

Beyond the tipping point: American higher education in transition

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*Nothing of him that doth fade,
but doth suffer a sea-change,
into something rich and strange
(Shakespeare, 1604)*

ABSTRACT. For more than two decades experts have predicted that the US higher education system was headed toward systemic change. Many signs now point to a conclusion that we have reached that inflection point. The severe economic downturn of the past six years, combined with major demographic shifts and dislocating technological change, have exposed serious structural weaknesses in the US system that pose significant threats to all but elite tier institutions. This paper examines the current state of US higher education in light of these forces. It discusses the implications of innovative technologies and practices, as well as how institutions might use them to adapt and thrive in a higher education world turned upside-down.

KEYWORDS: *Global economic downturn, MOOCs, Technology, US higher education system*

Introduction

For over two decades experts have been predicting a period of disruptive change for America's vaunted higher education system. It now is evident to most knowledgeable observers that we have finally reached that stage. Richard Katz (2012), former senior fellow at Educause has characterized the US system as having passed "the inflection point" and at the May 2013 annual meeting of the Western Association of Colleges and Schools¹, Ralph Wolff, its president, observed that he has seen more change during the past year than in the twenty that preceded it (Wolff, 2013).

Despite more than two decades of warnings, the dawning reality that this period of upheaval has finally arrived appears to have

1. WASC is one of the six "regional" accrediting bodies in the US recognized by the US Department of Education.

It is the institutional accreditor for most colleges and universities in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands

come as a shock to the professoriate and administration of most US colleges and universities. Not surprisingly some deny the signs and believe this period to be the result of just another economic cycle. These individuals, most often members of the professoriate, argue that sanity and predictability will return to the system.

While it is true that the severe economic downturn of the past five years was a catalyst for the current conditions, a deeper analysis of the American higher education landscape suggests that the outcome was probably inevitable. In fact, the financial crisis exposed serious preexisting weaknesses in the US system that pose significant threats to all but elite tier institutions.

WASC's Wolff, who has been at that Association's helm for the last 13 years and on its staff for more than 31, has watched the progression of the US system and has been at the forefront of those "crying in the wilderness" about the coming change. At a 2011 conference on the Future of State Universities, Wolff argued that the business model of higher education is "broken". Katharine Lyall (2011) of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching agrees: "The business models operating most public universities have become unsustainable. Most were put in place in the 1970s when states were in much stronger financial condition and there were fewer competing needs for state resources" (p. 1). A report of the Lumina Foundation's 2010 National Productivity Conference titled *Navigating the new normal* drew the same conclusion:

"After centuries of excellence and decades of cyclical recessions, higher education has developed some bad habits. When facing budget shortfalls, colleges and universities have not always adequately addressed underlying cost drivers and have instead pursued short-term solutions. Today, the need for fundamental changes is inescapable" (p. 9).

The global economic downturn may have brought to light the system's structural defects but most observers now realize these would have become apparent eventually. Placing blame for the system's current flaws is probably unproductive, however. The structure of the American higher education system is based on more than three centuries of convention and practice that for most of those years produced excellent results. Over that time the system evolved to meet the exigencies of the times - as with the

Morrill Act in the mid-19th century that resulted in the creation of America's Land Grant universities, or the GI Bill of Rights that provided educational funding for military service members returning from World War II. In both cases the result represented a dramatic shift in the system that equipped it for its time.

In the present case, however, the rate of change has been so rapid as to make recognizing the defects and adapting the system to them in any kind of orderly way nearly impossible. Over time the system has also become much more layered and complex as the American population has grown and as the population has become significantly more diverse. In *The fifth discipline*, Peter Senge (1990) held that "structure determines behavior" by which he meant in part that each system imposes its own logic and those in the system most often behave in predictable ways (Senge, 1990). Senge claimed, in essence, that ten different leaders faced with identical circumstances in the same system would tend to make qualitatively the same decisions.

The basic structural conventions of America's colleges and universities have been around a long time, are fiercely held, and fully subject to the forces of inertia. For example, the constructs of shared governance and tenure, while noble in aim, tend to work against practicing the flexibility necessary to adapt to a rapidly changing external landscape. Faculties guard their prerogatives jealously and may either strenuously oppose incursions or "committee" them to death. This makes exerting strong presidential leadership difficult. Leon Botstein (2013), president of Bard College observes that: "The constituents in a university really do not want leadership."

"Faculty enjoy their own authority. We like the absence of centralized leadership. We want paper pushers and fund-raisers; we do not want people at the helm guiding the major intellectual functions of the university. We love our anarchic independence. In this context, anybody who wants to be a university administrator ought to be disqualified by definition" (p. 74).

Despite the inherent good these structures have historically contributed to the system, especially in more stable times, they highlight one area of structure and practice that have prevented the majority of mainstream academia from responding to an external

environment undergoing radical change.

Kahn Academy creator Salman Kahn (2013) suggests that all of this has created a growing public perception about the value of higher education:

“The core value proposition of higher education is under increasing scrutiny, part because of the disconnect between student expectations, the traditional classroom experience, and the ever growing need for active creators in the marketplace. There is a basic divide between most students’ expectations for college - a means to employment first and a good intellectual experience second; and what universities believe their value is - an intellectual and social experience first, with only secondary consideration to employment” (p. 41).

In fairness, the current crisis is not attributable merely to internal structures. It is also the product of at least three major external forces: preexisting underlying economic issues unrelated to the recent recession, major shifts in the demographic makeup of US society, and the effects of rapid, dislocating technological progress. These interrelated forces have converged to create a very different and challenging environment for US colleges and universities. Understanding the effects of these forces is critical for leaders of institutions that will survive and thrive in what some are calling “the new normal” (Zemsky, Wenger, 2011).

The interplay of external forces

As discussed, the prolonged economic recession exposed structural defects of the system. While it is true that the economics of higher education is certainly related to the overall health of the economy it is also true that in the present case, the end of the recession will not end the financial woes of most US colleges and universities. That is because this is not simply another economic cycle. In hindsight the system has been operating on borrowed time and the economic boom that preceded the recession camouflaged the realities. Ironically, while institutions were building capacity, adding to their physical plants, and adding cosmetic inducements to their

campuses that would enable them to compete for the traditional undergraduate population, the evolving demographics of the US population was eating away at the system's superstructure.

Significantly, however, these actions were occurring at a time when the traditional undergraduate segment was decreasing in size relative to the total college attending population. From a microeconomic standpoint these actions represented a natural and understandable response - when faced with the prospect of falling enrollments and the threats this change represented, institutional leaders redoubled their efforts to compete. At the same time the number of students who fall into categories defined as at-risk (Donnelly, 1987) continued to grow. These include:

- Low socioeconomic status
- Living in a single-parent home
- Changing schools at non-traditional times
- Below-average grades in middle school
- Being held back in school through grade retention
- Having older siblings who left high school before completion
- Negative peer pressure

Additionally, minority students are significantly more likely to be labeled at-risk than white students. The risks of failing or dropping-out increase considerably for members of ethnic minority groups.

At the same time, those representing the traditional 18-22 year-old undergraduate segment - those most people see in their mind's eye when they think of typical college students - now represent only one in six students in the higher education system. Yet, most traditional 4-year colleges and universities in the US continue to focus primarily on this population in terms of curriculum, delivery modalities, schedules, and physical plants.

One of the 12 inconvenient truths put forward by Richard Vedder (2012) appears to relate to this seeming disconnect between demographics and academic programming. He writes that "colleges are run to serve staff, not students" (Vedder, 2012). The traditional undergraduate population is perhaps more accustomed to complying with the conventions of campus schedules and conventions in part because they are more likely to have the time and resources to do so, as well as the expectation that "this is how college is done". Non-traditional, at-risk populations are

less likely to have the experiential context and, further, the roles, responsibilities, and characteristics of their lives make complying with the rhythms of the traditional campus untenable. Growing segments of the US college-attending population (or those who might benefit but whose access is limited or restricted) are simply underserved by most traditional institutions.

The aging of the American population has also had a significant impact on the economic fortunes of higher education. The leading edge of the Baby Boom generation (Americans born between 1946 just after the end of World War II and 1960) is nearing 70 years of age. This is the largest generation in American history, not to mention being among the most affluent and politically active. It should not surprise anyone that by sheer force of numbers this cadre of Americans has driven both social policy and social change. In the competition for scarce resources, the "Boomer" generation was already placing significant pressure on government's ability to fund social entitlement programs. Because of increasing life expectancy, Boomers will continue to demand a disproportionate share of the public pie for many years to come - and every additional dollar directed at them is, of course, a dollar not spent on higher education.

It would not be a misstatement to characterize the impact these demographic changes represent for American higher education as being akin to a tectonic shift. These trends were already proceeding but the further erosion of the tax base during the prolonged recession magnified their effects. The same is true of the severe investment losses suffered by institutional endowment funds thanks to the meltdown of financial markets in 2008 and the subsequent depletion in the ranks of endowment fund donors able or willing to contribute.

When increased funding for defense spending and homeland security are factored in - budget line items that have grown steadily since 9-11 - the portion of federal and state government spending in the US devoted to higher education dropped even more precipitously. State tax subsidies are only just now beginning to recover but most experts agree that higher education spending will not approach previous levels.

“The financial recession of the past two years has driven home a sobering awareness that colleges and universities cannot expect to receive a substantial reinvestment of public dollars. Even if state governments were in a position to appropriate more dollars, neither higher education in general nor a state’s publicly financed colleges and universities would likely rise to the top of the list of contenders for increased public funding” (Zemsky, Wenger, 2011).

To the many colleges and universities that added programs, faculties, and facilities in the years leading up to the crisis, the challenge of paying for those decisions has now become the primary focus. While most institutions were forced to cut expenses, the levels of fixed costs for faculties and facilities made it difficult to achieve significant relief through these efforts. Below the elite level, many institutions also deferred maintenance on plant and equipment. While that strategy may have proven effective during prior economic cycles as institutions attempted to ride out the storm, in this environment it may be the case that it simply postpones the inevitable.

Predictably, institutions clawed back from their budget shortfalls by shifting the burden to students. In the face of decreased tax subsidies and smaller endowment pools to draw upon, tuition and fees rose dramatically over the last decade across most of higher education. This trend had begun even before the financial collapse. Understandably, the year-over-year increases eventually resulted in a public outcry that continues today and led to calls for government investigations, increased regulation, and the imposition of cost controls.

Further exacerbating a bleak situation, as state governments cut funding and raised tuition and fees students turned increasingly to the US federal government loans and grants. Because tuition levels had increased so significantly, students began to borrow significantly more than before tuition began its steep upward climb. The result is that student debt has rapidly reached what most agree are crisis levels - now estimated to total nearly \$1.2 trillion.

As Evan Applegate (2013) illustrates in the following chart, student debt is “now second only to housing debt”, surpassing credit card debt.

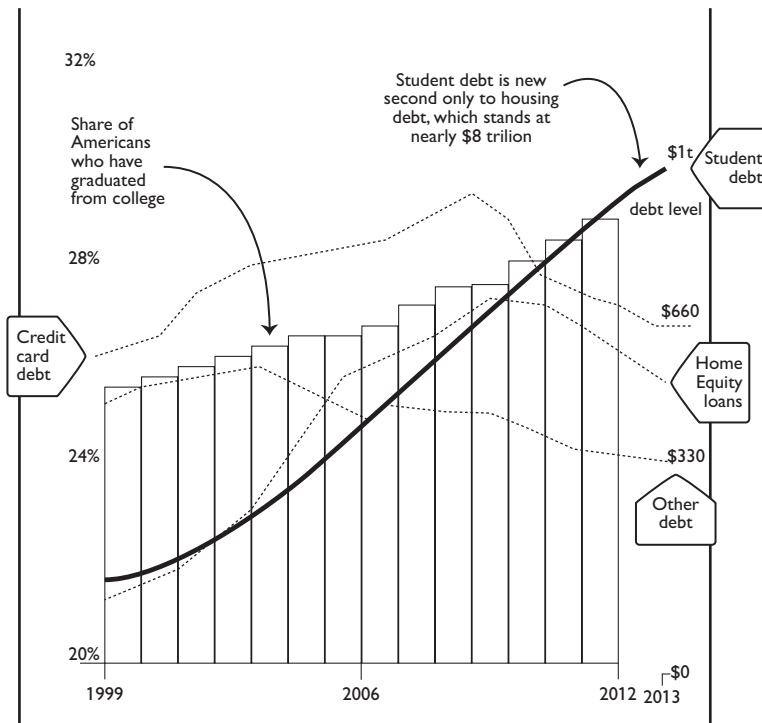


Figure 1. Student debt, credit card debt, housing debt, by Evan Applegate (2013)

Of course, in a depressed economy, students are less able to find post-graduation employment and as a result, student loan defaults have risen to equally dire levels.

As might be expected, considering the magnitude of debt levels, the result has been significantly increased scrutiny on the part of the US Department of Education and the Congress. The rapid growth of federal funding for higher education, particularly in the area of guaranteed student loans and grants, has raised the alarm and has understandably led to increased questions about whether taxpayers are receiving value for their investment. There have been increased calls for greater accountability and transparency on the part of institutions. The stepped-up scrutiny has also taken the form of more regulation and threats of regulation.

Initially the bulk of the regulations were focused on curbing perceived abuses in the private enterprise sector of higher education because these institutions serve an inordinately large population of at-risk

students. Not surprisingly, the highest debt levels can be found among at-risk populations described above. These are the students who are more likely to be negatively affected during an economic downturn.

“Interpretations of available data reveal a strong correlation between the percentage of at-risk students that an institution enrolls and the outcomes of the students attending the institution. Other recent studies have found similar correlations between student demographics and graduation rates and default rates”. (Guida, Figuli, 2011, p. 141)

As the recognition has grown that responsibility for the debt crisis extends beyond the private enterprise institutions, the US government’s increased regulatory focus has gradually spread outwards to embrace the wider universe of institutions - a fact that the traditional higher education community has hardly received with enthusiasm. The higher education community is largely united in the belief that the federal government has increasingly intruded into areas involving academic judgment that have traditionally been the prerogative of the institutions and their faculties.

Additionally, the role of the US accreditation system based on peer review and continuous improvement is being challenged. Accreditors are increasingly expected to assume consumer protection and financial oversight responsibilities over the institutions they accredit that previously have been reserved to the federal and state governments. In essence, the US government has co-opted the accreditation system and is moving it more in the direction of a European-style government audit system for quality assurance.

Notably, legislative language to reauthorize for the US Higher Education Act is currently being proposed. This is the federal statute that governs the administration of student grant and loan programs. In today’s climate, most experts expect to see additional conditions placed on institutions - conditions that most see as meddling and having little to do with actually improving the quality of teaching and learning. The continuing divide between the government bureaucracy and the higher education community is substantial. Institutions and accreditors have been slow to respond seriously to calls for greater accountability and transparency, while

policymakers demand that educators demonstrate wise stewardship in administering public funds and producing competent graduates. The momentum appears to be moving in the direction of increasing levels of regulation.

In addition to the economic and demographic factors discussed above, the rapid rate of technological advancement, particularly in the area of digital communication and content creation and delivery, has been and equally disruptive and dislocating force in American higher education. The seeds of the digital revolution in education were planted mid-to-late 1970s with the introduction of what most characterize as the first real personal computer - the Apple II. Innovative institutions appeared willing to push the envelope of higher education practice and to structure around the needs of non-traditional audiences, using accelerated formats as well as more standardized curricular designs and instructional methods.

Other organizations also appeared that were not colleges or universities but that created services to serve them. Notable among them was the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), created in 1974, to pioneer formalized approaches to Prior Learning Assessment. CAEL began to popularize the notion that college-level learning took place outside the college classroom and that an academically defensible process validating that learning could be developed. CAEL was in some ways a precursor to the competency-based approaches that are now beginning to appear.

Advances in digital technology accelerated over the next decade as storage devices got smaller, processors got faster, and digital communication began to replace analog systems. By the early 1990s, the Internet grew out of the scientific network that gave birth to it and shortly thereafter the invention first web browser created a revolution.

At about the same time, the first online courses and programs began to appear. Depending on the segment of the higher education audience, these efforts were met either with veiled skepticism or with almost Luddite-like antagonism. Undaunted, innovators also began to design instruction using rich media and venture capitalists began to invest. eLearning companies boomed with the dot.com craze (and many of the same "bombed" with the dot.com collapse). Some that failed clearly appeared before their time and, because access was far from universal and bandwidth was inadequate these early efforts were largely unsuccessful.

The lessons of those companies were not forgotten, however, and as those barriers were demolished new market entrants appeared. These included academic publishers in search of new business models to replace the single author, big textbook that had for many years been the dominant repository of academic content. Though that model still exists its hegemony in higher education is waning as digital content is disaggregated and increasingly democratized through an open course movement evolving in parallel with commercial content providers. Others, like the Kahn Academy, developed organically and grew into a business model to gain a significant amount of notoriety. The growth of commoditized content in the form of inexpensive self-paced courses from companies like Pearson and Straighter Line are beginning to threaten the revenue base of liberal arts colleges, for example, who will be expected to grant transfer credit instead of charging tuition. Additionally, institutions like Western Governors University pioneered competency-based programs that are now gaining currency among others eager to explore new ways of educating the American population - which places further pressure on institutions that cling only to anachronistic models.

Despite the enthusiasm with which the segments of the higher education community who are focused on and believe in online and digital instruction, it is still viewed cynically by a large segment of professoriate. Allen and Seaman (2012) reported on a research about faculty and administrator attitudes. In their study “faculty report being more pessimistic than optimistic about online learning” (Allen, Seaman, 2012, p. 5).

“Professors, over all, cast a skeptical eye on the learning outcomes for online education. Nearly two-thirds say they believe that the learning outcomes for an online course are inferior or somewhat inferior to those for a comparable face-to-face course. Most of the remaining faculty members report that the two have comparable outcomes. Even among those with a strong vested interest in online education - faculty members who are currently teaching online courses - considerable concern remains about the quality of the learning outcomes”. (Allen, Seaman, 2012, p. 2).

Conversely, these authors report that academic technology administrators are extremely optimistic about the growth of online learning, with over 80 percent reporting that they view it with “more excitement than fear” (Allen, Seaman, 2012, p. 2). In another study the same authors (2011) report that nearly two-thirds of academic leaders indicated that online learning is a critical part of their long-term strategy (Allen, Seaman, 2011, p. 4). Further, Lederman and Jaschik (2011) found that “three-quarters of public college presidents believe online learning can help their institutions increase both enrollments and net tuition revenue” (Green, Lederman, Jaschik, 2011).

To the present day, educational technology seems poised to continue its rapid evolution, if possible at an even more frenetic pace. Lev Gonick (2013) has identified 12 technology megatrends that will drive change in higher education.² Several of these trends relate to online education and digital technologies:

- The death of personal computers: the rise of mobile computing devices sounded the death knell of the PC. Avoiding the temptation of building content around the scaffolding of a particular appliance.
- The proliferation of mobile devices: the fight is not longer about Mac or PC. Gonick says the new world will need to be appliance agnostic. He calls for commitment to a BYOD model (bring your own device).
- The rise of social networks: use of email and text messaging are declining among younger populations entering or ready to enter the academy are communicating via social networking platforms, the number of which continue to explode. Institutions need to go where the students go.
- The valuation of x-as-a-service: the necessity of a rational process for making deciding whether to build and host internally vs. contracting
- The implementation of the flipped classroom: the concept deserves a real trial, not just dabbling around the edges. That will take resources devoted to it to test the concept.
- The future of the learning space: big investment needed for integrating virtual technology into learning spaces that allow for real-time collaboration.
- The legitimization of online learning: the online train has left

2. The descriptive comments following each numbered item are the author's

the station. Focus on perfecting the product to ensure the value of the degree.

Gonick says that the task ahead for innovators is to consider “what are the challenges that we face and how can we remain engaged in that vanguard role while, at the same time, figuring out what we want to hold onto from the past”. What is critical to this discussion is his implicit assumption that the integration of online education is no longer in question - it is just a matter of how, how much, and how quickly. While Gonick’s trends tend to be big-picture in nature, there is a set of more immediate, granular advances involving technology that the American higher education community is working to understand and adapt to, as are many colleagues across the world.

As a case in point, the last two years have seen the rapid appearance and phenomenal rise in the popularity of the Massive Open Online Course or MOOC. Growing from an experiment by Stanford Professor Sebastian Thrun, the concept has taken off. Thrun left Stanford and with two others set out to create his own company, Udacity, to create and market MOOCs. Other commercial ventures appeared in short order - EdX the partnership of Harvard and MIT, with Coursera growing out of Stanford. Whether MOOCs can live up to the hype is still an open issue. In that vein, two persistent questions continue to be raised about the future of the MOOC. The first relates to completion the phenomenon of low student completion and success rates. The second deals with whether a viable business model will emerge. What MOOCs do appear to symbolize however is an open adoption of and commitment to online education by three of the most prestigious universities in the United States. Symbolically, at least, their actions may hasten the process by which we “remove the curse” from online education. Their recognition and validation of online learning has captured the attention not only of the higher education community but also of legislators and policy makers looking for more efficient and cost effective means of delivering higher education. In fact, some members of the California State Legislature frustrated with the bottleneck caused by the lack of available courses necessary for students to graduate proposed legislation that would force California’s state-run institutions to grant credits for MOOCs that satisfied those course requirements - much to the consternation of the faculty and

leadership of those institutions. Moving even beyond that, Udacity has partnered with Georgia Tech University and AT&T to offer a MOOC-based online masters degree in computer science at a cost of \$7000. If it works, it will likely force the kind of restructuring, the lack of which that led to the crisis in American higher education. It is clear that online learning has and will continue to make a significant impact on the future of higher education in the US - and around the world. Regarding the current crisis in American higher education described in this paper, it is clear that something has to change. It is probably safe to assume that at least for the time being the elite, top-tier private institutions - the Ivy League and their counterparts - will survive and continue to thrive. The same is arguably true of the most prestigious liberal arts institutions because their brand identities make it possible more for them to compete for traditional undergraduate populations and they tend to be well resourced through their endowments. Most or at least many large state flagship "Research I" institutions will also likely survive. These institutions are more likely to receive supplemental funding from state, federal, corporate (e.g. defense and pharmaceutical), and venture capital support because they are seen as economic drivers. It may be, however, that in the coming world, the undergraduate mission of these institutions might be channeled off to teaching institutions.

For the rest of the higher education community preserving the status quo is probably unsustainable. Some revered conventions will yield to financial exigency and institutions will either adapt or die. Large numbers of small, underfunded, financially strapped liberal arts institutions are in jeopardy of disappearing altogether. Many comprehensive state institutions that try to emulate their "Research U" siblings will likely fail to garner consistent financial support as the competition for scarce resources continues to heat up and these institutions will be forced to focus on providing more efficient ways of teaching and learning. Private enterprise institutions once seen as drivers of innovation have become, in many of their practices at least, mature and mainstream. They are threatened increasingly by non-profit institutions that have finally begun to figure out the calculus of competition under the conditions of the new normal.

Institutions in the second-tier and below that wish to survive and thrive will be forced to reinvent themselves. Small incremental

changes are unlikely to stand up against the tsunami of constrained resources, shifting demographics, and changed expectations. Decreasing the cost of a higher education while assuring its effectiveness will require a combination of strategies. These may include online and blended instruction, prior learning assessment, streamlined credit aggregation policies and processes, competency-based instruction, and granting credit for commoditized content in high subscription courses and innovations akin to MOOCs that haven't yet appeared.

To higher education's true pioneers and innovators the future will always be viewed "with more excitement than fear" (Allen, Seaman, 2012, p. 2). They understand and accept, almost as an article of faith, that the price of overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges is that some will survive and thrive in the new normal and that others will not. We rightly mourn the passing of comfortable aspects of the past but would do well not to forget that they too were once part of a "new normal". The process of disruptive change is painful but ultimately beneficial.

Adapting to our current challenges is a requirement if we hope to create and maintain healthy, vital higher education institutions capable of meeting the needs of future generations of students and serving the public good. Navigating the best path will require the arduous work of figuring out, as Gonick (2013) wrote, how to meet today's challenges while deciding what to hold onto from our past. Given that the pace of change is more likely to accelerate than slow down, it is probably wise to start preparing for the next new normal.

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Sintesi

La radicale trasformazione in atto nell'Higher Education americana è ben lungi dall'essere conclusa.

Lo studio californiano getta lo sguardo oltre il punto più critico del sistema universitario statunitense, corrispondente al 2012-2013, per analizzare le cause profonde della crisi odierna.

Essa in realtà non si origina unicamente all'interno del sistema, ma rappresenta il prodotto della reciproca interazione di tre principali forze esterne:

- *gravi criticità economiche preesistenti, non connesse all'attuale recessione;*
- *mutamenti significativi nella composizione demografica della società statunitense, profondamente segnata da fattori quali l'invecchiamento della popolazione e l'incremento vertiginoso dei debiti degli studenti, secondo solo a quello edilizio;*
- *un progresso tecnologico accelerato che, portando in primo piano le nuove tecnologie digitali, l'istruzione a distanza, il suo accreditamento e la sua piena integrazione nel sistema complessivo dell'istruzione e della formazione, rivoluziona incessantemente l'Higher Education nazionale e globale.*

Queste componenti fortemente interrelate convergono nel disegnare un panorama universitario assai differente rispetto al passato.

Il mantenimento dello status quo risulta di conseguenza ormai insostenibile. Di fronte alla riduzione generalizzata delle risorse, ai cambiamenti demografici e alle mutate aspettative, è infatti imperativo diminuire il costo dell'Higher Education assicurando nel contempo qualità ed efficacia, obiettivi che esigono la combinazione simultanea di una pluralità di strategie. Queste comprendono l'utilizzo diffuso dell'istruzione online e blended e della valutazione dell'apprendimento in ingresso, come pure l'adozione su larga scala di sistemi di istruzione e formazione che valorizzino adeguatamente le competenze e di politiche e processi semplificati di aggregazione di crediti.

Appare pertanto urgente affrontare con decisione le sfide di oggi, senza tentare di eluderle, per creare e sostenere, nel medio e lungo termine, istituzioni universitarie in salute, efficienti e vitali, in grado di soddisfare i bisogni delle future generazioni di studenti e di servire validamente il bene pubblico.