CHAPTER I

The Gap between the Student Experience and University Operations

Maurice, an eighteen-year-old first-year undergraduate student at a private, nonprofit four-year university, has a chronic medical condition that requires daily treatment at the campus health center. He is also dyslexic and entitled to additional tutoring outside of class and extra time for assignments. While the university does provide such accommodations, it also requires that students present written authorization from a doctor and a statement describing the specific services needed. Living away from home for the first time, and focused on making friends and obtaining his medical treatment, Maurice neglects to file the required academic accommodation request.

This seemingly minor lapse has serious consequences. As Maurice falls behind in his classes, no one reports his declining academic performance. Any of his professors can issue an "early warning" notice alerting his academic advisor that Maurice is struggling and possibly in need of assistance, but none of them do. Overwhelmed, Maurice decides to withdraw from classes and start over the following term with the proper support. His academic advisor agrees to this plan, completes the form withdrawing him from the university, authorizes a partial tuition refund, and informs Maurice he will be able to register the following semester in good standing.

Assuming all is in order, Maurice stops going to class. Later, when his mother calls the Office of Student Accounts about the refund, she is told Maurice is still enrolled. She calls several university offices; they all say that there is no record of Maurice's withdrawal and that if he is not attending classes and completing coursework, he will face academic dismissal. She finally reaches Maurice's academic advisor, who is surprised to find that the withdrawal petition is indeed missing from the record. But now that the semester is almost over, full payment is required, and the advisor says he lacks the authority to withdraw Maurice.

Maurice's mother works her way up the chain of command; staff members at each level are powerless to help, as the problem involves several different administrative jurisdictions. She finally reaches the dean, who eventually agrees to have the registrar retroactively adjust the official record. At long last, the accounting office, with the support of the registrar, issues a partial refund of Maurice's tuition.

Having resolved his academic and financial situation, Maurice can now register for the following semester. By this time, it is late in the registration process; afternoon classes are already full, and morning classes conflict with his daily medical treatment. After more frustration and anxiety, Maurice's mother again contacts the dean, who once again intervenes to clear the administrative hurdles. Maurice ultimately gets the schedule and the academic accommodations he needs.

Had Maurice's mother not checked on the delayed refund, Maurice would have inadvertently failed all his courses and been academically dismissed. Several different things involving different parts of the university had gone wrong: Maurice failed to request an accommodation; all five of his instructors and his advisor missed opportunities for early intervention; somehow his withdrawal form went unrecorded; and administrators at different levels and divisions lacked the authority to resolve the issue because it crossed the jurisdiction of their individual offices.

Maurice's story is not an isolated event – thousands of students at American universities face similar situations each year. Nor is it merely an unfortunate accident. Rather, what happened to Maurice is the direct result of stovepiped, deeply entrenched, and increasingly arcane university structures and procedures conflicting with the needs and expectations of today's university students. Raised in an era of user-friendly access to information through their electronic devices, Generation Z students justifiably expect clear communication and efficient problem-solving that, much to their frustration, universities often fail to deliver.

Today's eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old college students bring a different set of expectations to the university experience than their predecessors. They expect seamless service via smartphone and simultaneously face an unprecedented multitude of complex, inherited, yet rapidly evolving societal problems, many of which threaten their safety and even their existence. University leaders alone cannot solve climate change or structural racism for their students, but they *can* improve the student experience at their institutions. Residential four-year nonprofit colleges and universities can and must adapt to the new needs of today's students. If they do not, they risk losing their students to other competitive

educational and experiential options, potentially compromising their position as the educational destination of choice.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a moment of reckoning for university administrators, forcing many of them to balance the safety of the university community with declining enrollments and revenue, and increased expenses. For most, it is a uniquely stressful time, where meeting the public health crisis and fiscal challenge are front and center. It is difficult in this situation to look downstream, well after the pandemic, toward the market position of one's college or university. The pandemic will impact the psyche of an entire generation and will be remembered not only by those who are applying to or are in college now, but by the children whose lives have been disrupted and will be applying to college in a decade. This is therefore a moment to reexamine long-standing operations in the name of improving the academic product and confronting its increasing cost. It is a chance to dismantle outmoded structures and craft a holistic educational experience that meets the needs of current students as well as those yet to come.

The Crucibles of 2020–2021

In early 2020, when the novel coronavirus first began to ravage the world, over ten million undergraduate students were enrolled in America's public and private nonprofit four-year colleges and universities.[1] The vast majority were in their late teens and early twenties, with only two out of every ten over the age of twenty-five.[2] Many of the schools they attended have their origins in the late nineteenth century, when the modern American university took shape, and retain the organizational structures and traditions that characterized their founding.[3] These schools survived world wars, economic hardship and depressions, dramatic enrollment shifts, natural disasters, and previous pandemics. The pandemic that began in 2020, however, has proved more disruptive to more residential academic settings than any other event in the last century.

Even before the pandemic, the American residential college and university system was facing strong headwinds. Demographic trends, rising college costs, a volatile economy, and increasingly restrictive immigration policies were already reducing the number of potential college students. The popular press and families of current and prospective students had begun to question the value of a college degree and the return on the substantial investment. Universities had become mired in controversies involving college admissions bribery scandals, polarized political rhetoric

on and off campus, racial tensions, and even questions of institutional mission. As they have done since early in the history of the modern American university, critics questioned the value of a liberal arts education, arguing that colleges should instead emphasize career training and the kinds of technical skill-building that lead to employment. Investigative reports revealed shocking instances of faculty, staff, and coaches using their power to abuse and exploit students. On campus, students themselves had been demanding a more pluralistic curriculum, greater inclusion, and stronger protections from harassment.

The residential four-year nonprofit university has fallen out of step with today's students. While venerable, the established structures and traditions of colleges and universities have hampered their ability to adapt to the needs of twenty-first-century students. More diverse in their personal backgrounds and life experiences, the students of Generation Z bring different expectations and higher levels of stress and anxiety to the college experience than previous generations. A seemingly minor but extraordinarily significant difference is that they are the first generation to have grown up with the smartphone. It's not just that today's students spend great amounts of time peering at their screens. It's that the smartphone, the services it provides, and the information that flows on its cascade of pixels defines this generation's expectations about how the world, including the world of the university campus, should work. Most colleges and universities are not meeting those expectations.

The crises of 2020–2021 have revealed important realities about the nature of the university. At the onset of the pandemic, American residential campuses swiftly closed and, for the most part, shifted courses online – an option not available during pandemics of the past. Faculty and staff remained in their homes and communicated electronically. Most students did the same. By highlighting the absence of in-person contact, the abrupt transition made clear that residential colleges provide more than an academic education. The residential college experience is a pivotal social exchange, where what students learn outside the classroom is often as important as what they learn inside it. As psychologist Mary Alvord quipped, "People go to college not only for an education but to seek social connections, become independent and explore their identity – all of which are rather difficult to do over Zoom."[4] For people in their late teens or early twenties, the college experience serves as a bridge to adulthood, a place to explore ideas, to challenge and shape individual perspectives of the world. Beyond classroom content, this experience involves interacting daily with people from different backgrounds, unexpected in-depth

conversations with faculty and peers, developing lifelong friendships, exposing oneself to new intellectual challenges, joining in special events, and engaging with stimulating outside speakers. Living on a campus away from home can be a transformative experience that exposes students to a broader community dedicated to discovery, dissemination of knowledge, and a collective spirit enriching the life of the mind.

As campuses shifted to online instruction in the spring of 2020, the sense of loss around these missing interpersonal interactions was palpable. Students eager for traditional pomp and circumstance, large-scale campus events, new friends, parties, and quality time with peers were wary of the value of the online instruction that many campuses were offering during the pandemic. Some educators, meanwhile, saw online teaching as a cost-effective prescription for the university's future. But students made clear their lack of enthusiasm for that approach and their hopes to return to the face-to-face interaction and socialization of the residential college. In one large survey of public university students, 81 percent of respondents said they would choose to return to campus rather than study online; nearly 87 percent reported that they learn more effectively on campus.[5] Justin Reich, director of the MIT Teaching Systems Lab, predicted that "when vaccines arrive, most students will return to campus and most teaching will return to classrooms."[6] Some students who had paid full tuition for the Spring 2020 semester sued, demanding partial refunds for what they described as a rushed online experience. Parents, many of whom were hit hard in the economic downturn, were understandably concerned about cost as well as the safety of their children. But this was more than a financial loss. The lack of ceremonies, rites of passage, and recognition among peers and colleagues saddened everyone in the university community.

As soon as the enormity of the novel coronavirus's threat to public health became apparent, a second crucible appeared, this one economic. A combination of stay-at-home orders and consumer caution shuttered businesses all over the country. Millions of workers were thrown on unemployment. Many of the kinds of jobs students depended on to help pay for their education, for spending money, and in some cases, for survival, disappeared. Some students' parents, meanwhile, suddenly found themselves in economic circumstances ranging from frightening to desperate. The value of the stock market dropped precipitously in March 2020 before beginning a remarkable rebound, quite different from what happened during the Great Depression. As a result, most investors and university endowments retained a significant portion of their invested

funds and accumulated wealth while the virus levied the greatest economic toll among the most vulnerable. In fact, more than a year after the onset of the pandemic, the New York Stock Exchange reached record highs. According to *Forbes*, the annual ranking of billionaires leapt by nearly 30 percent, further highlighting the wealth inequality between the wealthy and the poor.[7] People of color, whose death rates from COVID-19 well outpaced their share of the population, took a particularly hard economic hit. While the rich prospered, others of lesser means were left hungry and faced the threat of eviction or foreclosure from their homes. The implications are evident for lower-income families or those who have become downwardly mobile – the resources available to earn a college degree have become that much more precarious.

The Memorial Day 2020 killing of George Floyd under a Minneapolis policeman's knee, captured of course on a smartphone, fired the year's third crucible: a sense of injustice over centuries of discriminatory treatment against Black Americans. The cumulative resentment of historic indignities, of unequal justice and incarceration, of generations of Black men, women, and children harassed or killed by police, could no longer be contained. Frustration and outrage touched the soul of the nation. Despite the silent and lethal virus, thousands of protestors of all races, many of them traditionally college-aged, poured into the streets in cities and towns throughout America and around the world. Many of them continued to participate in peaceful protests throughout the summer, even as threats of violence increased around them, reflecting the nation's ever-deepening ideological divisions.

These ideological divisions were driven by disinformation, extremism, and increased polarization, the fourth crucible of 2020–2021, which have lasting implications for students, colleges, and universities. Throughout the Trump presidency, the voices of conspiracy theorists, QAnon supporters, far-right extremists, White supremacists and nationalists, anti-vaxxers, anti-immigrationists, coronavirus deniers, illegal militia groups, and neo-Nazis all found in President Trump's rhetoric both vindication and fuel for their anger about the direction of America. This anger reached its terrifying apex on January 6, 2021, when avid Trump supporters violently attacked the US Capitol. Having been told repeatedly, and without evidence, by the president himself that the integrity of the election vote count had been violated and Donald Trump was the real victor, the armed mob attempted to break up the joint session of Congress that was meeting to count and certify the electoral votes for then President-elect Joe Biden. Five people died and many more were injured in the insurrection, including 138 police officers.

High school or college students, often sheltered due to the pandemic, witnessed parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, or acquaintances trying to overturn a democratic election; some saw them as seditionists and others saw them as patriots. Enticed by their own emerging identification with the ideas of the far-right, some of these observers became social media targets for recruiters harboring disinformation and extremist perspectives. These recruits include students who are entering or returning to college as campuses manage their way through the pandemic. The anger that might have once found an outlet in etching a swastika in a bathroom stall may now find young allies emboldened to voice their hate in a more open and violent forum.

During the Trump presidency, the president's supporters and the president himself decried democratic institutions, dismissed the establishment press as fake news, and disregarded public health measures and scientific evidence. In this sphere of thinking, expertise derived from years of education and professional experience was no longer a valued qualification; indeed, it was sneered at as a trick of the liberal elite. Many in the far-right vilify and criticize the university itself as a bastion of leftist propaganda, full of pompous faculty who denigrate America's past accomplishments and indoctrinate students with ideas associated with critical race theory and White privilege. Sometimes it is the students themselves who make these criticisms; according to a study by Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, incidents of students reporting on faculty discourse in the classroom increased more than fivefold between 2015 and 2020.[8] The most frequent topics that triggered a student complaint were how faculty dealt with issues of race, political partisanship, or gender.

Some faculty called out for their teaching have become targets of harassment. For example, student reports of perceived faculty liberal biases or restrictions associated with free speech, along with the names of these faculty, have been published on a conservative website, *Campus Reform*. 40 percent of the faculty members identified on the website reported receiving messages of hate, threats of violence, or death threats.[9] The climate in the classroom has changed as students have found outlets that reflect the country's underlying polarization.

Added to this overall context, some elected state officials have raised concerns about the content taught in college classrooms, particularly when it comes to matters of race, raising new concerns over faculty academic freedom in the classroom. The Florida State Board of Education, for example, now requires public universities to assess and report on the

"viewpoint diversity" of all of their courses.[10] In this age of disinformation, issues that reflect the nation's divisions, from adherence to public health recommendations to the content of classroom instruction, unfortunately, are framed as sides to be taken, as matters of equally valid opinions rather than matters of objective facts and objective falsehoods.

These multiple crucibles of 2020–2021 will be etched into the memory of a generation, affecting their sense of themselves and how they perceive the world, much as the Great Depression affected the perspectives of those who lived through it. For students returning to their college or university campus, the influences will be immediate. Having experienced the power of protest, many students of color will no longer be willing to tolerate instances of racism on their campuses. Many White students who joined in the protests or witnessed videos of police brutality on unarmed Black individuals, for their part, may now be more willing to confront the forms of systemic racism that their predecessors might have ignored or denied, but that were always familiar to their Black peers. Across the board, students and faculty have made it clear that they expect their own colleges and universities to pay greater attention to aspects of systemic racism. And, along with this movement, we have a growing counter-movement of White supremacists and neo-Nazis in America impelled and emboldened by disinformation campaigns. These potential conflicts pose new challenges for academic administrators at residential campuses.

The nation's campuses are being reforged by the crucibles of 2020–2021. Over the spring and summer of 2020, different campuses considered as many as fifteen variations of in-person and online education, as well as changes to the academic calendar.[11] Some financially vulnerable institutions were forced to close their doors, merge with other campuses, or suspend operations. Few were able to weather the pandemic without reductions in personnel expenses and operational costs. Even as they lost revenue, campuses incurred additional expenses from adjusting their methods of delivering education. Those included support for additional course design, technical assistance, and infrastructure for distance learning; thinning residential, classroom, and meeting locations; sanitizing; testing for and tracking infections; screening visitors; purchasing protective clothing and equipment; identifying quarantine rooms; and creating safe socially distanced spaces. Some campuses cut back their array of academic programs, amended their support services, reduced contributions to pensions, made across-the-board cutbacks, froze hiring and eliminated pay increases, shrank the number of staff in positions for which the campus simply had less demand, and furloughed others.

Quality academic programs, dependent on talented faculty, take years to build. Yet in a tone-deaf moment, Purdue University proposed that 10 of the 16 directorships focused on race, gender, and ethnicity be slated for elimination. In the wake of the swift outrage that followed, Purdue rolled back the reductions. The incident reflects the challenges universities face in balancing budgets and meeting academic priorities.[12] In another painful cutback, the University of Akron announced that it would eliminate 6 of its 11 academic colleges and eliminate 178 positions, including 96 members of its tenured faculty.[13] Reports of campus cutbacks and program terminations were all too common. Cocurricular programs and activities placed in hibernation during the pandemic will take time to reemerge and revamp once the danger passes – if they are to return at all.

As colleges and universities reopen and as students return, administrators will need to face these multifaceted issues. They will also need to face an underlying issue: a dated structural configuration out of sync with student expectations and a limited capacity to bring the fragmented curricular and cocurricular pieces into a coherent whole for the benefit of students. This can bedevil too many students and challenge capable professionals to effectively manage in such an environment.

The question of how to make the university experience better and more valuable for students in a post-pandemic world demands attention as universities compete with each other and with alternative educational institutions for shrinking numbers of traditional-age students. The very scope of the present crises presents an opportunity to finally embrace long-discussed and sorely needed changes. In its annual survey taken during the pandemic, *Inside Higher Ed* found 47 percent of university senior business officers agreed with the statement, "My institution should use this period to make difficult but transformative changes in its core structure and operations to better position itself for long-term sustainability."[14] A subsequent survey of college and university presidents echoed this sentiment.[15] The task before academic leaders is not simply to restore what once was, but to recognize these tragic moments as a unique space to assess multiple institutional weaknesses, even failures, and reemerge stronger and better prepared to educate a changed student body for the uncertain world they will inherit.

Three Central Arguments

Administratively Adrift presents original data about modern student encounters with traditional four-year degree residential colleges and

universities, fresh perspectives on the inner workings of the university, and fact-based insights gleaned from a four-year, university-wide innovation initiative I led as provost of American University. The student experience is the sum of all encounters, whether in or outside of the classroom. As a result, this book pays as much attention to student services and administrative operations as it does to academics, if not more. I show how the hundred-plus-year history of the American university has led to its current structure; distill the voices of students, faculty, and staff; and explore how successful organizations outside of higher education deliver services. I use these insights to produce recommendations for reorganizing and revitalizing residential universities, with the goal of providing today's diverse students with a holistic learning experience. The book rests on three central arguments.

Argument One: Generation Z and Structural Lag

First introduced as a theoretical concept by sociologist Matilda White Riley, the term structural lag refers to the phenomenon of society and its institutions failing to keep up with the changing needs of population cohorts or distinct population constituencies.[16] This lag creates challenges for the most vulnerable or those less visible, as their needs can be underserved. I use the concept to examine the emerging gap between the evolving needs of contemporary students and the institutional structures of four-year nonprofit residential colleges and universities.

Today's students, frequently referred to as Generation Z, are a unique and distinctive generation that began arriving on college campuses a few years before the pandemic.[17] Born on the cusp of the new millennium (1997–2015), they have lived through school shooting drills (and sometimes school shootings) and the 2008 recession. They have participated in the struggles of the LGBTQIA, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter movements. They are living through a worsening climate of national polarization, rampant online disinformation and its consequences, the environmental crisis of global warming, and the threat, for some of them, of deportation. An unprecedentedly racially and ethnically diverse cohort confronted with widening socioeconomic inequality, Generation Z arrives on campus with levels of anxiety, stress, and depression not previously observed among college students, concerns only exacerbated by the pandemic and social unrest (a topic I discuss at length in Chapter 2).[18]

It is highly significant that, in Gen Z's experience, information has always been ubiquitous and available at a moment's notice on a

smartphone. They are experienced digital natives who have grown up in a connected world where personalized access to goods and services is only a click or a swipe away, where bureaucratic structures have been mediated by the technology available in an app or through artificial intelligence. Their expectations for how organizations provide goods and services are in marked contrast to the often bureaucratic, impersonal, and sluggish operations of the university.

The disconnect between Gen Z's expectations and the residential university's current operations and organizational structure – one of semi-independent units loosely stitched together, each with its own distinct professional identity and operations – can at times inadvertently add to student burdens and as a consequence impede their academic success and well-being. The fragmented structure of the university too often results in different administrative units delivering services in isolation from one another, producing omissions, delays, contradictions, limited authority to resolve problems, and poor coordination across relevant service offices. This, in turn, limits universities' ability to effectively support students in the classroom. The frustrations of coping with an unresponsive bureaucracy increase costs, stress, extend the time to earn a degree, and disproportionately impact those who are most vulnerable. In some cases, they can push students to abandon the campus. All this dilutes the effectiveness of a college education and increases society's skepticism about whether college is worth the cost and accumulated debt. The pattern of operational functions of the university lagging behind the needs and expectations of its students adds to their frustrations and in some cases impedes their success – hence a structural lag has emerged between setting and constituency.

A significant portion of the residential student experience happens outside the classroom, in encounters involving personnel from dozens of offices. From the student's perspective, each of these encounters contributes to their total experience at college, but the university customarily views student issues from the perspective of separately functioning academic departments and administrative units, often described as stovepipes or silos (see Chapter 7 on the flow of information). Even the university's preferred mode of communication highlights the stark differences between student and university cultures: in a survey of 1,143 Gen Z college students, university reliance on email was described as equivalent to "what hand-written or typed office memos and snail mail were to previous generations."[19] Yet, the university's communication with students relies on email, which at times students do not read. The crises of 2020–2021 are an opportunity to reconsider the fragmentation that characterizes

universities' operations, an issue of some urgency, given their impact on students' well-being and eventual success.

When organizations' administrative and organizational operations fall out of harmony with the people they serve, they are experiencing structural lag. This book chronicles such a gap between residential colleges and universities and their students. While Riley introduced the term in the context of an aging society, the theoretical framework can be applied to any institution or societal circumstance lacking congruence between people's lives and the social structures they encounter. Historic examples of efforts to mitigate structural lag include the physical accommodations sparked by the disability rights movement or the replacement of institution-based psychiatric wards with community-based care.

In the for-profit sector, market demands force businesses to either remain in step with customers' changing expectations and needs or quickly go out of business. In the nonprofit or governmental world, such direct accountability is less immediate and often only appears after repeated and forceful pressure to change. One example is the shift in drivers' licensing procedures in many states. Instead of forcing drivers to wait in line for hours to renew their licenses in person, many states have shifted to easy-to-use email-in renewals (thank goodness).

While American nonprofit residential colleges and universities offer students many different choices in location, size, cost, academic emphasis, and cocurricular/extracurricular opportunities, they are bound by strikingly similar underlying bureaucratic structures, procedures, and operations. Too often, once Gen Z students become immersed in their academic setting of choice, they find that the total educational encounter bears little resemblance to their prior lived experience. For those most at-risk or vulnerable, the lack of alignment between their needs and the *modus operandi* of the university can create obstacles to their success. In contrast, those students whose parents or siblings are college savvy are more likely to have access to the tools that allow them to adjust to the more baffling, fragmented aspects of university bureaucracy. Some students will muddle through; others will fail. Universities typically view such failures as the student's fault for not fitting in and not performing well academically, if they even attempt to assess the student's departure at all. What is striking is that across the nation, and before the entrance of Gen Z students, less than half of students who started a four-year college degree graduated in four years; after six years, graduation rates barely exceeded the 60 percent threshold at the institution where they first enrolled.[20] Yet, the academic

community rarely acknowledges its responsibility to meet students where they are.

This book incorporates students' descriptions of their encounters, often in their own voices, as they navigate the university. Drawn from student journals and feedback at focus groups and meetings, these accounts show how students can easily run afoul of university processes. All it takes is a chronic health condition, or forgetting to file a required form, or a misunderstanding regarding a mandatory procedure, or an interruption in the flow of relevant information about them to their counselors or faculty advisers. Take Maurice, whose encounter is summarized at the opening of this chapter. In his case, the campus offers an early warning system on student progress, but no one bothered to notify the advisor of Maurice's failing academic performance. Of his five different faculty members (of whom all but one professor taught classes of twenty students or less), not one bothered to send an early warning to Maurice's advisor that might have changed his trajectory.

In the chapters that follow, I present evidence of the consequences of an archaic bureaucratic system. In addition to diagnosing the problem, I point to specific efforts to foster a more holistic approach to student support, including original strategies that wrestle with the organizational problems.

Argument Two: Shaped by History

My second claim is that we must understand the history of the university's structure and governance if we are to transform its operations. Many of the obstacles to change are rooted in century-old patterns that strengthen faculty independence and encourage staff expertise, but also foster something like a guild structure for each group, with its own culture, subcultures, norms, and national alliances. In his classic history of the American university, Laurence Veysey wrote, "By 1910 the structure of the American university has assumed its stable twentieth-century form," including the familiar hierarchy of presidents, vice presidents, deans, departments, faculty, and core disciplinary divisions (see Chapter 3).[21] Given their heavy schedule of teaching, research, and service, most faculty see the overall student experience at the university as someone else's responsibility. They are guardians of the cognitive domain; others can assist with psychosocial and administrative experiences (much more on the subject in Chapters 4 and 6).

As the university expanded, so did the number of professional staff hired to administer a myriad of programs and services in response to an

expanding array of regulations, expectations, constituencies, and obligations. Over time, these activities have become institutionalized, a routine part of campus operations, their personnel allied with national associations that advance standards for their specialization. The pattern of replication, viewed as best practices and promulgated by peers affiliated with the respective national association, is seen in nearly every one of the professional services offered at colleges and universities, ranging from academic advising to financial aid, from the university registrar to admissions officers, from disability services to student judicial affairs.

In Chapter 6, I identify thirty-six different national professional organizations in which those who provide student services (directly or indirectly) can exchange ideas, explore best practices, and connect with peers at other campuses. The result of this professionalization, while important for professional development, also has its consequences: first, a level of uniformity within the professional specialization is institutionalized nationwide, and second, with so many different specializations that are available on campus too often they become disparate, poorly connected, and even, at times, operate in conflict with one another. Furthermore, the faculty and staff serving students have become bifurcated – the faculty engaged with academic life and other professionals with campus life and administrative functions. Even at mid-sized universities few, if any, faculty would discuss their students with residential housing personnel, even though these staff members have nearly daily contact with the students who appear in the classroom. Instead of coalescing around the needs of students, university personnel in different domains have been moving in centrifugal directions away from each other. But if a student has economic problems, is not eating or sleeping well, feels unwelcome, alone, or homesick, or is stressed about problems back home, that is likely interfering with their ability to learn. In the end, it should matter to everyone.

In recognition of and out of concern for the increasing specialization etched into the fabric of the academy, in 1937 the American Council on Education explicitly demanded that colleges and universities "consider the student as a whole person" in every respect – not just their academic development, but "the development of the student as a person rather than upon his [or her] intellectual training alone."[22] It speaks explicitly to the expectation of a holistic learning experience, an idea central to this book. Unfortunately, this remains an aspiration rather than an achievement. The question today is whether we have reached a point where the structure and the culture of the university directly conflict with its purpose – the preparation of students for life.

Throughout the book, I draw upon this concept of holistic education, deeply admired by academic leaders but too often lost in implementation, that can powerfully influence all sectors of the academy that touch student life, including the curriculum.

Argument Three: Integrated Student Pathways, Holistic Education, and Alignment

The third theme of the book is a broad reflection on how the learning experience can be made more holistic to better prepare students to assume roles in an increasingly polarized and divided society. Yes, the overall university structure is dated; yes, our students expect more clarity across university operations; and yes, we are hampered by a deeply engrained history and alliances that make change very difficult. However, as other effective organizations outside the academy have evolved to be more end-user focused, so can the university become more student-centered by coalescing appropriate academic, administrative, and service components.

The university is labor-intensive, dependent on learned faculty and skilled professionals. Expanded numbers of faculty and staff over the decades have been added to an existing infrastructure designed decades ago. It is time to question if the bureaucratic structure and the expansion of specialization are working in the best interest of students.

Transforming the academy will take the same sort of assessment and analysis that have proven successful for other organizations. Aspects of that methodology (discussed in Chapters 8 and 9) provide insights into the everyday problems students encounter in the university. What we have learned from other industries is to reassess the alignment of services from the perspective of the end-user. The end-user, in this case the student, needs to know where authority rests, who has the power to resolve problems that are beyond the domain of any single individual or office, and who is eventually accountable. At the moment, answers to these questions are highly diffuse in the academy. Once they are determined, administrators can map the flow of information and the alignment and sequence of actions. This is a large and complex undertaking, not just intellectually, but politically, as it potentially reshapes positions and responsibilities ingrained in the different specializations and offices.

Given the scale and complexity of student psychosocial and academic life, academic leaders will need to design and provide new pathways for student data and information and designate those with the responsibility

and authority to act. In Chapter 10, I present ideas that amend aspects of the current structure to be more responsive to students.

The early twenty-first century is a time of two contradictory trends. On one hand, there is evidence of unprecedented social and political polarization. On the other hand, outside the sociopolitical realm, it is a time of unprecedented convergence, as the amalgamation, integration, and alignment of what used to be disparate functions become more and more the norm. The evidence of convergence is not limited to electronic devices, smartphones, or cars, but includes organizational functions and even ideas in emerging academic fields. Organizations that provide services have reorganized with the end-user in mind, with an emphasis on providing smart, efficient, personalized, and accessible services. Students are quite comfortable with this form of organization and the thoughtful integration of information – particularly when it is delivered via a smartphone. Additional incorporation of the smartphone into university functions can potentially aid the integration and alignment of administrative and support functions that are currently segregated, providing a designated university official and the student with immediate information and directed access to support services.

Beyond just combining the data kept in separate repositories or speeding access to this data, designers must carefully work out new sequences and pathways that make it easier and faster to support the end-user. Central to this alignment of multiple specialties is the rethinking of the pathways from the perspective of the student, and identifying a central point of contact with the authority to promptly leverage support for the student.

The same integrative thinking can be applied to the academic sphere where a foundation of liberal arts coursework and subject specialization are aligned with skill sets relevant to the intertwined and complex global, scientific, and social problems students will eventually encounter.[23] A capstone component helps ensure the convergence of the learning experience. Issues of truth, justice, ethics, morality, civic responsibility, civility, and character development are part of a holistic learning experience and maybe a modest antidote to the destructive nature of the aforementioned societal polarization.[24]

Many of the specialized databases that currently exist for students were designed to meet the needs of professional office personnel. Too often, digital documents travel the same routes through different offices that paper documents once did. The university has lagged in planning and reconceptualizing the flow of information for students, allowing units to

retain their autonomy and control of information, leaving the student end-user with balkanized functions – digitized, yes, but not smart (see Chapters 7 and 10).

To illustrate the problem of multiple actors and diffuse lines of authority in the university, let me highlight just four of the numerous direct contacts students have: (1) the faculty member teaching a course, (2) the academic advisor counseling on an academic plan, (3) the financial aid officer, and (4) the resident director overseeing student behavior in the residence hall. Should something go wrong for the student, each of the four has a different path to follow to intervene and access student data. The people in these roles may occasionally share information, but most often they work within their existing lines of communication.

The instructor has the option, but not the requirement, to provide additional tutoring to a student outside of the class during office hours or at a mutually agreed-upon time. The instructor can notify the academic advisor or encourage the student to seek additional support if there are problems with academic performance or evidence of excessive stress. (On some campuses, the instructor also carries an advising load.) Beyond the course roster, email address, ID number, and a grade sheet, a typical faculty member has little other data about the student other than what the student chooses to share.

If the academic advisor is informed that the student is having difficulty in any of their classes, they discuss the situation with the student and afterward can recommend academic support services, recommend seeing a counselor, or work with the student on a change of major. Customarily, advisors maintain a file on each of their advisees and have access to course registration and the student transcript. On certain problems they might engage their immediate supervisor, involve an assistant dean, associate dean, or dean. The dean, if necessary, can reach out to the vice provost to resolve a problem involving several administrative units.

Financial aid officers encountering a problem involving the ability to pay or not meeting Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) will be in touch with the student. They maintain an array of records on the family's financial circumstances, the federal financial aid request, the determination of need, and the loans, scholarships, and financial aid received, including any changes or adjustments over time. They also have access to the transcript and course registration. The officer may consult with a supervisor and, on occasion, the advisor, registrar, or bursar, while maintaining confidentiality regarding the financial records.

If there is an incident in the residence hall where the student, for example, fights with another student, the residence hall director is likely

to reach out to their supervisor and the dean of students. They might recommend a meeting with the student, counseling, or disciplinary action. The residence hall personnel and dean of students maintain their own confidential records on student behavior.

Note that these four individuals in direct contact with students only occasionally interconnect or share information and often do not know that they may be dealing with the same student. Only when there is a serious problem and issues have escalated do officials meet and discuss the situation. However, it is less likely that the faculty member will be involved.

From the student perspective, issues of social and psychological adjustment with peers, financial capacity to make tuition payments over four or more years, success in courses, and overall academic progress and area of focus are but one interwoven topic. In the university, academic progress is separated into one domain, social development in another, economic and financial circumstances are managed in yet a different one, and physical and mental health in a fourth domain – all of which are independent of one another (and at times further fragmented within these domains). Yet no one has taken on the systemic challenge of thinking through how the necessary information flows can be appropriately connected to provide timely advice and support to maximize student academic success and personal well-being.

The integrative task becomes even more complex when we consider the array of interactions beyond this highly simplified description of four university functionaries to include career planners, counselors, Title IX officers, coaches, officers of clubs and fraternity/sorority life, spiritual leader, staff for orientation, and health care providers, to name a few. In the final chapter of the book, I explore ways to connect the disparate intellectual components along with the administrative and service components.

University leadership has paid too little attention to the organization of the administrative and service functions vital to student success, either because problems in those areas are at a level deemed acceptable, or they are not fully understood, or leadership has simply not prioritized the issue. Some defenders of arcane university procedures argue that forcing students to navigate such systems provides them with a valuable life skill. But surely a liberal arts education should be designed to prepare students for the future, not to cope with a legacy of the past. Cumbersome institutions in the private sector have already been disrupted by more nimble innovators that are increasingly responsive to their customers/stakeholders. The university needs to adapt to this changing environment, both for the sake of

its students and for its own sake. If it doesn't, it will face the same sort of disruption as other industries – something that has already begun. For-profit colleges are already grabbing a share of the student market, not because they provide a better education (they do not, as graduation rates demonstrate),[25] but because they are customer-focused in pursuit of the singular goal of making a profit. The stakes for students are high, too. The quality of education in the classroom is affected by the quality of their life outside it.

The Certainty of Uncertainty

Historians remind us that universities have faced crises before. At the turn of the twentieth century, college administrators and faculty confronted student rebellion, unpopular wars, and physical conflict. Issues of race and class have been woven through the history of American higher education. Then, as now, the cost of college was an issue, leading to searches for less expensive options. Long before there was an internet, correspondence schools provided low-cost courses through the mail.

Not even the current pandemic is unique. The influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 is estimated to have caused 50 million deaths worldwide and 675,000 in the United States alone; the heaviest losses were among healthy young men aged 25–40.[26] Despite this tragedy, many colleges and universities remained open, with closures limited to weeks. With no vaccine, most campuses relied on nonpharmacological interventions – wearing masks, eliminating large-scale events, instituting hygienic procedures, and segregating the sick. College and university archives are replete with photos of auditoria or gymnasia filled with cots for the infirm along with tributes to students who had died.[27] Yet, despite the turmoil and suffering, college enrollments continued to grow. *The Harvard Crimson* wrote in 1919 that the enrollment surge was

> larger by 42 per cent than in 1918 and larger by 21 per cent than in 1916, the record-breaking year of pre-war prosperity. So immense and insistent has been the flow of men, that for many colleges the old-time problem of how to attract more students has given way to the problem of how to take care of the students who want to enter.[28]

Even if not unprecedented, the contemporary crises facing residential educational settings are exacerbated by demographics. The United States is entering a trough of declining numbers of traditional-age college students because of multiple factors, including a decline in birth rates beginning nearly two decades ago. Other factors include student loan debt, price

sensitivity, and the financial strain facing middle-class families, all of which have created a smaller pool of graduating high school seniors seeking residential college options. Some high school graduates are deciding to forego college altogether. Competition among residential colleges and universities for qualified students to meet enrollment targets has already led to tuition-discounting in private colleges, which now has reached over 50 percent of the advertised price.[29] Can the residential undergraduate experience demonstrate its cost-benefit value to families in an increasingly competitive marketplace and a challenging economy?

Still, placing the current plight in an historical perspective reminds us that educators overcame the challenges of the past. In 1939, at the beginning of World War II, Abraham Flexner wrote in *Harper's Magazine*:

> It is not a curious fact that in a world steeped in irrational hatreds which threaten civilization itself, men and women – old and young – detached themselves wholly or partly from the angry current of daily life to devote themselves to the cultivation of beauty, to the extension of knowledge, to the cure of disease, to the amelioration of suffering, just as though fanatics were not simultaneously engaged in spreading pain, ugliness, and suffering. The world has always been a sorry and confused sort of place – yet poets and artists and scientists have ignored the factors that would, if attended to, paralyze them.[30]

Certainly, there is turmoil and a tremendous loss of life worldwide today – life-threatening disease, environmental degradation, unequal justice and discrimination, disinformation and political polarization, human suffering, famine, poverty, economic struggle, war, and despotism. But just as in 1939, faculties continue to create, imagine, teach, and discover at the remarkable institution of the university while serving millions of students every day. Whatever the crisis and whatever its duration, colleges and universities will remain central to American society. Our task, as campuses fully reopen is to make the experience more efficient, enriched, and responsive to the post-pandemic generation of students. Our challenge is to embrace a model of residential education that is holistic and student-centered.

This book urges universities to become more student-focused and sensitive to the overall student experience, both in and beyond the classroom. It recognizes that all university experiences, from coursework to social life, from library support to quality food, from efficient course registration to thoughtful career planning, and from the clarity of financial aid rules to students' relationships with their roommates, influence whether a student thrives, struggles through, or possibly exits college without a degree.

The seeds for a more holistic and student-centered university have already been planted. While provost at American University from 2008 to 2018, I worked with colleagues on a four-year effort to better understand the entire student experience and take steps to improve it. This book draws on information and insights from that experiment (described in detail in Chapters 8 and 9), including material from student journals; interviews with faculty, staff, and students; data gleaned from campus surveys; and exploration of service models outside higher education. It could not have been written without these multiple perspectives.

The following chapters are building blocks toward a better understanding of the rewards and constraints that influence faculty, staff, and academic administration in priority-setting and decision-making. These rewards and constraints are common and deeply embedded across many colleges and universities. The final chapter offers suggestions that can move a college or university toward a more integrated, holistic, and cost-effective residential learning experience better matched to incoming students. It suggests adjustments to both faculty roles and staff responsibilities and explores student-centered approaches that can strengthen the relationships so critical for student well-being and success. I trust other scholars and administrators will both critique and build upon them.

Information about the students whose stories I tell in the book has been edited to ensure they remain anonymous. Also, many of the situations and complications regarding administrative operations at American University have been revised, updated, and changed since I chronicled them here and are part of a process of continuous improvement. They are intended as examples; over time, other issues will undoubtedly replace them.

Notes

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2 "School Enrollment in the United States: October 2017 – Detailed Tables," table 5, United States Census Bureau, December 11, 2018, accessed August 16, 2019, www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/school-enrollment/2017-cps.html.
3 Throughout the book, I use the words "college," "university," and "academy" interchangeably. Certainly, there are differences in scale and complexity between small colleges and large public research universities. However, the

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