

# Presidential Leadership for Public Purpose



THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
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**I**T HAS BECOME a well-rehearsed litany. Declining public appropriations for higher education by states with reduced tax revenues and increased demands to fund healthcare, roads, prisons, and K–12 education as first-order priorities. Tuition increases that each year substantially exceed the growth of family income, threatening to put a college education beyond the reach of too many low-income students. A changing demographic profile that ought to yield an increasingly diverse college student body but is not doing so. The growing prominence and market success of private-sector/proprietary providers as well as alternative modes of educational delivery through digital technology and other means. Questions about the effectiveness of learning and the value of the education that universities and colleges provide, as measured by the rates of student persistence and graduation. A seeming gridlock that often prevents institutions from adapting to change by any means other than growing larger and adding to existing costs. And finally, an abridgment of the hope that doing a better job of documenting higher education's value would yield an increase in public support—combined with an instinct that greater public financial support will never come about without such evidence. It is a set of questions that pertains not just to effective learning and the financing of higher education but equally to the continued ability of colleges and universities to serve the public interest.

The discussions these questions have engendered are often as fractured as the list of lamentations is long. Too often, the resulting debates are without focus, frequently without apparent purpose, and, alas, too often missing the voices of university and college presidents. In previous epochs, presidential leadership was a force for change in American higher education, as university and college presidents served not just as witnesses and respondents but also as active shapers of the national dialogue.

To engage presidents more directly in what is becoming an increasingly rancorous discussion of higher education's current priorities, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education convened a set of presidential soundings and exchanges in the spring and summer of 2010 with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education. The process included one-on-one interviews and a two-day roundtable discussion to consider higher education's role in meeting the nation's need for a more highly educated and skilled population in a time of dramatic change and uncertainty. In all, the process involved presidents of 28 universities and colleges—including two- and four-year institutions large and small, public and independent, proprietary and nonprofit. A Presidential Roundtable convened in Leesburg, Virginia, in July 2010 included 16 of the 28 presidents initially interviewed who were able to participate. The goal of these presidential soundings was to provide a vision of higher education's continued vitality in a time of fiscal constraint, and to offer a set of actions that presidents can take to help both their institutions individually and the nation collectively to move forward.

## Vision and Commitment

The irony confronting all college and university presidents, including

ourselves, is that most of the institutions we lead were founded by men and women who, having understood the need to respond to societal challenges, made institutional change their first priority. Public policy and public agencies were often their institutional partners in promoting a vision of change and a commitment to excellence. The Morrill Act of 1862, which led to the creation of a national system of state land-grant universities, foresaw the need for a population that, because it knew more, could do more. Though signed into law during the upheaval and uncertainty of the American Civil War, the Morrill Act conveyed a powerful vision of the nation's productive vitality in the coming age.

Following the Second World War a second set of federal initiatives further transformed American higher education by making clear that the nation's colleges and universities—and by extension, their president-leaders—were to be principal vehicles for fulfilling the vision of a nation prepared to provide global leadership. The first was a largely serendipitous federal investment in American higher education—the GI Bill, which resulted both in an expanding pool of college-educated workers and a federal commitment, later formalized in the 1970s, to making a college education broadly available. The rapid expansion of the American economy during this time increased living standards for nearly everyone and made it possible for growing numbers of American families to send their children to college. Shortly after the GI Bill's implementation, a compelling report published in 1945 by Vannevar Bush, entitled "Science, the Endless Frontier," emphasized the critical importance of scientific discovery and progress not just for the advancement of human well-being, but also for the nation's strategic purposes in what had become a world theater of ideological and military contention. Bush's case for science ultimately yielded the creation of the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health, providing the foundation for the development of the modern research university in the United States.

Complementing these federal investments were the equally dramatic increases in local and state spending for higher education. The expansion of the community colleges during the 1950s and '60s, as well as the establishment of regional universities, often as part of new state university systems, further extended the promise of college to any student with a desire to learn and a willingness to work hard.

## Constricting Horizons

By nearly everyone's account, the landscape of expanding opportunity created in earlier times of societal vision and commitment has now become a constricted range for growing numbers of students, particularly those for whom the cost of attending college is a major consideration. The percentage of

**Our roundtable brought together presidents of universities and colleges across the full spectrum of higher education, including leaders of public-sector, independent, and proprietary universities and colleges.**



Presidential Roundtable facilitator Robert Zemsky, professor and chair, the Learning Alliance for Higher Education, University of Pennsylvania (left), and Gail Mellow, president, LaGuardia Community College

Photos by John Troha, Black Star, for CrossTalk

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whites who have earned a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science continues to outpace the degree attainment rate of Hispanics and African Americans by a factor of roughly two to one.

For those of us who participated in the Presidential Roundtable, this disparity in college participation and attainment has become higher education's principal challenge—one that directly confronts the nation's continued vitality, particularly when coupled with two other facts. First, the United States has fallen substantially behind many of the nations with which it com-

petes in the global marketplace in terms of the proportion of its citizens with a college education. Second, the populations that are growing the fastest across the United States are those that have been least well-served by the current system of higher education. More here is at stake than simple equity. What is required is a fundamental expansion of educational opportunity, as expressed in the Obama administration's call for an additional eight million college graduates by 2020 beyond those currently predicted to earn a college degree.

At the same time, there is a continuing need to educate all Americans, providing the critical knowledge and skills that allow graduates to function as thinking, engaged, and contributing members of society throughout life. The challenges of the future will require an American population that possesses verbal and numerical literacy, critical thinking, and effective communication as a foundation for participation in a nation based on democratic principles.

Many have observed that higher education has evolved into a mature industry, organized and run in essentially the same way for half a century. Dramatic changes have occurred through these decades—in the nature of societal needs and challenges, in methods of creating information, and in modes of teaching and learning. Changes in the nation's demographics are yielding a population that is more diverse in terms of ethnic, cultural, and economic background—a population whose members bring widely divergent levels of preparation for college, who approach the act of learning in different ways, and who are accustomed to using digital technology as an integral part of their learning.

The problem, simply stated, is that American higher education at its core remains vested in a structure designed for a student population more characteristic of past decades than of the present or future: a structure designed to serve what was then a middle-class, predominantly white student body—a subset of the 18- to 22-year-old population that had chosen to attend college

even though other opportunities had then existed for productive employment without a college degree. This was a student population that for the most part matriculated directly from high school, enrolled full-time, and graduated in four or five years. With the virtual disappearance of opportunities for unskilled labor in the U.S., in this century a college education has become essential for anyone who seeks meaningful employment and social mobility. However broad the spectrum of traditional higher education institutions in terms of mission, size, and control, too many have yet to recognize what it means to provide students from a broader range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds with an education that allows them to find fulfilling and productive places in the workforce and in society itself.

American higher education faces a major challenge in its capacity to edu-

cate students in the numbers required to increase the nation's competitiveness in a global economy. Virtually every state now faces severe constraints in its ability to support the system of traditional public and independent higher education institutions within its borders. Public universities and colleges inevitably find that the amount of their budgets funded by state appropriation accounts for a steadily shrinking share of the whole. For the past 30 years, both public and independent nonprofit institutions of higher education have met the need for additional resources, in large part through tuition increases which have averaged three percent to five percent above inflation and growth in family income per year in real dollars.

The nation's system of higher education is often described as a pyramid in which the foundation layer consists of students attending open-enrollment institutions, including students who matriculate in community colleges, technical institutions, and proprietary institutions offering two-year degrees or certification in targeted employment skills. Further up the pyramid is a substantial cohort of students in public regional universities as well as in less selective independent liberal arts colleges. The next stages of the structure include students in state flagship research universities, and finally students enrolled in the nation's most selective independent colleges and research universities.

As it tapers toward the top, the pyramid comprises an ever smaller number of institutions with selective admissions that enroll the nation's highest-achieving students, who in many cases are also the most advantaged students in terms of educational and socioeconomic background. What may be less clear from the image of the pyramid itself are the different expenditures made to educate students at each tier of the structure. In fact, the dollars expended per student in the lower tiers of the system are substantially less than the dollars spent to educate students in the upper strata. From the standpoint of meeting the nation's need for a better educated and more highly skilled population in the coming decades, the higher education pyramid as it now exists would need to be inverted.

It is the nation's community colleges and regional universities—open-enrollment or less selective institutions with a strong mission to promote educational access—that have experienced the effects of financial recession in the most direct and painful ways. In recent years, these institutions have accommodated substantial growth in enrollment with little or no corresponding increase in public appropriation; very often these two- and four-year institutions feel the double whammy of increased enrollment accompanied by double-digit percentage reductions in the rate of state appropriation. The inevitable result is larger class sizes, a deteriorating ratio of full-time to adjunct faculty, and fewer opportunities for the direct faculty-student interaction and mentorship that often mark a turning point in a student's life. Some community colleges in particular have found themselves stretched to the very limits of their capacity, forced to turn away applicants with a sobering message that says essentially, "There is no room at the inn."

Too often universities and colleges tend to focus more intently on emulating their more selective peers than on taking stock of their students' learning needs and helping them achieve educational success. Institutions of every kind



Craig Swenson, chancellor, Argosy University System (left); Paul Zingg, president, California State University, Chico; and Gregory Wegner, Managing Editor, *Policy Perspectives*, Knight Higher Education Collaborative, University of Pennsylvania

naturally seek to enroll students of promise among their study body, though in some cases a desire to attract the best and brightest can eclipse a commitment to educate students from a range of educational, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds including first-generation college students. Very often the strategic vision pursued is to advance an institution on the scale of public esteem—whether measured by the annual media rankings of colleges and universities or by other factors that make an institution appealing to the more advantaged and high-achieving students, to the public, and to other members of the profession generally.

The element that tends not to figure substantially in the visions and strategic plans of institutions is a concern for measurable improvement in learning.

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The more typical strategy is to focus an institution's imagination, energy, and resources on becoming more selective, more attractive to the best students and faculty, rather than on configuring the institution to educate the student body of the future. While there are promising signs in some states that have mandated steps for more seamless transfer between two- and four-year institutions, many four-year institutions need to build more constructive relationships with regional community colleges to facilitate coherent

progress for students who have chosen to begin their college education in a less costly institution.

Even less likely to appear in the aspirations of most four-year public and independent higher education institutions is a goal of working constructively with regional K–12 schools to foster a better understanding among students of the advantages that result from a college education, and to help students and schools identify the middle and high school courses and the habits of mind that best prepare one for college-level study. The fact that K–12 teachers are trained for their professions by the nation's universities and colleges represents a substantial and largely missed opportunity to establish strong linkages of reciprocal engagement with teachers and their school systems, helping to realize the vision of a more seamless K–16 education.

### Value and Utility

Continuing these trends will inevitably result in a further separation between the prevailing nature of higher education and the most pressing needs of a nation struggling to maintain its place in a global economy. Many regard higher education as having commodified itself, having lost much of the passion and commitment that characterized an earlier time when the goals of universities and colleges were perceived to be more closely aligned with the nation's needs for higher education. Some foresee a worst-case scenario in which higher education devolves further into a series of niche markets—in which the most selective institutions offer a boutique education to those most able to pay, in which proprietary institutions with low overhead costs attract growing numbers of students to career development programs for which there is high market demand, and in which public institutions highly dependent on declining state appropriation experience both an erosion of educational quality and a diminished appeal to potential students as tuition increases place them beyond the threshold of affordability.

One result of this increasing commodification of higher education is a weakened proclivity among parents, students, policymakers, and the general public to regard higher education as having intrinsic value—a quality in its own right that prepares students for a lifetime of learning and growth and thereby strengthens the nation's social, moral, and civic well-being. The more prevalent disposition is to regard higher education in terms of its utilitarian purpose. While the rationale for the support of higher education has never been devoid of practical considerations—ranging from the need to train future pastors in

the 18th century, educate a rising generation in the agricultural and engineering sciences in the 19th century, or train K–12 teachers for the influx of the baby boom generation in the 1960s and '70s—there is now far less willingness to regard universities and colleges as special kinds of institutions, deserving of respect and support as stewards and creators of knowledge.

The financial recession of the past two years has increased the public perception of higher education institutions as being more attuned to their own vitality than to the well-being of those they serve. Recent national surveys conducted by Public Agenda indicate that while most Americans consider higher education as essential for a fulfilling and economically productive life, a growing proportion of the American public perceives no essential difference between the behaviors of traditional higher education institutions and other enterprises concerned mainly with their own financial health. In a Public Agenda survey conducted in 2007, 52 percent agreed with the statement that “colleges today are like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line.” In 2008, 55 percent assented to this statement, and by 2009, 60 percent of survey respondents conveyed this view. A declining share of the public now regards colleges and universities as institutions chiefly concerned with the quality of education they provide or the affordability of their academic programs.

In another respect, it is the tension between changing societal priorities and the seeming inertia and introspection of traditional institutions that feeds a decline in the intrinsic value accorded to higher education. Perhaps no societal institutions, including colleges and universities, can ever be perceived with the same generosity of spirit in the wake of continuing public scandals involving virtually every profession from Watergate forward. There are also many cases in which societal values themselves become fixated on matters that lead to costly and often unproductive outcomes. The U.S. has become a nation that spends more on prisons than on higher education. In higher education itself, an example of skewed priorities can be seen in the fact that in some institutions, intercollegiate sports attains a stature and appeal out of all proportion to its role in fostering a student's educational and social development in college.

Beyond these factors, the sense of exasperation often heard among policymakers and the general public stems from a sense that many public-sector and independent universities and colleges, particularly four-year institutions, are slow to respond to emerging changes in social and economic circumstances. Too often there is a sense of disconnect between the language of legislators and the public, on the one hand, and the language of traditional higher education institutions on the other. Higher education administrators and faculty talk about the values that inform learning and the



Daniel Hamburger, president and CEO, DeVry Inc.



Robert Atwell, president emeritus, American Council on Education (left), and Richard Legon, president, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges



James Votruba, president, Northern Kentucky University (left), and Patrick Callan, president, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

pursuit of knowledge. Those outside the academy talk about the need for jobs and a population with employable skills. One of the great challenges confronting higher education is to connect these two conversations more effectively than before.

These factors, in combination with a major economic recession, have helped to feed a set of attitudes among policymakers and the general public very different from those that gave rise to the Morrill

Act, the GI Bill, and the higher education amendments that created the Pell grant program. The current assessment by legislators and other public policymakers is that higher education, given its prevailing inward focus, is not a major part of the solution to the challenges facing the nation; in fact, many perceive that, unlike K–12 schools, colleges and universities are neither in crisis nor can they be counted upon to help reshape the nation's agenda.

### Structure and Change

The financial recession of the past two years has driven home a sobering awareness that colleges and universities cannot expect to receive a substantial reinvestment of public dollars. Even if state governments were in a position to appropriate more dollars, neither higher education in general nor a state's publicly financed colleges and universities would likely rise to the top of the list of contenders for increased public funding. While policymakers may consider higher education to be important, there are three observations about these institutions that are likely to give pause to legislators in any consideration of resource priorities:

- Universities and colleges as a whole have not been as responsive as they could have been in meeting the evolving public need for higher education, preferring instead to grow and develop on their own terms.
- Too often traditionally organized colleges and universities, both public and independent, seem incapable of innovation or change except by adding to the full range of programs currently in place.
- Many universities and colleges have not succeeded in improving either persistence or degree attainment.

Collectively these observations represent a call for greater agility and innovation on the part of our institutions as well as a capacity to increase substantially the proportion of citizens who both begin and complete a college edu-

cation. In a more fundamental sense, the observations represent a call for higher education institutions to become more accountable for the dollars that states provide them. In the minds of many policymakers, business leaders, and the general public, higher education institutions too often seem unwilling to be held accountable for the public dollars invested on their behalf. Our institutions must accomplish what to many will appear a truly daunting task of educating more students while simultaneously doing what they have largely proved unable to do for the last 50 years—curtail those habits and customs that have caused our costs to increase substantially faster than household income.

Even when our institutions want to change, the forces acting to preserve existing programs, customs, and procedures remain extraordinarily strong. The agents that can inhibit change within a college or uni-

versity are both internal and external. Any proposal for a change in academic programs or personnel can expect to encounter resistance from faculty; apart from the natural instinct to protect one's own domain, the internal argument against radical change is that it will cause the institution to lose standing among peer institutions. Board members can also align themselves with particular programs and intervene to prevent needed reform. Many public universities and colleges find another impediment to change in the strong regulatory environment state governments have created, which in some cases requires state approval for virtually any step that an institution or a set of public institutions wishes to take.

Not every institution needs to change in the same way; differences in mission will point to different courses of action in different universities and colleges. Regardless of the type of institution, however, a process of meaningful change will require strong presidential leadership in order to succeed. A practice of simply staying the course, pressing on in the hope of renewed public appropriation, is not a strategy for the future. As long as universities and colleges present themselves as being continually in need of more money, both the public and its elected officials will likely consider higher education as part of the problem, not the solution.

### Different Modes of Proceeding

Even though the exemplars of meaningful change in higher education remain comparatively few, our conversation identified several instances of innovation that offer the hope of new pathways through the gridlock of conventional practice within the academy. Some of these constitute meaningful steps to work within the culture of traditional public and independent universities and colleges. Others are initiatives that essentially begin with a blank slate, setting about to create educational programs of value from the ground up.

**Streamlining the curriculum.** One of the prime opportunities any institution can pursue to make the pathway to a degree more straightforward and efficient is to focus the programs of study more directly on essential courses that



Donald Farish, president, Rowan University (left), and Frank Friedman, president, Piedmont Virginia Community College

are fundamental to the institution's learning goals. Many colleges and universities have experienced a proliferation in course and program offerings as a result of the laissez faire environment that gave rise to dramatic curriculum expansion from the late 1960s forward. In a system that requires 120 credits to graduate, it is not uncommon to find that more than one-third of students who graduate have taken 145 or more credits. This phenomenon represents tremendous inefficiency not just for the institution but also in terms of costs that students incur in earning a four-year degree.

The array of courses listed in the catalogs of many institutions today evokes the image conveyed 25 years ago by the Association of American Colleges (now AAC&U) in its "Integrity in the College Curriculum": that the undergraduate curriculum has become a smorgasbord in which anything goes. While the thought of making structural change in the curriculum to increase the effectiveness of students' progress toward the degree may seem attractive in the abstract, achieving this goal is extraordinarily difficult for any traditional

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Jane McAuliffe, president, Bryn Mawr College (left), and Charles Reed, chancellor, the California State University

college or university in the U.S. It is a goal that cannot be achieved without presidential leadership. Curricular reform requires that an institution take a deliberate step back from the array of graduation requirements both within the major and general education. Requirements for some disciplinary majors result from national accreditation standards, though in other cases a growth in the number of required units for the major may derive primarily from a department's wish to sustain its enrollment levels.

At a time when fewer students may aspire to graduate school, it is reasonable in some cases to ask how many specialized courses for a major are actually necessary. Reducing the number of electives could also result in a more focused curriculum and a sense of shared progress among cohorts of students, who would be more likely to proceed together through the curriculum and provide mutual support in learning. Such a step could also effectively increase the institution's capacity to staff courses in the core curriculum with

full-time tenure-line faculty, yielding a reduced need for adjunct faculty and a reduction of costs. Making headway on curriculum reform must involve steps that make such a change in the faculty's own interests. Creating a more focused and direct set of routes to the degree could reduce institutional costs and increase the likelihood of students completing their studies and graduating in a timely way.

**Applying digital technology.**

Beyond its ability to support distance education, digital technology creates the capacity to rethink the processes of teaching and learning. Digital tools infuse the interactions between students and faculty in tradi-

tional college courses, creating a variety of modes for instruction and dialogue both within and outside of class. Technology creates avenues for faculty members to engage students in different ways, and to create new teaching materials in digital form. A generation of students has come of age in the presence of technology, and these students fully expect that their own learning process will involve digital means of interaction with the faculty, their student peers, and sources of knowledge.

The power of the Internet has created an environment of unmediated access to information, in contrast to an earlier time when higher education and

the academic disciplines served essentially as stewards of important knowledge. One of the essential skills higher education must impart to students in the digital age is the ability to think critically, to discern the value of information they encounter, and to make responsible choices based on what they have discovered. Some institutions have taken a further step in applying the tools of technology to rethink fundamentally the teaching and learning process. Such innovations often emphasize project-based learning and concept mastery over the sheer memorization of content which can easily become outdated.

Regardless of how far an institution chooses to pursue the avenues to improve learning through technology and alternative pedagogies, there is a need to mentor faculty members in the use of these tools to meet the learning needs of current and future students. Working effectively in these modes can result in increased student success in learning and graduation.

**Learning from private-sector institutions.** The dramatic and steady growth in the number of proprietary institutions of higher education through the past decade makes clear that these

institutions have introduced a viable and important set of options to higher education. Private-sector institutions do not experience the constraints that often inhibit change in traditional colleges and universities; they have proven themselves particularly adept in addressing the needs of adult learners who must combine education with work and other responsibilities. The enrollments of proprietary institutions now approach 12 percent of all postsecondary education enrollments in the U.S. To be certain, there are pointed questions and increasingly vociferous disagreements—among policy-makers, higher education leaders, and members of our own roundtable—concerning potential abuses in recruitment and financial aid practices as well as the quality and utility of some program offerings in proprietary institutions. Yet proprietary institutions have clearly found ways to respond to shifting demand for higher education with greater alacrity than traditional public-sector or independent institutions.

The increased flexibility of proprietary colleges and universities derives principally from their different traditions of ownership and decision-making. In proprietary institutions, it is the institution, rather than the faculty, that owns the curriculum. The institution can set standards for instructional quality and method, and then scale its programs up in multiple settings. The institution has no obligation to offer a full range of courses, and it need not continue a program if the market demand has diminished. The profits that proprietary institutions earn are allocated not just to shareholders and taxes but also to capital expenditures to enhance the learning environment of students. Private-sector institutions have also proven themselves more proficient than most traditional colleges and universities in applying technology to achieve their educational purposes.

The difference everyone focuses on, however, is that faculty in private-sector enterprises generally do not receive tenure or even the assurance of continued employment. While proprietary institutions do employ some full-time professors, the appeal made to most faculty is very much a "pull" strategy—one that attracts faculty members through incentives—the prospect of auxiliary income, linked in some cases with the opportunity to approach the teaching and learning process in different ways with different students. Many of those who serve as instructors at private-sector institutions are also tenure-line faculty members at traditional universities and colleges; and it is sometimes observed that faculty members who are strong and vocal advocates of academic governance in their "home" institutions are more amenable to policy changes

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Gene Block, chancellor, University of California, Los Angeles

implemented by the managers in a proprietary setting.

We do not believe the issue is tenure per se—it is a practice that has served higher education well in preserving and strengthening the independence of the faculty-scholar. We do believe, however, that the active consideration of other forms of contractual relationships between those who teach and the institutions they serve is long past due.

***Creating revenue-generating centers within not-for-profit institutions.***

A promising strategy to serve public purposes and generate an alternative source of revenue is to establish self-funding units within a traditional public or independent institution. One possibility is to create a program of adult continuing education within a public or independent university or college. Often these units are able to explore different models and reconfigure themselves to address emerging needs and opportunities in ways that the traditional academic program cannot. Because they serve primarily students who are seeking educational skills and certification for employment, these units may not elicit the full respect of an institution's more traditional academic departments.

Part of the challenge is to create the incentives—to exercise the “pull strategy”—that helps faculty members see the benefits that result from the ability to innovate expeditiously in continuing education programs. A program of this kind can operate as a limited liability company (LLC), in effect combining attributes of a not-for-profit mission with a unit that generates revenue to cover its costs and provide incentives for faculty to participate. In such an arrangement, state funds may well support the university's core undergraduate and graduate programs, while the adult education classes are funded entirely from that program's own tuitions. While faculty members are not typically required to teach in an institution's continuing education program, there are incentives for them to act in ways that benefit the public interest as well as their own professional development.

**Presidents to Presidents: Making Personal Commitments**

In our willingness to take on the significant challenges facing higher education, at times speaking what others might well consider the unspeakable, we drew strength from our very diversity. Our roundtable brought together presidents of universities and colleges across the full spectrum of higher education,

including leaders of public-sector, independent, and proprietary universities and colleges. Our conversation exemplified the extent to which there is essential agreement among different sectors of higher education in the assessment of current challenges and in the kinds of actions institutions can take to address those challenges. At the same time, none of these challenges can be effectively addressed without the strong leadership that presidents must provide. The actions that we propose require a strong personal commitment of presidents to pursue as key goals in their professional lives. Our recommendations are made in the first person plural: By speaking in this collective voice, we underscore the need for a kind of presidential leadership that is willing to work collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals, within and across higher education institutions.

As we hope we have made clear, we understand that the issues confronting higher education are both substantial and often divisive. What American higher education will require in the decade ahead is a willingness to rethink its deeply embedded structures. There will need to be changes in how our institutions

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Stephen Lehmkuhle, chancellor, University of Minnesota Rochester (left), and David Maxwell, president, Drake University



Richard Lariviere, president, University of Oregon

both budget our resources and teach our students. Institutions will need to explore and take advantage of new models, drawing from promising instances of innovative approaches to change within traditional public and independent institutions, as well as from private-sector providers that constitute a vital and growing share of higher education. Institutions will need to consider curriculum reform as a core element both for improving educational attainment and containing costs. Even more broadly, colleges and universities need to evaluate what they teach, how they teach it, and how they evaluate learning success.

Responding successfully to these challenges will result in a roster of institutions that are less homogeneous, more distinctive in character and structure, as each sets about to improve the learning of its students while constraining what it costs to deliver an effective and quality education. While no president can single-handedly ensure this result, no institution will likely succeed in both improving student learning and constraining costs without presidential leadership. The same paradox applies to the question of ensuring that American higher education comes to be truly representative of the national body politic. No amount of presidential exhortation will close the attainment gap—yet no institution on its own is likely to contribute to the necessary re-making of the nation's collective student body in the absence of strong leadership on the part of its chief executive.

Here, then, is our collective agenda for presidential action:

**Be a Public Advocate for the Beneficial Impact of Higher Education**

- Convene the conversations—within your institution and with higher education's external stakeholders—that focus on higher education's sustaining commitment to advance public well-being by providing a high-quality, affordable education to a changing population of learners.
- Articulate the need for public institutions to have sufficient flexibility within state regulatory structures to pursue alternative approaches to fulfilling their mission in a changing financial, demographic, and learning environment.
- Make a personal commitment to reach communities of young people who are underrepresented in higher education. Visit schools, churches, com-

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munity organizations, and other venues to convey both the benefits that result from a higher education and the kinds of courses in middle and high school that prepare students for college success.

- Make a concerted effort to tell your institution's story, particularly as it relates to achieving public purposes. Cite examples—to legislators, and to the public in general—of how your institution has transformed the lives of graduates.

#### Develop Partnerships with Other Stakeholders

- Lead the efforts within your institution to strengthen partnerships with K–12 schools, building on the fact that colleges and universities train the nation's K–12 teachers for their professions. Work with leaders of K–12 schools to develop ways of helping more students understand both the benefits of a college education and the steps needed to prepare for college study through the middle and high school years.
- Forge meaningful linkages with K–12 schools that can help advance education at all levels. Without presuming that higher education can “fix” the challenges confronting K–12 schools, presidents should provide public support and offer assistance as requested by K–12 leaders to ensure that more students are able to read, write, and perform arithmetic functions by fourth grade. This benchmark offers a telling measure of students' likelihood of achieving educational success, in school or in college. In taking these steps, a president affirms that program completion is a full system problem involving higher education as well as K–12 schools.
- Establish strong partnerships among two- and four-year institutions in the local region to minimize the hurdles students often encounter in the transfer process.

#### Lead Your Institution in Understanding Challenges and Making Needed Change

- Draw the attention of faculty to the changing environment for higher education and the implications of those changes for your institution in the future. The issues of higher education quality, affordability, and capacity must be topics of active discussion inside your institution as well as without.
- Lead your faculty in understanding the changing composition of higher education's student body—in terms of ethnicity, financial circumstance, modes of learning, and goals after graduation—and the implications of those changes for higher education in the decades ahead.
- Work to shed new light on the common, though mistaken, assumptions about the cyclical rebounding from a financial recession. Actively counter the perception within your institution that the most fitting strategy is to hunker down and await the return of more favorable economic circumstances rather than engage in meaningful structural change.
- Provide strong leadership to eliminate some of the obstacles that prevent your institution from doing the right thing in fulfillment of core educational and social values. For example, impress on tenure committees the need to take account of the important service that an African American faculty member contributes to your institutional mission in being a mentor to minority students.
- Lead the charge in bringing the full power of institutional commitment to beneficial actions that too often exist as isolated boutiques or cottage industries within your institution. Commit your institution to goals that lend themselves to measurement and accountability for achieving a public purpose—for example, a goal of enrolling a certain percentage of the student body who are first-generation college students, and actively supporting their educational progress and success.

#### Provide Strong Leadership for the Improvement of Learning

- Provide professional development opportunities and support for faculty members who seek to improve your institution's graduation rate. Support faculty efforts to develop evaluation procedures and intervention strategies that can increase the rate of student persistence and success.
- Support the measures of persistence and sustained learning as criteria for institutional effectiveness. Lead your institution in such actions as adopting a Head Start program for tutoring students preparing for college.
- Commit your institution to adopt better means of assessing the teaching and learning process—what happens “inside the box.” Higher education

can no longer expect to win public support through an assurance that “inside the black box, amazing things happen to students.” Commit your institution to voluntary accountability reporting that demonstrates how it is meeting its educational goals.

#### A Continued Journey

Though it was not without tough-minded candor that we confronted the challenges facing the nation's colleges and universities, our roundtable conversation nonetheless gave cause for optimism. Our exchanges over two days

reaffirmed the essential mission and purpose of our universities and colleges to serve the nation's public well-being through education and the creation of new knowledge. Different though our institutions are in some respects, they share a common heritage and commitment to serving public purpose. The changes our institutions have experienced and will continue to face are substantial, and the pathways to meeting those challenges are neither simple nor straightforward. Most of our institutions bring strong commitments to faculty

autonomy, curriculum, collegial governance, and organizational structure. These traditions have contributed substantially to higher education's achievements while helping ensure the freedom of academic pursuit and the integrity of institutional decision-making.

Presidential leadership of the kind we describe does not mean issuing proclamations and expecting broad compliance; it means working productively with faculty members, providing them with information on changes within society and higher education, and gaining their trust as partners in a shared effort to ensure the continued vitality and well-being of the institution. The specific actions presidents must take to lead the process of transformation will differ by institution as each confronts the need for change in the context of its particular values and culture. We are convinced that with strong and effective presidential leadership of this kind, colleges and universities will continue to progress on a course that stresses commitment to quality and inclusiveness, even in an environment of reduced public resources.

It is often observed that no other country has equaled the United States in the rich capacity and diversity of its higher education institutions. Colleges and universities have been part of the fabric of this nation and a strong factor in many of its spectacular achievements through the 20th century. Yet higher education's seminal contributions in the past do not guarantee its success in educating a student population that is larger, more diverse in culture, ethnicity, educational and economic background—and one that differs from previous generations in its modes of learning and sequencing of higher education. Quite simply, more of the past cannot suffice for serving the nation's educational needs in the future. College and university presidents must take the lead in reminding their faculty of the primary role of higher education in ensuring the nation's continued economic productivity, civic engagement, and competitive strength in the years ahead. Nothing less than the sustaining, forceful leadership of presidents is required to advance the heritage of higher education in the 21st century. ♦



David Breneman, university professor, University of Virginia (left); Catharine Hill, president, Vassar College; and Richard Celeste, president, Colorado College

**Our roundtable conversation gave cause for optimism. Our exchanges over two days reaffirmed the essential mission and purpose of our universities and colleges to serve the nation's public well-being through education and the creation of new knowledge.**

This essay derives from a Presidential Roundtable convened in July 2010 in Leesburg, Virginia, by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The National Center has focused primarily on policy issues concerning higher education access, affordability, and learning effectiveness within state contexts. Among the Center's seminal contributions to the public policy dialogue are the series of state-by-state report cards, *Measuring Up*, a series of policy essays, as well as its work with Public Agenda to gauge public opinion about higher education's contribution to the nation's public purposes.

The National Center, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education, launched an initiative to bring university and college presidents more directly into the national dialogue concerning the challenges and prospects facing higher education. The process began with individual interviews of presidents of 28 higher education institutions, including the heads of state university systems, public research universities, public comprehensive institutions, community colleges, private-sector institutions, and independent colleges and universities. A summary document recounting the thinking of presidents on several key questions was prepared and distributed to all of those who had been interviewed. That summary served as background for the roundtable discussion.

**The following individuals were participants in this roundtable and helped shape the resulting essay's central themes:**

Robert Atwell  
President Emeritus  
American Council on Education

Gene Block  
Chancellor  
University of California, Los Angeles

David Breneman  
University Professor  
University of Virginia

Patrick Callan  
President  
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

Richard Celeste  
President  
Colorado College

Donald Farish  
President  
Rowan University

Joni Finney  
Vice President  
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education  
Practice Professor  
University of Pennsylvania

Frank Friedman  
President  
Piedmont Virginia Community College

Daniel Hamburger  
President and CEO  
DeVry Inc.

Catharine Hill  
President  
Vassar College

John Immerwahr  
Professor of Philosophy  
Villanova University

Richard W. Lariviere  
President  
University of Oregon

Richard Legon  
President  
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

Stephen Lehmkuhle  
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University of Minnesota Rochester

David Maxwell  
President  
Drake University

Jane McAuliffe  
President  
Bryn Mawr College

Gail Mellow  
President  
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Charles Reed  
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Craig D. Swenson  
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James C. Votruba  
President  
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Gregory Wegner  
Managing Editor, *Policy Perspectives*  
Knight Higher Education Collaborative  
University of Pennsylvania

Robert Zemsky  
Professor and Chair  
The Learning Alliance for Higher Education  
University of Pennsylvania

Nancy Zimpher  
Chancellor  
State University of New York

Paul Zingg  
President  
California State University, Chico

**The following presidents were interviewed for the Presidential Roundtable:**

Edward Ayers  
President  
University of Richmond

Donald Eastman  
President  
Eckerd College

John Fry  
President  
Franklin & Marshall College

Gordon Gee  
President  
The Ohio State University

John Hitt  
President  
University of Central Florida

Freeman Hrabowski, III  
President  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Mark Huddleston  
President  
University of New Hampshire

William Kirwan  
Chancellor  
University System of Maryland

Robert Mendenhall  
President  
Western Governors University

Diana Natalicio  
President  
University of Texas at El Paso

Eduardo Padrón  
College President  
Miami Dade College

John Schlegel, S.J.  
President  
Creighton University

The interviews of presidents were conducted by Robert Atwell, David Breneman, John Immerwahr, and Robert Zemsky. David Breneman prepared a summary of themes from the interviews of presidents, which provided foundations for the Presidential Roundtable discussion. The Presidential Roundtable was facilitated by Robert Zemsky, and the essay developed from the roundtable discussion was drafted by Gregory Wegner and Robert Zemsky.