

Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY



Ep. 71: Injecting Social Mobility Into the Carnegie Classifications

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

The Carnegie Classifications are an enduring institution in higher education, but they're about to undergo a facelift that could be dramatic. Hello and welcome to The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and The Keys host. Thanks for joining us. Today's discussion will explore the recent news that the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching - which created the main system we use to differentiate among types of colleges and universities about 50 years ago - had chosen the American Council on Education, the largest and most diverse association of college presidents, to remake and run the classifications going forward. I'm joined today by the leaders of the two organizations, Tim Knowles of Carnegie and Ted Mitchell of ACE, to talk about the partnership and about why the time is right to refresh them. But as Ted Mitchell explains in the conversation that follows, these groupings not only describe the higher education landscape, but the way that governments and others use them, they also shape institutional behavior, sometimes in unintended ways.

TED MITCHELL:

What started out, Tim set it right, a typology, which is a descriptive set of categories, has become normative. And I think that that idea of a gold standard or a north star has not simply captured the missions of institutions, but it has directed the missions of institutions.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Much of the discussion with Tim Knowles and Ted Mitchell revolves around their plan to add a significant focus to whether and how much colleges and universities contribute to social mobility and racial equity, potentially by adding an entirely new classification that would sort institutions by the degree to which they are engines of mobility and equity. The idea of judging and even ranking colleges on social mobility is getting a lot of attention these days. And in our second interview today, I'm joined by Brendan Cantwell, an associate professor and coordinator of the Higher Adult and Lifelong Education Program at Michigan State University. He talks about an essay he published in the Chronicle of Higher Education this month about the potential unintended consequences that focus in too much on social mobility in college rankings can have. Spoiler alert, he thinks social mobility is important to pay attention to. Now, on to today's discussions, the first of which is with Tim Knowles, who has been president of the Carnegie Foundation since last year, and Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education.

Tim and Ted, welcome to the club and thanks for being here. Tim, the classifications are obviously a foundational part of what Carnegie does, and I'm sure that finding the right home for them was probably a top priority for you. Can you tell us a bit about how this process unfolded and why you landed on ACE?

TIM KNOWLES:

Thank you very much, Doug, and thanks for having us. When Carnegie Foundation was thinking about who the right partners were for becoming a home for the classifications for the next five or so years, we were really thinking on three fronts. First was the ability and convening power, and clearly ACE engages institutions of higher ed nationally globally. Ultimately, the power of the classifications are gonna be borne based on their utility, and ensuring they're redesigned and reimaged with the post-secondary sector is key. And so, ACE was central to doing that well, in our view. The second thing that was important to us was policy traction. And ACE obviously has a very long history of impact on higher education policy going way back to the creation of the GED, the GI bill, and many, many more examples

in more contemporary way. Carnegie, too, has had an important policy role, Pell Grants, TIAA-CREF, GRE, Educational Testing Service, etcetera. So, being sure that the classifications actually were going to be under girded over time by coherent and supportive policy was important to us as well.

And finally, the willingness to think ahead with integrity and try to think clearly about what are our big challenges globally and nationally, and how can how can the higher education sector writ large help to address those big challenges. And look, first and foremost on our list is the social and economic mobility challenge. And there was tremendous alignment with ACE on trying to think about that one in creative ways.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Ted, why was ACE interested in taking on these classifications? And how does it fit into your overall strategy for the organization?

TED MITCHELL:

Great question and thanks for having us. Great to be here and great to be with Tim. This is going to be a terrific partnership. Now, picking up on Tim's points on the three vectors, I think that I'll work back through them. As you know well, Doug, ACE has been focused for several years now on the importance of equity, racial equity, social mobility. And we've been doing as much as we can on the program side and also on the visibility side to highlight institutions that have been All-Stars in producing upward mobility for institutions. Our board reflects that idea and certainly our program development around equity based leadership, the race and equity analysis of higher education, all of those things have continued to point us to the social importance of these issues. And so, the opportunity to work with Carnegie and to work with Tim and his colleagues to build that into how the core classification system, how we think about higher education in the country, is something that we've been pushing around inside ACE for some time.

So, this is an aspiration come true for us. Second, I think on the policy side Tim is right and generous. Both Carnegie and ACE have been very active in policy work, some of the most fundamental changes in higher education. So, it's time that we teamed up on those and not just work on parallel paths, but team up for the next generation of real change, which is to broaden the aperture and to create identifiable lanes of excellence for institutions. And that's what we're all in, as you know well, and as the field knows, ACE is the only association that represents all institutions, two-year, four-year public and private. And because we sit there in the ecosystem, we understand how much it matters to institutions to be represented, to have their missions, their excellence, their work be represented in the classification system. And we think that over the next several years we'll be able to build that kind of robust, three dimensional view of institutional excellence.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Tim, you're newish to Carnegie at this point and presumably brought a fresh eye to the classifications. And I'm curious - and I'll give Ted a chance to weigh in on this as well -, but what is your sense about what the classifications as they're currently constructed do well? And maybe where are the gaps that could use some improvement?

TIM KNOWLES:

They are 50 years old, almost 50 years old. So, my first comment is that they are ready for rethinking, rescrutinizing, reimagining. That said, they do some things and have done some things incredibly well.

They create a typology in an incredibly diverse ecosystem. They're a way of differentiating based on all sorts of vectors, whether what degrees are given out, whether size of institution, the amount of research versus other activity, teaching activities. But again, after 50 years... And then we've made refinements on the way, it struck me as incoming president that this is a moment to ask some more fundamental questions about the extent to which the post-secondary sector is addressing, not causing, but is addressing some of the big fundamental challenges the nation faces and how can the classifications be leveraged in new and creative ways to do that. There are, as I'm sure you and your listeners know, they're both universal classifications, things that we we look at across the board, no matter what kind of institution you are.

And everybody gets such a classification. And then there's a smaller number, very small number, of elective classifications where people can, in essence, vote with their feet and say, I want to be recognized for X or Y. Currently the public purposes of higher education and community engagement particularly have lots and lots of utility. And there's an opportunity, as Ted has suggested, to really think through broadly aperture, think through a suite of classifications that would be more inclusive and more informative. So, things they don't do so well. They are not a ranking and often we hear this is a ranking, but they're not. The rankings rank, there's one through 2043 or one through however many institutions of that type there are. We were never designed as a ranking, but they have been used as such. And that's an area. So, our one has become a gold standard that many people chase. We are not irregularly asked to send framed pictures of their letters with the R1 designation. And we say, no, no, we don't do that.

This is not a ranking. And yet both at times government and certainly the ranking agencies have leveraged the Carnegie classifications as such, and that's something we have to think much more carefully about.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Ted, what's your sense of what is working and what isn't it with the current classifications?

TED MITCHELL:

Not a surprise that Tim and I see eye to eye on many of these issues. I think going back, I think let's remember that in the late 1960s, early 1970s, one of the things we needed to understand better was the distribution of research across American higher education institutions. And so, I think that Carnegie from the very beginning, the classification system, did a terrific job and still does a terrific job of identifying those institutions whose mission is really focused on high level, big science, other kinds of research. So, I think it played a very important role in signifying to the public, to agencies, the institutions themselves, who is doing what kind of work, especially in the area of research. The classification systems were less sharp as they moved through the different categories. And I think if we were to ask (UNKNOWN) readers to name five Carnegie classifications, they could probably do three, all three of them starting with R. And, you know, I don't think that that's accidental.

I think that that was rather intentional. And to Tim's point, after 50 years, I think it's right for us to take a look. Is that still exactly what we want to focus on? Is that what we need to understand? And I think that our answer is a yes and we should continue to focus on that. But I think that we are really struck by a number of the critiques of higher education about whether higher education is just an elite institution serving the elites, whether it really does generate racial equity, social mobility, opportunities for people to climb the economic ladder to join the American dream. And we want to highlight that as we go

forward. So, I don't think that there are things that Carnegie didn't do well, I think that there are things that have changed in the ecosystem. Think of the number of institutions has tripled since then. The number of students who are going to higher education has quadrupled. It's time to take a look at this. I think the one downside to where the classifications have been is that what started out, Tim said it right, a typology, which is a descriptive set of categories, has become normative.

And I think that that idea of a gold standard or a north star has not simply captured the missions of institutions, but it has directed the missions of institutions. And there I think we, Carnegie and ACE, want to create multiple lanes of institutional excellence that are aligned with their missions, rather than asking them to reshape their missions to align with the classifications.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

When actual rankings try to respond to criticism that they incentivize less than ideal institutional behavior, they tend to alter or, more often, tweak their criteria by minimizing the weight given to certain factors or embedding new ones. Whether they're successful in that process is a topic for a different conversation. But regarding the classifications, to what extent do you envision accomplishing your goals by sort of reconfiguring the basic classifications to either de-emphasize research or focus more on other factors versus - and this would be the other way to go - adding a new and separate classification that would supplement the core categorization? Is one of those approaches likelier than the other?

TIM KNOWLES:

My quick answer is that's the work ahead of us, and we want to do that in an inclusive and collaborative way, which is one of the reasons ACE was such an important partner so that we could enlist tribal colleges, HBCUs, big research elites and everything else in the mix in terms of guiding what these decisions are. My second answer is there remains value, as Ted just said, in creating typologies that differentiate between certain kinds of activities, whether it's delivering two year degrees or delivering lots of teachers and social workers to the field or delivering large bodies of science, STEM related research activity. So, in that sense, I don't think it's a an/or, let's do this or that. It's really a how do we make this a more robust suite end portfolio. I'll say this as well, just to sort of capture the challenge of the R1 becoming a destination for everyone. One of my first conversations when I became the president of the foundation was with the president of an HBCU who said to me point blank, "Tim, guess how many HBCUs are R1s?" And I said, "I think I know the answer to that." And he said, "Yeah, and it'll take me 100 years to get there." So, when you have a classification system that is suddenly become normative and is a destination, as destination's embedded, that's why we have to rethink, because those very HBCUs are doing, in some cases, as much or more for the country in terms of addressing another fundamental problem in income inequality and social and economic mobility as any of the elite research institutions may be doing.

And that's why we think this has been such an important time to revisit and build a more comprehensive picture and, frankly, create multiple destinations if there have to be destinations.

TED MITCHELL:

The HBCU example is an important one because I think it does speak to the different ways that institution can be excellent. And so, if you look, for example, at the percentage of young men and women of color who leave HBCUs and go on and get PhDs, especially black scientists, there's an overwhelming overrepresentation of HBCU graduates among that list. And yet the classification system

doesn't have a way yet of rewarding that. Similarly, among regional, comprehensive institutions, there are social mobility rates that are far greater than there are in many of the flagship research universities. That's not to deny the importance of the flagship research universities as engines of social mobility, but where do those regional comprehensives get to a point and get to get their letters framed? And I think that what we're after here is, again, not to diminish the role of America's great research universities, it is a part of what makes our education system great, but, you know this, sort of the first sentence that I learned when I came to ACE was the greatness of American higher education lies in its diversity.

That is true. And we want to recognize that diversity for the social impact that it has.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Let's focus on social mobility and contribution to equity for a minute. Recognizing that this is a work in progress, is there a decision that is gonna have to be made about whether to incorporate those factors through a new, separate classification of some kind, rather than through a revision of the core one we're all familiar with?

TED MITCHELL:

The quick answer is the one that Tim gave a moment ago, that is the work. And so, there will be decisions and that will be an important one about whether these become factors in the basic classification system. I don't want to distinguish between basic, which is what we got and then universal, which is a bit of a broader category. Right now, Doug, we do see the creation of a differentiated set of indicators around racial equity and social mobility. We don't know if that's how it will end up, even if it is an independent categorization within the universal classification. We know that we have to work internally to make sure that that is coherent, that it is responsible, and it reflects the kind of nuance that we started with. So, we think we need to build it and then we'll decide whether it's independent, whether it is an augmentation to the basic or not. The other thing I want to go back to is Tim mentioned the elective classifications. We think that there's a lot of opportunity for institutions to show the diversity of their missions and their impact as we solidify the electives and expand those electives to include things like tribal serving institutions, to think about sustainability, for example, in things that institutions do that are important and impactful that we haven't yet built into the typology.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Tim, why are racial equity and social mobility so essential to build into the classifications at this particular moment in whatever way you ultimately decide to go?

TIM KNOWLES:

I'll just point to two pieces of research. One is Raj Chetty's work on economic mobility since 1940, which basically paints an incredibly stark picture of decreasing mobility over the last 50 years. And though he hasn't yet updated it for this current generation, there's every expectation that economic mobility is really going backwards in this country. The other piece of research, less well heralded, but equally important, perhaps more so, is work done by the Federal Reserve, Duke and economists at the New School, which looked at net income of families by race. And on average the net worth of a white family was \$247,000. On average, the economic net worth of a Puerto Rican family was \$3,020, and on average, the number for a black family was \$8. When income inequality is so skewed, it's... Again, this is not pointing fingers at the post-secondary sector, at higher education. This isn't saying higher education is the reason for that. However, higher education is an instrumental variable in addressing that.

And that's why to elevate social and economic mobility, in my view, in a much more serious way if we want to get ahead of a problem that is instrumental not just to the nation's economy, but to the democracy.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

One quick follow up to that. I think it was in your bio on the Carnegie site, talks about the Carnegie as desiring one of its key missions as being an engine for equity. And I'm curious, do you think that the classifications as they've been constructed and as they've been operating in this increasingly, you know, outdated or 50-year-old way, have they contributed as a positive for an engine of equity or have they been in any way part of a part of something that impedes that or that that doesn't drive it?

TIM KNOWLES:

I think the answer is both. I think when you have a situation where R1 institutions are told or invited by the Federal Government to apply for \$300 or \$400 million grants and those opportunities aren't available to R2s or any of the other classifications, they're really just for R1s, then you build in the potential for significant inequity into the very system. Because how do I become an R1? I become an R1 by having resources, by having X number of degrees, X number of research dollars, this kind of student teacher ratios. And so, then if because I have resources, I then I'm eligible to have more, that is worth interrogating in a serious way. And when you have institutions that are doing really elegant work in terms of propelling young people, whether state systems or private institutions and the propulsion is a value, is a fundamental value, like actually being able to move from one quantile to the next in terms of your economic status, then, you know, I think you could argue that classifications have helped to reinforce some of the (UNKNOWN).

TED MITCHELL:

We do a lot of work with presidents and with new presidents in particular. And one of the interesting things, and a little bit disturbing, is to hear a new president stand up before the alumni and say, my goal is that within ten years or five years or pick a number, we will be an R1 institution without actually asking the question why, or asking the question, what are we doing that would be equally valuable to society? And so, I think the normative aspect of this is, as Tim said, is contributing to (UNKNOWN), it's contributing to the maldistribution of resources across institutions of higher education, whether they're federal research dollars or philanthropic dollars. And again, we're trying to create a suite of classifications that allow excellence to emerge around the kind of throughput that Tim is talking about. He talked about the really stark and really negative data around income distribution and around family wealth. And on the other side, I think the hope in this is that we see the countervailing information and the countervailing research from Tony Carnevale and his colleagues at Georgetown.

We see it from a number of a number of researchers across the landscape that higher education does matter. And achieving a bachelor's degree does matter in terms of individual economic and social mobility and in terms of intergenerational mobility. We think both are terrifically important. And so, focusing on those in this moment in our history, we think is going to be a way to increase the attention on and the importance of building ladders of social mobility within and across institutions.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Ted, is there any tension created by a membership organization that does lobbying like ECE in taking on this job of revising and essentially, you know, helping to sort of run these classifications?

TED MITCHELL:

So, it's a good question. And Tim and I obviously talked a lot about it as we went through this process. Have three quick answers. I mean, one is that unlike an individual institution or a subset of institutions, ACE represents everybody. So, it's going to be very difficult for us to sort of put a thumb on the scale around one type of institution. And that's really why we're getting into this, is because we see the value of so many different kinds of institutions. Second, we're building an organization that will be separate from the rest of ACE. And so, that personnel will be, you know, doing their own thing. And then third, and this goes back to something that Tim mentioned that I really want to emphasize. This is not gonna be some sort of backroom science experiment. We at ACE pride ourselves on engaging the community in hard issues. And so, we will make this process as open and as transparent and as iterative as possible, so that at the end of the day, people are bought to the algorithm, if you will, by which the classifications will work.

And they will have said, Yeah, I saw those. I know what's going to happen. And, you know, I roughly agree with the direction. In fact, we're going to go farther than just doing that on the front end. We're committed to making all of the data available. And so, creating open APIs for researchers across the field to use the data that we gather in ways that can help inform and, I hope, enhance the classification, the utility of the classifications.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Tim, anything you wanted to add here?

TIM KNOWLES:

Two short things. Thing one is just another way to emphasize one of Ted's points is that in embedding the classifications, as has happened historically in a particular higher education institution, there are inherent conflicts there as well. If it's an R1 currently or an R2, we were going to be grappling with similar issues. And number two is the nature of the partnership itself. Carnegie's name remains. And they remain the Carnegie classifications, and that brings with it a separate and objective level of scrutiny on the part of my trustees and my institution to the classifications, such that we're gonna want to be sure that they maintain their integrity, that the intellectual rigor in terms of what is defining a particular classification holds. And so, there's a layer, an additional layer of scrutiny in that sense as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You both took care to differentiate the classifications from rankings, though we also talked about the extent to which even the classifications can influence institutional behavior in a few of the same ways that rankings do. How do you see the revising of the classifications and potentially the classifications after that as being a potential antidote to a guard against some of the potentially damaging effects that rankings may have on how institutions behave in terms of chasing prestige or selectivity over other goals and values?

TED MITCHELL:

One of the things we don't want to build is another 50 year classification system. Instead, we want to build a classification system that is much more malleable, that learns from the work and learns from the response of the field and changes as a result of that. We haven't talked about it, but one of our hopes is that as we develop these classification, these new classification rubrics, we are able to help the field understand what it takes to improve in them, how to be the best engine of social mobility, how to be the best sustainable institution. And so, we hope that the normativity becomes... One of Tim's

colleagues calls it intentional normativity, that we look for ways to help people improve around that pinnacle of excellence that they want to achieve.

TIM KNOWLES:

It's another great question, Doug. You know, it's probably a human compunction and it's certainly an American compunction to rank things. We just love this, we have an appetite for it. And I think in some ways, the classifications, like just as we have appetites for things that are unhealthy for us, we need countervailing forces. We need doctors telling us, don't always eat that. And I think the classifications in some ways represents that. That though, in the first sentence of the U.S. News and World Report rankings, when they describe their methodology they mentioned the Carnegie classifications, saying this is anchored on blah, blah, blah, blah. I think our job and our obligation is to do something different. And that is to say that the kind of distinguish between 5,000 plus institutions isn't our goal, but we are going to make value judgments about what's important. That's the intentional normativity. We do think economic mobility matters. We do. And we think that higher ed is an important engine for that.

And so, we are going to pay attention to it, but we're not going to differentiate between the first and the 183rd. We're going perhaps to say there are three or four levels at which you can, in essence, be viewed to perform. And so, yes, there may be an E1, an E1 may come with supportive public policy opportunity to be engaged in, learning opportunities may come with resources for the first time, whether public or philanthropic. So, I think our job fundamentally is a complicated one and is a more nuanced one that, yes, we value things. And so, I don't want to be blind to that. And we're putting a judgment on some things being important, but we're trying to do it in a different way. (RELAXING INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Our second interview today is with Brandon Cantwell, who is an associate professor of higher education at Michigan State. Brandon, welcome to The Key, and thanks for joining us.

BRANDON CANTWELL:

Oh, thanks very much for having me.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You published a thought provoking essay in another higher education publication recently entitled Against Social Mobility Rankings that responded, at least in part, to the proposed revision of the Carnegie classifications that we just heard Tim Knowles and Ted Mitchell talk about. Can you give listeners a quick summary of the key points of your piece?

BRANDON CANTWELL:

So, that article was actually written before I even knew that the Carnegie classifications were going to incorporate social mobility. And then, when that announcement happened, I was able to just fold that topic in a little bit because it was related to the rest of the article. But the article itself was a response to the growing trend in higher education policy and advocacy world in the public conversation to shift the conversation away from exclusion, highly selective universities, to give much more attention to those institutions that are serving students broadly and that are doing quite a lot of good and important work in terms of social mobility and providing gateways to new opportunities for students who otherwise wouldn't have them. And, on the whole, I, like many people in the sector, are very pleased with this shift

in the conversation and think that it is productive and right and orienting policy with the values that many of us have. But the catch is that I think that there can be too much of a good thing.

And where I became concerned with the direction of the conversation is with this new development of providing rankings for social mobility. And the reason that I'm concerned about that is not because I think social mobility is bad or we shouldn't have data about social mobility. I think social mobility is good and we should have data about it. But I know that the methods used don't allow us to attribute cause to the social mobility. So, we can't say that the institution itself, the University of Maryland or something, caused social mobility for its students. Now, that's not to say that the University of Maryland had no hand in helping its students achieve good things. It's saying that it's a really complicated process that involves a lot of factors, and isolating the University of Maryland's impact is really a difficult thing to do, even when you do localized adjustments. So, I was raising this point that context really matters and that when you begin to rank something like the best campus for social mobility down to the worst campus for social mobility, there's a really strong implication that the differences between those campuses are caused by choices that the administration is making.

And to some extent that is true, but to a large extent it may not be true. That, yes, it's great to shine a light on the campuses that are doing really good and important work and are implicated in social mobility or helping with social mobility, but it may be not helpful when we begin to do actually ranking in some ordinal way because of the causal implications and because it takes what is a very complicated topic and distills it into something that seems more simple than it is.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Unpacking a few things there. Why is it hard to attribute a good or bad outcome on social mobility to an institution?

BRANDON CANTWELL:

Ways in which it is related to the institution's behavior. The students that apply to the institution that the institution chooses to select. If the institution is admitting students from a broad range of backgrounds, low income students, then it is in a better position to support those students to achieve social mobility because it's technically possible, right? Upward social mobility anyway. That's in the institution's control. Also in the institution's control is the type of supports that the institution provides to help students graduate and get through the kind of advising and academic and social supports that an institution is providing the students. Things that are partly in the institution's control are the cost of education and the debt and price that students pay. So, I say that's partly in institutions control because yes, they can certainly make choices about how they spend their money and how much money they need to generate to operate, but a lot of those costs are fixed.

And so, while there is some areas of discretion, it is not fully in the institution's control. And an institution with a lot of resources, say, from an endowment with unrestricted access to funds, is better able to make choices to support lower income students than an institution that doesn't have these kind of resources. An institution that benefits from a state that provides a generous public subsidy is better able to control those prices and the costs associated with participating in higher education than an institution that doesn't. And then things that are really out of the institution's control are the types of jobs available in the communities where it's located, in the communities where their students live and make families after they graduate. So, places where there are lots of jobs and lots of high paying jobs

you can see more social mobility because those opportunities are just available for students to take advantage of once they graduate, and especially if they're able to earn a degree.

I'll also say that, you know, the extent to which these measures can get sophisticated is really sort of endless. You notice that a lot of campuses that do the best on social mobility indexes are in New York and Los Angeles. And making \$100,000 in New York City is different than making \$100,000 here in East Lansing, Michigan. And so, you can also think, if we're talking about the national distribution of incomes and position on the sort of, you know, economic scale, that tells us one thing. But what that reality is for somebody who's living with that salary is another thing. And so, that's also out of the control of the college, right? The cost of living and where it's located.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Carnegie classifications are not a ranking. We just heard Ted talk very much about that. So, some of the critiques or worries that you have don't apply as much. But the classifications do drive institutional behavior in some ways that rankings do, in part because some people use them not exactly as a ranking, but pretty close. I mean, there are the pursuit to be and R1 does lead some institutions to focus on research and potentially to be more selective in admissions, etcetera, etcetera. And in fact, as we just heard, the reasons why the folks who are now going to be responsible for Carnegie's classifications want to include some assessment of social mobility, use it a counterweight to what they recognize it's probably still valid but not fully inclusive way of judging institutions. I'm curious kind of how you look at that, a potential use of social mobility, do you still see ways in which that could be problematic?

BRANDON CANTWELL:

I am taking the sort of wait and see approach with Carnegie because we don't know yet how social mobility will be measured or how this classification will work. I think that it in some ways helps to remedy one of the issues with the Carnegie classifications, which is basically they actually have pretty finite and fine grained distinctions in there. But when you look at the bigger categories that everybody sort of uses and knows while they're telling the truth, they often provide not enough information. So, my employer, Michigan State University, is in the same basic, you know, R1 category as Stanford. And Michigan State and Stanford are really different places. And there are some ways in which Michigan State and Stanford are directly in the same category or activity. Michigan State and Stanford may occasionally compete for the same faculty members. Stanford usually wins. (CHUCKLE) Michigan State and Stanford definitely compete for the same federal research grants that are available. And so, in that sense, it may make some sense.

But Michigan State University and Stanford are not really in the same undergraduate student market. And yes, you can distinguish between public and private in the Carnegie classifications, but the basic classification is the same. So, one thing that the social mobility classifications, layering them on, can help to understand the types of students and the sort of place in the higher education system, if you will, that an institution fits in. And now, what kind of value judgment you place on that, whether it's good or bad or just descriptive, is up to you. And that's why I am a little bit less concerned on the face of it, with classifications than I am with rankings, because it doesn't have a very strong implied value judgment necessarily. It's much more a description of mission and activity. And of course, we as individuals, as policymakers, as journalists or thinkers about the sector, you know, we have values and value judgments, and those are OK to bring into these conversations. But the classification itself is a little bit less loaded, if you will.

You know, when the classification started, they were devised sort of in parallel with the federal data collection system of (UNKNOWN). And it was a way for people inside of higher education, for policymakers to make sense of, to form some common understandings of what this expansive landscape of higher education in the United States was doing. And that needs to be periodically updated, but particularly because, you know, that R1 classification that we're using today - and that's not even a classification, it hasn't been for years, and it's just stuck. So, we're sort of cemented into this time where we understand the higher education system in the United States through these classifications in a particular way that doesn't reflect the classifications anymore, that may not reflect the system of higher education anymore. So, updating it is useful. Now, whether that gets taken up, whether the unintended consequences of this sort of are less helpful than the potentially helpful aspects... You know, that's possible.

It's going to ACE, so that's another interesting question because now, you know, ACE is a membership organization and some of its members might not be happy about the way the classifications work in one way or another. And so, that's a potential thing to look out for. And, in fact, I think that move is in some ways more interesting than the adding the social mobility classification. So, that's my kind of reaction to that. Definitely interesting. Wait and see. I can see ways in which it could be helpful. I can see ways in which it could go wrong.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Picking up on that, what problems could you see arising from ACE's involvement in the Carnegie classifications?

BRANDON CANTWELL:

I could imagine that some of the ways that social mobility categories are devised could not be especially welcome for many of the private universities, colleges and universities that ACE, you know, represents and has been known to represent in the past. So, there would be a sort of potential tension between doing what is essentially right for those members and doing a social mobility classification in a way that makes sense to researchers and accountability folks. But the other thing that I'll say, trying to think about this sort of the whole picture of it, is it definitely indicates some movement and a shift in higher education generally and among institutions that are recognizing that this is something that they need to pay attention to. Bring Carnegie to ACE and, at the same time, adding the social mobility classification is a suggestion, you know, that the sector as a whole recognizes that serving students and participating in activities that lead to greater social equity is important.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Interestingly, you know, you describe the early reasons for the classifications and they weren't meant to be sort of values based. And as, you said, that has happened nonetheless. This decision, this shift, while it is certainly focused on providing more information and doing more classifying, it does reflect a little bit of a shift in values. So, it's sort of almost an acknowledgement that these things do reflect values in some way that is different from what they were originally intended.

BRANDON CANTWELL:

Yeah. And I'll walk it back a little bit to say, of course, there were values in the original rankings. I don't mean to say that they weren't values based, but those values were based on like trying to make sense of the higher education system based on how people understood it at that time and their thoughts about what it ought to be doing. And there's a lot of emphasis at that point with balancing expanding access

with maintaining the sort of intensity of research and excellence. And it worked its way into the field of understanding excellence and equity or excellence and access as tensions to be balanced. And I think that there is a shift in the conceptualization of that from not excellence and equity or excellence and access, however you want to think about it, as intention, but as one way to be excellent is through equity, is through access. And definitely that shift is reflected in this emphasis on social mobility in general, which is, again, one of the reasons I think that this is a useful development.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Thanks to Brendan Cantwell for that trenchant analysis of the pros and cons of trying to judge institutions by their contributions to social mobility and equity, and to Ted Mitchell and Tim Knowles for their candid assessment of the hard work in front of them in bringing the Carnegie classifications up to date. This will be an interesting process to watch, and it's almost certain to trigger the discussion that Brendan talked about over the potential tension between excellence, access and equity, which is likely to be intense at a time when every discussion seems to turn into a debate. We'll keep an eye on this as it unfolds and suspect we'll return to it down the road. That's all for this week's episode. Before we wrap, please remember to subscribe to The Key on your favorite podcast platform and don't hesitate to reach out to me via email, Twitter, LinkedIn or any other mode of communication about topics you'd like to see us explore in future episodes. I'll be back next week. Until then, stay well and stay safe.