

Addressing the Challenges  
Facing American Undergraduate Education  
***A Letter to Our Members: Next Steps***  
***From:***

American Council on Education (ACE)  
American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)  
American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)  
Association of American Universities (AAU)  
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU)  
National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)

Serious challenges face American higher education and our nation's continued economic competitiveness and security. Some of these challenges have been identified during the multiyear effort to reauthorize the Higher Education Act and in several recent reports, including *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* by the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* by the National Academies and *Mortgaging our Future* by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.

Among the challenges identified are:

- Expanding college access to low-income and minority students
- Keeping college affordable
- Improving learning by utilizing new knowledge and instructional techniques
- Preparing secondary students for higher education
- Increasing accountability for educational outcomes
- Internationalizing the student experience
- Increasing opportunities for lifelong education and workforce training

These challenges primarily affect undergraduate education. There are other critical challenges facing higher education, particularly related to research and graduate education and the increasing competition in both of these areas from other countries. A number of activities are underway to address these international challenges to U.S. leadership in research and graduate education. However, our focus in this document is on undergraduate education, the center of much recent public discussion.

The assumption underlying recommendations for meeting these undergraduate education challenges is the need for change. We agree that there is a need for change. This is not new. It is important to note that reassessment and change is a continuing process in American higher education. We understand that your institutions are dynamic and diverse. We know you compete with each other for just about everything and, in today's hypercompetitive environment, this means that rapid, meaningful change is inevitable.

Without change, you risk standing still and thereby falling behind, both as individual institutions and collectively. None of you can afford this, and our nation cannot afford this in the competitive global marketplace.

Some fundamental aspects of higher education, however, do not and should not change. The most basic goals of an undergraduate education remain the ability to think, write, and speak clearly; to reason critically; to solve problems; to work collaboratively; to acquire field-specific knowledge; and to acquire the judgment, analytic capacity, and independence of thought to support continued, self-driven, lifelong learning and engaged citizenship. These critical goals of undergraduate education must endure.

What should and does change over time are *how* these goals are achieved. The pressure for re-evaluation and change increases as colleges and universities seek to ensure that the nation has a highly educated citizenry and skilled workforce capable of operating effectively in the complex, rapidly changing, and increasingly competitive global environment.

Ultimately, each of you has to tackle these issues individually based on your mission and educational objectives. But the multiple patrons of, and participants in, higher education all have roles to play. State and federal governments, to cite the most obvious examples, have essential supporting roles. And we, the Washington-based presidential higher education associations, working with allied organizations, must play a convening and coordinating role in helping our member institutions address these issues.

Many of you are already working on the challenges facing higher education in a careful and systematic way. The decentralization that is the hallmark of American higher education makes it difficult to keep track of all that is taking place. Indeed, one of our key goals is to gather and compile information from as many institutions as possible, share it with other campuses, and make certain that it is widely available to policymakers and the public.

However, we believe we have more than just a clearinghouse role to play. Our associations will undertake an effort to assist you in addressing these challenges. While the final agenda is yet to be constructed, we expect it to include the following issues and actions in responding to the challenges noted above:

***(1) Expanding college access to low-income and minority students.*** Too many lower-income and minority students fail to enroll in higher education. The federal government's Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance indicates that each year nearly 400,000 academically qualified students fail to pursue a postsecondary education because they cannot afford it. According to their recent report, *Mortgaging our Future: How Financial Barriers to College Undercut America's Global Competitiveness*, between 1.4 and 2.4 million bachelor's degrees are likely to be lost during the current decade because of financial barriers faced by students. This enormously diminishes individual opportunity and wastes precious human capital.

The single most effective step to boost college participation of low-income and minority students is to increase substantially the value of Pell grants. There have been many calls to do this and we strongly support the bold recommendation of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education to increase the average Pell grant to 70 percent (from 48 percent in 2004-05) of the average in-state tuition at public four-year colleges and universities over a period of five years. A strong Pell grant will do as much for America today as the GI Bill did a half century ago.

We are aware of the complexity of the current system of student financial aid and of the long history of each provision in the law. We are supportive of a thoughtful review focused on this complexity to work for maximum program and operational efficiency. It is important that this review fully engage the higher education community.

Access for low-income and minority students has been a central goal for most colleges and universities for many years. This goal has not been fully achieved. Good work is being carried out today to reach underserved populations, but more is needed. We will identify and disseminate effective steps that are being taken by specific institutions to increase low-income student participation in and graduation from college. We will also seek additional new methods to expand access to higher education.

We can already cite some efforts to reach underserved populations. For example, the TRIO programs have helped launch the successful college careers of thousands of low-income, first-generation college students. The California State University system has assisted underserved students by distributing more than 700,000 copies of its free "Steps to College" poster available in five languages, and is preparing to distribute another 500,000 this fall. The CSU system has also reached out directly to community members through such events as its "Super Sunday" college information sessions that have reached more than 30,000 people. St. Edward's University, a small Catholic college in Texas, has begun a CAMP program (a federal, state and institutional partnership) that offers scholarships for the sons and daughters of migrant and seasonal farm workers and is representative of many private colleges and universities pursuing outreach to underserved students.

In the coming months, ACE, in partnership with the Advertising Council and Lumina Foundation for Education, will launch a major three-year national public service campaign to encourage low-income, first-generation students to prepare for college. The *Know How To Go* campaign will use national public service announcements (PSAs) on television, in print, and on radio to provide information on how low-income students can prepare for college. Additional information and collateral material will be available through a special website and toll-free number. Print material will be available in both English and Spanish. Perhaps most importantly, the campaign will support an extensive network of community partners to provide assistance to students and families where they live.

The National Academies' *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* report called attention to the continued under-representation of women and minorities in academic science programs.

The National Academies also issued a report entitled *Beyond Bias and Barriers* devoted to the underutilization of qualified women in the sciences. Our associations will collaborate to identify steps that can be taken to advance the recommendations put forward in these reports. Further, the National Science Board has a new Commission on 21st Century Education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and we will carefully review its recommendations.

**(2) Keeping college affordable.** According to 2005-2006 data from the College Board, 46 percent of full-time undergraduates in four-year colleges and universities face tuition charges of less than \$6,000, prior to receiving financial aid. In addition, all community colleges charge less than this amount. At the same time, many families worry that they cannot afford a postsecondary education and believe that colleges are indifferent to the impact of tuition increases. During the last decade, you have taken significant steps to control costs while maintaining academic quality. For example, many of you have formed consortia for collaborative purchasing agreements that have saved millions of dollars. There is no doubt that these and similar efforts must and will continue in the years ahead. We must identify new approaches to contain costs using technology and other tools.

The calculation of "net price," and how that may differ from "sticker price"—tuition—is one proposal for providing clearer information about what students and families actually pay for college. Given the extraordinary range of costs and financing options, calculating such a figure is exceedingly difficult. However, individual colleges and universities should make every effort to do so.

**(3) Improving learning by utilizing new knowledge and instructional techniques.** In the last decade, cognitive research has uncovered many important insights about effective instructional practices and student learning. But, as Derek Bok observed in *Our Underachieving Universities*, we have not always systematically implemented what we have learned. We can make more extensive use of this knowledge to enhance student learning under differing circumstances with diverse groups of learners. Such efforts must be continuous and not episodic in nature.

We encourage all of you to review the research on this topic, gather information about successful practices, and make that information available, especially to deans, department chairs and faculty members. Much work in this area has been done or is underway by many organizations and individuals. While individual institutions must undertake this effort, it can be enhanced with the support of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

**(4) Preparing secondary students for higher education.** As a nation we are disenfranchising many in our society by not adequately educating them in our elementary and secondary schools. Despite efforts to set standards and increase the share of students completing college-preparatory courses, many students still do not graduate from high school ready to succeed in college. This growing crisis, which especially affects low-income students, manifests itself sharply in science and mathematics, but it is a systemic

problem of breadth and depth that warrants focused and sustained attention by all parties invested in K-12 education, including the higher education community.

One key to solving this problem is to better align high school curricula and graduation requirements with college-readiness standards. ACE along with several other organizations are working on the National Diploma Project, a state-based initiative to increase the number of high school graduates who exit secondary school ready to do college-level work without remediation or to move smoothly into the workforce or military service. ACE with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and several other organizations will soon announce an initiative whose purpose will be to increase the number of high school graduates who exit secondary school ready to do college-level work.

Your institutions confront unprepared students every day and have implemented stopgap measures like remedial courses and tutoring. Remediation is appropriate and effective for addressing individual and small-scale deficiencies; it is not sufficient to meet the current national scale of academic unpreparedness. Higher education must participate in a coordinated, national effort to address K-12/higher education transition problems. Many of you are already working with local and state educational systems to address this issue. We will identify and disseminate successful practices that can be adopted by others.

Finally, the *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* report recommends that America increase the number of new, fully certified science and mathematics teachers by 10,000 every year. In response, NASULGC, AASCU, AAU and NAICU (in conjunction with the Council for Independent Colleges and Project Kaleidoscope) will soon launch a multifaceted initiative to increase the number of science and mathematics teachers prepared by colleges and universities and recommended to states for certification. The goal is to develop innovative ways to attract the most talented university students into these fields and provide them with the education, tools and professional relationships necessary to produce significant improvements in elementary and secondary school science and mathematics education.

**(5) *Increasing accountability for educational outcomes.*** Much of the recent public discussion about higher education has focused on steps that might be taken to document outcomes of higher education, including assessments of student learning and academic achievement.

A number of projects seek to evaluate student learning and intellectual growth during undergraduate education. We will examine these pilot projects and their implementation on campuses, and seek ways to facilitate their development.

NASULGC and AASCU are developing a voluntary, transparent system of accountability for public four-year institutions. Wide consultations with the public four-year colleges and universities are underway and we encourage a careful review of this thoughtful concept. AACC has launched a task force on accountability to examine these issues in

the distinctive context of community colleges. AAU is working with its member institutions to develop better information for students and parents about the actual costs incurred to attend an AAU university, the average times to degree, graduation rates, and the post graduation outcomes of students. NAICU has compiled an extensive database of the myriad ways in which institutions demonstrate accountability to their various stakeholders so that innovative practices can be disseminated.

We need to develop better ways to demonstrate student academic progress and program completion. In particular, there is interest in more comprehensive graduation rates. Obviously, graduation rates are influenced by many factors and no institution should be judged on this information alone. But the current federal system of calculating institutional graduation rates primarily measures students who enter college full-time and stay at the same school for their entire undergraduate career. These calculations tend to exclude older students who often do not enroll full-time and do not capture the real experience of other part-time students and those who transfer from one institution to another. In the same vein, we are in an era in which 35 percent of all students transfer and 20 percent are enrolled in more than one college at the same time. We need to seek opportunities to reduce barriers to student mobility among institutions and a better way to assess the educational success of students who attend more than a single college.

Getting this information is not a simple matter: the issue has been widely discussed and there are a host of technical/operational and personal privacy issues that must be satisfactorily addressed. However, the interest in this topic is clear and the higher education associations will convene a task force of associations and other groups to address these issues.

One of the principal means of providing accountability is accreditation, the most critical part of quality assurance in higher education. Like higher education itself, accreditation is a complex, heterogeneous system that involves regional, national, and specialized accrediting agencies, all of which have different roles and missions. The particular strength of accreditation is its independence from both government and the institutions it accredits. All accreditors now make student learning outcomes a central component in the accreditation reviews, and this will continue. But we must expand our efforts to ensure the public that accreditation is a strong, meaningful assurance of academic quality. In part we can do this by identifying specific questions that continue to emerge about accreditation and develop ways to better inform the public about these issues. ACE, in concert with the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), will convene other education associations, accreditors, and the academic community to identify ways we might give more attention to these concerns and visibility to these efforts.

***(6) Internationalizing the student experience.*** As globalization continues to make the world a smaller place, we need to make certain that students gain the skills and knowledge to excel in whatever careers they pursue. This includes giving more attention to international issues in the curriculum, increasing proficiency in foreign languages, and expanding the number of students who acquire international experiences. Most of you have already taken steps in this direction and are continually adding to these efforts.

Cooperative ventures with foreign colleges are commonplace, and the number of Americans who study abroad is slowly but steadily increasing. There is no doubt, however, that we need to do more.

We strongly support the recommendation of the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program that within a decade, one million American students per year should be participating in study abroad. The Lincoln Commission urged that a federal competitive grant program be established to be used largely for scholarships to help students finance overseas study. The proposed program is designed to encourage individual institutions to greatly expand their own study abroad programs. A million Americans studying abroad each year will change our country and the world.

We need to continue to look for new ways to internationalize undergraduate curriculum and to enhance and expand the teaching of foreign languages, especially languages that are critical in the global economy and the U.S. position in the world. We support the Bush Administration's proposals to increase the study of foreign languages.

***(7) Increasing opportunities for lifelong education and workforce training.*** Preparing students for the workforce is a central task of many in higher education. Given the public interest and our concern in the nation's future competitiveness, we must pay more attention to the employment outcomes of our graduates of workforce development programs. Truly, this is one case where one size can never fit all. Working directly with colleges and universities and with accreditors, AACCC will convene a meeting of campus officials and assessment experts to examine the range of employment outcome measures currently being used by institutions, as well as those in development. The goal is to build a broad repertoire of outcome measures that effectively assess what happens after students complete these programs.

Given the rapid pace of change in today's economy, even people with degrees need periodic access to affordable educational and training programs to update their skills and knowledge. Retiring baby boomers and others look to higher education institutions to prepare for second careers. Meeting these needs is central to the mission of a large number of our members and is strongly supported by all of the associations.

***A note on funding.*** Every institution struggles to control costs. But when costs increase, or when revenue from one source declines, revenue from another source must be tapped to balance the budget. Fluctuations in revenue sources complicate these efforts. There is no question that state funding has decreased as a share of the budget at almost all public colleges and universities. Often, tuition increases are almost unavoidable to offset decreases in state support.

Student aid from the federal government is absolutely critical to helping low-income students finance a higher education. Unfortunately, the maximum Pell grant has not increased in five years—the longest such period in the more than 30 years the program has been in existence—and its purchasing power has significantly diminished. We believe that boosting the average and maximum Pell grant is absolutely critical.

But the bottom line is that we need sufficient resources to meet the challenges that have been placed before us. It is unrealistic to assume that we can expand access to low-income students and enhance academic quality without the resources to accomplish these goals.

Fortunately, the public understands the importance of higher education to our nation's well-being. We believe that by addressing these challenges in an open and forthright fashion we will enhance the willingness to increase public support for higher education and students.

***Summing up.*** American colleges and universities are the world standard in part because of the autonomy and independence that forces each of your institutions to identify and respond to new challenges and opportunities. Indeed, the respected British newsweekly *The Economist* recently noted, "America's system of higher education is the best in the world. That is because there is no system." We must take advantage of our diverse and flexible "system" to meet our current challenges.

We are at a critical moment. Never has higher education been more important to America's long-term economic well-being and social progress than it is today. A recent poll of registered voters found that 92 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Decisions we make about higher education today will help shape America's economic competitiveness 25 years from now." The challenges we face are real and urgent. We must address them with effective and timely changes if we are to serve American society as well in the future as we have in the past.

We are committed to this end.