Foundation Course

CONNECTION Interviews Nellie Mae Education Foundation President Nicholas Donohue

Nicholas C. Donohue is the new president and CEO of the Quincy, Mass.-based Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the largest philanthropy in New England devoted exclusively to education. Donohue succeeds Blenda J. Wilson, who wrote regularly for CONNECTION *before retiring in December 2006. Donohue has been a classroom teacher, a university trustee and commissioner of education for the state of New Hampshire. Most recently, he served as special master of Hope High School in Providence, R.I., where he was appointed to oversee implementation of the Rhode Island commissioner of education's order to restructure the underperforming school.* CONNECTION *Executive Editor John O. Harney interviewed Donohue about issues facing New England and the foundation's role.*

CONNECTION: You've only had a couple months in this job to survey the landscape. What's your impression of the challenges facing New England?

DONOHUE: I think the main issue is that New England is a fabulous place to live, a place many people have a great affiliation with, and it's a place that is undergoing a transformation. The race, ethnicity, age and backgrounds of people coming to New England are changing and will change even more dramatically in the years to come. At the same time, we know our economic and social well-being depends upon preparing more graduates and workers with significantly higher levels of educational achievement.

CONNECTION: What exactly do we mean by "achievement" and how would you measure it?

DONOHUE: We need a set of standards that are broad enough to reflect the opportunities and challenges people are going to engage with in their workplaces and in their lives. Successful achievement means knowing math, being able to read and write well, knowing how to solve problems and work with other people, how to communicate well and manage yourself, use technology and understand history. It's about striking a balance between knowing a robust set of facts about what has gone on in the past, for example, and understanding how the systems of history predict the future. It's also a balance between getting a good job and leading a fulfilling life, doing well and doing *good*.

CONNECTION: How do we agree upon what students need to know?

DONOHUE: There is sufficient information from employers and educators and people who care about social issues to describe what our hopes should be for graduates at various levels. The real challenge is not articulating those standards, but organizing for success in achieving them and measuring them well. Organizing for success includes creating a seamless set of standards that spans the life of the learner instead of competing sets of standards for early learning, K-12, higher ed and workforce—with chasms between them. Measuring well means looking at performance-based systems that tell us more broadly how people apply their intelligence in complicated situations, because our future is about being able to think and innovate. There are already competency-based assessments in a few New England states that we'd like to learn more about.

CONNECTION: You've suggested a *new* kind of education reform is needed. What do you mean by this?

DONOHUE: There have been waves of reform for generations and we're going through one now. And important progress has been made. But it's fair to ask some basic questions about things we still hold as unchecked assumptions. We are seeing these kinds of questions asked in terms of early learning. At the K-12 level, there has been a huge focus on instructional improvement. This must continue, but the context in which teachers and students are working must change as well. It is still a restrictive, rigid, age-based model with students moving through in lockstep in front of staff who are dedicated and intelligent but often underprepared in subject areas. We need to take a closer look at how we organize schools and use technology to personalize instruction. This means questioning deep-rooted assumptions about how schools are put together including how to staff differently and locate differently. If we adjust the context for learning, I believe the challenges around instruction will diminish.

CONNECTION: Coming from the K-12 environment, do you see any lessons for higher education in the No Child Left Behind experience?

DONOHUE: No Child Left Behind has given the whole conversation about underperforming K-12 students a different flavor. Now, higher ed is facing questions

about how we know whether students have succeeded other than that they've paid their tuition and completed their coursework. And that's a healthy conversation as long as it doesn't go too far and define a tiny box into which graduates need to fit. One lesson from No Child Left Behind is to be cautious about an assessment system that may be too narrow. That would be a crisis for New England higher education with its diversity of options and goals. I think there's a middle ground, and I hope the foundation can help the region find standards for all levels of education that are defensible and able to withstand revision as the world changes around us.

CONNECTION: How do issues of achievement relate to the foundation's historical mission of expanding opportunity for underserved populations and what exactly do we mean when we say "underserved"?

DONOHUE: Given where we have been as a country, the most obvious underserved groups are low-income students and low-income students of color—the "minority" students who are becoming the majority in America. By embracing high expectations for underserved populations and helping the neediest students through high school and college, we serve these groups as we push the whole venture forward. We have partners who are doing this very well, helping students who would not otherwise succeed in today's higher education institutions. A lot of learners come to our schools with significant disabilities or disadvantaged backgrounds. Our challenge is to apply educational approaches that make the most of what they bring to the table and to really expect them to succeed. I believe we can organize an educational experience where everyone succeeds at higher levels than we accept today. However, I am not sure it is going to happen by simply improving "school" as we see it today. We need a different model—one that is much more personalized and authentic and much more rigorous.

CONNECTION: Is it realistic to aim to prepare *all* people for college?

DONOHUE: We have to. A high school diploma simply is not a sufficient endpoint for anyone in today's world. Does everyone have to go to an elite, four-year college? No. There is a vibrant and growing market of postsecondary experiences for young people and those offerings need to be nurtured, because you need some college experience and ideally a college degree of some kind in order to be economically and personally successful in today's society. And that's only going to be more true as the rest of the world catches up with us educationally and economically. Community colleges are trying to respond to this reality. Small private institutions are attracting a broader audience out of business self-interest. I think we are entering an exciting time, when a greater variety of educational opportunities will emerge to meet the needs of more and more customers.

CONNECTION: What's required to prepare more students for educational success?

DONOHUE: We need to have very high expectations of our educators. We need to invest wisely in education and not give ourselves excuses for lower performance. And we need to be clear about outcomes and measure them sufficiently. But there's also a "public will" piece that we've yet to grapple with. We've been a society that has done well overall but there have always been people inside that mix who have not done well and who have not achieved the American Dream. Now, the interests of our fellow citizens are more intimately tied with our own interests. I expect my own children to do well in school. But if we're going to succeed as a society, I need to expect other children who might look very different from my own to succeed too. It's not just about being a generous and charitable majority community. It's about being an intelligent and strategic society that says we all want to achieve more in order to succeed together.

CONNECTION: Is there a point where the foundation's role is really to address poverty in New England insofar as poverty shapes the inequities in opportunity and achievement?

DONOHUE: Our mission will continue to focus on educational opportunity and educational change. But we do need to acknowledge that issues such as housing, employment, criminal justice and health care all play a role in promoting success. In order to learn, you have to be in school. If you're out of school because you're sick or you can't pay attention because your teeth hurt or your family is moving *again* or you are hungry or you have to work—all those things get in the way of achieving. There's real fertile ground there for work that will enhance educational outcomes. And I think there will be places where the foundation can encourage cross-field collaboration on these connections.

CONNECTION: How can philanthropy make a difference that other sectors can't?

DONOHUE: Part of our job as a foundation is to find the organizations that are doing the best work and get behind them and learn from them. Then there's a complementary role, which is to provoke and challenge assumptions about how we do our business. Since none of us have figured out the absolutely correct way to educate everybody, the foundation has a chance to push the edges and challenge people's thinking about what education needs to look like tomorrow even as it nurtures things that organizations are doing well today. While the challenges are broad, I am very hopeful about our future. We will find our way ahead as a region—and as a country—and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation will be part of that success.