

"Risks in University Reform" by James H. Mittelman

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When Finland looks at international experience with university reform, what lessons should be drawn? Endowed with resources of plenty and global reach, the U.S. model is especially compelling. Yet universities in the United States are beset by controversies over reform. As a student, professor, department chair, director of a university foundation, and dean, I have been in the thick of these mêlées.

Seemingly, a case can be made for the American model because of the correlation between national economic competitiveness and educational excellence. On the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index 2007-2008, the U.S. economy again scored number one (with Finland in 6th place, though it has sometimes been first on these registers). And in The Times (London) World University Rankings 2007, six of the top 10 are American universities; the other four, British. More than its British and Finnish counterparts, the American university offers mass education beyond secondary school.

However, the figures do not tell the story of the risks in reforms afoot at U.S. universities, where debates surround governance, access, and autonomy.

Governance: Administrators proclaim the need to reorganize and be lean and mean. The outcome of countless hours devoted to strategic planning is a list of bullet points and targets subject to productivity measures.

Accompanying this corporate exercise is an upward swing in authority. For example, within the U.S. federal system, some state governments are changing the laws to allow governors to name the CEOs of public universities. Meanwhile, the gaps among salaries paid to top administrators, full-time faculty, and contingent faculty are rapidly growing. According to the most recent figures (for 2005-06) compiled by the American Association of University Professors, 81 presidents from private universities received more than \$500,000 in total compensation. Over 10 years, the spread between presidential and faculty salary increases widened six-fold.

The outlay in executive pay packages exceeded the \$1-million mark at some universities in 2005-06. And when their leaders leave office, they qualify for generous severance payments and deferred compensation.

Access: Soaring costs are mainly shouldered by "consumers." At The George Washington University, for example, a full-time undergraduate embarking on a four-year degree program will pay \$40,393 in 2008-09. Add room and board, which averaged \$14,130 last year.

Only the elite institutions with hefty endowments are able to enlarge aid or replace loans for certain income groups. These reallocations can reshape the diversity of the enrollment and affect career options. Many students face a difficult choice of whether to attend a prestigious private university or a more affordable public institution. Even the latter encounter shrunken support from state legislatures and must seek private dollars.

Autonomy: In this climate, intellectuals bear a mounting work load. More students are taught by a higher proportion of part-time teachers (without benefits). Assessments of faculty performance emphasize numerical measures of productivity even though much of it is not amenable to counting.

Commercial activities such as outsourcing courses, franchising campuses, and purchasing property may not organically relate to nourishing intellectual creativity, which is at the core of a university's mission. Or as one of my students interested in emerging markets succinctly put it in a negative evaluation of a course on social theory, required for Ph.D. candidates: "It's not marketable." Treated as paying customers, some of them regard the old adage "knowledge for knowledge's sake" as quaint, if not downright naïve. The trend is toward consumer sovereignty.

The antidote is to counter this push. The application of corporate thinking, sometimes in the guise of new legal status, to universities risks reducing their autonomy. But diminishing self-governance endangers educational excellence. One hopes that when it comes to the academy, wisdom will prevail.

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