Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series

Tertiary Education Systems and Diversification: Adapting the Wisdom of Burton Clark to the World Bank's Support for Effective and Inclusive Reforms

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Working paper no. 65 May 2021



Published by the Centre for Global Higher Education, Department of Education, University of Oxford 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY www.researchcghe.org

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ISSN 2398-564X

The Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) is an international research centre focused on higher education and its future development. Our research aims to inform and improve higher education policy and practice.

CGHE is a research partnership of 10 UK and international universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, with support from Office for Students and Research England.

Tertiary Education Systems and Diversification: Adapting the Wisdom of Burton Clark to the World Bank's Support for Effective and Inclusive Reforms

(2021 Burton R Clark lecture on higher education transcript¹)

Roberta Malee Bassett

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¹ This is a transcript of the 2021 Burton R Clark lecture on higher education that Roberta Malee Bassett planned to give at the sixth annual conference of the Centre for Global Higher Education, held online on 11-12 May 2021.

Abstract

This talk will focus on tertiary education systems, the holistic whole that encompasses all formal post-secondary education, and it is in large measure because of Burton Clark and his peers that we have the foundations upon which to build tertiary education systems that can serve the evolving and fickle expectations of society. Rarely does global research (or even do global conferences) on higher education focus on whole tertiary systems and the breadth of institutions and stakeholders and missions that are captured in a well-developed system. Research universities generally dominate the discourse on higher education: world-class universities, ranked universities, prestigious universities. But, globally, researchintensive universities are the exception and not the norm in their educational ecosystems. Most universities outside the wealthiest countries do not conduct extensive research and are not staffed by research-focused academics, and most students globally attend teaching-focused institutions. The well-developed tertiary education system is a symbiotic and organic network of diverse institutions, with complementary but distinct missions, populations, and expected outcomes. As a policy advisor, I approach this discourse from a macro-perspective-independent of institutions and governments—and that perspective will frame this lecture, which is centered on the theme of this conference—Remaking higher education for a more equal world. It is structured in four parts, all of which, to varying degrees, utilize the wisdom of Burton Clark as conceptual frameworks.

Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the late Adele Clark, the wife of the late Burton Clark for supporting this series of annual lectures on higher education.

Disclaimer: The ideas and opinions in this lecture belong to Roberta Malee Bassett and do not represent an official position of the World Bank.

First, I have to express my thanks to Claire and Simon for extending this invitation to me—I'm an unorthodox selection for an academic lecture series of such renown in our field. Bringing a non-academic to deliver a keynote lecture might be seen as a bit risky. So, I will do my best to do justice to their faith in my ability to bring an unexpected perspective to this illustrious and important event.

I also wish to give special thanks to Adele Clark for supporting this series of annual lectures on higher education as an important global enterprise. I have no doubt the depth of Mrs Clark's knowledge of higher education would rival that of anyone participating today. Much like Dr. Edith Altbach, the wife of my mentor and dear friend Phil Altbach, Adele Clark played an instrumental role in editing and critiquing the work of her husband, and the proof of her wisdom is in the pudding, as they say. Bob Clark's works on higher education endure as foundational knowledge pieces in our field.

This talk will mainly focus on tertiary education systems, the holistic whole that encompasses all formal post-secondary education, and it is in large measure because of Burton Clark and his peers that we have the foundations upon which to build tertiary education systems that can serve the evolving and fickle expectations of society. As a policy advisor, I come at this discourse from a macro-perspective independent of institutions and governments—and that perspective will frame my lecture, which is centered on the theme of this conference—Remaking higher education for a more equal world. It is structured in four parts, all of which, to varying degrees, utilize the wisdom of Burton Clark as conceptual frameworks.

I will first contextualize the impact of higher education on the individual by briefly describing my own experience, in which higher education has been the most transformative and consistently present element of my life to date.

Next, I will shift the discussion from the individual to the system level and feature elements of the upcoming World Bank position paper on tertiary education, which aims to offer policy practitioners a framework for steering their tertiary education sectors through these uncertain times.

Part 3 will illustrate the application of the World Bank's framework to global higher education today, as a result of COVID-19 and the changes brought by rapid adaptation to nearly catastrophic disruption and in spite of these COVID-19 impacts; and Part 4 will close with some brief ideas on the signal—what higher education should be doing as drivers of equity—and the noise—all the rhetoric and historical baggage and political posturing—regarding what's coming for global higher education.

I will begin my lecture today with a bit of background, to frame both my presence here and the context of the World Bank's effort to be a force for positive and sustainable and equitable reforms in global higher education.

A bit about me, then, and the path that brought me to a long (and this Covid year has felt like a dog year, for sure) and incredibly fulfilling career in international higher education. I have to start by mentioning my parents, oddly enough. My mother is from Thailand and met my father while he was stationed there during the Vietnam War. They married, and my mom reluctantly emigrated from Thailand to the United States, where I was born and raised: I am a biracial daughter of an immigrant mother from a country she revered. Neither of my parents had attended university, and the town where I was raised was overwhelmingly white and working class. These are the characteristics most crucial to understanding the road I've traveled.

For as long as I can remember, I dreamed and prepared for an international life. Whether that was to take me back to what I considered my homeland (Thailand) or to become a diplomat (my career goal in my high school yearbook), I never doubted I would do something global. I suspect for many people tuning in today—no matter your country of origin or socioeconomic background—this was true for you, too. I also had a very stereotypical "tiger" mom, for whom top grades and commitment to education were everything. And a dad who backed her up but softened the edges. I was a very lucky kid.

So, I took all of these bits and pieces and found my way to an Ivy League university which guaranteed need-based financial aid, marking the first moment when a higher

education policy gave me access to a life changing tool. Columbia University gave me an education that far exceeded what I had imagined and the social capital to make the most it, and the transformative power of higher education was cemented into my core values—I am one example of social mobility the promise of higher education is meant to deliver, and I am aware of this every day.

At Stanford University, I studied for a Master's in higher education, and the anecdote of that choice offers a snapshot of the slow but steady evolution of the field of international higher education. In the mid-1990s, there were very few places to study higher education in an international context. Stanford was <u>not</u> one of them. When I submitted my application to the education school, I wrote that I wished to enroll in the international education and higher education programs in some hybrid form. Shortly after sending in my application, I received a call from Jim Lyons, the legendary former dean of students at Stanford and at that time the director of Stanford's higher education program. He told me I would have to choose, and he hoped I would pick higher education and bring an international perspective to the program. Anyone who has ever met Jim Lyons would know that the inevitable occurred—of course I chose the higher education program, where I interned in the Bechtel International Center. I was on my way to bringing international into my higher education work.

I graduated from Stanford and worked as an assistant dean there for five years, in student affairs and administration—learning the ins and outs of how a major university was run, amazed at the complexity and the assumptions made about what it takes to educate and build research, and create a learning community. I was hooked—universities are such special places. Who wouldn't want to spend every day around brilliant minds and excited students and libraries and arts centers? I still get excited walking onto campuses these many years later. There's nothing like the atmosphere of a university campus. But, international higher education continued to call, and eventually I moved east, to work and study at Boston College's Center for International Higher Education with Phil Altbach, who, when I finished my PhD, introduced me to Jamil Salmi at the World Bank. For the third time, my educational choice changed my life direction, adding the next link in the chain that has brought me where I am today.

I tell this story because for me, my life anecdote encapsulates much of what we hope higher education will do—expand horizons, open up opportunities, create lifelong connections and networks, build confidence, and lead to well-paying and rewarding careers. If it's not already pretty clear—I just love higher education, and I know how lucky I am to be in a position to help others improve it, benefit from it, be a part of it, and maybe love it a little bit, too.

The World of Higher Education/Higher Education in the World

With each passing decade a modern or modernizing system of higher education is expected and inspired to do more for other portions of society, organized and unorganized, from strengthening the economy and invigorating government, to developing individual talents and personalities and aiding the pursuit of happiness. We also ask that this sector of society do more in its own behalf in fulfilling such grand and expanding missions as conserving the cultural heritage and producing knowledge. This steady accretion of realistic expectations cannot be stopped, let alone reversed. (B. Clark, 1987)².

Last year, roughly 222 million students were enrolled in formal post-secondary education around the world, more than doubling the 100 million student enrolment figure from 2000. It is estimated that there will be 377.4 million students by 2030, an increase of 281 percent over the 30 years from 2000 to 2030, surpassing the growth between 1970 and 2000.³ This growth can be attributed to many factors, including expanded access programs, an increase in the number of providers (both public and private), and greater information on the benefits of achieving post-secondary education, but the simplest answer to the question of why are we seeing such growth is that more students than ever are moving through the education pipeline—from primary to secondary and to graduation. More students than ever are prepared to continue their studies after secondary education.

² Clark, B.R. (1987). The Problem of Complexity in Modern Higher Education. Working Paper No. 9. <u>https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED288415.pdf</u>

³ Calderon, A. 2018. *Massification of Higher Education Revisited*. Melbourne: RMIT University, June. <u>https://www.academia.edu/36975860/Massification_of_higher_education_revisited</u>.

Almost three-quarters of the expected global growth for the population aged 18–23 from 2015 to 2035 will be concentrated in 10 countries: Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, and Tanzania.⁴ With so much of this growth set to occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is an even greater imperative to expand investments and opportunities in the tertiary sectors across the region, to maximize the relevant outcomes advanced skills and research bring to individuals and societies. Rapid and continuing youth population growth presents a stark challenge for all the aforementioned countries and, genuinely, all governments and tertiary education institutions (TEIs) around the world, particularly in their ability to anticipate and respond to social, political, and economic needs in the decades to come. Promoting tertiary education as a means of addressing key strategic and policy imperatives requires ensuring that tertiary education is suitable for and adaptable to local and global needs.

Within this context of massive growth and the pressures faced by every government to build a knowledge society to contribute toward—and benefit from—the global knowledge economy, the World Bank continues to refine its frameworks for advising countries on how to assess their sectors and design and invest in reforms.

Some data about the World Bank's work in tertiary education

Since 2015, the Bank has funded more than US\$9 billion in investments in tertiary education reforms, making us the largest external financial supporter of the sector globally. We divide our operations across 6 regions (Africa; East Asia; Europe and Central Asia; Latin American and the Caribbean; the Middle East and North Africa; and South Asia), and the majority of our tertiary education lending has been to countries in Africa (29%), Europe and Central Asia (22%), and South Asia (12%) since 2015. Our lending activities are client-driven, in that we only develop projects at the request of and in partnership with the borrowing country. We work primarily with governments at the national level—technically with Ministries of

⁴ Ibid 2018.

Education/Higher Education/Science and Technology/Agriculture, etc., and financially with Ministries of Finance. Very often, analytical work precedes a lending project, by digging deeply into the qualitative and quantitative data of the sector and the national context, to determine the more appropriate intervention to design solutions to the problem at hand or the questions being asked. World Bank projects are structured around a simple and measurable development objective and implemented by the countries themselves with technical support and project monitoring provided by the World Bank, typically for a duration of 5-6 years. (This is obviously a tight simplification of a very complex project process, but I am happy to answer questions on this either after the talk or via an email or follow-up.)

We have been working on a position paper at the Bank to provide a simple guide for both internal and client dialogues on how to focus their reform efforts, broken into five main categories: *a strategic systems approach, equity, resilience effectiveness, and technology*. In keeping with the theme of this conference, I will focus on the first three.

Strategically designed systems as engines of equity

...Systems slide over the long-run... along the track of elite to mass participation (even if some do not slide very well and stall at minor inclines), relating to more heterogeneous clienteles as they include more students drawn from more segments of the population. Input demands multiply, extending the tasks of teaching and increasing the congruences that must be fashioned if individual desires and institutional capabilities are to mesh. (B Clark, 1987, p. 2)

As Bob Clark noted many years ago, tertiary systems are in constant motion adapting and evolving to changes in their environment and their clientele. A strategically diversified and flexible tertiary education system is vital for creating the variety of interwoven pathways crucial to meeting the needs of society. An indispensable tool for expanded access and effective learning is the creation and strengthening of a range of postsecondary institutions such as community colleges, polytechnic institutions, and technical training institutions—with public and private; online and in person; short-course, certification, and full-degree options—all of which are part of one single ecosystem, together with universities.

Tertiary education systems are characterized and distinguished in multiple ways, including:

- By the issues these systems try to address, such as access and equity, employability, innovation, and the role universities play in regional development
- By the diversity of mission (the balance between teaching and research, the student populations they serve, their relationship with their local community and labour market, etc) and forms of institutional delivery, serving the complex needs of complex societies
- By the roles of different actors such as learners, academics, higher education institutions, ministries, and families
- By key instruments like governance and management, financing, and quality assurance
- Through the application of distinct tools and the extent to which they endorse (and drive) new technologies.

For students and scholars in North America, this model is pretty familiar, having been in place for more than 100 years in some states and provinces/territories. In other countries, the presence and respect for non-university tertiary institutions such as Polytechnics, further education colleges, and training institutes also signify comfort with diversity in the post-secondary sector. Students of all ages and levels of preparation have an access point to continue their education within this diverse ecosystem of post-secondary opportunities. For much of the world, however, non-university tertiary education is still minimally developed. And everywhere in the world, there are value judgements made regarding the credentials provided by non-university TEIs.

Changing how cultures value non-university post-secondary learning will be as vital as improving financing and strategic leadership and planning. There is no doubt, however, that this move must take place, to absorb the students seeking postsecondary learning and credentials and ensure that the outcomes from that learning are relevant and sustained for the broadest cohort of student and the diverse needs of society. Such diversity of stakeholders and outcomes leads to the next key focus of this talk, equity.

Committing to EQUITY

A national valuation of social justice—fair treatment for all—is pressed upon modern academic systems as a set of issues of equality and equity, first *for* students and second *by* faculty, other staff, enterprises, and sectors *for themselves*. With respect to students, equality is taken to consist, in ascending order of stringency, of equality of opportunity in the sense of access, equality of opportunity in the sense of treatment once admitted, and equality of outcome or reward. (B Clark, 1983⁵)

To date, tertiary education expansion has not meant equitable access, even in diversified systems. When systems expand access, the immediate beneficiaries have come from the upper socio-economic groups (and globally, expansion has occurred in the wealthiest countries). More than anything, these first waves of increased access have largely been a case of finding study places for students who would have been unable to access tertiary education due to a lack of space not a lack of preparation or connections. And while students from all economic quintiles have been accessing tertiary education in greater numbers—all boats are being lifted as it were, but some boats are just bigger than others—this predominance of enrolment by the wealthier quintiles, in global and local terms, can actually be seen as having expanded the equity gap instead of closing it.

⁵ Clark, BR (1983). The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

For policy interventions to work effectively, not only to expand overall numbers but in purposefully closing the equity gap, issues of equity and inclusion must be addressed across three key vertical dimensions: access and enrollment, retention/persistence, and completion and successful transition to postgraduate engagement (for example, further studies, employment, and entrepreneurial activities). In terms of Access, examples of measures that have proven effective include: outreach programs of information and financial support targeted toward high achievers from disadvantaged groups from an early age and well before upper secondary; better and more easily accessible information on study options, career prospects, and earning potential; fair and equitable selection and admission procedures; better links between admission and the needs of students and the labor market; and low costs of changing study paths later on strong collaboration among schools⁶. Retention and creating effective learning environments for at-risk students can be addressed through interventions such as remedial opportunities for students admitted based on potential but lacking in the preparatory development and skills to succeed in the intensity of postsecondary education, expanded information sharing and outreach from the earliest stages of education; accessibility of premises and learning materials; flexibility of provision; bridge programs; adaptation of course design; academic and psychosocial guidance, learning laboratories, and tutoring to support extracurricular academic development; and counseling and targeted financial support.

Horizontal equity considerations (i.e. distribution of students across the breadth of academic fields and institutions) must also anchor interventions designed to expand opportunities for all who wish to access them and promote the outcomes sought by graduates, particularly with regard to labor market outcomes that can be evaluated

Herbaut E., and Geven, K. (2019). What Works to Reduce Inequalities in Higher Education? A Systematic Review of the (Quasi-)Experimental Literature on Outreach and Financial Aid. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

⁶ European Commission. 2017. *Study on the Impact of Admission Systems on Higher Education Outcomes. Volume I: Comparative Report.* Brussels: European Commission; and

https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31497/WPS8802.pdf?sequence=4&isAl lowed=y

and understood via tools such as graduate tracer studies and labor market forecasting efforts. Equity policies must consider not just improvements in the number of enrolled students but must also promote access to every possible field of study, especially those most valued by the job market, and support all students toward completing their degree programs.

Resilience for EQUITY

The transition to online delivery of teaching and learning exacerbated existing equity concerns and introduced new ones. Tertiary education students who did not have access to adequate resources were confronted by a "digital divide," which worsened existing inequalities. Tertiary education systems in some regions were more successful than others in the transition. It is worth noting, however, that internet access is only one consideration in mitigating disparities in online delivery. Reliability, speed, and affordability are critical factors for a virtual academic experience, among many others, and organizations have voiced their concerns about the online transition. The African University Association signaled that, among the 700 universities operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, very few were well-prepared and sufficiently equipped to deliver their programs online.⁷ Connectivity remains an issue, and in some countries of the region governments have difficulties guaranteeing continuity in power supply.

Further, inequities tend to be interconnected. As such, students who were (or became) vulnerable due to the online transition, likely faced other disadvantages and risks, heightening adverse impacts. For example, in East Africa, pregnancy rates for girls in late secondary and tertiary education grew at alarming rates during the pandemic's closures, likely removing a cohort of talented girls from the tertiary education pipeline, at least for the immediate future. Broader economic concerns emerge as young people, particularly in households which experience job loss as a

⁷ Salmi, J., Nina Arnhold, and Roberta Malee Bassett. "The Big Bad Wolf Moves South: How COVID-19 Affects Higher Education Financing in Developing Countries." (Education for Global Development Blog). June 24, 2020. Accessed July 10, 2020. <u>https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/big-bad-wolfmoves-south-how-covid-19-affects-higher-education-financing-developing</u>

result of COVID-19, may decide to drop out from HEIs to find work and support their families.

There is a widespread assumption that tertiary education is easily adaptable to a remote learning, but why should this be? Students enrolled on relatively well-resourced campuses—fully equipped with technology and infrastructure—return home to the same neighborhoods as their primary and secondary school neighbors. For many places, there is insufficient infrastructure, and homes lack the hardware and connectivity for distance learning. Moreover, tertiary education is a largely bespoke endeavor, where students craft their academic calendar according to their interests and fields of study and where the quality and opportunities are driven by research infrastructure and direct interactions between research and teaching. Such academic work cannot be delivered by radio or television, unlike at earlier stages of education.

Online and distance learning forced massive adaptation for tertiary education institutions regarding how information and coursework is delivered, strongly impacting how (and whether) students learn. There is, however, an implicit bias in this move, which assumes and requires a level of technical capacity, hardware and infrastructure, that is simply not the reality for students around the world. Digital infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, reaches only about 34% of the population, and in many countries on the continent, the rate is much lower. University campuses are also the technology hubs—loss of one often meant the loss of both. Instead of allowing for broadscale learning continuity, the move to remote learning left millions of students without any accessible options for continuing their studies after leaving their campuses, widening the achievement gap between these students and the students with the means to keep studying.

As evidenced by the pandemic response experience, the focus on reforms for tertiary systems and institutions must include resilience planning at the highest levels—especially for equity challenges. For a social sector system like education, systems resilience can be defined as (1) the capacity of an enterprise to survive,

adapt, and grow in the face of turbulent change⁸; and (2) the capacity of a system to experience shocks while retaining essentially the same function, structure, feedbacks, and, therefore, identity.⁹ Both definitions are relevant to tertiary education systems, which need not simply "survive, adapt, and grow in the face of change" but, as COVID-19 proved all too clearly, must also know their essential functions and identities (missions and stakeholder communities) in order to sustain those when faced with transformative shocks. Tertiary education systems/institutions must embrace agile frameworks that promote using the shock as an opportunity for reflection, assessment, and evolution in order to maintain commitment to their essential function and identity; that is, there must be adaptation without capitulation. As the history of tertiary education has shown, universities and colleges are among the most resilient institutions on the planet, because their value and function remain essential to society.

Separating the signal from the noise—What role will tertiary education play in promoting a more equitable world?

I will close my talk today with opinions and predictions about what the future does and does not hold for tertiary education. This is, of course, a favorite past time for pundits and academics alike these days. The university remains one of the most venerated and yet simultaneously vilified institutions in modern society. Every country holds its institutions of higher learning in genuine esteem—aspiring to attend, respecting the academic (and administrative) profession, enjoying the cultural benefits of living in proximity to these beautiful and almost mysterious places where knowledge is created and merit is valued. And yet: universities are a battleground of every generation's culture war—do they indoctrinate, do they give advantages to those least in need while exacerbating equity gaps, are they even necessary, should

⁸Fiksel, J. 2006. "Sustainability and resilience: Toward a systems approach." *Sustainability Science, Practice, and Policy* 2: 14–21

⁹Kerner, D. A., and J. S. Thomas. 2014. "Resilience Attributes of Social-Ecological Systems: Framing Metrics for Management." *Resources* 3 (4): 672–702. <u>https://doi.org/10.3390/resources304067</u>.

the public pay for them? This is the paradox in which we all work and live as we pursue our careers and aspirations in higher education.

In this lingering pandemic and the uncertainty that has destabilized so much of our lives and routines, the rhetoric around the future of tertiary education has exploded, in large part because these opinions and editorials do not require research and data to promote nor is there any accountability. Comparing universities to DVD rental stores or CD players, etc., as if their obsolescence is imminent. But in the day-to-day work with countries around the world, it is clear to me that nothing particularly dramatic looms in the foreseeable future. The signals seem fairly optimistic.

First, tertiary education is not in a crisis globally, no matter how many editorials are written about this; there is no new world order for post-secondary education on the horizon. Higher learning institutions have been around in some form for nearly one thousand years and have been the creators of as much innovation as any other sector could claim. It is worth noting that, despite physical shutdowns of university campuses across the world, universities contributed perhaps the most impactful outcome to end the pandemic: Oxford University developed a vaccine using data published on the genome of the coronavirus by a Chinese virologist at Fudan University. This vaccine is the centerpiece of COVAX, the global vaccine initiative which cites equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for low-to-middle-income countries as its goal.

Support for university reforms is only growing and at a very rapid pace. There are institutions in the United States that are in dire crisis—but the pandemic only magnified existing issues at some institutions. Small, private liberal arts colleges dependent on tuition have been closing at rapid rates for the past few decades, and while we mourn the loss of their contributions to the diversity of the sector, the agile higher education marketplace in the US means students decide if these colleges remain valuable. Some evolve and adapt, some don't. Its academic Darwinism. Globally, however, closing institutions is not the trend. On the contrary, higher education institutions are exploding in number and diversity of structures and programs around the world. Demand for study places is increasing, and the market

is responding. Countries need to focus on quality assurance and regulatory frameworks to manage this explosion of institutions; few are concerned about having too many.

Next, digitalization and technology will not solve equity challenges for a generation (or more). No matter what you are reading about the transformative power of technology in higher education, it will not be solving the equity challenges students face in achieving tertiary education. Technology is expensive, already a barrier for lower income students. Infrastructure (reliable electricity, ease of accessing clean water, physical space) are as important as technology in remote delivery of education, and the world's poor (even in its wealthiest countries) simply do not have the infrastructure to benefit from the wonders of digitalization and remote learning, not without massive economies of scale to significantly drive down costs to the beneficiaries.

Finally, not enough attention is being paid to students—what they want and how they learn. Pundits and policymakers seem to be speaking for students a lot, using anecdotes to represent wholesale demands to be made on their behalf. COVID-19 has made this even noisier. In higher education programs, student development theory, when offered at all as a course, is often separated entirely from education policy programs. Some of the loudest noise in the field of international higher education is about the student experience, and yet so little is based on actual research. What we hear when we speak with students around the world in our stakeholder-driven work is that traditional-age students want to live with fellow students (on or off campus), they want to learn with each other inside and outside of the classroom. Those needs and values change depending on the students, etc. will have different needs and require different support.

A more equal world can be best supported by equitable higher education systems that center their activities around ensuring students have access to and support through the academic program they choose, no matter when in life they have the opportunity. Moreover, authorities in a position to constrain the agility of the system

to slide over the long run and respond to the needs of all its students would do well to recognize the value of these diversified, articulated, and valuable systems that offer a place to as many students as might wish to seek it.

I will close with a quotation from Bob Clark on how higher education systems support diversity in experience and values, to serve students throughout their educational journey:

Among their institutions, systems can and do proliferate institutional types, arrange the types in functional and status hierarchies, and make permeable the boundaries between the sectors so that students can move from one to another in search of different types and levels of training. Diversification is the key to how higher education systems effect compromises among the plurality of insistent values. (B. Clark, Higher Education Systems, 1983, p. 255).