Beyond 2018: Challenges of America's Higher Education*

Phylis Lan Lin

University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, USA

Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

It is a known fact that the world is ever-changing, and as higher education is consistently faced with new challenges, institutions have the option to become active in changing and proactive in responding to changes and new trends. Higher education must respond to many new demands beyond 2018. The purpose of this presentation is to delineate major challenges which colleges and universities in America are facing today. These challenges are: to control the increasing college costs, to prepare for the skills for the 21st century, to increase retention and graduation rates, to establish strategic international partnerships, and to develop sustainable financial paths and development. The presentation also recommends four major tasks which higher learning institutions must confront with: making college affordable, keeping high retention and graduation rates, internationalizing of higher education, and enhancing meaningful learning environment and life-long learning.

Keywords: higher education, challenges, international education, goals

Challenges

It is a known fact that the world is ever-changing, and as higher education is consistently faced with new challenges, institutions have the option to become active in changing and proactive in responding to changes and new trends. Higher education must respond to many new demands beyond 2016 (Lin, 2016b). Areas calling for some of these proactive responses include: (1) global challenges in economic, political, and social development; (2) changes of the enrollment landscape increasing diversity (age, gender, and ethnicity) for both students and faculty (issue of inclusion); (3) workforce development and new skill demands in the 21st century; (4) the emerging business model in higher education; (5) the competitive edge in human, capital, and physical resources; (6) increasing globalization and internationalization in higher education through international partnerships; (7) the “innovative disruption” model of quality education delivery in higher education in the Internet⁺ era; and (8) some controversial issues, such as race and free speech dilemmas, campus safety, the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) vs. humanities debate, and sexual assault on campus (Gardner, 2018). These are some of the pressing issues that higher education leaders must face and find solutions for.

Higher education institutions exist, in part, to encourage people to embrace the idea of change, and students are required to embrace the ever-changing world around them if they want to have any effect on their campus, their community, and the world. With so many challenges in American universities, including limited

* Paper to be presented at the International Conference on Education, Psychology, and Society, July 10-12, 2018, Tokyo, Japan (Paper ID: ICEPS0111).

Phylis Lan Lin, Ph.D., professor of Sociology, Associate VP for International Partnerships, University of Indianapolis; professor of Graduate School of Business, Ph.D., OD, and MBA Programs, Assumption University (effective August 1, 2018).

resources, affordability, new technology, and diversity/inclusion, just to name a few, it is imperative that American universities clearly identify the goals and challenges of the higher educational system. Only then, we can work collaboratively and efficiently to react to the growing needs, especially in the era of Internet⁺, and the desired skill base required for students in the 21st century, not only to cultivate them to become global citizens, but also to influence and prepare them for career success.

As the world is ever-changing, our educational system must be willing to identify and adapt. It is obvious that there are specific 21st century skills necessary for students to acquire, therefore, we must begin now to look beyond 2016 to identify challenges, both nationally and internationally, for the higher education system in both present and future.

The first challenge is to control increasing college costs. This issue is closely linked with the notion of promoting social equality and opportunity. Unaffordability may deter some talented students from receiving formal higher education. The high cost of American college tuition has prevented not only domestic students but also many high-caliber international students, especially students from the developing countries in recent years, from studying in America. Cost has appeared to be one of the key reasons for discouraging joint-degree program students from transferring to their partner universities in the U.S. despite handsome scholarship offers for international students from their partner universities in the U.S. For those who really want to study abroad and do not care about the quality of education they receive, tuition cost would be the priority consideration in choosing a foreign university abroad. The affordability of attending colleges and universities is a top challenge for both domestic and international students.

In addition, about 30-45% of college students are first-generation college students. Higher learning institutions have a special challenge to educate students who have no family history of college-educated professionals. We must let families and students realize that college is an investment that pays off.

The second challenge is how to prepare students with the skills to meet future work demands; students must become technology savvy. The Internet of Things (IoT) and the technologies that drive it have shown tremendous impact and disruptions on higher education that we never experienced two decades ago. In this age of big data and endless information, every educational institution must rethink innovative teaching and learning experiences for both faculty and students. Colleges and universities must continue to embrace technology and new ways of teaching and learning if we hope to engage students. The IoT is not only a skill set or a stream of technology or devices; it is also a mindset. It is a set of resource integration and methodology. The IoT paves the way for creativity. We will soon live in the word of the “smarts”—smart phone, smart home, smart city, and of course, smart students. Combining education with technology are not just about bringing learning resources to students, but also about leading us to design new ways to evaluate students' learning experiences and outcomes. Traditional measurement may become obsolete. Educational reform should focus not only on revamping the curriculum, but also on how to measure the “smart-learning” outcome.

Institutions must be accountable for the overall quality of education they provide. The value of higher education must be reexamined, and students' learning outcomes must be assessed with valid and reliable tools (Keller, 2014).

The third challenge is how to increase retention and graduation rates. Universities and colleges must devise new programs and efforts to assist students to succeed and graduate in a timely manner. It is interesting that international students have a higher average of graduation rates than do domestic American students. It is apparent that motivation for and commitment to higher learning might be one of the key factors for the

above-average academic performance among the majority of international students. There are a number of key reasons for students dropping out during one semester or one year of study in college. The reason could be only one, but more often than not, it is a combination of reasons, including financial, academic, social, and family.

Internationalization is the fourth challenge. Universities and colleges must establish strategic international partners to bring international students to campus. Internationalization will not only enrich a diversified campus culture but also increase substantial revenue, as most international students pay full tuition—This is especially true for Saudi Arabian students who study in America under King Abdullah's scholarship program (Lin, 2015). Today, almost all universities have an International Partnerships (Strategy) Office to work with academic units, admissions, registrar offices, the International Division, and so on, to promote engagements with countries in different regions and to explore opportunities for establishing strategic international partnerships, to coordinate international collaborations in research and education, to assist students in their experience abroad, and to work on strategies to recruit international students. In addition to enhancing campus diversity with the presence of international students, the tuition revenue from international students in many cases has assisted universities' business models. Recruiting international students presents a different kind of challenge to the Admissions Office. By and large, international students look for two factors: ranking and tuition costs. We need to convince international students (and more often than not, their parents) that a good match, quality education, and positive learning environment should be their choice path (Sutton & Obst, 2011).

The fifth challenge stresses that higher education institutions must maintain or develop sustainable financial paths and grow, especially in light of budget cuts in state and federal funding. Universities and colleges must find new ways to promote institutional advancement and adopt a business and accounting model in managing operational funds. Since this financial and budgetary issue is complicated and is also beyond the scope of this paper, a detailed discussion about it will be deferred to a separate paper (Keller, 2014).

Strategies

Making College Affordable

It is undeniable that higher education faces many global challenges, including economic, political, and social. With diminished affordability, students have less access to higher education. The leaders in higher education are aware of shifting student demographics. As the student population is reduced to those who can afford tuition or are given scholarships from individuals or organizations outside their families, the system of higher education must create new strategies to reflect these new realities.

Many students who would not typically have the opportunity to afford college have, in the past, been able to rely on state funding to help counter the increasing costs of education in the United States. This is no longer as much of a viable option for students because the funding for higher education from states is shrinking. Universities must find ways to assist students in making their educational aspirations attainable: privatizing student loans, procuring subsidies from state and federal governments, and seeking private funding. There must be a focus on opening the doors to students who would previously have relied on state funding. It is not right that only a limited number of people in the U.S. have access to higher education, and universities need to focus on creating opportunities for all students. Higher education systems need to proactively engage in advancing endowments, building overall philanthropy, and creating partnerships with savvy donors. The more the universities can use scholarships and grants, not loans, to help low-income families, the less the families and their children will have to carry loans while in college and carry the debt well into their work life upon

graduation. With the new tax law introduced by President Trump in 2018, it is estimated that the nationwide charitable giving may be dropped by 13 billion. It has been one of the major financial concerns for college presidents (Keldrman & Adamharris, 2018).

Because of the ebb and flow of finances, universities must now and in the future expect and be prepared for constantly changing costs and revenues. They must begin incorporating the business model. Although it is possible for universities to decrease student costs, it may be at the risk of decreasing revenue. Institutions will need to be intentional about cutting costs while still creating budgets that will lead to both short- and long- term viability. Following a business model will allow a university to maintain a sustainable and growing financial path. Inside this business model, universities will also need to be proactive about creating the possibility of transferability between universities, allowing students to move course credits more freely among institutions.

To make college an equity issue in American society, President Barack Obama has brought higher education to the fore over the course of his presidency. Some of his efforts include promoting college attainment, shifting to direct lending, holding for-profit colleges accountable, creating a college scorecard, taking a hard line on sexual assault, and promoting “free” college (Stripling, 2016). These efforts aimed to make higher education “accountable.”

Another issue related to affordability is the transferability of credits between universities within the United States and with foreign universities. As the transferability between universities increases, so do the options that students have as they pursue their goals and dreams. The pros of this transferability far outweigh the possible cons. Universities need not think only of their institutions’ success but also of the successes of the individual students. As their focus changes from isolation to collaboration, universities need not operate with one goal in mind but operate together as a corporation to overcome the many global challenges they are facing. For example, the shifting and declining number of certain international-student segments (i.e., students from Saudi Arabia and from EU countries) to the U.S. will definitely affect tuition revenue for many universities in the U.S. (Lin, 2015).

Keeping High Retention and Graduation Rates

The next strategy for higher education institutions in America is to find the best methods to keep retention rates high. Because of the challenges the changing world places on the educational system as a whole, it is imperative that the system be proactive in creating solutions to attract students. As students enter the higher educational system, however, it is necessary that universities work together on their retention efforts. Even as students enter the university, their desire to stay for the future should increase. It is not enough just to get a student into the classroom—The need is much deeper. Again, the higher educational system must be proactive in creating an atmosphere that leads students to success and keeps them coming back day after day and year after year. It is a tragedy if a student enters higher education only to become discouraged and find that his/her needs are not being met. The rate of students dropping out of college is alarming but it is also preventable, if the leaders of the higher educational system are intentional about creating a positive, relevant, and engaging environment.

As universities strive to create a climate of retention, one of the most obvious things for them to focus on is enriching campus life. The positive changes that students are faced with on campus will then transfer into the community, and as connections are made both on and off campus, students are more strongly tied to the university, where they are growing, creating meaningful relationships, and actively taking part in making the

world around them a little better. It is part of human nature to desire to be valued, to be meaningful, and to make a difference. This student-oriented learning environment is the added value for receiving higher education. When students are automatically placed in an environment where this is all possible, the likelihood of their pushing through any adversity they face in the college setting will dramatically increase. With these connections, students are then pushed to different interests and the need for interdisciplinary learning increases. Students will be “educated” to become well-rounded and to be able to continue their intellectual lives even after graduation. The statement universities should strive to make is that “a college’s graduation rate is obviously important—but so is what one learns on the path to graduation” (Roth, 2016, p. B3).

In the digital era, almost every institution is making great strides in using big data, including higher education institutions. Universities and colleges must have some database to understand the state of the institution. Big data such as student performance data will be a good reference for retention rates and for identifying and helping at-risk students. Big data can also be used to implement adaptive learning techniques so the failure rates can be reduced. Finally, big data will also be an asset for understanding whether hybrid learning will be a better way to meet student needs.

Internationalizing of Higher Education

Quality of higher education is a key to national economic growth and social development, and it has been one of the major national trends and governmental agendas in many emerging countries in the past few years. International education is transformative, and it literally changes lives (Lin, 2016b).

Furthermore, education and technology are coming together. We need to change our way of working and thinking. Education is an important national export. Distance learning (with technology as the major dimension) promotes internationalization of higher education. Almost all higher education institutions in America are engaged in some form and scope of international collaboration. Institutions of higher education must have complete commitment to a global strategy to recruit international students and to find long-term, sustainable success with their international partnership programs (Lin, 2015; 2016b). Higher education institutions must embrace the culture of inclusion and diversity, not limiting themselves to the inclusion of the local diversified student population but also embracing students from all nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. We must make the campus a welcoming and supportive place for faculty and students of all backgrounds. Furthermore, we must ask what colleges and universities can do to diversify their curricula. Courses that deal with global cultures and inequality should be integrated to general education core. Courses, such as Gender in the Workplace, Racism in America, Leadership across Cultures, and Civic Engagement should be considered part of the multicultural curricula. Internationalization and globalization in higher education go hand in hand. It takes a concerted effort (teamwork) to plan, implement, and assess an international project (in most cases, the joint project). Internationalization of higher education is closely linked with interdisciplinary studies and cross-cultural studies. Both studies focus on cultural and global competency. These studies can well be part of the pursuit for campus intellectual life.

Students at the university level will become engaged with the community and their campus, and their academic passions will grow. With this growth comes the possibility of the internationalization of campuses. With this opportunity available, and joined by transferability between universities, students from all demographics are given more opportunity to succeed in following their passions and their dreams to make this world a better place.

Enhancing Meaningful Learning Environments and Life-Long Education

Universities must intentionally create the possibility for interdisciplinary learning, as this is the main way to engage students, create an atmosphere of innovation, and push others toward change.

With the purpose of higher education being to prepare students for their future endeavors and for them to become global citizens, students in the university setting should also be given opportunities to innovate and become lifelong learners—not just in their specific fields of study but in any topic that could be of interest to them. Students should be given the skills necessary to expand their goals and interests, so they can be innovative and adapt as viable citizens in this changing world. Universities need to strengthen their career-preparation curricula, so students are better prepared for the world they will soon be completely immersed in.

Their careers as learners should not stop once they walk down the aisle and receive their diplomas. The goal of America's higher education should be to create innovative lifelong learners who have the skills and capacity to thrive in meeting the demands of their future work (Lin, 2016a). Though some may say that once students walk out the door, it is those students' responsibility to stay connected to their alma mater, the truth is that the goal of higher education should be to engage all students before, during, and after their time on campus. Universities should maintain the goal of creating and sustaining partnerships with alumni. They should offer curriculum for alumni. The Chinese proverb, "Living to old age, learning to old age" points to the essence of lifelong learning and continuing education. The university should have an open-door policy to welcome alumni to be on campus, not just on homecoming day but also throughout the semester.

One of the megatrends in the 21st century is high technology advancement; we live in the world of the IoT. We are working with the digital-device generation (Lin, 2016a). Higher education must adapt to the changing learning environment and the new culture of technology. We must be prepared for the IoT in higher education. The Internet⁺ education is based on big-data network resources and change from passive acceptance to active hunting, breaking the boundaries of traditional higher education time model, geographical boundaries, and psychological boundaries. From curriculum revision to the delivery of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), the learning process is no longer limited to the physical classroom space; the open-university concept, lifelong learning, and international collaboration have been around for decades, and they will continue. A successful transformation to a digital classroom involves more interaction, conversation, problem-based lessons, and project-based learning. Colleges and universities must continue to embrace technology and new ways of teaching if they hope to engage students and to make the higher education enterprise more efficient.

Students' cultivation for global citizenship in this world continues long after they leave higher education. When students become alumni of a university, the institution needs to be intentional in connecting with them. This builds rapport, and with this positive overall rapport built among past and present students, the meaning of receiving higher education will become evident, which should be a main focus of higher education.

Who knows what jobs will be born one decade or two decades from now? The world is changing, and the speed of changes is going faster and faster. The changes will affect all walks of life. Some predictable social forces (megatrends)—including globalization, technological developments, demographic changes, environmental crisis and low-carbon developments, urbanization, the rise of the middle class, and individualization—will create new economic order, opportunities, and challenges for all of us, especially for Millennials (Generation Y). Educators must understand Millennials' subculture (Lin, 2016a).

In *Colleges That Change Lives*, Pope (2006) pointed out that “America’s educational system, the envy of the world, is the only one that enables everyone to realize his or her potential” (p. xiii). Pope, through personal interviews with students, alumni, professors, deans, and administrators in 40 colleges, compiled profiles of these “life-changing” colleges. Here are some students’ reasons showing us why these colleges are life-changing for them:

1. Professors become friends as well as mentors; learning is collaborative instead of competitive;
2. Provided me a job in my field; provided me with valuable life skills;
3. I have the ability to adapt and thrive;
4. I have an integrated sense of where I fit in;
5. You are learning how to become confident in your own ability to take control of your experiences;
6. Students are on committees with faculty, and they listen; and they are on the Academic Affairs Committee;
7. The curriculum reflects both the interrelatedness of world issues, and the fact that international education is not just for the few specializing in international studies, nor just those studying off campus, but for all who to be educated in the broadest sense for life in the 21st century;
8. On race relations, there are some separate interests, but everybody is ready to accept everybody else. It is something we are taught. Consensus is acceptance of differences;
9. There is a wonderful sense of community;
10. The honors program has a special curriculum and tutorials;
11. This university has shown me that accountability, honesty, and hard work are the most important values one can have. It changed my life by making me realize and accept what my gifts were.

These comments and reflections from students truly tell us what the real goals of higher learning. It is not the college per se, but the type of education a college can provide students that counts.

The reality is that our world is rapidly changing all the time. Higher education institutions must change with it. As we adapt and are intentional about setting goals for 2016 and beyond, we must create learners who will have the capacity to effect great change in the world around them and to appreciate the true and added values of higher education. It is imperative that institutions of higher education be proactive in identifying those challenges, and also in developing strategic plans to cope with and overcome them. To do so, we must ask, “What should the university have in place to help students succeed? How can colleges and universities change students’ lives?” (Pope, 2006). That question must be followed with “How can we ensure that there are action steps in place to make this a reality?” and “Are we preparing students for the workforce?” Many faculties are asking whether the university should be research- or teaching-oriented, because a university’s orientation will affect teaching load, resource allocation, curriculum design, and so on. The author argues that regardless of whether a university is focused on research or teaching, the question that should be addressed is regarding the fundamental mission of higher learning, i.e., whether the university is providing the most meaningful learning environment and experience that it can for its students. It is, fundamentally, the learning process that shall count for the purpose of education.

In an annual report, from a nationwide study of more than 100,000 higher school students, by Eduventures identified seven things students think about when choosing a college. These are: affordability, availability of a desired program, reputation/academic quality, career outcome/job opportunities, value of education for cost, feeling of fit, and proximity to home (Wyllie, 2018). Tony Blair, former prime minister of Great Britain, addressed the Future of State Universities Conference in Dallas, Texas, on November 19, 2012. Blair made a

most insightful statement about the status of higher education:

How do we educate people? Education is absolutely central. There are challenges within the educational system itself. Making change is tough. In education, we really have many difficulties: new structures (new types of school), new ways of working, new skill sets, and new ways of funding, etc. (Blair, 2012, p. 2)

But challenges will also bring new sets of solutions. In other words, universities and colleges must map out strategies to deal and cope with three interrelated aspects of student success in higher education. We must deal with the increasing costs of education attainment. We must find ways to assist students to stay in and finish school, and to assist them with their career plans and to become life-long learners. These strategies are related to the overall reexamination of the learning process, to learning goals, and to the integration of career preparation as part of learning. Table 1 lists areas for strategic planning for each facet in higher education in 2016 and beyond.

Table 1

Challenges and Strategies

Cost (economic, opportunity, & social justice issues)	Learning process and learning goals	Career preparation
Increase affordability Increase access (educational attainment) Reduce student indebtedness Online classes Cost-cutting scholarships Respond to shifting student demographics Create new strategies for recruitment (domestic and international) Respond to shrinking state funding (through privatizing student loans; subsidies from state and federal governments & seeking private funding by working with savvy donors; advancing endowment and philanthropy); Adopt business model. While cutting costs will reduce revenue, higher education has to balance the budget. Align with university's strategic planning (e.g., Vision 2030; Stanford 2015) Increase transferability between universities.	Increase retention (e.g., strengthen academic success programs for students; include financial and classroom performance, personal issues, etc. in student advising) Enrich campus life Reemphasize effective learning Respond to new modes of learning (e.g., MOOCs, Online 1.3, Online 2.0, hybrid model, and competency-based education) Introduce interdisciplinary programs Create a new learning environment to cultivate students to become innovators (applied researchers) Measure learning outcomes—assess progress and learning goals (creativity, critical thinking, adaptability to change, being good citizens with high civic engagement) Connect with the community Internationalize campus (create innovative curricula, create strategic international partnerships, welcome international students) Restructure of faculty role in for-profit in colleges and universities	Meet demands for the future of work (skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global economy) Connect with alumni Assess the value of higher education Increase graduation rates Strengthen career preparation and services for students (e.g., promote industry partnerships to foster career readiness) Prepare for pathways for graduate (advanced) students Contact: Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, lin@uindy.edu

Proactive:

1. Respond to global challenges (economic, political, and social);
2. Respond to diversity (gender, age, and ethnicity) in academe;
3. Respond to quality education and lifelong learning;
4. Respond to workforce development;
5. Respond to emerging business model in higher education;
6. Respond to “innovative disruption” in higher education;
7. Respond to increasing internationalization in universities and colleges;

8. Respond to competitive edge (human, capital, and physical resources).

Challenges:

1. To control increasing college cost;
2. To prepare students with skills to meet future work demands;
3. To be accountable for overall quality education;
4. To increase retention and graduation rates;
5. To maintain sustainable financial paths and growth;
6. To prepare students to become a life-long learners and global citizens.

References

- Blair, T. (2012, November 19). Internationalization of higher education. Presentation at *The Future of State Universities Conference*, Dallas, TX.
- Gardner, L. (2018, January 5). Enrollment in a troubled locale. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A9-10.
- Kelderman, E., & Harris, A. (2018, January 5). What colleges need to know about the tax overhaul. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A24.
- Keller, G. (2014). *Transforming a college*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lin, P. L. (2015, June 5). How to decrease Islam phobia on U.S. campuses? Implications for the future of U.S.—Saudi educational exchanges. Keynote speech presented at *The People to People Association 5th Annual Conference*, Chicago, IL.
- Lin, P. L. (2016a, April). *Megatrends and the future of work*. Presentation made at the National Zhongshang University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.
- Lin, P. L. (2016b, October). Trends of internationalization of higher education in China: Challenges and opportunities. Paper presented at *The International Sino-Foreign Presidents Forum*, Shaoxing, China.
- Pope, L. (2006). *Colleges that change lives*. London: Penguin Books.
- Roth, M. S. (2016, September 30). Barack Obama's imprint on higher education. *The Chronicle Review*, pp. B3-B5.
- Stripling, J. (2016, September 30). Obama's legacy: An unlikely hawk on higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A20-A25.
- Sutton, S. B., & Obst, D. (2011). *Developing strategic international partnerships: Models for initiating and sustaining innovative institutional linkages*. New York, N.Y.: Institute of International Education.
- Wyllie, J. (2018, February 23). The 7 things students think about when choosing a college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A19.