

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Edge

Higher ed is changing. Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer and *Chronicle* veteran, connects you with the people, trends, and ideas that are reshaping it. Delivered on Wednesdays.

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From: Goldie Blumenstyk

Subject: The Edge: 4 Ideas to Improve Higher Ed and How Last Year Changed Them

I'm Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer at *The Chronicle* covering innovation in and around academe. Here's what I'm thinking about this week.

Four ideas for improving higher ed, and how they've evolved in the last year.

In March 2020, *The Chronicle* held its sixth annual "Shark Tank:Edu Edition" a fun SXSW EDU tradition in which we invite entrepreneurs and others to pitch their ideas for improving higher ed to a panel of judges, with a live audience getting in on the grilling. Except last year, "South by" was canceled a few days before we were all set to leave for Austin, so we held the pitchfest ourselves, over Zoom. (Little did we know. ...)

It took place the same week I described the unfolding Covid-19 crisis as a ["black swan" moment](#) for higher ed. (Little did we know. ...) I said then that I would share details from the pitches in a future newsletter, but in the face of so much upheaval on campuses — and in the lives of students, professors, and college leaders — the moment never seemed right.

[SXSW EDU 2021](#) takes place virtually next week (more below on the March 9th [panel on nontraditional students](#) I'm moderating). While we didn't organize a shark tank this year, I've been wondering if and how the pandemic and national reckoning on race have changed things for last year's contestants, who were focused on admissions and career development. Spoiler alert: Yes, a lot has changed.

These are just four ideas — and we offer only reactions, not money. Still, [I always take the pitches](#) as indicators of the fault lines people see in higher education. Likewise, the judges' reactions can highlight the complexities of fixing them. (Hat tip to Bridget Burns, executive director of the University Innovation Alliance, who made our event possible last year and continues [to host the recording](#) on the UIA YouTube channel.)

With thanks to my fellow returning sharks — Paul Freedman, now president of the Learning Marketplace at Guild Education, and Catharine (Cappy) Bond Hill, managing

director of the nonprofit research consultancy Ithaka S+R — here are the initial pitches and reactions and how it's all shaken out since.

What: Training on more-inclusive practices in college admissions

Who: Marie Bigham, a longtime college counselor and now co-leader of the nonprofit [ACCEPT](#), Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today

The pitch: Having founded an organization [to press colleges to recruit and admit more low-income and minority students](#), Bigham said the group was looking to develop an educational program called JEDI (Justice Education Diversity Inclusion) to teach admissions professionals and others how to eliminate the unnecessary barriers and implicit biases in the admissions process.

The reactions: All of us appreciated the intentions but wondered if JEDI would make a difference. Similar anti-bias training is increasingly common in the corporate world, Freedman said, but sometimes it's offered "to just check the box." And as Hill, a former president of Vassar College, noted, the constraint on colleges when it comes to enrolling low-income students is ultimately whether the institution has the money for financial aid — and a willingness to spend it. Without that, Hill said, if admissions does well, "they're gonna blow by their budget."

Where things stand: With so many colleges having gone test-optional and pledging to increase racial diversity, the admissions landscape has changed a lot in a year. Bigham is the first to recognize that was due "way more" to the pandemic and calls for racial justice than to ACCEPT's advocacy. To her, though, those shifts are not enough. "We're still playing by the same deadlines. We're still clinging to the same forms," she told me. "I wish more had changed." Though derailed by Covid-19, ACCEPT has begun to transform itself from a 6,000-person Facebook group to a nonprofit that promotes [policy papers](#) and runs webinars. The JEDI program, Bigham said, is still "in process."

What: A crowdsourced resource to help students and families find an affordable college

Who: Mark Salisbury, a veteran college administrator and instructor and co-founder of the company [Tuition Fit](#)

The pitch: When students and their parents look at colleges, said Salisbury, “they want to shop by price, but they can’t.” That’s because the available information doesn’t tell them how a college is likely to tailor a financial-aid offer to a student’s particular academic and financial profile. By crowdsourcing such data from actual financial-aid offers, Salisbury said he could help students identify colleges more likely to award them more-generous aid packages, or negotiate for a better deal.

The reactions: We were all somewhat sympathetic to Salisbury’s point that the “opaque criteria” colleges now use to award aid can damage credibility, but as Hill warned, solutions like this one could easily backfire. One risk: fueling “merit-aid competitions” that could draw funds away from students who need financial aid. Freedman also noted that price isn’t everything in college choice. The cheapest option “might not be the best institution” for that student, he said. I shared those concerns and also wondered whether information gleaned from 4,000 aid offers was really big enough data to generate precise enough guidance for families to use.

Where things stand: Tuition Fit’s data set now includes information from more than 10,000 aid offers, and its user base has grown as well. Before the pandemic, the company (it’s for-profit despite its .org URL) was focused on selling its data to colleges, too, but “once things went bananas,” Salisbury said, “they just didn’t have the bandwidth to talk with us.” So he focused on the consumer side and built a tool for college-search professionals (like high-school counselors and college-access organizations) that allows them to search by price and give students instant feedback on colleges in their price range.

What: A training and mentorship program to assist faculty members moving to “the dark side” of academic administration

Who: Terri Givens, a political scientist who became a college administrator before founding the Center for Higher Education Leadership, now [Brighter Higher Ed](#)

The pitch: When professors get tapped for an administrative role, they’re often unprepared for what they’ll face. Givens learned that firsthand 15 years ago when, as a new associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin she was named a vice provost. “It was like drinking from a fire hose,” she recalled. The company she founded in 2019 offers affordable online courses and facilitates one-on-one mentoring to teach academics the nuts and bolts of accreditation, budgeting, and other aspects of administration that can be unfamiliar to professors.

The reactions: We agreed that Givens had identified a real problem. But despite her assertion that more training might make it easier for colleges to recruit professors for such posts, we each had our doubts. Freedman questioned if colleges would really pay for this (Givens said it was priced to appeal to individuals, too), Hill asked if online courses could give people the confidential advice they’d really need (Givens said the mentorship could), and I wondered if this was redundant, given other higher-ed groups that already offer professional development (Givens countered that the community orientation of this program was different).

Where things stand: Brighter Higher Ed is still developing a leadership curriculum for higher-ed faculty and administrators. Givens, meanwhile, has shifted gears a little. The book she was writing, [Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides](#), became even more relevant last year, and she began offering workshops for folks in higher ed and the corporate world. (The book was published last week.) That work is “compelling but hard,” said Givens. “There's so much work to do, and it's not something that can be done quickly,” she said. “Everybody just wants us to tell them what to do, when the real work is internal. You can't change the system without changing yourself.”

What: A model for greater collaboration between colleges and employers on work-based learning

Who: Ashley Bass, a former project director in the City University of New York's Office of Continuing Education and Workforce Programs and now education-programs associate at GitHub

The pitch: Bass, who last year was running a federal grant program at CUNY that helped low-income New Yorkers and others underrepresented in the technology industry land jobs in that field, made a case for mandated work-based learning as part of a college education. Students of all income levels would get experience that could help them make better career choices, she said, and requiring it would also make academic departments collaborate to develop meaningful work-and-learn courses. If we expect that to happen “magically,” she said, “we’re in trouble.”

The reactions: Longtime readers know I’m a huge fan of this model. So is Freedman. But I shared his skepticism about being able to engage enough employers to make this broadly feasible. It’s no accident, I said, that only a handful of colleges operate full-scale co-op programs. Bass’s reply — that colleges could develop virtual opportunities, too — seems even more prescient today, with the explosion in remote work and virtual internships.

Where things stand: When the pandemic hit, Bass shifted duties, working first to raise funds for emergency aid to students, and then to run an [upskilling program](#) that connected 5,000 students and others with free online training courses to help them land tech jobs. The grant program at CUNY ended in December, and Bass is now working at GitHub, a platform used by millions of software coders, where she’s still pushing for work-based learning, but from the work side. Her latest pitch: a pilot program that would bring in a cohort of community-college students to work with GitHub teams on various projects, giving them real industry experience and compensation.

The Most Onerous Form in College Admissions

By Eric Hoover

The Fafsa is tough, but the CSS Profile is grueling. There's a human cost.



THE REVIEW

Why Haven't More Colleges Closed?

By Rebecca S. Natow

Prognosticators predicted mass shutterings. That hasn't happened, but other enormous changes are underway.



FALL PLANS

The California State System Made a Big Bet for Fall. It Paid Off in Enrollment.

By Eric Kelderman

Long before many colleges had set their plans — and despite a prevailing narrative that students wouldn't enroll — California State declared that fall semester would be largely online.

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The veteran reporter Goldie Blumenstyk writes a weekly newsletter, *The Edge*, about the people, ideas, and trends changing higher education. Find her on Twitter @GoldieStandard. She is also the author of the bestselling book *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*.



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