(Out of) Focus

David C. Paris

To cite this article: David C. Paris (2020) (Out of) Focus, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 52:1, 4-6, DOI: 10.1080/00091383.2020.1693811

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2020.1693811

Published online: 28 Jan 2020.
In discussions at my and other institutions, there was one question that would frustrate me. It was typically asked in “big picture” discussions, for example about strategic planning. The question was, “What makes us distinctive?” or, worse, “What makes us unique?”

I found it frustrating because it usually produced an abstract, ill-focused discussion, filled with wordplay and wordsmithing. It seemed rather removed from what might be planned or done. As one wag put it with respect to (bad) strategic planning, it was “where the rubber meets the air.” This question or some version of it was, in my mind, wheels up.

On a couple of occasions, I tried to provide a more concrete answer to the question or offer a substitute. In the former case, “What makes us distinctive is that we do what other or even most institutions do, but we do it exceptionally well or better.”

In the latter case, the question might be, “How well do we do what we do for those we serve, and how can we do it better?”

Neither the answer nor the substitute question is perfect. But they shift the focus from who we are to what we do and, more important, whom we serve and how well. They suggest attention to results for the groups that want or need what we can offer and to the results of our efforts with them.

The difficulty with my framing is that there is a potentially huge number of groups, and associated purposes, individual institutions and higher education collectively might serve. We have known this for a long time, perhaps best articulated nearly six decades ago in Clark Kerr’s classic, *The Uses of the University*. Kerr noted that what he called the modern “multiversity” “is an inconsistent institution. It is not one community but several… . Its edges are fuzzy—it reaches out to alumni, legislators, farmers, businessmen, who are all related to [its] internal communities. As an institution, it looks far into the past and far into the future, and it is often at odds with the present. It serves society almost slavishly—a society it often criticizes, sometimes unmercifully.” The result is it “has many publics with many interests.”

Sifting and prioritizing the various possible claims on our time and resources, the groups we can and should serve, and how we can assess how well we meet needs can be daunting. But I would suggest pursuing this kind of focus is desirable and too often missing from discussions of institutional distinctiveness and identity.

The articles in this issue illustrate a range of such purposes and clients and how we might serve them better. Perhaps the best example of clarity of focus is the article by Cheryl Crazy Bull, president and chief executive officer of the American Indian College Fund and her colleagues—all leaders of tribal colleges or universities (TCUs)—Cynthia Lindquist, Ray Burns, Laurel Vermillion, and Leander “Russ” McDonald. The four case studies illustrate a common mission in “two categories: support for revitalization of culture and identity, and support for individual and tribal self-determination. The vision of the founders of tribally controlled institutions was to provide Native people with access to higher education while recognizing the critical importance of preserving and teaching their tribal knowledge, cultures, and traditions.” These institutions pursue this dual mission in various ways: “culturally competent health and wellness programming, economic revitalization, workforce development, language restoration, community capacity building, and tribal governance.” But all are strongly and deeply rooted, “place-based.” “TCUs are the places where tribal nation-building occurs through the offering of academic and continuing education programming that aligns with tribal economic and governance priorities and cultural values.”

Although most institutions do not have a similarly clear student
demographic and place-based focus, they can be clearer about how to serve particular groups within and across institutions; this is well illustrated by two articles. First, the “Playing the Numbers” feature by Gina Johnson and Sara Appel discusses the “900,000 military-connected students enrolled in higher education in the United States.” “Military-connected” is a broader category than veterans, including “students with a current or prior connection to the military, including dependents and spouses, and also refers to members of the National Guard, reservists, active duty personnel, and veterans” who are eligible for financial support. Johnson and Appel provide data “on rates of completion, time to degree, major, and engagement.” They note that these students are successful in comparison to their peers but are somewhat less likely to be engaged with their institutions. The authors suggest that colleges and universities might better serve military-connected students in this regard by accessing “a variety of resources from organizations focused on this population,” such as the Student Veterans of America.

An even larger group of students who have too often not been well served across institutions are those who transfer. As is now familiar, too often credits do not transfer, and students lose time to degree or, worse, exhaust their financial support. As Jane Sherman and Pat Shea’s cover article points out, while many states have tried “tweaks to old systems, promising to incrementally improve the process” of two–four-year transfer, few have had broad success, and these efforts have not typically addressed either the students who transfer across states or “the 47% of transfer students who move from one 4-year institution to another.” For the last eight years, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education has been spearheading the development of an “Interstate Passport Network.” Network member institutions across states agree to accept “block transfer of lower-division general education attainment based on student learning outcomes rather than on specific courses and credits.” This “mega-articulation agreement” has already granted 35,000 passports, and it shows great potential as “a solution—for our nation’s collective pool of transfer students.”

In serving the groups and purposes we choose, we need to have structures and processes that support the work, that help us think about and evaluate what we do. Three articles in the issue suggest broader and narrower ways this might be accomplished. The first, the cover article by Susan Elrod, Lorne Whitehead, and Mary Taylor Huber, is the broadest. They call for recognition of “the scholarship of mission” (SOM), “scholarly work that improves institutional effectiveness in benefitting society.” They note, “SOM itself is not new—it is a new name for a time-honored, if under-appreciated, form of valuable scholarly research.” SOM meets the criteria for scholarly research, as Elrod et al. show with an example of “the recent development of data analytics tools for identifying ‘at risk’ students to help improve their chances of success”; this research serves the institutional and social goals of diversity and equity. “SOM projects build understanding for improved operations within institutions and consequently much better fulfillment of their missions” and deserve recognition and support.

A second article, by Bret Danilowicz, Rebecca Judge, Janet Hanson, Sherri Hughes, and Lori Sundberg, examines the processes for dealing with budget issues and budget-driven program review specifically. Because “campus leaders are increasingly linking academic program funding to student demand and institutional net revenues,” they argue, institutions need to think about how “to formalize a process that links budget to the academic performance of units.” Based on their experiences, they offer a 2 × 2 typology of “locus of responsibility” (central administration/academic units) and “time dependency” (annual/episodic as a way of thinking about budget-based program review). Although there are trade-offs across the options (e.g., buy-in vs. possibility of significant structural change), Danilowicz and his coauthors argue “that linking program reviews to annual budgeting before crises emerge promotes a more mission-aligned process with higher buy-in among stakeholders.” They also offer specific “recommendations for starting a budget-linked program review”
Concerning administrative communication and alignment (e.g., with timelines, training, accountability) to “create an effective and nimble budgeting system that promise to enhance effectiveness … and efficiency.”

Similarly, the article by Deborah Carlisle and Gabriela Weaver has an internal focus on effectiveness, in this case with respect to STEM education. They note the growing numbers of STEM Education Centers (SECs) seeking “to strengthen their undergraduate programs, as well as their pipeline.” Based on 12 site visits and a national survey, they note the complementarity and overlap of SECs with more traditional Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs). The SECs play a more disruptive role to help institutions “realize potential in previously unexplored opportunities—a form of disruption within the institutional norms of higher education.” The CTLs, on the other hand, “stabilize innovations in teaching and learning in ways that align with traditional measures of quality.” They describe how these different centers work across several areas: STEM education research and scholarship; use of data and resource allocation programs; and services. Overall, “Our research allowed us to identify mechanisms through which SECs and CTLs can bring balance to reform efforts and in so doing strengthen each other’s overall impact.”

In figuring out whom higher education serves and for what purposes, two broad, ongoing issues have been particularly fraught and are the subject of the other two articles in this issue. The first is the relationship of higher education to the workforce. Matthew Hora and his students (Rena Yehuda Newman, Robert Hemp, Jasmine Brandon, and Yi-Jung Wu) in a course he taught decided to write a collective paper on the “employability discourse.” The discourse reflects several popular assumptions about skills, higher education, and the market such as “employability [is] a simple matter of enterprising college students having the ‘grit’ and initiative to acquire in-demand skills,” that soft skills are “easy to teach and learn,” and “well-paying jobs and social mobility will be awarded exclusively on the basis of merit and diligence.” These and other assumptions, they note, are “contradicted by ample evidence of the critical roles that labor market structure, hiring discrimination, personal circumstances, social connections, and economic trends play in determining whether or not someone can get a job.” Hora and his coauthors argue that we should reject the employability discourse, and they offer recommendations that focus “on social change and students’ long-term well-being.”

The other fraught issue is “political correctness”—the ongoing claims, among others, that the left-leaning professorate is indoctrinating students and that colleges and universities have become institutional allies of the Democratic Party. Robert Maranto, a “known Republican,” suggests that the empirical evidence is more mixed than this indictment and academic defenders’ replies suggest. He discusses how “higher education’s relative political homogeneity affects undergraduates (seemingly far less than Fox News claims) and how it affects conservative faculty in particular and faculty research generally (considerably).” In the former category, he argues, “If professors do try to indoctrinate students, they do not seem very good at it” (emphasis in original). Maranto is far more concerned about “the lack of ideological representation among higher education faculty [that] is empirically far easier to establish and likely of far greater importance.” Hiring decisions and journal reviews too often involve political bias, and conservative academics too often feel isolated, even closeted. Maranto offers several suggestions regarding free expression on campus and the role of professional associations in developing a “more ideologically diverse higher education sector [that] would make for better teaching and a more stimulating intellectual environment overall.”

These articles illustrate that higher education, in Kerr’s words above, “has many publics with many interests.” The concept of focus allows us to repeatedly, well, focus on who we serve (e.g., military-connected students) and/or to what purpose (e.g., “employability”). Kerr’s multiversity has, if anything, become more exposed to a range of demands and heightened public scrutiny, and these demands are, in Kerr’s words then and no less true now, “rooted in the logic of history … an imperative rather than a reasoned choice among elegant alternatives.” At the same time, these articles suggest a variety of research, programs, and policies that help us focus on and meet the needs and demands of society.

—David C. Paris