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# Our Universities: Demographic Shift

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## Our Universities: Demographic Shift

The changing nature of students, their interests and abilities, requires that our universities change too. While they do, we must remember the attributes of learning and insight, and the abilities and skills that make the university valuable to all change little, it all. Universities help create cause in students, not effect.

*An explanation of cause is not a justification by reason.*

C. S. Lewis

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The January 2013 report from the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, "*Knocking At the Door: A Projection of High School Graduates*," contains clarifying revelations. The number of blacks and whites finishing high school will decrease in the near future as the number of Asian Americans/Pacific Islander and Latino graduates will increase. Like a tsunami.

Additionally, over the next few years there will be a reduction in the total number of high school graduates produced until the numbers stabilize at around 3.3 million nationally according to Ronald Roche of *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* in the January 17, 2013 edition.

Some states are particularly challenged. In Wisconsin two-year enrollments are down. University leaders and state policymakers suggest these realities are due to a 6.3% decline in Wisconsin high school graduates projected from the year 2010 to 2015, according to a story in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel last October.

The diminishing number of students available to attend universities and the nature of their backgrounds, expectations, and aspirations exacerbate a continuing decrease in university budgets through lower tuition revenue. Cost increases for everything from faculty to football push the prospects of college out of the reach for new and different cadres of students.

Universities have two options. Bend or break.

Bob Lay, Dean for Enrollment Management at Boston College, suggested that with this shift in demographics produces a larger number of students from less affluent families where college study has not been the norm. These recent high school graduates participate with less family experience, understanding and support. Yet, increasing expectations and believed benefits of the university experience abound creating unrealistic expectations for student and institution alike.

Universities will stand and deliver; or lie down and die.

Dean Lay also suggested that *"The notion that we are merely gatekeepers for our institutions has thankfully faded in the minds of current leaders in higher education."* His optimism is admirable, but many institutions continue to move too slowly towards a revitalized approach to university life in response to a markedly different group of students.

False hope in the power of distance learning and online instruction to provide a high-quality university experience shifting from classroom to digital experience will fall short. It is effect not cause. The new demographic, like the old demographic, wants contact with interested professionals who take tutelage seriously.

Most freshman classes at state universities are now more representative of the population they serve than at any time in history. This is great news. However the graduating classes revert back to the same old look, with the shifted demographic holding the bag, but not graduating. Hopes die: debt thrives. Access is encouraged and rewarded with cheap loans, but success is locked up in after-school detention.

It is better not to accept a student unprepared and live in the deceit that they will complete a worthwhile program than to take in a person with the lowest likelihood of graduation. William Powers, president at the University of Texas suggested many of the students are fully capable, but have not been challenged, nurtured, or tutored in a way that allows them to be successful. He packages the problem crisply, *"Often, they may have gone to a high school where they didn't have a calculus class or advanced placement classes. The challenges are also financial and what I call cultural. They might be away from home, and they don't have parents and aunts and uncles who have already been here."*

The times are tough for many universities...but will get tougher yet. Little relief is in sight for universities unwilling to simultaneously hold onto the traditional values of the university experience, enlightened teaching and engaged faculty and staff, while also looking at alternative methods to reduce the total costs and increase the effectiveness of the university experience.

Requiring all students to participate in some form of either low- or no-cost distance education, encouraging students to begin at a community college and reducing costs and scouring out ineffectiveness are all valuable considerations, but none a panacea in isolation.

These actions and others help to address the dramatic demographic shift and the escalation of the expectations that comes with it. At our universities academic leadership that understands cause is required.