Response to Ivory Tower Documentary (250-400 words)

What is the central message of this film, from your perspective?

The film, Ivory Tower, illustrates the complex issues that face Higher Education in the United States in the 21st century by analyzing varied institutions and programs. To me, the overarching theme of the film is that higher education is faced with challenges unlike the industry has ever experienced before; in all cases, the primary challenge is that of economics and value. From skills-based learning at Harvard, to the attractiveness of the ‘party school motif’ of Arizona State University to the Silicon Valley Uncollege program, families and institutions alike find themselves asking questions about the value of both a degree in terms of skills and jobs but also the value of the college experience itself. Tuition has risen at astronomical levels, often in an arms race as institutions seek to compete with each other to provide useful services. As investment in higher education decreases, economics becomes the key question as families are often tasked to bear the costs. In response, institutions have attempted to uncover unique ways to cut costs and establish value with families, through programs like MOOCs/Udacity at SJSU, CS50 at Harvard, flipped classrooms, or online learning. Additionally, institutions face unprecedented change as Cooper Union charges tuition and Wesleyan faces scrutiny from parents about the return on investment. The reason that these issues are so important lies in the fact that universal higher education is a very important American value. The challenge moving forward will be: ‘how can we stay true to our values of access for many (if not all) and guarantee affordability and accountability at the institutional level?’ This film’s case studies prove that we will likely not find one simple answer but nevertheless there must be some action as the system currently disadvantages our young men and women.