



ENGAGING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOCIETAL CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION



*I*n the United States, as in virtually any setting, societal need has been a driving force in the founding and evolution of higher education institutions. Through the provision of education as well as research, universities and colleges have contributed substantially to the advancement of public well-being. The Morrill Act and the establishment of land grant colleges, the GI Bill, the creation of community colleges, the intensified commitment to science education following the advent of Sputnik, the Education Amendments of the early 1970s, which greatly expanded access to higher education through the federal government's investment in financial aid—each can be understood as a direct act of public policy stemming from a broadened conception of higher education's role in serving public purposes, accompanied by a commitment of government at several levels to provide the political

and financial support necessary to realize that potential.

At the outset of the 21st century, a confluence of social, economic, and political forces pose daunting new challenges to the nation's continued vitality and make clear the need for higher education to assume new responsibilities. There is little question that higher education must be among the most important intellectual and creative resources assembled to address an array of critical challenges confronting society—including the sustainability of natural

resources; the provision of health care for all in a growing, aging population; and the renewal of economic vitality across a wide demographic range, which entails helping more working adults acquire higher-level skills and knowledge, instilling core human values, and strengthening social structures to ensure that future generations experience lives of justice, equity, and fulfillment. Higher education must organize its resources for increased responsiveness to, and engagement with, society's core challenges in the century ahead.

These are challenges requiring new alignments of higher education's capacities, as well as commitments of public policy and financial resources comparable to those of any previous age. In contrast to earlier times, however, the past three decades have witnessed

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students to incur greater debt than in the past. This gradual shift of costs to higher education consumers creates a particular burden for a growing number of traditional-age college students who are from low-income households, have little family precedent for college attendance, and are reluctant to incur major debt for a college education.


Given these societal changes, higher education has two fundamental responsibilities to help ensure the continued well-being of the nation today:

- to provide graduates and the nation at large with the skills needed to be effective in a global, increasingly competitive economy, in which corporations reach across nations and geographical divides in search of new markets, more efficient production, and less costly labor; and

- to close the achievement gap between those students in this country who are advantaged—educationally, culturally, and economically—and those who are not.

To be sure, there are important purposes beyond these two specific responsibilities that higher education should bear, and that public policy and public funding can help bring about. In the 21st century, universities and colleges will be called upon to marshal their full intellectual

and organizational strength to address core challenges of the nation and the global society of which the U.S. is part. The research mission has enjoyed strong political and financial support as federal agencies continue to fund scientific research at robust levels, and this component of higher education's mission must continue to play a central role in the nation's future vitality. The particular focus of this essay, however, is the role of public policy and the focusing of institutional effort in meeting the nation's growing need for higher education. Beyond their role in preparing students to be productive and economically competitive, colleges and universities serve an essential purpose in providing graduates with skills of critical thinking and expression



In contrast to earlier times, the past three decades have witnessed a decreased willingness to make public policy a key lever for engaging higher education institutions in addressing public purposes. In place of major policy initiatives and accompanying financial support to address commonly defined public challenges, state and federal governments have been more inclined to take as an article of faith that higher education institutions will serve the public well-being through the pursuit of their own self-interests.

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During these same decades, the nation's transition to a knowledge-based economy has effectively eliminated many manufacturing jobs that once offered middle-class lifestyles without a college degree. Now more than ever, attaining a life of self-fulfillment, civic engagement, and economic productivity requires a college education. In recent years the cost of a college education has grown dramatically, requiring many

in the liberal arts tradition—educating graduates to contribute as citizens to a democratic society whose well-being is increasingly entwined with that of other nations in a global society.

The strands of these fundamental challenges entwine to create a growing sense of urgency for progress on several fronts. It is important for the U.S. to keep pace with the social and economic progress in other parts of the world—progress linked to major investments in higher education, as well as advances in educational attainment in other countries. Remaining competitive in a global economy increasingly requires workers who are more productive and resilient than in earlier times; this means they must be learners for life, capable of returning to higher education to retool for changes occurring in the knowledge base and skill requirements.

These are problems that the intellectual assets of the academy are well suited to address, given the right incentives. Since these institutions constitute the strongest creative and educational assets of the nation and its states, the core question has become: How can their attention and focus be gained in order to address these problems?

The challenge for the years ahead is to achieve a public agenda in an era of diminished public purposes. Many have observed that in the relative decline of policy as a motivating force, higher education institutions may choose priorities primarily from market considerations, setting agendas that seek to advance their own prestige and market position more than the fulfillment of publicly defined purposes. If markets have supplanted the force of policy *per se* as the primary drivers of higher education's motivations, what actions will create the market that engages universities and colleges in solving the nation's most important challenges? Any successful strategy must recognize that no single, centralized approach—no one “market”—can enlist the energies and passion of higher education to achieve a particular purpose. Higher education in the U.S. rightly and productively proceeds from a system of incentives rather than control.

What is required is a new concept of coordination and governance—to craft an agenda of public purpose in an environment of increased private interest and diminished policy engagement.

To Optimize Learning

The most important educational goal confronting higher education in the 21st century is to optimize learning by students and by society in general:

to educate a growing, increasingly diverse set of learners to be effective and fulfilled as workers and citizens, capable of meeting new challenges they will encounter throughout their lives. To optimize learning means setting forward-looking expectations for universities and colleges, conveying the need to educate graduates for living effectively in a complex world, in terms of personal health as well as financial and social well-being. Optimized learning is that which helps strengthen democratic and civic institutions in the nation. This conception of learning extends beyond the education of students in classrooms to include higher education's impact on societal organizations, businesses, corporations, and value-based organizations—all made possible by a greatly expanded sense of higher education's educational mission. To optimize learning entails an increased sense of responsibility—within the nation at large, its individual states, and in public and private institutions of higher education—to achieve learning outcomes and meet educational standards that address growing societal needs.

For institutions, optimizing learning means taking responsibility for learning and substantially raising the number of those who persist and succeed in programs of education. It means closing gaps in achievement without lowering the bar for results. In many cases succeeding in this challenge will entail rethinking the nature and content of degrees as well as their timing and mode of delivery. Optimized learning requires that

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schools to achieve shared educational purposes—and in particular, to reduce leaks in the education pipeline. Though higher education cannot be placed in a position of direct responsibility for the success of primary and secondary education in this country, colleges and universities can increase the likelihood of optimized learning to the extent they see their own purposes as aligned with those of K–12 schools and work to achieve those common educational ends.

Conjoining Self-Interest and Societal Purpose

To optimize learning in the sense here described will require that many different stakeholders strike a balance between societal and self-interests—moving beyond the perspective that regards individual well-being as fundamentally at odds with the achievement of a collective good. What is required is a perspective that understands individual and collective benefits of higher education as conjoining parts of a whole. Explicit responsibilities fall to different players in a partnership for public purposes.

State governments

State governments are in many ways the most consequential agents in optimizing learning in the U.S. Beyond their direct contributions to operating and

capital construction budgets in public institutions, states provide a societal milieu and considerable support for private colleges and universities, from the understanding that independent institutions are key players helping to meet a state's higher education needs. Through the past several decades, states have seen an array of growing demands on their resources. Universities and colleges have come into competition with other public service agencies that do not share higher education's capacity to raise independent funds. As a result, public and private institutions alike now find that public funding constitutes a smaller proportion of their total budget. As universities and colleges respond by shifting more of their costs to students and their parents, the impression created is that higher education is essentially a private good, available to those with the means to pay.

The more pressing concern is the absence of deliberate intention or purpose in the financial support states provide to higher education institutions. No one would claim that the relative decline in direct support to public universities and colleges through the past decades has resulted from conscious policy decisions to make these institutions less important. The phenomenon has come about rather from increasingly urgent demands in other areas, entailing incremental cuts and one-time fixes to close a given year's budget gap. In allocating funds to institutions, states tend not to make decisions based on a broad perspective that asks what educational purposes are to be attained in return for public investment in universities and colleges. In fact the vast majority of funding that higher education now receives from state governments provides no motivation for changing current patterns of behavior. The most powerful incentives embedded in public base funding simply reinforce the instinct for institutions to stay the well-trodden course.

There is a fundamental need for states to progress beyond the mode of business as usual in supporting higher education. Too often states act in the name of simply building and maintaining capacity, rather than using that capacity to achieve a well-defined outcome. The passion for earmarks in Washington, D.C. and in state capitals only feeds the habit of disconnecting public funding from any sense of the broader purposes to be achieved by colleges and universities. There is comparatively little in state budgetary allocations that would explicitly drive a college or university to direct

its intellectual goods and services to achieve such ends as the alleviation of poverty, the more efficient use of resources, or the renewal of the economic vitality of a state through education or research. The tendency is to conceive of higher education as simply an engine of economic development in itself, rather than as an instrument for increasing economic and social well-being through the educational results it produces.

States need to engage deliberately in defining the purposes they seek to fulfill through their higher education institutions, both public and private. Given the multiple factors that affect the behavior of universities and colleges, states cannot act as sole agents in effecting the changes required to optimize learning and, more broadly, to align the capacities of the academy to address critical challenges facing society in the years ahead. States can, however, work to call more particular attention to those areas in which their educational interests align with the priorities of others—including the federal government, citizens and businesses of the state, and the leadership of higher education itself—to identify where the confluence of public purposes and individual interests occurs. Without seeking to micromanage, states can ask questions and engage in dialogues that impress on institutions the importance of fulfilling public educational purposes as a priority of universities and colleges.

The federal government

While the federal government exerts no direct control of universities and colleges in the U.S., it is a powerful motivator of institutional behavior through its substantial investment in both research and student financial aid. One of the principal recommendations of the Spellings Commission Report on the Future of U.S. Higher Education (2006) was to strengthen the federal government's support of financial aid, in part by simplifying the procedure by which middle- and lower-income students apply for federal aid, and in part by increasing the availability of need-based financial aid through the Pell Grant program. These steps can provide a powerful counter to the prevailing tide of market motivations, fed by popular rankings and other factors, that often compel institutions to direct their energies to increase resources, prestige, and selectivity, even as growing numbers of students who have financial need fail to seek or attain education beyond high school.

Another important role of the federal government is to oversee the collection of better-quality, readily accessible data that provide a basis for assessing institutional accountability and facilitating informed choice for students and parents. The federal government can also contribute substantially to the goal of optimizing learning through policies that offer incentives in the form of tax credits for companies that provide the opportunity for their employees to seek higher education, as well as for employees who pursue that opportunity.

Business leaders

A key challenge in creating partnerships to optimize learning is to encourage a kind of thinking and dialogue among a range of stakeholders that makes innovation possible. At both the regional and state levels, business leaders need to be a voice at the table in considering ways to provide a broader range of citizens with the education and training to be competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy. A key indicator of successful partnership is the ability to “gather mass”—to draw interest and support from a variety of stakeholders, thereby creating a combined impact that no single partner could achieve by itself. Through the motivation or pull of productive employment and opportunity, businesses complement higher education's efforts to advance or push students toward educational attainment. Both of these forces are needed to create an educated workforce and engaged citizenry.

Every party with an interest in advancing the public well-being through higher education should have a disposition to think creatively about opportunities for collaboration between higher education and business. Businesses bring a direct knowledge of changes occurring within given industries and a keen sense of changing skill requirements for current and future employees. Such knowledge makes it imperative that businesses be a partner not just in the funding of higher education, but also in the design of educational programming to meet evolving needs in the workforce. Leaders of business contribute to the effectiveness of higher education by helping define the learning outcomes a global society requires. In

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In addition, business provides critically important feedback on the degree to which students master the qualities required for success in the workplace. As such, business leaders become essential partners

in the measurement and successful achievement of learning outcomes—a fundamental requirement if higher education is to deliver at its fullest capacity and garner the financial and political support it will need to succeed.

Governing boards

In concept the governing board of a university or college is the agent of accountability to public purposes. Whether appointed or elected, trustees of these institutions have a primary responsibility for ensuring that an institution's governance and its financial resources work to achieve purposes that are conducive to the well-being of a state's citizenry and of society in general. Trustees have the responsibility to hold the institution accountable to its mission without micromanaging or imposing personal or political agendas. Individually and collectively, trustees must understand both the academic mission and finances of the institution. One of the principal impediments to a governing board's ability to function as intended is the wide disparity in the knowledge or experience of individual trustees. All too often trustees are appointed on the basis of political favor rather than merit.

As a result of these and other factors, trustees can easily become part of the problem rather than constructive forces to align institutions with the fulfillment of public purposes. Both collectively and individually, trustees can buy into the worst pathologies of the institutions they oversee. By the selection criteria, compensation package,

and mandate given a president, trustees can contribute directly to the subordination of public purposes to institutional ambitions motivated by a desire for

prestige. Led by the arguments of a president and faculty, board members can easily be drawn into the mentality that conceives of advancing the well-being of the institution itself as the primary and all-encompassing goal, while deferring or forgetting entirely the institution's deeper responsibility to the state and its citizens.

A governing board cannot single-handedly commit an institution to a course of action that opposes its own natural inclinations. It can, however, help to steer an institution on a course of increased accountability, and it can charge an institution to identify the standards to be applied in gauging its fulfillment of public purposes. It is imperative that boards of trustees hold universities and colleges accountable to the broader range of purposes that constitute the basis for a state's political and financial support. To the degree that trustees relinquish this expectation of responsiveness to the body politic, they contribute to a growing sense of disjunction between higher education institutions and the public purposes for which they ostensibly exist.

Higher education administrators and faculty

A staple element in the success of higher education in the U.S. has been the autonomy that allows individual universities and colleges measures of freedom in pursuing public purposes in keeping with their own institutional goals and strengths. But even as they enjoy substantial freedom in pursuing institutional missions, higher education administrators and faculty have an obligation to commit their institutions to helping advance states, the nation, and society in general in seeking solutions to critical challenges of the century ahead. The political and financial support provided by government are in themselves powerful motivators of such engagement. In addition to its budget for sponsored research, the federal government benefits public and private universities and colleges alike through the Pell Grant and other financial aid programs that expand both access and the range of educational choices available to students. Very often state governments create policies that deliberately include independent institutions within their boundaries as parts of a higher education strategy—for example, by contributing to the tuition of state residents who enroll in those private institutions. Higher education

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administrators and faculty need to conceive of federal and state support as investments in the future well-being of society, rather than as a fundamental right or a reward for past performance.

Among the challenges that particularly confront the nation's higher education institutions are the need to increase access and degree attainment, particularly for students of lesser economic means, and to design programs that allow students to update their knowledge and competencies throughout life. Success in addressing these challenges will allow higher education to contribute substantially to optimizing societal learning that extends beyond the education of students in classes as traditionally conceived. Higher education faculty and administrators must conceive of themselves as having explicit responsibilities in fulfilling an expanded set of educational purposes in the U.S.

Drawing the Strands Together

To optimize learning in the U.S. and its individual states necessarily involves a range of players, each with a different set of responsibilities. Critical to the success of any such initiative is the ability to weave together separate strands in a coherent fabric to achieve what every party understands as shared educational goals. There are several aspects of a successful strategy to draw together the interests of different parties in achieving such common goals.

Productivity and management of costs

A requisite step to gaining strong political and financial support—from state or federal governments, the business community, or students and parents—is higher education's demonstrated commitment to using funds in responsible ways to foster effective learning and to fulfill the educational purposes that constitute the basis for public and private support. No effort to strengthen higher education's fulfillment of public purposes can hope to succeed by calling for substantially increased funding as the first requirement for any concerted action. While increased funding for higher education could occur in the next several years, it is not likely to happen until universities and colleges demonstrate their ability to achieve desired results in effective and efficient ways.

Targeting of funds to achieve the purposes identified

It is often observed that incentives accomplish more than regulation in bringing about desired behavior from institutions both public and private. A collective strategy to improve educational results must first define the purposes to be achieved, then allot financial and other resources to the extent that institutions demonstrate successful attainment of those results. As noted above, the base funding that public universities and colleges receive from state governments, for the most part, has little relation to explicit educational goals a state wishes to achieve. A more effective strategy to optimize learning is one that links dollars to the achievement of desired results.

Measurement of outcomes in attaining learning goals

A core element of any successful program to optimize learning is a commitment to define the markers of progress, and to measure results according to criteria that have meaning and support both inside and outside higher education. Explicit standards of measurement must be devised that all parties understand and agree to adopt. Just as important as the measurement of results is the need to use those data to identify strengths and weaknesses of current practices, and to make changes as needed to improve learning results. There is no more telling sign of accountability than a demonstrated commitment to measure results and to use feedback to improve performance.

Coordinating many efforts to achieve educational purposes that serve the public good

Through the past decade a handful of states have exemplified promising approaches to achieving public purposes by building partnerships that engage a range of stakeholders in addressing educational challenges. New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Kentucky are examples of states that have made plausible inroads to

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developing partnerships in achieving shared educational purposes. Some recurrent themes inform the approaches taken by these states.

One component of effective practice is a state's ability to respond to emerging challenges in a cohesive way, through actions that engage various stakeholders collectively in defining and meeting the educational needs to be achieved by a state's universities and colleges. While the means of effecting alignment among often competing institutional interests may differ from state to state, every state needs the ability to exert a cohesive force among its universities and colleges to meet evolving public needs. By whatever means, states must work to mitigate the competition among public universities and colleges vying for increased support in state budgets. At best, states can draw their public institutions beyond the confines of narrow self-interest and engage them in the collective contribution to a state's educational needs. Finally, states must be prepared, through their allocation processes, to support financially institutions that demonstrate success in fulfilling public goals for higher education.

In some cases the unifying factor may be a venue in which higher education leaders meet with members of the private business sector to take account of changing

circumstances and needs. An effective, sustained dialogue between higher education leaders and representatives of the changing economic environment can yield a state system of heightened agility and responsiveness to evolving educational need. At best, the exchanges that occur from convening such perspectives both within and beyond the academy result in substantially improved focus on a shared purpose to optimize learning.

Higher education in the U.S. is a system that accomplished the learning requirements of the 20th century very well. But the challenges of the current age are of a different order, and new behaviors are needed.

Exercising Leadership

The call to leadership in meeting the challenge to higher education extends across several domains, and

there are pointed areas of responsibility for every partner in this dynamic:

- **State governments:** *Set clear expectations for universities and colleges in meeting a state's higher education needs, and hold institutions accountable for achieving those goals. Make necessary public investments in higher education, and align state funding more directly with the actions and outcomes expected of these institutions.* Every state must convey to its public and private institutions the educational and societal goals to be attained in fulfillment of the public good. At the same time, states must hold those institutions accountable and support them as they succeed in reaching goals conducive to public purposes.
- **The federal government:** *Support the expansion of educational opportunity by maintaining and enhancing the availability and purchasing power of need-based financial aid through the Pell Grant program. Contribute to the quality of higher education in the U.S., in part by continued support of the nation's research agenda, and in part by the collection and analysis of data that provide a reliable basis for assessment and comparisons among universities and colleges. Consider creating tax incentives for individuals who seek continued higher education, and for employers who support their employees in this purpose.*
- **Local business leaders:** *Engage state officials and higher education leaders in partnerships to design and deliver learning programs that meet the evolving skills requirements of workers in a global society. Provide feedback and constructive insights to gauge how well the state and its higher education institutions are educating graduates to be effective in the workplace.*
- **University and college governing boards:** *Hold institutions accountable*

to the public purposes they need to fulfill. Governing boards of public institutions in particular must resist the tendency to pursue narrowly conceived institutional interests without regard to the broader needs of a state and the nation at large. Trustees must have the experience and understanding that allows them to hold institutions accountable when institutional interest threatens to eclipse their fulfillment of public purpose.

- **Higher education administrators and faculty:** *Focus the intellectual goods and services of the academy to engage more directly in addressing society's core challenges. Accept responsibility to educate a broader array of students in a greater range of contexts and circumstance, including more students for whom cost is a significant barrier to higher education access and degree attainment.* Colleges and universities must proceed beyond the mindset that equates educational quality with success in amassing endowment, and educating primarily those who are economically and educationally advantaged. Presidential and faculty leadership must work to ensure that institutions meet their social obligation to educate more students of promise who have fewer financial resources.

One of the first tasks of leadership among these somewhat autonomous partners is to impart a sense of urgency and focus to a set of issues about which the public has grown largely complacent. The challenge of leaders—in the federal and state policy communities, among higher education governing boards, faculty and administrators, and across the business sector—is to educate the public about the critical importance of higher education as an instrument of social and economic vitality in the U.S. A combined effort is needed to ensure that higher education remains accessible and affordable regardless of one's economic circumstance.

The point is not that universities and colleges have failed. Their current structures and operations have proven effective in meeting earlier needs these institutions had evolved to serve. Higher education

in the U.S. is a system that accomplished the learning requirements of the 20th century very well. But the challenges of the current age are of a different order, and new behaviors are needed. The value-added of these institutions in the foreseeable future will result from delivering education to students from a broader array of social and economic circumstances, at all stages of life, seeking to be effective in a more complex world of international politics and relationships, and in a competitive global economy.

Part of the resistance to change, within higher education as well as among the public generally, may derive from a sense that behaviors are so entrenched that there is little that could change current motivations except a substantial infusion of new federal or state money. At the same time, virtually no one expects today that higher education would succeed in gaining a substantial increase in public funds without first demonstrating genuine initiative and progress in meeting public needs for higher education. Higher education cannot wait for that condition to change. Universities and colleges themselves must provide part of the initiative; in conjunction with a range of other stakeholders, they must create a stronger sense that meeting the educational needs of the 21st century is essential for the nation's continued vitality. ■

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