

Will America's universities go the way of its car companies?

FIFTY years ago, in the glorious age of three-martini lunches and all-smoking offices, America's car companies were universally admired. Everybody wanted to know the secrets of their success. How did they churn out dazzling new models every year? How did they manage so many people so successfully (General Motors was then the biggest private-sector employer in the world)? And how did they keep their customers so happy?

Today the world is equally in awe of American universities. They dominate global rankings: on the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy's list of the world's best universities, 17 of the top 20 are American, and 35 of the top 50. They employ 70% of living Nobel prizewinners in science and economics and produce a disproportionate share of the world's most-cited articles in academic journals. Everyone wants to know their secret recipe.

Which raises a mischievous question. Could America's universities go the way of its car companies? On the face of it, this seems highly unlikely. Student enrolments are higher than ever this year, as Americans who cannot find jobs linger or return to education. Cambridge, Massachusetts, shows no outward sign of becoming Detroit. Yet there are serious questions about America's ivory towers.

Two right-wing think-tanks, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Goldwater Institute, have both produced damning reports about America's university system. Two left-wing academics, Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, have published an even more damning book: "Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids and What We Can Do About It". And US News & World Report, a centrist magazine, says in its annual survey of American colleges that: "If colleges were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with serious cost-cutting and painful reorganisations."

College fees have for decades risen faster than Americans' ability to pay them. Median household income has grown by a factor of 6.5 in the past 40 years, but the cost of attending a state college has increased by a factor of 15 for in-state students and 24 for out-of-state students. The cost of attending a private college has increased by a factor of more than 13 (a year in the Ivy League will set you back \$38,000, excluding bed and board). Academic inflation makes medical inflation look modest by comparison.

As costs soar, diligence is tumbling. In 1961 full-time students in four-year colleges spent 24 hours a week studying; that has fallen to 14, estimates the AEI. Drop-out and deferment rates are also hair-curling: only 40% of students graduate in four years.

The most plausible explanation is that professors are not particularly interested in students' welfare. Promotion and tenure depend on published research, not good teaching. Professors strike an implicit bargain with their students: we will give you light workloads and inflated grades so long as you leave us alone to do our research. Mr Hacker and Ms Dreifus point out that senior professors in Ivy League

universities now get sabbaticals every third year rather than every seventh. This year 20 of Harvard's 48 history professors will be on leave.

America's commitment to research is one of the glories of its higher-education system. But for how long? The supply of papers that apply gender theory to literary criticism remains ample. But there is evidence of diminishing returns in an area perhaps more vital to the country's economic dynamism: science and technology. The Kauffman Foundation, which studies entrepreneurship, argues that the productivity of federal funding for R&D, in terms of patents and licences, has been falling for some years. Funding is spread too thinly. It would yield better results if concentrated on centres of excellence, but fashionable chatter about the "knowledge economy" stirs every congressional backwoodsman to stick his fingers into the university pie.

The Goldwater Institute points to a third poison to add to rising prices and declining productivity: administrative bloat. Between 1993 and 2007 spending on university bureaucrats at America's 198 leading universities rose much faster than spending on teaching faculty. Administration costs at elite private universities rose even faster than at public ones. For example, Harvard increased its administrative spending per student by 300%. In some universities, such as Arizona State University, almost half the full-time employees are administrators. Nearly all university presidents conduct themselves like corporate titans, with salaries, perks and entourages to match.

Given the size and competitiveness of America's higher-education system, you might expect these problems to be self-correcting. Why don't some universities compete by hiring teaching superstars? And why don't others slash prices? The big problem is that high-status institutions such as universities tend to compete with each other on academic reputation (which is enhanced by star professors) and bling (luxurious dormitories and fancy sports stadiums) rather than value for money. This starts at the top: Yale would never dream of competing with Harvard on price. But it also extends to second-division universities: George Washington University has made itself fashionable by charging students more and spending lavishly on its facilities.

This luxury model is unlikely to survive what is turning into a prolonged economic downturn. Parents are much less willing to take on debt than they were and much more willing to look abroad for better deals. The internet also poses a growing threat to what Bill Gates calls "place-based colleges". Online, you can listen to the world's best lecturers for next to nothing.

America's universities lost their way badly in the era of easy money. If they do not find it again, they may go the way of GM.

Fonte: The New York Times, Sept. 2^{sc} 2010. Disponível em: <www.thenytimes.com>. Acesso em: 17 set. 2010.