what most students want, and urges observers to acknowledge that people “go to college to get jobs.” His organization is now in talks with Strada about a partnership that could help colleges assess their usefulness to students, and redesign their student experience accordingly.

Mitchell mentions two ways that colleges can respond to student hunger for better occupational preparation. First, all varieties of instruction should try to be relevant and applicable to daily life. “We need to give students hooks to hang their theoretical work on, to connect them with the real world.” And campuses should
do a better job of providing "competencies like writing skills or computer coding."

This is not to say that all colleges should become purely "vocational" or focused only on practical exigencies. There is certainly a place for the liberal arts and more abstruse forms of education. But those paths also need to be rooted in human experience. And they need to put real demands on students.

"There is a lot of wandering" at a typical college today, says Mitchell. "That means lost credits and lost time." And bad habits. Strada's surveys have found that students who thought their education was "academically rigorous" had better long-term outcomes. Unfortunately, only 42 percent of college attendees say they were challenged in academics at their educational institution.

In addition to adding rigor, engagement with actual life, and connections to employment, colleges should require their students to think methodically about their goals, talents, and place in society. "Anything institutions can do to get students to focus on a pathway would be helpful," says Mitchell. At Purdue, freshmen are asked to do some career exploration before classes even start. They are queried about what they might do after college, and how strongly they feel about various goals. They are required to list alternatives that might interest them if their first idea doesn't pan out.

The university then links all students to mentors who work through this information with them. "Mentoring is now an explicit requirement of faculty," says senior vice provost for teaching and learning Frank Dooley. Instructors can't be promoted or tenured without becoming an active mentor. And not just in some abstract sense. Mentors are required to understand the goals of their assigned students, and "get students thinking forward: What do you intend to do with your life. How can you make the most of your time on campus?"

Purdue is also responding to appetites for more useful education by emphasizing experiential learning. This includes internships, mixtures of education and work, extracurricular and community activities, long-term projects that extend beyond one semester, and various forms of learning by doing. Donors could urge other universities to take similar paths.

In some places, the push to connect education and work goes much further. In 2018, for example, Strada Philanthropy gave $1 million to create a new "work campus" in Plano, Texas, connected to Paul Quinn College, a Dallas school founded in 1872 to educate freed slaves. Students at the new campus will be employed by corporate partners like Liberty Mutual and JPMorgan Chase at the same time they are studying and advancing toward degrees. "We're no longer in the day where we're training, and then praying people get jobs," says Strada's Daryl Graham. "Education and work go together."

Making education more useful, effective, and attractive to participants will require more than just changing campus culture and university offerings. Some young people will step off the university carousel altogether. It has become a kind of mania in America today that every student must go to college—that something is broken, or someone should be disappointed, if a person doesn't go right from high school to four-years-at-the-U.

Pushed by this expectation, many young people now flounder at college and leave with no degree but heavy debt (as you will see in the next entry in this collection of essays). Others eventually collect their sheepskin but find it did little to prepare them for what comes next. According to recent research, fully 40-50 percent of all college graduates age 22-27 are working in a job which doesn't require a college degree. Even a full ten years after graduating, more than 20 percent of college completers are in jobs that don't require a diploma.

Many of these individuals could be happier, less indebted, more quickly engaged in adult life, and more successful if they had easier access to paths other than the standard college track. But the flow of funds today—both philanthropic and public—overwhelmingly directs candidates to campus.

Many philanthropically supported charter schools press for 100 percent of their graduates to go to college. Government funding for career and technical education has actually declined over the last generation, while funding for college more than doubled. Tens of billions of dollars in Pell grants and loan subsidies and tax breaks that are available to college students have no counterpart for people seeking career-connected education.

As implied by the old adage "Never let schooling interfere with your education," there are many kinds of knowledge that can be acquired outside of classrooms. The Philanthropy Roundtable's Jo Kwong suggests that funders should not allow post-high-school choices to become a stark "campus or nothing" duality.

"Given the tremendous depth and breadth of the education landscape," she says, "there is a training path for everyone. But it might not be a four-year college for everyone, at least not right out of high school." She suggests that donors press for more individually tailored options for different kinds of young people. And more linkages to the real-world needs of employers and our economy—because that is where people will find the highest compensation.

"If we focused on 'fit' instead of prescribing a universal academic path for all, this would not be a problem," Kwong argues.
Oren Cass of the Manhattan Institute has recently suggested that “our education system’s designers and funders should pursue a different goal today: to re-balance the relative attractiveness of college and non-college pathways” so there are promising alternatives for all kinds of students and workers. He urges donors, companies, and government to mix classroom instruction, training, and subsidized employment to help individuals acquire skills that employers covet. Such programs will become a very “smart economic choice” for many young people.

One interesting trend today at some of America’s most inventive community colleges (fueled by savvy donors) is the creation of shorter programs than conventional associates’ degrees. These can be completed in just one to three months by adults who are busy with existing job and family responsibilities, often during off-hours so the student is able to continue to bring home income from an existing job while studying. These offerings don’t produce college credits but rather portable occupational credentials in areas like nursing, computer programming, construction, lab work, machine tooling, etc. Recognized by employers around the country, these practical credentials help holders move up the job ladder, start new employment, or qualify for raises and promotions at their existing employer.

There is yet another way that even traditional college can be made more useful, and less prohibitive in costs and time demands. The period from start to completion can be shortened. There are several ways to do this.

A nonprofit called Modern States Education Alliance is dedicated to helping lower-income students pile up college credits before they step foot on campus. This increases their ability to complete a degree on time, or even ahead of time. The Modern States program “Freshman Year for Free” methodically guides high-school students through online courses plus A.P. and other competency tests. Participants pile up credits accepted at 2,000 colleges which can total enough to accelerate their college experience by a full year. Thanks to support from the 501c3, they do this without any tuition or textbook expense, potentially saving students thousands of dollars, increasing their odds of completing a degree, and accelerating their arrival into self-supporting work and adulthood.

Another approach is that taken by Purdue University—which has launched a major internal effort to help motivated students complete many majors in three years instead of four. Purdue’s College of Liberal Arts has fashioned three-year options for virtually every degree it grants, and in 2018 several other schools within Purdue also offered three-year tracks to enterprising students. Typically this involves taking classes in the summer, often online, plus one or two regular-semesters with an extra course.

Already, more than 7 percent of all Purdue students now graduate in just three years, and the total is rising fast. The primary goal of shortening time in school is to help students save money and get an earlier start on life. Yet this useful innovation has also attracted attention, kudos, and larger numbers of excellent students to Purdue.

If every college worked to make their offerings more useful, there would obviously be large benefits to students. But, as at Purdue, there would also be benefits to the school. The original Purdue-Gallup report back in 2014 found that the odds of being “emotionally attached” to your alma mater are more than eight times higher if you feel the college prepared you and others well for life beyond the campus. That’s the kind of response that turns alumni into loyal donors.

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Degree Completion Rates Are a Disgrace

By the editors

What is your favorite campus doing to make sure students graduate instead of just passing through?

Time for a quiz. Line up 100 average American students just entering ninth grade. How many of them, would you guess, will have a college diploma and a job requiring a college degree ten years later?

The depressing answer: only 16 percent. And that time frame includes a couple extra years for catch-ups and re-dos. The proportion of young Americans reaching today’s idealized finish line in the “standard” eight years would be even lower. Our high-school to college to career pipeline is very, very leaky.

If you break down the statistics just for their time at college, you’ll see that four out of ten students who enroll at a four-year school end up with no degree even after six full years. Among the students who start at a two-year college, fully three quarters have no diploma of any kind six years later. Overall, only about half of the folks who start college of any sort walk away with a completed credential.

And despite today’s strong rhetorical push and heavy spending for college, our abysmal completion rates are not improving. “College attendance rates have risen steadily in the United States for the past two decades,” writes Harvard professor David Deming. Yet “bachelor’s degree attainment has not improved at all.” The fraction of young people holding a B.A. or B.S. today is actually lower today than it was 20 years ago, and about the same as it was 40 years ago.

If you zero in on problem populations, the picture gets even uglier. Among low-income, first-college-in-their-family students, only 11 percent have a degree six years after enrolling in a four-year program. Most of them will have accumulated something else, though: a load of debt. That not only drags them down, but also hurts taxpayers, because 45 percent of college dropouts default on their federal student loans.

As suggested in the essay prior to this one, some of those dropouts probably shouldn’t have headed to campus in the first place. They ought to have been offered a different pathway to work and self-reliance where they were better equipped to succeed. Philanthropists could be extremely useful in helping to design, launch, and spread such alternate career paths.

There are also things donors can do to reduce non-completion rates among students who do enroll. With backing from givers like the Lumina Foundation, 11 large public universities are now experimenting with various strategies to help struggling students turn their tassel. The University

Only about half of the folks who start college of any sort walk away with a completed credential.
Innovation Alliance includes Arizona State, Georgia State, Iowa State, Michigan State, Oregon State, Purdue, Ohio State, University of California Riverside, University of Central Florida, University of Kansas, and the University of Texas at Austin. It is testing things like small grants to make up tuition shortfalls, enhanced career guidance that help students envision their route from classroom to a job, predictive analytics that help universities identify students who are struggling, and strong advisory relationships for students at risk of quitting.

Funders such as the Bechtel Foundation and the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation are backing nonprofits like Bottom Line, College Forward, First Graduate, and Students Rising Above—all of which closely monitor, advise, and guide first-generation college students through their college careers. Bottom Line, for example, helps students choose classes, land internships, renew scholarships, and maintain positive attitudes about life challenges. An ongoing randomized control trial funded by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation has so far found that students receiving Bottom Line’s help are more likely to stay in college without taking breaks.

Donors are also looking at the remedial classes that many colleges use to try to help students with competency gaps catch up to college-level learning. Many of these classes are ineffective. The Gates Foundation, Ascendium Philanthropy, and the Kresge Foundation have teamed up to redesign remedial classes through the Strong Start to Finish program. So far, their $8.5 million in grants have gone to help universities in Georgia, Ohio, and New York shape new remedial courses that line up with credit-earning classes and paths to degrees, and give students extra tutoring.

One program that combines many of these solutions to help first-generation students graduate is the ASAP initiative run by City University of New York. It provides low-income students with dedicated advisers, extra career guidance, tuition waivers, help with books, free subway cards, and other perks. ASAP students take classes together, and must stay enrolled full-time. After doubling graduation rates among its targets, the program is now being replicated at five other schools, thanks to help from Ascendium and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

Until alternatives like these become more widespread and proven, donors might want to push colleges to at least be more open about their actual results, so students and families, funders, and other interested parties understand the risks of non-completion and the issues that need to be overcome. “If the FDA requires labels on food packages to certify ingredients and nutritional value, then universities should be required to publish all their data on how well their students learn, and the employment and career tracks of recent grads,” suggested a post from the investment fund run by philanthropist Peter Thiel.

“I have always found it uncomfortable that higher ed tabulated six-year graduation rates, as though that was a satisfactory result,” wrote Purdue president Mitch Daniels in early 2019. “The longer one spends in college, the fewer years one has to earn a living and contribute to society. And, of course, the more it costs to finish.” Too many schools, Daniels warns, “have been complacent, or even complicit, in policies or practices” that allow large numbers of students to attend college without ever earning a degree. Donors might want to take up his complaint.
Don’t Feed the Dragon

By Karl Zinsmeister

Campuses are currently wracked by political correctness, harassment accusations, “implicit bias” goose chasing, and hate hunting. Avoid fueling the beast.

It’s not news, but in any discussion of hazards to be navigated in higher education today it bears repeating: Colleges are now completely disconnected from the views and priorities of mainstream Americans, and often enforce orthodoxies from the far edges of the political spectrum. As one wag put it recently, “Why are there some 5,300 universities and colleges in the U.S. but only one point of view?”

It isn’t just that campuses are philosophically unbalanced (something that has been demonstrated over and over, in everything from voting patterns to attitudes on sexuality to economic views). What’s more worrisome is that campuses are now illiberal. That is: they are very intolerant of speech and ideas that don’t fit with their prevailing ideological fashions, and prone to become cesspools of grievance, bias, political correctness, and witch hunting.

“People are weaponizing ‘safe space’ to mean you can’t disagree,” warned Public Welfare Foundation president Candice Jones at a recent philanthropic gathering. Though an African American liberal herself, she warned that the progressivism now enforced on almost all campuses is not doing anyone any good. “You are physically safe. The only things being challenged are your wits...for God’s sake give them some work! It is healthy to have tension and have your ideas pushed.”

There is often a kind of tail-wagging-the-dog aspect to this. Special-interest groups, by registering their objections with enough vehemence and moral dudgeon, now regularly cow entire campus populations into apologetic submission to fad thinking. The perspectives of less-ideological students and faculty—never mind the positions of alumni, donors, and citizens outside the ivory tower—are not represented at all. Tough and savvy donors can help slow this race to extremes.

First, let’s illustrate the problem, using two very recent events at Yale. In February, a group of law students invited to Yale the attorney who won a Supreme Court victory in the Masterpiece Cakeshop case. This was a landmark ruling in balancing the rights of religious individuals against the rights of gay-marriage campaigners, and was decided by an overwhelming 7-2 vote. Attorney Kristen Waggoner was an expert very much in the center of an important national debate, and willing to be questioned by students.

Then some student protestors labeled her and her public-interest law firm, the Alliance Defending Freedom, “homophobic, transphobic” haters. A group calling themselves the OutLaws wrote to the law-school dean demanding to know whether Yale would allow its students to work for “hate groups” like Waggoner’s ADF on university fellowships. Dean Heather Gerken wrote back to thank them for raising that issue. Then she announced that the university will henceforth deny its resources (millions of dollars annually in summer grants, fellowships, student-loan assistance) to students...
who intern, do post-grad work, or otherwise have contact with groups that "discriminate" on issues like "gender expression" or hold to religious creeds in other areas deemed offensive.

In April, a separate set of protests led Yale president Peter Salovey to declare his entire campus a hotbed of "discrimination and racism." He unveiled a slew of initiatives to reshape students and staff: “implicit bias” training, instruction in running “inclusive classrooms,” a student retreat to plan equity programming. Then Yale hired a diversity enforcer to study their campus procedures. The reviewer found hardly any evidence of discrimination or harassment. Indeed, one recent disclosure showed that not a single “underrepresented minority candidate” had been withheld tenure in the latest five years of professor hirings. Nonetheless, the reviewer recommended redoubled “training” on “race and other aspects of identity and difference.”

In response, Yale declared that it will add a new deputy secretary for diversity, equity, and inclusion and hire a slew of new “diversity specialists” to reeducate students and faculty. In a subsequent Wall Street Journal essay, author Heather Mac Donald listed the Orwellian alphabet soup of “inclusion” bureaucrats who now hold court in every corner of the Yale campus: A president’s committee on diversity and inclusion. A diversity and inclusion working group. A student advisory group on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The intercultural council. A vice president for student-life diversity. A chief diversity officer. Deans for diversity and inclusion in the grad school, engineering school, law school, management school, med school, forestry school, and other departments. Scads of Title IX coordinators. Scores of equal-opportunity specialists in offices of all types. A fully staffed Afro-American cultural center. A staffed Asian-American cultural center. A staffed Latino cultural center. A staffed Native-American cultural center. One wonders: Is there an office at Yale to advocate for the needs of left-handers?

Ironically, this impressive openness and outreach in one direction is combined today with harsh censure and closed minds on other fronts. Hooting down unpopular speakers has been a varsity sport at many colleges over the last decade. Intolerance is less visible but even more pernicious in classrooms. A survey conducted by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) found that a majority of all college students (54 percent) report they have recently had to stop sharing opinions in class to avoid personal attacks.

The long-accepted principle that “education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence”—as Robert Frost once put it—has now been completely thrown aside in higher education. Demands for “safe spaces” and speech-suppressing codes prevail on most campuses.

Some slow progress is being made on this front. The number of institutions that have ratified the University of Chicago Statement (which aims to preserve free speech on campus) rose to 65 by July of 2019. Current signees include places like UNC-Chapel Hill, Arizona State, the University of Wisconsin, Vanderbilt, Colgate, Georgetown, Columbia, the Florida state university system, Purdue, Princeton, and George Mason University. Nonetheless: 65 protected enclaves still leaves hundreds of colleges on the wrong side of open inquiry. The Diana Davis Spencer Foundation and individual donor John W. Altman recently announced they will take adoption of the Chicago principles into account when making future grants to universities. Other donors may want to do likewise. FIRE is a helpful guide on this.

Professor Camille Paglia has noted the great irony that the last time campuses became radicalized, in the 1960s, students and faculty were demanding fewer social controls, less paternalism, less suppression of individualism. Today, in contrast, “swollen campus bureaucracy, empowered by intrusive federal regulation,” is usurping education’s traditional commitment to free flow of thought and expression. This is a violation of the rights of students as well as faculty, she warns. Paglia calls for wider exploration of ideas on campus, including unpopular ones, without squelching, and presses on college administrators: “Any disruptions of free speech must be met with academic sanctions.” Donors could second that motion.

Another college mania whose ugly underbelly is now beginning to be exposed is the campus rape frenzy. In their book with that title, professor K. C. Johnson and legal journalist Stuart Taylor report that mob passions and ideologically skewed

The perspectives of less-ideological students and faculty (never mind the positions of alumni, donors, and citizens outside the ivory tower) are not represented on today’s campuses.
sexual-assault policies have destroyed rules of evidence and cross examination, presumptions of innocence, and other aspects of legal fair play at colleges and universities, ruining lives in the process. Their fact-based book reveals that hundreds of colleges are now being punished for these lapses. Since 2012, over 300 students have sued their schools in federal court after being denied due process amidst a harassment or sexual-assault charge, with 204 of those cases already ended by a verdict or settlement in the student’s favor. (Of course winning in court doesn’t necessarily repair a personal reputation that has been savaged by politicized accusers.)

Donors who keep themselves informed about these imbalances on campus will be better positioned to help moderate them. With careful guardrails around their gifts, some donors have found ways to support what is best about our higher-education establishment, without letting their funds fuel today’s poisonous culture wars on campus. One donor strategy, for instance, is channeling funds strictly to constructive, non-ideological fields.

Peter O’Donnell was a Texas philanthropist who concluded in the 1980s that the economy of his home state was too reliant on two industries: agriculture, and oil and gas. So he set out to build a third economic leg under the Texas economic stool—a high-tech sector. He made a series of gifts to the University of Texas that were tightly targeted on encouraging progress in science and math that could lead to economic growth.

Over a period of years, O’Donnell and his wife Edith gradually endowed a total of 156 separate projects and professors at U.T. in fields like microelectronics, engineering, materials science, computer theory, physics, and math. (They did all this anonymously so that the naming rights to the chairs could be used to attract matching funds—see “Privacy as a Philanthropic Pillar” in the Spring 2017 issue of Philanthropy for details.) In this way, Peter O’Donnell became the driving force behind the emergence of Texas as a powerhouse in computers, cellular technology, chip fabrication, and other fields. You could say without exaggeration that this donor put the tech in Texas. And he produced this enormous result without underwriting campus craziness—by carefully focusing his grants on economy-building hard sciences rather than making general-fund gifts that could end up subsidizing soft-headed nostrums.

Another donor who relied on close targeting to avoid tendentious college ideology is financier Paul Singer. After both of his sons went to Williams College he was solicited by their development office for a large gift to a capital campaign. He declined. He was willing to support the school, but wanted to be certain his donation would be used wisely in areas he cared about. So he called on experienced hands like fellow donor Bill Simon, Jr., Princeton professor Robby George, and former foundation director Jim Piereson for advice. Two practical recommendations emerged:

First, do not give endowment funds. Only offer a couple years of funding at a time, renewable if used to the donor’s satisfaction. Second, avoid going through the president or development office, who will direct the spending as they choose. Instead find a likeminded professor who can supervise the activities you want to support with your donation. Make sure all spending and program execution is shaped and approved by that campus ally.

Singer identified Williams political scientist James McAllister as the person to create, with his donation, a new program in American foreign policy. For about $150,000 a year, the result is a lecture series, a visiting professor, a postdoctoral scholar, a journal, summer seminars, campus events, and a core group of 15 to 20 students at a time who coalesce around the program’s hardheaded approaches to strengthening America’s position in the world. Singer notes that this amount of money would have disappeared into insignificance, or fed active nonsense, if he had poured it into a generalized capital campaign. But by defining his gift carefully, making it time-limited, repeatedly renewed, and run by a person he has confidence in, it has had real influence. He has re-upped his gift several times, and the program is entering its twelfth year. Some of the students participating in it go on to make a life’s work of the principles and information they absorb.

If you are determined to support higher education, are a savvy giver, and recoil from the idea of feeding the campus dragon, consider one of these more targeted approaches. You might be able to floss the dragon, and make it a little bit healthier.

"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence," said Robert Frost. This has been thrown aside in higher education today.

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Resist the Throttling of Religious Colleges

By Adam Kissel

Enemies of faith want hundreds of institutions of higher ed to shut up or shut down.

Gordon College is an evangelical liberal-arts school whose mission is to “integrate Christian beliefs and practice into all aspects of our educational experience.” It is one of America’s 1,024 faith-oriented institutions of higher education that face exclusion, unequal treatment, willful misrepresentation, and persecution with growing frequency. These religious colleges have company: nonprofits like the Boy Scouts of America, for-profits such as Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A, church orders such as Little Sisters of the Poor, and other religiously influenced institutions also have been attacked by anti-religious activists, and squeezed by government pressure.

Gordon College, Westminster Theological Seminary, Thomas Aquinas College, and others have even faced threats to their continued existence: having their official accreditation revoked. To protect the freedom, access, diversity, equity, and inclusion of all colleges—including religious ones—the Trump Administration’s Department of Education has recently taken action to partially blunt de-accreditation attacks. But religious colleges remain in the crosshairs of critics who view them as insufficiently progressive. Donors who support higher education or who seek to safeguard religious freedom and toleration will want to watch closely.

Gordon’s accreditation was first threatened in 2014, after the college president joined a letter to President Barack Obama asking that religious contractors be allowed to participate on equal footing with other contractors in federal programs. Advocates who believe religious institutions like Gordon discriminate against sexual minorities struck back. The city of Salem, Massachusetts, ended a contract with the college. The Lynn school district terminated a longstanding partnership that had benefited local students. Then the New England Association of Schools and Colleges demanded that Gordon prove within a year “that the College’s policies and procedures are non-discriminatory.”

NEASC is one of a group of regional accreditors that have been delegated by the federal government to determine whether colleges should be eligible to participate in federal programs such as student loans. No college can afford to lose its accreditation. To avoid this calamity, Gordon worked with the American Center for Law and Justice to remind NEASC that accreditors must respect the stated mission of the colleges they are assessing. After this legal intervention, NEASC reconciled with Gordon.

For some years now, intolerance for religious education has been creeping into academic practice and federal policy.
Yet this was neither the first time nor the last that an accreditor threatened a religious college in the name of progressive social change. Back in 1990, the Middle States Association questioned Westminster’s accreditation because its charter required that its board be made up entirely of ordained elders. (That made the board all male.) Middle States also was enforcing new criteria that judged institutions “on the basis of their affirmative-action hiring programs, the multicultural content of their curricula, and their efforts to promote racial harmony.” After then-Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander delayed extension of Middle States’ authority to accredit for the government, and Westminster agreed to add women as advisers, Middle States backed down.

Around the same time, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges added “diversity” requirements for all schools under its supervision that attempted to force colleges to restructure their curricula, alter their boards of trustees, and end religious professions required of faculty. Only after a range of colleges objected did WASC soften its demands.

Most recently, the Higher Learning Commission (which accredits colleges and universities in a 19-state region) proposed in 2018 to remove existing language from its evaluation standards about respecting a college’s religious mission. After the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and college presidents working with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni engaged ten members of Congress to object, HLC backed down.

For some years now, intolerance for religious education has been creeping into federal policy more broadly. Religious institutions have been excluded from equal treatment in college-prep programs and college-loan forgiveness regulations. The Obama Administration even published rules from several federal agencies that required faith-based service providers to post warnings to potential beneficiaries who might object to being served by a religious group.

In May 2016, a “Dear Colleague” letter was sent out jointly from the Obama Administration’s civil rights offices at the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice warning that they would begin to interpret Title IX (the law that bans sex discrimination in colleges) as prohibiting schools from treating students according to their legal sex if they chose to assert a different sexual identity. Christian colleges saw that move as directly threatening all federal perks if they refused to house and otherwise accommodate transgender students however those students demanded. That cloud lifted, for now, once the incoming Trump Administration rescinded the letter.

Another initiative of the new administration is likely to reduce (at least temporarily) the danger that religious colleges might be put out of business by their accreditors. In 2018, the Education Department announced a new rulemaking to protect religious institutions during accreditation, federal grantmaking, and student-loan operations. This followed President Trump’s direction to the Justice Department to apply, through all federal agencies, Constitutional principles of religious liberty, especially those confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2017’s Trinity Lutheran v. Comer case.

Under the proposed Education Department rules, colleges will find it easier to qualify as having a religious mission and to change to an alternate accreditor if their existing one refuses to respect that mission. These new rules must go through a public comment and final revision period before they become official, but within a year or two, a stronger set of protections for religious colleges is likely to be in effect.

Congress also has opportunities to safeguard religious colleges. The Higher Education Act is long overdue for reauthorization. One prominent effort to do that, the PROSPER Act, would strengthen the ability of colleges to maintain their religious mission. The bill also would protect freedom of association for religious students at secular colleges, forbidding colleges from denying student religious organizations the same “right, benefit, or privilege that is generally afforded to other student organizations at the institution.” Some philanthropists may want to encourage reformers who support such initiatives in our executive and legislative branches.

There are other ways that donors can help protect the position of religious schools in higher education. One is to underwrite the public-interest law firms that pursue legal cases like Trinity Lutheran—which build valuable Constitutional bulwarks for faith-inspired institutions. Groups such as the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), the New Civil Liberties Alliance, the Christian Legal Society, and the Alliance Defending Freedom protect many colleges and student groups through their advocacy.

Other professional organizations worth notice are those that represent religious schools during efforts to use the accreditation process to punish faith-based colleges. The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni have valuable experience here.

Countering threats to faith-infused colleges and universities will further America’s Constitutional principles of equal protection and religious liberty, and help more than 1,000 religious institutions serve their students according to their own missions. Donors interested in American principles and character-based higher education will find many eager allies.

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