



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION ENTERPRISE

On March 27, 2014, the Center for Higher Education Enterprise and the Future of the University Working Group of the Humanities Institute invited Ohio State students, faculty, staff and administrators to discuss trends in undergraduate education. More than 60 attendees gathered in Page Hall to hear from featured speakers and to engage in small-group discussions on the coming challenges and opportunities for undergraduate education.

To kickoff the discussion, Ohio State President Emeritus E. Gordon Gee gave a macro-level view of higher education's external environments at the federal and state levels. According to Dr. Gee, the balance of higher education quality and value is the issue of our time, and will frame the trends in higher education. Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education Wayne Carlson then outlined the challenges confronting traditional undergraduate programs, including the goals and expectations of today's students, employer perceptions of skills and pressures from state government. Lastly, Professor David Staley discussed three results from an environmental scan on trends in undergraduate education: increases in data-driven learning, the changing demographic of undergraduate students and concerns about the value proposition of higher education. You can view those remarks at <http://chee.osu.edu>.

Following these remarks, attendees engaged in small-group discussions to react to the topics presented by the speakers and to offer their insights into the trends they are seeing in their classrooms and workspaces. Staff from the Center for Higher Education Enterprise took notes at each table and synthesized the results. Below are the major themes and supporting points that the attendees believe will frame the future of undergraduate education. We report comments as offered by the attendees, without attempting to verify the accuracy of factual assertions.

Cost, Efficiency and Financing

- The financial crunch in higher education stems partly from a larger generational divide in our society. The baby boomers benefited from higher education financed by others (parents, tax revenues supporting public institutions). Now they are shifting the costs of education to students, who need to take out loans. The baby-boom generation, meanwhile, will absorb a tremendous amount of resources to support their Social Security and Medicare payments; these obligations make it difficult to support the current generation of students.



- Ohio State brings in a lot of money each year, but less than half of that money is devoted to education. A large amount of grant, contract and government funding is earmarked for research, medical care and other services.
- When Ohio State and other universities cut educational costs, they often turn to adjuncts. This has created a class of underpaid, silent workers. The situation isn't that different from manufacturing companies that outsource their work to low-paid laborers in other countries. We have allowed this practice to increase incrementally, but it raises real ethical and quality issues.
- Widening income inequality may also affect financial support for higher education. The wealthiest families know that they can buy the highest quality education for their children. Who advocates for the taxes needed to support children of other families?
- An advisor commented that students in his or her department who want a specialization, in addition to normal tuition and fees, also have to pay approximately \$50,000 alone for the extra lab courses. Entry-level wages, however, make it difficult for graduates to pay these expenses back.
- A faculty member also raised concerns that university administrators are more worried about the institution's bottom line than student learning outcomes, even citing an experience of effectively being told to lower standards in a program so the university would not lose millions of dollars per term.

Structure of Undergraduate Education

- The structure of some degree programs (e.g. max of 18 credit hours per semester) limits some students' ability to graduate in four years (music students, engineers).
- How much do we focus on what students really need to know? We spend a lot of time teaching knowledge that is now readily available at students' fingertips, and do not spend time on critical skills. We need to make sure everything being taught to students leads to the final goals of what they need to be able to do/know at graduation. The things students are often tested on in higher education are not relevant to their degrees/skills needed.
- Though funding is available, there are no specific guidelines on how to work towards creating more interdisciplinary programs.
- The desire to have better rounded students seems to conflict with the goals of decreasing time-to-degree and granting students certificates of completion for specific careers.
- Do three-year degree tracks stunt undergraduate student development? Some say yes.



- Graduate teaching assistant turnover is a problem with continuity between science classes, especially labs/recitation. For example, Bio 101 may be taught by a different TA than Bio 102, which can undermine the student experience.
- We need to balance educating minds (intrinsic value) with providing students with transferable, work-related experience
- What is the role of advisors? Advisors must take preventative measures to ensure student success (i.e. at-risk students).

Preparing Students for the Workforce

- What does the bachelor's degree represent? Does it still function as a valid signal to employers that the holder may be a competent employee? Concerns about what students learn while in higher education seemed to be at the forefront of several participants' minds. One faculty member suggested as many as 80% of his students understand less than 10% of the syllabus.
- We should think about undergraduate degrees that open many doors, not just degrees targeted to particular occupations. We should try to gather evidence that our degrees are valuable in several lines of work (or, if not, devise degrees that are) and then promote that value to prospective students and employers.
- An example was used of a faculty member who aims to structure class time to teach things that the students "couldn't figure out on their own." That may be a useful formula for undergraduate education more generally: What do we provide to students that they wouldn't figure out on their own?
- In some departments, we teach students how to make their own jobs; we know that they won't simply be hired by an organization. If we are going to track outcomes for graduates, we need to account for graduates who are entrepreneurs.
- Over the last decade, graduation rates have increased significantly at Ohio State, and probably at other flagship state universities. Does this mean that we are doing a better job teaching and advising students? Or is it because we are admitting better qualified and motivated students?
- It is often said that college graduates lack soft skills, yet universities tend to look down on/not support their humanities departments.
- Students are often going through the motions to obtain their degrees without gaining skills needed to succeed in the workforce. How do we overcome this?



Preparing Students for Citizenship

- The debt that students are leaving school with impacts our larger society in that organizations like Peace Corps are receiving fewer and fewer applications each year; students can no longer afford to engage in service.
- Universities should be able to provide free education to citizens.
- Universities do not seem to be engaging in citizen-development.

Technology

- A faculty member believed that the university should provide mandatory professional development in learning new technology and ways to utilize technology in their courses.
- Several attendees view Ohio State as behind on technology. Some web pages are very dated and faculty members/students do not integrate available tools like Carmen into teaching and learning.
- Departmental segmentation is an issue in terms of academic success. Staff members have no way of going to one place to see what is “going on” with students who need assistance. Students’ experiences with different university offices are unknown and isolated. Technology can be used to mitigate this issue.
- A guest commented that moving toward more technology-driven teaching and learning will be difficult, because he or she believes Ohio State attracts/caters to traditional students. The primary student demographic does not push for alternative approaches, according to this guest, so creating policies that cater to nontraditional students may not be successful until the nontraditional demographic grows.
- How can we measure the quality of online courses? The quality of online learning varies greatly without always being commensurate with cost. A space is needed for identifying, training, best practices, quality control and qualifications for online classes

Role of Faculty

- There is a generational gap among faculty at Ohio State. The more senior faculty experienced a relatively hospitable job market. Many of them have also spent their entire careers in academia. Recent hires have been “kicking and clawing” in the job market since they graduated from school. They also are more likely to have entrepreneurial business experience that they could apply to issues on campus. At least some of these junior faculty are frustrated that they don’t have an opportunity



to apply more innovative ideas to undergraduate education (and other campus issues). Senior faculty, who are more conservative, remain in control of the institution.

- If we think of the university as a business, do we want to be GM or Apple? Apple supports a lot of innovative ideas, knowing that some will fail and others will succeed. Can we give faculty and staff the ability to innovate without fearing repercussions for failure?
- The need for faculty to excel in everything (teaching, research, service) provides a source of tension in universities. Do all faculty need to excel in all areas? How do we incentivize otherwise? The incentives do not match the faculty population and university needs.

Demographics of Today's Undergraduate

- Some guests believe that Ohio State is insulated from what's going on with changing demographics at other institutions.
- Nontraditional students may be less concerned with the traditional students' definition of the undergraduate/student life experience. For example, students who already have dependents or returned veterans might not need the social networks/socials benefits offered by the typical undergraduate experience. We must find a way to engage them in a way they find valuable.
- Must place emphasis on giving students who come in as juniors/seniors a quality educational experience.
- Ohio State must do more to solve the language barriers of international students.

Connections to Secondary Education

- Discussants also touched on the low-level writing skills that were mentioned during the featured speeches. The general consensus agreed with comments from the presenters that students are substantially behind where they should be in terms of writing abilities. This raised concerns about primary and secondary education in the U.S. and appropriate ways for university instructors to respond to these deficiencies.
- We need to rethink our ways of transfer from each point of students' education.
- Guests believe there is a disconnect between the goals of secondary and higher education; we must find a common language between the two.



- Writing skills lacking at all levels: Is this an unbiased measure of the quality of student writing in past decades as compared to now, or is this a perception on our past?

Higher Education as a System

- Community colleges, regional campuses and other 4-year institutions are an essential part of this quality/cost question. We need to think of higher education in Ohio as a system, with each part contributing what it does best.
- Some guests believe that the California plan, put in place many years ago, is a model for an effective statewide system.
- A guest noted that the featured speakers did not address the needs of students outside the main campus four-year university system; namely, students at regional campuses.
- Undergraduate education is not a “one size fits all” situation. For example, some regions of the state are interested in simply boosting number of citizens with degrees, not specific industry-related credentials.

Ratings and Rankings

- How is Ohio State responding to initiatives like President Obama’s proposal for college scorecards and ratings?
- College ratings can be dangerous if they don’t account for the preparation and supports that students bring to college. If colleges are rated based solely on graduation rates, they will be less likely to admit students from lower-income backgrounds or from poor public school systems.
- Any ratings system should try to measure “value added” by colleges. This is analogous to systems that rate hospital safety by adjusting for the seriousness of conditions treated. A maternity hospital naturally has a lower mortality rate than a cancer treatment center. Just as we don’t want to discourage hospitals from treating the sickest patients, we don’t want to discourage colleges from admitting higher-risk students.
- Ratings based on job outcomes are also problematic. It is hard to track graduates; does any department really do it effectively?
- The internet, social media and databases are making it easier to track graduates’ jobs. At least in some fields, many grads use LinkedIn, making it relatively easy to track their jobs. Some states have created databases that link graduates from each



public school to their jobs and salaries, by using data employers supply to the workers' compensation plan in the state. None of these approaches are perfect, but effective tracking may soon be available with tools like these.

- *Washington Monthly* has an interesting ranking of undergraduate institutions, and Ohio State does relatively well on that ranking. Why don't we hear more about it?
- The external environment focuses too much on student success 1-2 years out of college.
- Value system is not one size fits all. Do all students place value on salary? Can't we ask them what they value? Yet, where does affordability fit in the value system if we don't focus on salaries?