Big, Bold, and Highly Accessible

Alan Ruby

University of Pennsylvania, alanruby@gse.upenn.edu

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What do Arizona State University, the University of California, Riverside and the University of Central Florida have in common? Well, for a start they are all large – Arizona State alone has more than 70,000 students – and have boosted their total enrolment to become increasingly diverse. In the words of Michael Crow, president of Arizona State: “We define ourselves by who we enrol, not by who we exclude.”

They all serve a lot of “first-generation” students: young people who are the first in their family to attend college. It is their success with this group that makes the trio particularly interesting. And at all three, about 60 per cent of students graduate within six years.

They and three others – the University of Buffalo, the University of Texas at Arlington and Georgia State University – were the focus of a forum last month in Washington DC. Hosted by the New America Foundation, a liberal thinktank, the meeting, titled The Next Generation University, explored how these large institutions have succeeded at a time when state support for higher education has been slashed.

To be fair, all six are well-known institutions domestically and have large operating budgets that offer some capacity for innovation. They attract good students and faculty, and are strongly connected to their local communities: Central Florida, for example, has had close ties to the Cape Canaveral scientific complex and its vast workforce since its inception in 1963.

All have worked hard to reduce barriers to access and completion for first-generation students. One standout strategy has been reducing the real price for low-income students by targeting financial aid: in a country where needs-blind or academic merit aid is common at elite universities, using students’ socio-economic background to allocate financial assistance is innovative.

They have also put a lot of effort into making sure that students stay on track to graduate. The vast course array in US higher education and the relative freedom students have to pick and choose sometimes act as impediments to completion. Learning lessons from the big online retailers that use customer preferences to predict future purchases, Georgia State utilises its 2 million student grade records to predict success, allowing it to identify students who need particular support to graduate on time. It also determines the courses where students are most likely to struggle and matches those at risk with student tutors who have already completed the courses.

All six universities have research ambitions but place a premium on good teaching: Dr Crow argues that contrary to popular wisdom, the best researchers are often the best teachers, as their enthusiasm and ability to communicate about their field helps them to engage students. Supporting, celebrating and rewarding good teaching are common at these large institutions. Some use financial incentives, and there is a lot of support for pedagogy through technology and professional development. This commitment to teaching is an important factor in staff recruitment and retention. Individually, none of these strategies is distinctive or unfamiliar. What is distinctive is the breadth of the policies adopted by all six institutions and the fact that they have been pursued and sustained over many years.

For me, the biggest point made by the sextet’s record is that it is possible to increase access to higher education by attracting and retaining first-generation students and ensuring their success, even during a period of constrained resources.