



HIGHER EDUCATION'S TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE DILEMMA

By Leonard Geddes

Higher education institutions are grappling with significant challenges, often rooted in the split-focused nature due to a misalignment in their triple bottom line approach. To thrive, colleges must measure success not just in operational and academic terms but also in employment impact, ensuring graduates are employable and can contribute meaningfully to society. This article explores the necessity of balancing these three dimensions to overcome the current struggles and achieve sustainable success.

Why Colleges are Struggling Academically, Financially, and in Employment Outcomes

Practically everyone working in higher education has felt the recent financial pressure to perform better. Some schools have frozen budgets, cut programs, laid people off, and even shut down. The long-standing challenges culminating in these problems haven't persisted for decades without solutions from people, programs, and technologies. However,

the fundamental question remains: What does performing better mean?

Upon examining any institution's data, positive and negative points emerge, but the core reason for higher education institutions' struggles lies in the misunderstanding that we operate as a triple bottom line business. The *Harvard Business Review* defines the triple bottom line as measuring success across three dimensions. In higher education, these dimensions are operational (financial), academic, and employability (societal).

Understanding the Triple Bottom Line in Higher Education

Higher education operates on a triple bottom line principle:

- Operationally: We must attract enough students to keep the doors open.
- Academically: We must maintain high academic standards.
- Employability: We must ensure graduates have employable competencies.

Understanding the triple bottom line approach

can be likened to the process of factor analysis in research. Just as factor analysis groups related variables into core factors to simplify and interpret complex data sets, the triple bottom line framework organizes an institution's various success metrics into three essential dimensions: operational, academic, and career-readiness. This method allows institutions to distill their multifaceted operations into a manageable and holistic assessment, enabling more strategic decision-making and targeted improvements.

If higher education were driven by a single bottom line—such as private-equity firms focusing on maximizing profits, corporations focusing on increasing shareholder value, or religious organizations fulfilling their spiritual missions—it would be much simpler to operate. We could harness the power of a singular focus. However, the complexity of balancing operational, academic, and employment metrics makes the management of higher education institutions uniquely challenging.

The Real Problem: Misaligned Metrics

Despite the entrenched perception, colleges and universities do not have enrollment problems. This view is counterintuitive given the tuition dependency of most institutions. To illustrate, consider Somewhere University, which hasn't kept its enrollment high enough to cover operational costs. The administration, facing budget shortfalls, concludes, "We are not enrolling enough students to cover our costs." But is this the real problem? Like most colleges, Somewhere University obtains more applicants than students they enroll. If the institution were singularly focused on enrollment as its only bottom-line metric, then they could solve their problem instantly by enrolling all applicants—and would win the award for the quickest and most impactful higher education

A vibrant academic culture should concomitantly produce graduates who are career-ready, aligning operational, academic, and future employment goals.

meeting in history. 😊 Despite their applicant overages, automatically enrolling all applicants could solve the financial issue but would compromise academic standards and culture, and it would undermine the institution's other bottom line: ensuring students are employable.

Lowering enrollment standards erodes academic culture, which is foundational to the institution's identity. Faculty members, who have invested greatly in their education and training, did not sign up to compromise academic quality for enrollment numbers. Furthermore, undergraduate education is a significant investment for families. In addition to the holistic values of higher education, students must graduate ready for either advanced education or a financially secure job.

One corporate executive I recently interviewed noted, "Work is learning. Much of what employees do involves learning quickly and operating with uncertainty." Doesn't this perspective align perfectly with many universities' missions of developing lifelong learners? Therefore, a vibrant academic culture should concomitantly produce graduates who are career-ready, aligning operational, academic, and future employment goals.

Challenges of Conflicting Bottom Lines

Colleges and universities must decide if their bottom lines will conflict with each other or complement each other. Conflicting bottom lines can create significant challenges, such as compromising academic standards to meet

enrollment targets, or sacrificing employability outcomes for financial stability. Conversely, when these bottom lines complement each other, they contribute synergistically, enhancing the overall performance and reputation of the institution. For instance, high academic standards can lead to better employment outcomes, which in turn attract more students. Additionally, preparing newly enrolled students to thrive academically can increase retention (an operational indicator) in the short term and enhance their employability in the long run, establishing a positive feedback loop.

In a different scenario, let's say Somewhere University decided to replace several of its faculty with adjuncts. This move may enhance its operational bottom line in the short term, but it will immediately diminish the academic culture bottom line and send the institution into decline over the long term. This is not to denigrate adjuncts; rather, it is based on the reality that adjuncts balance multiple

adjunctships. Additionally, when institutions lose full-time faculty, the student body loses mentors and role models, and the campus culture undoubtedly changes.

Like many institutions that aren't as strategic as they claim, Somewhere University felt it had to settle for a Faustian bargain—a red ocean strategy that left them battered and tattered, not realizing a blue ocean strategy was available.

Achieving Alignment and Success

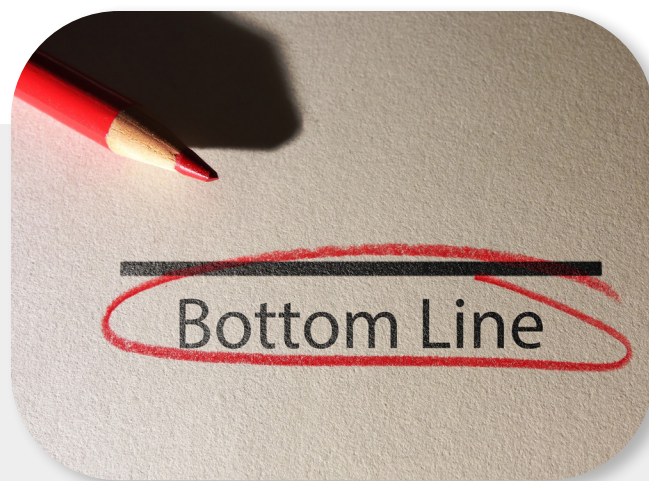
The challenge lies in aligning the three bottom lines. Misalignment causes frustration and failure in higher education. By adopting a structured process focused on building academic competence, institutions can balance and achieve success in all three areas.

To address the triple bottom line dilemma, higher education institutions must redefine


Questions for Institutions to Ponder

- 1. Perspective Shift:** Higher education boasts some of the best minds in history, which is why the issue isn't brain power but a shift in perspective. What perspectives, narratives, or compromises is your institution harboring that prevent it from aligning its triple bottom-line metrics?
- 2. Focus on Metrics:** Which bottom line metric does your institution prioritize the most: operational, academic, or employment?
- 3. Stakeholder Priorities:** Which stakeholders (faculty, administrators, athletic coaches, etc.) focus on which specific metric, and how does this impact overall alignment?
- 4. Alignment Strategies:** How does your institution currently align its operational, academic, and employment bottom lines, and what strategies have been most effective?
- 5. Potential Achievements:** What potential achievements could your institution reach if its metrics were perfectly aligned?

By contemplating these questions and embracing a triple bottom-line approach, we can navigate the current struggles and emerge stronger and more resilient as ever.



what performing better means, balancing operational, academic, and employment goals. This alignment is crucial for overcoming financial and employment challenges, ultimately leading to sustainable success.

Educators and administrators must engage in reflective practices to evaluate and align their institutions' goals. By fostering an environment that prioritizes academic competence, operational efficiency, and employment impact, higher education can thrive. 



Leonard Geddes is founder of The LearnWell Projects, an academic success organization devoted to making learning more visible, manageable, and effective. His work leverages metacognition

research to optimize student learning, enhance faculty instruction, and improve institutional outcomes. Leonard provides workshops and trainings for colleges and universities throughout North America.



Making Learning More Visible, Manageable & Effective

learning@thelearnwellprojects.com
thelearnwellprojects.com
1-866-337-3030

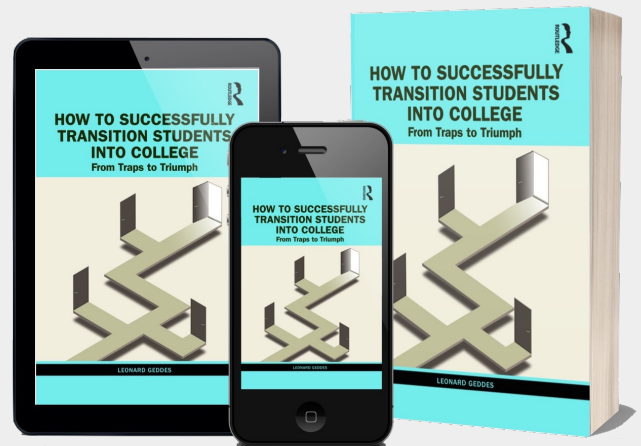
 thelearnwellprojects

 thelearnwellprojects

 leonard-geddes

 learnwelledu

 bit.ly/LearnWell_youtube



Challenging traditional notions about why successful high school graduates struggle in college, *How to Successfully Transition Students into College: From Traps to Triumph* sheds light on the obstacles that hinder a seamless transition and provides clear guidance on how to overcome them.

Drawing from research and real-life stories of educators and students across a variety of institutions, Geddes illuminates a critical truth: it's the successes students had in high school that work against them in college, not their failures. This book explores the hidden structural, functional, and cognitive traps that undermine students' academic work, strain teacher-student relationships, and impose artificial limits on their potential. Armed with formulas for academic success, it provides tools for guiding students towards levels of high performance and supplies teaching methods for how to create an educational environment conducive to success.

Packed with practical advice, actionable steps, and inspiring success stories, this landmark book serves as an invaluable roadmap for college educators seeking to empower their students and revolutionize their institutions.



Scan the QR code or visit transitiontraps.com or to learn more.