When I last wrote for About Campus, in the May/June issue, Volume 20, Number 2, I observed the anxious state of our students. I referred to reports in publications such as The New York Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education, and quoted Daniel Smith that “recent studies have found that, among college students, neuroticism levels have increased by as much as 20 percent,” and the demands placed on campus mental health services have grown dramatically in recent years. A lack of faith in the future—and confidence in one’s ability to meet its challenges—seems more pervasive among current college students than I can ever recall during my more than 30 years as a student affairs administrator. Almost a year has passed since I shared these observations, and seniors still seem anxious to me. I continued to ruminate on this topic, but the more I think about it, the more I realize it is not just our seniors who are anxious, but it is the academy as a whole.

It does seem as if higher education is under siege, and the anxiety that higher education is experiencing is likely directly related to this. Consider Steve Cohen’s apocalyptic statement from the web version of his recent Time magazine article: “Colleges are facing a perfect storm that could shutter hundreds of them and leave many more wondering how to survive. Yet much of higher education’s leadership is in denial that anything is amiss.”

This article articulates three reasons for this “perfect storm”—“soaring tuitions, technological disruption, and parent dissatisfaction.” In my view, there are many sources for the more general anxiety that is afflicting higher education, some of which emanate from within, and some of which that are being imposed upon from outside the higher education.

Internally, signs of the impending apocalypse abound. Consider the vantage point of full-time faculty members, who fear their ranks are dwindling as an army of adjuncts barely piecing together a livelihood is at the ready to supplant them. Add to that the decreasing percentage of untenured faculty in tenure track positions, and we have a formula for unease.

Then there is all of the commotion about massive open online courses (MOOCS). Although their widespread adoption seems more unlikely with each passing day, they nonetheless threaten to multiply the reach of individual instructors exponentially, and, given their size, thereby reduce the overall need for more faculty. The less need for faculty—the more anxiety.

Staffing trends are one source of anxiety for the faculty; their students are, of course, another. Some faculty lament that the students with whom they have been entrusted often lack a foundation for higher learning. Other students do have the requisite skills but expect to obtain, rather than earn, their diplomas without great effort, quid pro quo, in exchange for their tuition and fees.
Students’ parents are a cause of faculty anxiety, too. Student engagement in their learning may not be what it once was (at least compared to the rose-colored memories that critics like Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa describe in their 2011 book *Academically Adrift*), but parental intervention certainly has skyrocketed. It is not uncommon for some parents today to proofread their students’ academic papers, or to insert themselves in other ways into the teaching and learning process, which does little to support student development, abets student independence, and frustrates faculty members.

William Bowen and Eugene Tobin have written about how the diminished potency of faculty governance is also a cause of faculty concern, as, to the long-time faculty member, institutions seem to be managed more and more by administrative fiat and less through shared governance. Even worse to them, the “corporatization” of higher education depicted by such authors as Ellen Schrecker in *The Lost Soul of Higher Education* and Joel Westheimer in *Higher Education or Education for Hire?* has allegedly transformed the academy into something more akin to a business than an educational entity, with disheartening consequences.

That is just the perspective from campus. From off campus, the academy has been barraged with an onslaught of criticism, and higher education has become an easy target for the media and the politician. We hear and read that the higher education “bubble” will soon burst, just like the housing bubble whose burst contributed to the Great Recession, and that a great upheaval is coming. We hear and read that our institutions have reached a tipping point in terms of affordability. President Obama has proposed that higher education be free, at least for community college students; Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has proposed that both two- and four-year public college educations be free for all. Some employers tell us that our graduates’ degrees are indeed already not worth much, and that graduates lack workplace-ready skills.

At the state level, funding for higher education has not been restored to pre-recession levels, according to Michael Mitchell, Vincent Palacios, and Michael Leachman, and there is little reason to think that it will ever be. If a policy maker does support higher education, it is likely for its potential for economic development rather than for less obvious utilitarian functions such as the development of one’s creative talents and social skills that we have long considered part of a well-rounded college experience.

In the wake of diminished resources—the result of budget cuts by said office-holders—institutions have eliminated programs that are deemed not to be practically oriented (like Latin at the University of Maine), adding to faculty apprehension. In some cases, funding reductions have been a catalyst for externally imposed institutional mergers (Paul Fein describes one instance of in his article “Major Mergers in Georgia”), and some colleges and universities have had their identities completely subsumed by the stronger partner. Anxiety mounts.

One might think that less government funding would be accompanied by less government regulation; however, while states have been cutting their allocations for higher education, they have simultaneously been handing down pages and pages of government mandates. Recent news reports about the Task Force on Federal Regulation of Higher Education revealed both the psychic and financial burdens of increasing governmental oversight. For instance, as cited in a recent *Washington Post* article by Nick Anderson, Vanderbilt University estimates that it spends $14 million a year to comply with federal higher education regulations. Such regulations, along with their inherent deadlines and audits, are yet another source of institutional anxiety.

Many states have jumped on the performance funding bandwagon, although, as Allie Bidwell highlighted in *U.S. News and World Report*, there is little to no evidence to show that performance funding actually improves the educational experience. Performance funding breeds institutional competition, which in turn makes institutional leaders even more anxious.

State disinvestment in higher education, coupled with greater state and federal regulation of higher education, is, for the most part, a quite recent phenomenon. Once upon a time, campuses were, by design, removed from the raucous cities and bustling towns from which they sprung. Monasteries were sanctuaries by intent, so too were the early American women’s colleges. Isolation was part of the appeal of these institutions, and considerable effort ensured that the outside world did not intrude on academic life. Moreover, there was little political and media interest in higher education, and the geographic isolation of colleges and universities was compounded by a general lack of interest in higher education by the non-college going public. In the current era of mass higher

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education and digital higher education, the boundaries between college and community have been, for the most part, eliminated. Higher education has captured the attention of the mass media and of political office holders with aspirations for higher profiles. One consequence of the removal of the old boundaries is greater institutional anxiety.

Other bedrock institutions in American society have also been buffeted by the winds of social change. In *Haven in a Heartless World*, Christopher Lasch asked, “Does the family still provide a haven in a heartless world? Or do the very storms out of which the need for such a haven arises threaten to engulf the family as well?” (xiii). Today, one might be inclined to ask if the college or university experience can provide a haven in an anxious world, or if colleges and universities are destined to do nothing more than reflect and fuel the disquietude that “threaten(s) to engulf” them.

Lasch opined, “The sanctity of the home is a sham in a world dominated by giant corporations and by the apparatus of mass promotion” (xvii). Could the same be said today of the sanctity of the college and university?

For me, this set of circumstances begs the following questions:

- What are the costs and benefits of striving to restore more of a sense of isolation and respite from the rigors of daily life on our college and university campuses?
- If the benefits are determined to outweigh the costs, is it desirable from an educational perspective to create more distance between our campuses and the so-called real world?
- If this is deemed as desirable, is it at all attainable?

In order for policy makers and the public alike to be able to answer these questions accurately, considerable effort must be devoted to establishing a mutually acceptable understanding of the social purposes of higher learning.

In order for policy makers and the public alike to be able to answer these questions accurately, considerable effort must be devoted to establishing a mutually acceptable understanding of the social purposes of higher learning. In this context, the most pressing imperative confronting the higher education community is to bridge the gulf in understanding the purposes of higher education that separates the policy makers, who determine higher education funding, and what the women and men who lead the campuses and systems understand those purposes to be.

Understanding breeds trust. The realization of a more complex understanding of the multiple purposes of higher education as both a public and a private good could, in time, lead to a greater appreciation for how higher education is conceived and administered. Without such an understanding, it is doubtful that the anxiety higher education is experiencing will be alleviated in the foreseeable future—anxiety which is ultimately about the role of higher education in 21st century America.

Simultaneously, I would suggest that it is the responsibility of the higher education community to cultivate, out of a more common understanding of the purposes of higher education, sustained rapport between higher education’s leaders and business and political leaders. Often those of us in higher education approach these influential leaders and decision makers not necessarily because of what they think, but in the hope that they will open their coffers to us for special projects or new initiatives. Genuine rapport requires more than lobbying by one party or accommodation by the other. It involves caring about what others are thinking. All too frequently, in my view, the higher education community does not earnestly care about what others outside of the academy are thinking about it. Genuine rapport flows from genuine caring and fosters honest and open dialogue, not posing nor posturing. In the absence of genuine rapport, institutions of higher education become faceless, cartoonish conglomerates subject to simplistic “us against them” portrayals.

The development of a mutually supportive, genuine rapport will likely not occur unless higher education also strives to fix the persistent misperception that there is a great difference between what employers state they are seeking in college graduates and the skills that recent college graduates actually demonstrate in the workplace. The Association of American Colleges and Universities and Hart Research Associates’ survey of employers
conducted in 2013 demonstrated quite clearly that employers’ priorities for college student learning are in fact very much in sync with the kinds of general capacities and skills colleges and universities purport to foster, such as critical thinking, complex problem-solving, and written and oral communication skills.

Eventually, albeit counterintuitively, I would hope that increased interaction, greater shared understanding of the purposes of higher education and the needs of employers, and the development of authentic rapport will enable our colleges and universities to recreate, in some ways, the buffer that previously existed between campus and commerce, between academe and the political arena, and provide a “haven” for the development of the skills that we, together, believe will lead to enriched lives and an enhanced society. All of this, in my view, could contribute to lessening the levels of anxiety that American higher education is currently experiencing.

In my last piece, I asserted that we could allay our seniors’ anxiety through our own placid and assuring behavior. Allaying the anxiety of our colleagues and institutions, to the extent that it is possible, will require something considerably more intentional and less insular. Is the academy up to this challenge?

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