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Cooking Up High Quality AND a Varied Menu

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So many people have opinions about what counts as quality higher education that we need to parse them into categories in order to keep the arguments straight.

With a Dimensions of Quality schema, people could make cleaner arguments and also note when dimensions are interrelated. These Quality Dimensions could include: Content, Pedagogical Strategies (both curricular and co-curricular), Delivery Channel, Delivery Format, Desired Learning Outcomes, Student Progress, and Student Success.



Too many people conflate curriculum content concerns with pedagogical strategies. Too many people believe knowledge and skills have to be acquired separately. And then we hear [arguments that pit teaching seminal readings against using teaching strategies focused on critical thinking and analytical skills](#). Quality education does both.

Too many people assume that education options promoting access for commuter or busy adult students result in lower quality outcomes. They equate “time in class” with learning, and we get arguments implying that convenient delivery channels and accelerated formats produce inherently lower-quality outcomes. Quality education transcends delivery channel and format issues, producing the same learning outcomes through engaged classroom experiences, online channels, and formats that can range from 16 to 8 weeks. Our job when it comes to delivery models is to ensure that concerns for efficiency and access do not overpower concerns for quality. Quality and efficiency can and should co-exist.

Too many people, including [Florida Governor Rick Scott](#), confuse initial job placement with long-term career success. Here we get pushed to focus on and fund academic majors that seem directly linked to occupations at the expense of liberal arts. Quality education — even at the certificate level — creates the program-appropriate blend of liberal arts and professional education to prepare students not just for their first job, but for an unfolding career during which they may change paths multiple times and accept increasingly responsible positions of authority and leadership. Moreover, quality education — at a community college or top-tier program — prepares people not just to be workers, but also to be engaged citizens. It’s part of the social compact of a democratic society — the civil rights issue of our times. It’s about more than jobs. It’s about building careers, changing generations, and ensuring an educated electorate.

And too many people think that quality education happens only at “top-tier” or “highly selective” residential institutions because they spend relatively larger amounts per student and produce high retention and graduation rates, as measured by the traditional 6-year standard. Typically, students at these schools are well prepared for learning. A majority of the students come from advantaged backgrounds and bring in high test scores, as well as AP credits that give them a kick start. In part because these institutions offer low class sizes, they do indeed spend more per student on academic support and engaging programs. It is a recipe for success. And I have proudly been cooking in that kitchen for the last few years.

But I've also been part of academic communities that cooked up success for students in institutions with lower rankings and at institutions that maintain a high ranking while still offering a mix of delivery systems designed to provide access to both traditional and nontraditional students.

Recently, the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) published sobering statistics about who gets access to quality education that we should not ignore. Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl from Georgetown University's [Center on Education and the Workforce](#) explained that "80% of the lowest-income students go to colleges in the bottom half of the postsecondary system." They cite overcrowding at community colleges and lack of resources to provide student support as key reasons for differences in student outcomes.

As long as rankings prevail as important indicators of quality, there will be lower-tier and less-selective institutions. And despite our collective best efforts to expand access to top-tier institutions, there still will likely be an inequitable distribution of low-income students in lower-tier schools for quite some time.

The way I see it, working to provide affordable, convenient, high-quality education for traditional and nontraditional students alike is not a new, daunting problem for higher education — we know the problem well. We know that we simply cannot continue to increase tuition at the top-tier residential colleges, and we cannot tolerate low-quality practices and outcomes from institutions in the lower tiers. We need to be solution-focused.

We need a complex blend of solutions, in part because "quality" is a complicated, multidimensional target. Also, we need to keep in mind that the quality ranking of a top-tier institution is a moot point for those people whose life circumstances simply do not allow them to relocate or become traditional, residential students — but who still strive to earn a degree and the better life it promises.

My point is this: The recipe for quality outcomes needs to produce a menu of access options. And we must collectively ensure that, regardless of where the 21st Century students seek their degrees or certificates, they will get what they deserve — a high-quality educational experience that will transform their life, lay the groundwork for their first job and a long career, prepare them for democratic citizenship, and set a positive trajectory for their family.