



LaGuardia Community College

Overview of American Council on Education Robert Atwell Lecture By LaGuardia Community College President Gail O. Mellow Each and All: Creating a Sustainable American Higher Education System

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A nostalgic view of American higher education is threatening its competitiveness, relevance and sustainability. Averting a crisis requires us first to understand that we are, each and all, part of a densely inter-connected educational ecosystem. Every institution type plays an important role in American democracy, economy and culture. But the contributions of Community Colleges have been hidden in plain sight, and their invisibility impairs the higher educational system and weakens the U.S. as a nation. While the Carnegie classifications are the common way to classify colleges and universities, there are really only two distinct forms of American higher education, those that select their incoming class and those that welcome all post-secondary students.

The difference between colleges in those two categories is profound and the data compelling. As higher education leaders, we have allowed the baccalaureate and community college systems to develop separately and unequally, with tenuous points of integration, and inadequate financial support for the latter. But the facts beckon us to recognize our points of commonality and shared destiny. Community colleges enroll almost half of all undergraduates, and nearly 700,000 of the 1.5 million annual baccalaureate graduates have used community colleges for some part of their educational pathway.

The pivotal nature of higher education in the present global economy must be juxtaposed against America's declining ability to prepare its citizens for college success. Today in the United States, 28 percent of 8th grade students scored below the basic reading level and 33 percent scored below the basic math level; nearly one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate; 8 million Americans speak English poorly or not at all; and 29 million Americans do not have a high school education and are the most likely to be poor, unhealthy, and if male, incarcerated. Internationally, the U.S. ranks 8th in the percentage of citizens with an associate's degree among the richest 30 countries in the world, and is the only country where the younger generation is less educated than the older generation. The system of American education is broken in many places. America is slipping in our ability to effectively participate in the leadership of the world. These are sobering facts, but they also point to a tremendous opportunity if we collectively address these concerns. Dedicating ourselves to helping all adults with a basic education achieve an associate's degree, we could add \$848 billion to the U.S. economy.

How can we grow a sound higher education ecosystem? What are the requirements? What principles should guide us? We must stop giving community colleges straw and expecting spun gold. The fact is that what happens to community colleges impacts all



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higher education. Colleges and universities must learn to effectively educate every student who enters our institutions, while also recruiting and succeeding with a significantly larger swath of the adult population in America.

To do this, we must radically improve three things. First, we must develop better pedagogy to teach a new kind of college student. Colleges must invest heavily in and deeply support faculty to make pedagogical innovations. Second, we must alter the way colleges are measured. We must create evaluation tools that better capture who is in college now, who should be in college, and the incremental impact of education along a continuum and on several non-academic indices such as wages, civic participation, and family well-being. Finally and critically important, we must address the current funding imbalance where community colleges enroll almost half of U.S. undergraduates, while receiving only 20% of the public higher education funding. The U.S. spends almost three times more to educate each 4-year college student than it does for each community college student. These funding disparities must be eliminated.

I ask you to join with me in creating a sustainable system of American higher education that is informed by the facts of our future, not the dreams of our past.

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Website link to lecture summary: www.laguardia.edu/atwell/