

First in a Series of Essays:  
Discussing Higher Education's Future



# Collective Foresight:

*The* Leadership Challenges  
*for* Higher Education's  
**FUTURE**





First in a Series of Essays:  
Discussing Higher Education's Future

# Collective Foresight: *The* Leadership Challenges *for* Higher Education's **FUTURE**

By

Byron P. White  
Xavier University (OH)

Peter D. Eckel  
American Council on Education

 **AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION**  
The Unifying Voice for Higher Education

*With generous support from*

**TIAA-CREF** institute

© March 2008



American Council on Education

ACE and the American Council on Education are registered marks of the American Council on Education and may not be used or reproduced without the express written permission of ACE.

American Council on Education  
One Dupont Circle NW  
Washington, DC 20036

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Additional copies of this publication are available for purchase online at [www.acenet.edu/bookstore](http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore) for \$25.00 per copy, plus shipping and handling. Copies may also be purchased by contacting:

ACE Fulfillment Service  
Department 191  
Washington, DC 20055-0191  
Phone: (301) 632-6757  
Fax: (301) 843-0159

When ordering, please specify Item 311744.

Cover Illustration © Paul Schulenburg/Images.com

# Table of Contents

---

Preface	iii
Introduction: A Focus on the Future	1
Focusing the Crystal Ball	3
Funding	3
Escalating costs and rising tuition	3
Outcome-driven funding	3
An unforgiving marketplace	5
The Public and Its Perceptions	6
Access and social fragmentation	6
Changing demographics	6
Growing public skepticism about higher education	7
Knowledge and Information	7
Shifting foundations of knowledge	7
Decline of civil society	8
Losing ground to global competition	9
Concern for the environment	10
The Unpredictable Unknowns	10

Laying the Groundwork for the Future	11
People	11
Attend to those historically left behind	11
Develop talent for tomorrow	12
Purposes	13
Resolve tensions in what and how we teach	13
Adopt a truly global orientation	13
Serve as stewards of place	14
Articulate higher education's social purpose	15
Practices	15
Question assumptions	15
Perfect collaboration	15
Develop the capacity for continual innovation	16
Look beyond higher education	17
Conclusion: Three Deceptive, Simple Questions	19
Appendix: List of Roundtable Participants	21

# Preface

---

Recent widely disseminated reports—such as the National Academies’ *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* and *Beyond Bias and Barriers*, the Spellings Commission’s *A Test of Leadership*, and *Mortgaging Our Future*, by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance—all forewarn of impending challenges facing higher education and highlight its shortcomings. Converging trends identified in these reports and elsewhere will undoubtedly shape American higher education in the future. The drive for more assessment, accountability, and transparency; the changing relationships between states and their institutions, including the “privatization” of public higher education; demographic changes among students, faculty, and senior administrators, including racial and ethnic diversity and the rise of a new generation and the impending retirements within another; advances in technology and the presence of science in everyday life; and the effects of globalization are just a few of these significant trends. Equally important are the unknown or emerging issues that will profoundly affect higher education in the not-too-distant future. Campus leaders have not only the challenge of responding to the impending future, but also the responsibility for shaping that future.

For the past four years, the American Council on Education (ACE) has held a series of roundtable conversations for presidents and other higher education leaders to explore the short-term implications of many of these trends—with a particular focus on accountability, public funding and privatization, market-based state policy, competition, and public confidence in higher education—and identify the work of leaders. Some of the questions discussed by roundtable participants have included:

- Where do state and higher education needs converge, where do they diverge, and how can higher education close the gap? Given trends in public funding, what is the appropriate balance among autonomy, accountability, and public funding?
- How does higher education renew, maintain, or in some cases, regain the confidence and respect of the public and state policy makers? How do the realities of the marketplace and current approaches to accountability complicate the situation?
- Given the rise of market forces, how do campus leaders move their institutions toward important public goals and objectives and maintain competitiveness? What tensions exist among academic prerogatives, the interests and needs of the public, and marketplace opportunities?

The conversations to date have been illuminating and resulted in a series of widely read essays, available on the ACE web site (see [www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu) and select Center for Effective Leadership from

the Programs & Services menu, then click on Presidential Roundtables). The three most recent essays are:

- *The Times Demand Innovation: Responding to Declining Resources and Heightened Accountability* (2007).
- *Toward Higher Ground: Reclaiming Public Confidence in a Competitive Environment* (2006).
- *Peering Around the Bend: The Leadership Challenges of Privatization, Accountability, and Market-based State Policy* (2005).

The questions explored in the previous roundtables have been important, yet their focus has been on immediate concerns. Just as important, however, is the need to project what these—and other—trends portend for higher education over the next 15 to 20 years and the role of campus leaders in framing and delivering the kind of future that higher education desires. Little evidence exists to suggest that any of the developments outlined above will subside. Instead, some current trends will strengthen, while other new trends, now barely visible, will emerge as important. What are the possible future scenarios for American higher education? How can leaders best prepare and position their institutions for the present while keeping an eye on the future? How might leaders work to best shape public policy to advance both higher education's common interests and individual institutional missions? How might leadership best lay a solid foundation today that will withstand an unknown tomorrow?

During a daylong conversation held in April 2007, we invited campus presidents to think broadly about trends affecting all of higher education and their implication for presidential leadership. This conversation provided an opportunity for leaders to reflect with colleagues from a range of institutions on what their visions for their own campuses might collectively mean for American higher education.

We thank Bette Landman, president emerita of Arcadia University (PA), who served as facilitator for this roundtable and a previous discussion on innovation in times of constrained resources and heightened accountability. We also thank roundtable participants Larry Bacow, Steve Curtis, George Dennison, Phil Glotzbach, David Maxwell, Judith Ramaley, and Lou Anna Simon for their responses to a previous draft of this essay. The TIAA-CREF Institute, under the leadership of Vice President and Executive Director Madeleine d'Ambrosio, supported this essay as well as the roundtable. We are grateful for the generous support provided by TIAA-CREF Institute and d'Ambrosio's continued interest in ACE's leadership activities.

For additional information on the ACE Presidential Roundtable Series and the subsequent essays, or if you are interested in participating in future conversations, please contact Peter Eckel, director of programs and initiatives in the American Council on Education's Center for Effective Leadership, at [leadership\\_programs@ace.nche.edu](mailto:leadership_programs@ace.nche.edu) or (202) 939-9728.



## Introduction:

# A Focus on the Future

---

University and college presidents are not clairvoyant. They cannot predict the future. Yet, increasingly, they must lead as though they can see well into the future. That is because the fortunes of higher education rest, in large part, on how well leaders today can anticipate and shape the trends of tomorrow. College presidents are fully aware of this. The stakes are high. For many, the very question of whether their institutions will thrive (or, in some cases, survive) hinges on their ability to make decisions today that will position their institutions to contend with changes that are over the horizon. The current environment—with its increasing competition, insufficient resources, and heightened accountability—creates increased pressure to “get it right,” and institutions have few resources to spend on risky ventures. Furthermore, it will be increasingly difficult to recover from miscalculations. Neither do the circumstances of today allow presidents to play it safe and find comfort in the status quo.

The future is something to be both excited about and wary of. Presidents, for the most part, are an optimistic lot. However, a few at the roundtable on which this essay was based were pessimistic about the academy’s prospects, predicting that some forces are going to deal a severe blow to higher education—one from which colleges and universities might not recover. Others, instead, believed that the winds of change already were moving institutions in ways that will serve them well in the unfolding future and that campus leaders, through individual and collective effort, can influence future circumstances. There was consensus among the participants regarding the major trends affecting higher education and implications of those trends for moving forward. Those at the roundtable also generally shared the prediction that American higher education has the capacity to respond to the changing world, is resilient enough to survive the challenges, and, with insightful and thoughtful leaders, can position itself to continue its three-century run as a relevant social institution. However, to accomplish this, the academy may need to transform itself in some dramatic ways. For this, it has much work to do.

The next two sections reflect the collective wisdom of the assembled presidents. First, this essay explores the trends most likely to shape higher education over the next 20 years or so. These trends reflect changes both within the academy and in the larger world. The second section outlines the agreed-upon actions that campus leaders might consider to position their institutions now for the future.



# Focusing the Crystal Ball

---

By definition, collective dialogue brings together views informed by different perspectives and experiences that become shuffled and combined to lead to a more nuanced understanding. The images of the future that appear in a figurative crystal ball become clearer as more people gaze into it. The trends identified below reflect the cumulative wisdom of presidents looking at and understanding their own worlds, which are very much bound to institutional mission and geographic location and can be very different from one another. While the presidents found much to be optimistic about in the future—high-caliber faculty, dedicated alumni, a recognition by the public of high quality, a continued demand for undergraduate and graduate education, and a dedicated cadre of both present and emerging leaders—the roundtable conversation focused predominately on the challenges facing higher education. This attention given to forthcoming challenges signaled an implicit consensus that U.S. higher education cannot rest on its laurels and that, to remain effective in the future, it must directly confront the challenges it faces. The challenges identified fall into three broad categories—funding, the public and its perceptions, and knowledge and information.

## Funding

*Escalating costs and rising tuition.* “The biggest issue,” said Skidmore College (NY) President Philip A. Glotzbach, “is cost containment.” Few in the room disagreed with him. From health care to utilities to new technology and the physical plant, the cost of managing colleges and universities is growing at a rapid pace, with the majority of campuses unable to maintain their current speed for much longer. Meanwhile, each year, state and federal legislators take less fiscal responsibility by either not raising tuition or challenging institutions not to do so. Students and their families face a greater burden in paying for higher education at a time when median family income is holding steady. The rising costs and the current nature of competition in which institutions are pressured to discount tuition, invest in merit aid, and offer top-flight amenities, create a fiscal calculus for disaster.

*Outcome-driven funding.* No president expressed a belief that the trend of insufficient public support for colleges and universities will significantly reverse itself. And the public support that might exist in the future may be strongest for efforts that directly produce tangible returns on investment, particularly in areas that meet state priorities, such as economic growth or workforce development. As one president said, “I have been asked by one state legislator, ‘Why are you concerned about undergraduates?’” the implication being that undergraduate instruction is the least important activity of colleges and universities, given immediate workforce and

---

If *quid pro quo* becomes the new funding principle, then successful universities will be those that most effectively show evidence of their ability to deliver benefits to either the state or private supporters.

---

economic needs. State policy may increasingly focus on short-term priorities as governments appear not to display the political discipline to devote attention to long-term effectiveness. In part, this trend is driven by parochial interests and the crises of the day, but it also may reflect the incapacity of public policy makers to take a long view due to factors such as term limits, budget cycles, and pent-up demands related to other underfunded priorities (such as K–12 education, state infrastructure, etc.) that are still affected by past cuts.

Concurrently, needed revenue may well come from private sources that expect something for their investment, a trend many presidents are seeing not only in contracts with corporations but also in donations from private individuals. If *quid pro quo* becomes the new funding principle, then successful universities will be those that most effectively show evidence of their ability to deliver benefits to either the state or private supporters. “We make grandiose statements about what our higher education systems do, but we don’t have a lot of evidence that we’ve done it

and if we do, how we made it happen,” said George M. Dennison, president of the University of Montana.

Providing this justification will require campaigns based on solutions, said Lee Todd, president of the University of Kentucky. “You have got to find something that you can measure so that we can go to our legislators and document our contribution,” he said. “We have to sell higher education to the legislators so they will provide some funding.” Todd, for example, spoke of a pool of resources to fund faculty research that addresses pressing state problems, thus linking institutional strengths with state needs.

But such a reciprocal relationship raises questions as well: What are the implications of not being able to deliver on the problems handed to higher education, asked one president. The social problems are tough—declining schools, criminal rehabilitation, poverty, job creation. Solutions are not easy to develop and progress can be limited. Thus, if higher education is able to convince policy makers that it can solve these problems with adequate support, it risks becoming associated with failed efforts or the inability to make notable progress.

Finally, this changed financial calculus raises some key questions for campus leaders, particularly regarding the extent to which colleges and universities become entrepreneurial. How do institutions with financial constraints balance the pursuit of social missions with the pursuit of additional resources that have the potential to distort that mission? Consider, for example, the donor who makes a sizable gift to an athletic program while the institution is struggling to meet its need-based financial aid goals. Such a tension is what Lou Anna K. Simon, president of Michigan State University, calls the balance between “our entrepreneurial self and our public

self.” She added, “The questions that we need to grapple with are: What are the ethics of both of these [roles]? When is a good deal not a good deal?”

*An unforgiving marketplace.* Competition in higher education may quickly become survival of the fittest, and many institutions simply may not be able to survive. First, institutions will not be able to move slowly and methodically into the marketplace as they risk being left behind. “The market is going to be so unforgiving,” said Montana’s Dennison, “that if you don’t choose well, you’re going to get shredded.” Successful institutional leaders will develop the foresight to know when to act and when to pass on what might be considered an opportunity by others. Rather than do as others do (such as jumping into full-scale distance learning or opening degree programs in China), savvy leaders will develop their own indicators of when an opportunity might be beneficial.

Second, leaders will have to figure out how to respond to what Michigan State’s Simon called the “tyranny of parochialism,” in which institutions pursue their own agendas in order to compete, even though those agendas may work against a collective good. Market dynamics, she said, “make it difficult to operate as a collective because there is no longer a common interest across higher education. We may have lost a bit of our own common good.” Such individual action creates a fragmentation that also threatens the collaboration among institutions that is necessary for collective advancement. Many issues affect higher education broadly and, without the collective ability to respond, higher education is at a loss. For instance, colleges and universities are better able to shape favorable public policy through joint efforts rather than from a position of individual interest, but future trends may work against this cooperative approach.

Third, at the same time, institutions will have to find ways to get out from under the counter-pressure that works against institutions trying to chart their own courses. Simon also spoke of a “‘tyranny of accountability’ that really pushes against all of the differentiation created from the new innovation.” Rigid accountability efforts can create narrow definitions of what is acceptable, focus institutional priorities in ways that don’t make sense given their missions and students, and, at an extreme, limit the ways in which institutions remain faithful to their missions.

The rub is that the unforgiving competitive market of the future promotes individualism that has the potential to undo higher education’s collective strength and, at the same time, to limit institutional flexibility to innovate in ways that advance missions.

---

The rub is that the unforgiving competitive market of the future promotes individualism that has the potential to undo higher education’s collective strength and, at the same time, to limit institutional flexibility to innovate in ways that advance missions.

---

## The Public and Its Perceptions

*Access and social fragmentation.* Access is not only a public policy priority but also an important value of higher education. However, the realities of rising costs, insufficient public funding, and heightened competition work together to put that value at risk. “I see a certain train wreck coming between real financial need and commitment to merit aid,” said David Maxwell, president of Drake University. The result may be a two-tiered system, with some schools offering well-financed education to a small, elite group of students, and others meeting the needs of a mass market and doing so with significantly fewer resources per student. “I fear we are moving in a direction that will lead to a very stratified higher education experience where, for a small number of people, it still becomes possible to go off and have a very classic, residential experience. And that’s wonderful and valuable,” said Steven G. Poskanzer, president of the State University of New York at New Paltz. “Nevertheless, the percentage of people who will have that opportunity will decrease and we will see almost a mass education versus an elite education. What will that mean for the fabric of the society?” Even community colleges—in which access and affordability have long been points of pride—are struggling with values and priorities. Stephen M. Curtis, president of the Community College of Philadelphia, noted that his college has seen tuition increase by 55 percent over the past five years.

*Changing demographics.* The nation’s changing demographics will affect higher education significantly, if not dramatically. The tendency is to think about demographics in terms of race and ethnicity, which are important factors. For example, the number of high school students from diverse racial backgrounds is increasing, and the population of many states is being shaped by migration and immigration patterns, with some states becoming “majority minority.” However, other trends also are significant and complicate the American mosaic. Some states are experiencing tremendous population growth not just among people of color but also among all their citizens. Other states, mostly in the North, are facing the reverse, with predicted declines in population.

The forthcoming retirements of the baby boomers and the rise of other generations is further shaping the demographic picture. As baby boomers age, many are leaving the workforce. At the same time, others of that age are unable to do so for economic reasons and are returning to college for more education and training. Health care, a priority for aging boomers, is competing directly with higher education in the public policy arena. Baby boomers also predominate in the population of senior faculty and campus administrators, while new faculty hires are members of Generation X and the traditional-age students enrolling now are known as the Millennials. Each group has its own set of expectations, priorities, and ways of thinking, which may be at odds with one another in the classroom and elsewhere on campus. Furthermore, ACE data show that close to 50 percent of all college and university presidents are 61 years of age or older. We can expect a generational change not only in campus leadership but in the faculty as well. Finally, income inequities are growing. The recent economic climate has treated some

individuals extremely well, while creating more difficult times for a growing proportion of the population.

*Growing public skepticism about higher education.* Amid these changes, higher education struggles to maintain its esteemed position as a relevant social institution. “The mythology of education as the great equalizer has faded,” said Dennison of Montana. “Education is the key to succeeding in America. That’s my family’s story,” he said. “But I’m not sure whether that is going to be so common a story going forward. I’m not sure whether there’s the same value. I’m not sure people value [highly] enough what education means.” A great deal of the skepticism has to do with a public perception that higher education simply is not responsive to contemporary societal needs. “I think we have to get very real with whether we are providing relevant knowledge, skills, and experiences for our students in higher education,” said Martha A. Smith, president of Anne Arundel Community College (MD). Colleges further lose public favor because of their seeming inability, or worse, unwillingness, to be accountable. Sizable, if not outright huge, endowments and billion-dollar capital campaigns do little to convince the public and policy makers that more public dollars are needed and that public policy has shortchanged higher education. Do taxpayers believe their money is being spent wisely, given the recent news articles on coaches’ salaries and conflict of interest in student loans?

Ironically, at the same time and through the lens of economic development, higher education is increasingly revered by policy makers and corporate leaders. A recent analysis of the state of the state addresses by the nation’s governors found that 76 percent of governors spoke of initiatives to foster partnerships that link the research capacities of colleges and universities with business needs, and close to 50 percent described initiatives to engage higher education more effectively in preparing their workforces to be globally competitive.<sup>1</sup> The result is that higher education is caught between two realities regarding its favored status; given the decline in relative public expenditures, disfavor seems to be winning.

---

Through the lens of economic development, higher education is increasingly revered by policy makers and corporate leaders.

---

## Knowledge and Information

*Shifting foundations of knowledge.* Much of the traditional understanding of what constitutes knowledge and how it is validated and transmitted is being reshaped by changes in technology, particularly by web sites such as Wikipedia and Google, as well as by free open-source courseware. This shift surfaces assumptions about knowledge that have the potential to drastically reshape higher education. How is knowledge created and disseminated? Who verifies knowledge, particularly in the age of Wikipedia, “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit” (according

<sup>1</sup> National Governors Association. (2007). *The governors speak—2007: A report on the state-of-the-state addresses of the nation’s and U.S. territories’ governors*. Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices. See [www.nga.org/Files/pdf/GOVSPEAK0704.PDF](http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/GOVSPEAK0704.PDF).

to its own web site)? What is the role of degrees and credentials, given trends in knowledge creation, ownership, and dissemination? What do virtual communities—Second Life, Facebook, and so forth—mean for the academic community, given the dynamic manner in which ideas are generated and shared in today’s global society? “The way knowledge is being created globally is collaborative and interdisciplinary,” said Winona State University (MN) President Judith A. Ramaley. “It’s co-created through networks and cyberspace.”

In many ways, colleges and universities have had a corner on knowledge and the ability to exploit it. But this historical reality may be changing, weakening the position of academe. Furthermore, while access is free and expanding, other forms of knowledge, particularly that generated by “big science,” is increasingly costly and governments are becoming disinclined to invest in it unless the payoff is immediate and concrete. These two trends, while pulling in opposite directions regarding the flow of knowledge, both have chilling effects for universities and colleges. Some types of understanding are widening; other avenues of knowledge are being foreclosed.

*Decline of civil society.* A deeper social change is creating a chill on many campuses that affects how students learn, what they learn, and possibly more importantly, how open they are to learning and new ideas. Discourse increasingly is thwarted by some individuals—students, faculty, alumni, and trustees, but also off-campus interest groups—who advocate narrow, extremist views with little willingness to solicit other viewpoints. Instead of engaging in open and constructive dialogue, they seek easy answers from a parochial viewpoint and are unwilling either to examine their assumptions or to do the hard work that generates deeper thought. At its extreme, this intolerance parallels other national and international movements around fundamentalism and extremism. Glotzbach of Skidmore College called it “the loss of rationality.” He said, “It is intrinsic in our [academic] nature to ask [difficult] questions, but our social context has come to expect extremely simple answers to those questions.” The rational discourse, essential to a liberal education, may be a way of the past. Asked Poskanzer of SUNY–New Paltz, “How do we retain the values of linear thought and arguments, so that students learn to engage in rational discourse, which traditionally is always at the center of the university consciousness? That is something in danger of being lost.”

---

People hold their positions and vie to see who can proclaim their points of view the loudest, rather than work toward better understanding.

---

In such an environment, civil debate also suffers. People hold their positions and vie to see who can proclaim their points of view the loudest, rather than work toward better understanding. This creates a growing unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue as individuals search for ways to skirt the hard choices rather than confront them. Said Drake’s Maxwell, “We no longer have role models in the public arena.”



A related casualty to this loss of discourse and the rise of sources such as Wikipedia and other networked sites is the value of science, according to some members of the roundtable. The practice of scientific discovery and objective inquiry is increasingly being countered by the emotionalism of opinions and beliefs. The volume of the arguments, not the proven facts, seems to be carrying the day. Anyone with an opinion on global warming can modify an online entry or post a paper regardless of his or her scientific training. Naysayers with a click of a mouse can “edit” years of scientific work to advocate their own untrained opinions.

*Losing ground to global competition.* Globalization puts two sets of pressures on institutions: to prepare students for a different future, and to be able as institutions to compete in an expanded market. Losing ground on the above areas also may mean that our country slips behind other nations in creating and supporting the infrastructure associated with the global knowledge age. As James Bernard Machen, president of the University of Florida, remarked about China’s escalating investment in higher education, “There are 200 million people learning to read English in China today, but they aren’t learning it so they can read Chaucer.” How well colleges and universities address these two pressures will influence the extent to which the nation remains economically competitive and colleges and universities remain socially relevant. The solutions to these challenges must be consistent with academic values and priorities, and in many instances be at least self-supporting.

First, institutions are being pressured to educate students for the global workplace. State governments, corporations, and, increasingly, parents of potential students are pressing colleges and universities to guarantee that graduates will find a high-paying job in the global knowledge economy. “When I think about global competition, one of the things that worries me is our ability to produce high-quality graduates who can compete with anyone in the world on a continuous basis,” said Jerry Sue Thornton, president of Cuyahoga Community College (OH).

Second, countries such as India, Korea, Germany, France, Australia, and China are investing deeply in their universities and advancing public policies that enable them to develop strong international presences. Students—including those from developed and developing countries—will shop a global market for educational opportunities. U.S. students may more readily look abroad for postsecondary education—particularly those in international fields—pitting American universities against one another as well as foreign institutions in a global competition for domestic and international students. Faculty members will be a part of this same global interchange. Worldwide competition also extends to research grants and corporate contracts, as multinational firms invest in R&D in different countries. Florida’s Machen said, “The global landscape is such

---

Countries such as India, Korea, Germany, France, Australia, and China are investing deeply in their universities and advancing public policies that enable them to develop strong international presences.

---

that there are credible academic faculty at these [now] major universities. . . . The world has changed.”

A growing number of new ways to structure international partnerships and engagements exist to address both of these challenges. The trick will be to develop and maintain these new types of relationships. “Our joint collaboration with China is more of a business venture than a standard academic partnership,” said Simon, of Michigan State. “Our facility, which opened a year ago, really acts as more of a traffic cop for us on a wide range of activities,” not just academic initiatives. Such approaches also meet the dual objectives of advancing academic values and priorities and increasing institutional self-sufficiency.

*Concern for the environment.* Interest in and concern for the natural environment, socially, politically, and economically, is growing and higher education institutions are finding themselves swept up by this trend for several reasons. First, campus scientists are at the forefront of research on the environment. Second, students are right behind them, as advocates for a more environmentally conscious society. And third, faculty members and students on campus are pushing colleges to be among the first institutions to embrace greener processes and technologies, whether in the consumption of energy or the construction of environmentally friendly facilities.

## The Unpredictable Unknowns

All these trends touch on the social, cultural, technological, and economic forces that are currently pressing on colleges and universities. However, there is another part of the conversation about the future that is difficult, if not impossible, to address. These are unknown or newly emerging issues that will profoundly affect higher education in the near future. Some of the important challenges for the future are less visible now than others. Before 2001, who would have predicted that issues of homeland security would become such a dominant national policy priority? No one was concerned about Wikipedia and user-driven knowledge (or the “democratization of knowledge”) when they were still relying on peer-reviewed journals and even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Until recently, academics were concerned with the *demise* of community as students spent more time on e-mail and the web, not with issues of privacy and other fallout from community networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Much about the future remains unknown and unpredictable.

# Laying the Groundwork for the Future

---

Leading for the future requires three capacities. First, college and university leaders must have a clear sense of what they want their institutions to be and do. Creating their visions comes through a deep understanding of the mission of the institution and the ability to work with key stakeholders to design a mosaic of what the institution can become. Second, leaders must discern the problems and opportunities ahead. Knowing the forthcoming terrain helps prepare one for the journey. The ideas presented in the previous section serve as a useful, if incomplete, starting point. Finally, leaders must lay the groundwork now to position their institutions to realize their vision, given the emerging future.

While none of these requirements is easy to fulfill, the third charge may prove most difficult. Leaders must simultaneously live in the present with all its demands and do the work for tomorrow, which may seem like a distraction or even an imprudent use of time and resources, given immediate pressures. Laying this groundwork for the future may have few short-term gains, and may even be costly. For instance, convincing one's faculty and students during times of financial duress to invest for the distant future rather than spending on today's needs can be one of the most challenging tasks for a leader. Yet, making that argument successfully is essential to effective leadership. This section focuses on this third challenge, providing some concrete steps for institutional leaders to secure their institution's future.

## People

*Attend to those historically left behind.* A casualty of the changing financial calculus may easily be low-income students. As state policy moves toward market structures and public support fails to keep pace, and as institutions ratchet-up merit aid, students from low-income backgrounds may suffer disproportionately. The country cannot afford to turn its back on those students. Competing in the global marketplace will require maximizing all the human talent the nation has to offer. "I'm very concerned that we get to all citizens of this country because we are going to need every single one of them if we're going to achieve the goal of being competitive in the world," said Smith of Anne Arundel Community College.

Much of the challenge is grounded not only in holding costs down and providing adequate need-based aid, but in addressing prior schooling. In order to achieve this, higher education will have to join forces with elementary and high school educators more deliberately than in the past.

“We’ve got to get our hands dirty with K–12 and try to get those kids who are not considering going to college,” said Kentucky’s Todd.

*Develop talent for tomorrow.* An essential component of higher education’s future and its ability to change successfully is effective leadership. “We have a challenge to build a cadre of leaders who can identify and react to what today we’re calling the unexpected,” said Linda M. Thor, president of Rio Salado Community College (AZ). “We must prepare leaders who will be more in tune with the trends and are able to act on them proactively.” This challenge becomes even more pressing as the latest ACE data show that almost half of today’s presidents are aged 61 or older; they will retire in the near- to midterm. Many key attributes of successful leaders will remain the same, such as the importance of academic credentials and experience in higher education, the ability to articulate and embody academic values, the capacity to articulate and develop a vision, the skills to get things done by building committed communities and securing necessary resources, and a deep passion for higher education. Yet this new generation of leaders may require new characteristics as well. For instance, future leaders will need an ability to more effectively engage external audiences as partners, as discussed above, to advance the institution’s mission (in ways beyond raising money), and generally to advocate on the institution’s behalf. The leader of the future will need to identify strategically and then secure a wider array of resources to support the institution.

---

The job of the president, ultimately, may be about framing problems and engaging people to develop solutions.

---

Leaders also will need to effect different types of change continually. They must recognize that different times will require different leadership and then be able to adapt. They must be able to strike balances between competing priorities and stakeholders without having either side feel shortchanged. The job of the president, ultimately, may be about framing problems and engaging people to develop solutions.

The future success of colleges and universities does not rest solely with administrative leaders, however. Engaged faculty members also will be essential. On many campuses, a new spirit of responsibility is emerging among talented young professors. Presidents notice that these new academics are more engaged, concerned about the effectiveness of their work, and interested in socially relevant questions or applications of their work than faculty from previous generations. They are unwilling to sit on the sidelines or hide in their classrooms and labs, and are strongly committed to positioning their institutions for the future. Others are concerned that this sense of self-determination offered by a new generation of faculty ultimately will succumb to characteristics shared more generally by other young people in their age group, who have a loose sense of connection to institutions and are less inclined to feel a sense of personal obligation for institutional direction and stability. Said Maxwell of Drake University, “I fear that may have a negative impact on faculty fulfilling their responsibilities for shared governance, for taking ownership of the institution’s future in the ways that their predecessors have.”

## Purposes

*Resolve tensions in what and how we teach.* The type of learning needed to prepare students for the future is placed at risk if higher education cannot address some fundamental tensions in its curricula. First, the tension between the liberal arts and professional education will need to be resolved so institutions can best prepare students for a future that demands both intellectual and practical skills. “If you talk to the corporate leaders, they’ll tell you a liberal education is needed to get ahead. Yet, if you talk to the human resources people [who do the hiring], they’ll tell you [they] want somebody who has practical skills,” said Montana’s Dennison. “Yet liberal educators don’t want to talk about careerism, and vocationalists don’t want to talk about liberalism. That will have to change.” The uneasy truce between academic tribes that currently allows this to occur (e.g., typical distributed general education curricula) may not be sufficient in the future. Instead, campuses will need to find constructive ways to provide both types of education in an intentional and integrated manner.

Second, teaching will need to become even more collaborative and more cross- and interdisciplinary. This starts, of course, with the faculty. Graduates in many areas already are expected by their employers to move beyond a single academic discipline to solve problems from an interdisciplinary perspective as part of a team, real or virtual. “Interdisciplinarity is one issue that, if you look at the next 10 or 20 years, will take more of a center place,” said SUNY–New Paltz’s Poskanzer. “The capacity to have students working across fields will require universities to at least make spaces for that” process to occur. Interdisciplinary learning will also take place outside the traditional classroom. Linking different fields and disciplines will be important, but so will be the ability to link learning from different experiences. Putting ideas into practice and having opportunities to make those connections under the tutelage of skilled experts helps deepen learning.

Finally, the burden will increasingly fall to higher education to teach the values and practices of deliberative democracy. The presidents expressed deep concern not only that people seem to be less inclined to take on the responsibilities of citizenship, but that there exist virtually no arenas in which such practices can be learned. Colleges and universities will need to devise an “education for civic engagement,” said Lawrence S. Bacow, president of Tufts University.

*Adopt a truly global orientation.* What has been accomplished thus far regarding U.S. higher education’s interaction with the rest of the world is most likely but the tip of what is to come. U.S. higher education has a strong track record in educating international graduate students and recruiting foreign-born academics, and a consistent record in sending students overseas for short programs (albeit one that has not seen steep growth). Many institutions also are making concerted efforts to expose their students on campus to international ideas and issues. However, American colleges and universities will need to make significant progress in sending more students overseas for both short and long stays. A handful of institutions are making commitments

and developing the means to do this, but for the vast majority, study abroad is not becoming significantly more prevalent. Colleges and universities will need to incorporate international ideas and perspectives fully into the curriculum. Students, regardless of career choice or discipline, will need to acquire an understanding of the world beyond the nation's borders and develop the capacity to learn from and about different cultures. International dimensions can no longer be an “add on” or an option that students can select—or not.

Beyond educating their own students, and as noted previously, American campuses will need to prepare themselves for the growing international higher education marketplace. They will find increased competition with international universities for international students, non-U.S. born faculty, and research dollars. At the same time, their offerings and degrees may be in higher demand, thus they will need to develop capacities, online and face-to-face, to work in other countries, understanding the needs of the local community, the regional higher education system, and pertinent quality assurance mechanisms.

Finally, campus leaders may have to convince the public that international education is beneficial, as some Americans may not share that same sentiment. Said Thornton of Cuyahoga Community College, “At colleges and universities, we clearly understand the need to compete. We clearly understand the need to globalize our education and international education, but I’m

not sure [that] in our broader American population there is as much support for that as we feel in higher education. There is an America that has a huge pushback to it.” Of particular concern are those who feel their jobs and livelihoods are threatened by global outsourcing.

---

As institutions adopt a global view, they must simultaneously attend to the needs of their local communities. Colleges and universities, regardless of mission, rely on their local communities and, in turn, have a responsibility to address certain local needs.

---

*Serve as stewards of place.* As institutions adopt a global view, they must simultaneously attend to the needs of their local communities. Colleges and universities, regardless of mission, rely on their local communities and, in turn, have a responsibility to address certain local needs. The work of institutions can go a long way in raising the stature of their localities (whether defined as city, state, neighborhood, or region) and improving the lives of area citizens. Noted Winona State’s Ramaley, “Most of us are important engines for change and critical place keepers.” The work can be grouped into two large categories of issues, which are more likely to overlap than to be separate and distinct. On the one hand, institutions are relied on to address pressing social issues such as K–12 education, aging, health care, or poverty. The other set of issues—related to regional economic development, including workforce development, new business incubation, innovation, and competitiveness—is increasingly finding itself front and center on institutional agendas, as policy makers and corporate leaders recognize higher education to be a key driver and resource in the growing knowledge economy.

*Articulate higher education's social purpose.* Finally, higher education can best do well by doing good. Leaders, in the midst of budgets, entrepreneurial activities, curricular decisions, and strategic plans, can best be served by reinforcing and stressing higher education's social purpose. "I think the thing we will always bear in mind is that we are valuable to society and valuable to industry, in particular *because* we are different," said Bacow of Tufts University. Reaffirming the values and the means that make higher education a special contributor to society helps elevate the work of institutions and their leaders above the fray of simply management and accountability. Given the pressures, it is too easy to become distracted or intentionally downplay those key contributions and the special roles played by colleges and universities. Without a deliberate strategy to remind key stakeholders beyond the campus that higher education is a unique and essential social institution, we risk being viewed in simple terms, and in effect, as much less than we actually are.

## Practices

*Question assumptions.* How higher education collectively advances itself depends on what we choose to do, how we are structured, and where we set our priorities. But it also depends on the assumptions we hold that shape our future actions. Said Maxwell of Drake University, "Our operating behavior as institutions and organizations is based on a set of assumptions—assumptions about the world, assumptions about who we are, assumptions about what we do. Ultimately, the biggest challenge for us is determining which of the assumptions we are making right now are still going to be valid and operative in 20 years." What are those assumptions that will serve us well, and which ones may need to be jettisoned? How do we create solutions for future problems, some of which are only now beginning to come into clarity?

*Perfect collaboration.* Higher education in the future may well need more voices, not fewer, in shaping its direction, and may rely increasingly on a broader array of institutional and other partners. Said Bacow, "The boundaries that traditionally have defined organizations have become much more permeable. And we're struggling in some ways with how to deal with these more permeable membranes." The ability to collaborate effectively will play itself out in numerous arenas.

First, governing campuses in the future will be a much more open and collaborative process. As the demands on institutions grow, so will the number of stakeholders involved with a serious and sustained commitment to institutional success. Said Maxwell, "There are shifts in ownership in the future of the institution. . . . There are a lot of people who really do have a stake in the future of the institution, from students and their parents, to faculty, the governing board, the alumni. We've had a very successful and reasonably static model of governance for the last half century. It has served us well. But I think we are seeing shifts in how the parts of that formula understand and place their [own] role, particularly the public sector."

Second, institutional leaders will need to know how to work collaboratively within their institutions to identify and tap leadership in others as the issues become more complex and the stakes become higher. Said Skidmore's Glotzbach, "I think there is one thing that's very clear: People who are in leadership positions are going to rely upon a skill that has not been traditionally honored in the leadership of higher education and that is relationship building—the capacity to negotiate, the capacity to network with a broad range of leaders."

Third, campus leaders will have to manage relationships with other organizations, including other colleges and universities, but also community organizations, government agencies, and businesses. Said Dennison: "Our relationships with other institutions will also have to become more fluid so that we can respond to a societal need or so we can bring together the right compilation of sources to tackle the obstacle. We're going to have to have new types of networks and ties to these different types of factors. Otherwise, we will really start to seem irrelevant."

Creating new partnerships and organizational structures can range from tedious to frustrating to gut-wrenchingly difficult. But more and more examples are emerging of colleges and universities finding new ways to collectively deliver education, produce scholarship, and improve society. Dennison spoke about his efforts in Montana to encourage collaboration among public higher education institutions. The effort included building new facilities, integrating staff and administrative infrastructure, and developing new curricula. Additionally, colleges and universities have to continue working to resolve the awkwardness of building beneficial partnerships with the private sector. "We've broken the interface between the academy and business," Bacow said, "which is much more challenging and interesting today than it was in the past."

*Develop the capacity for continual innovation.* Resolving the problems facing institutions will require hard work by leaders and their institutions. Increasing affordability and containing costs, making scarce dollars go further toward advancing institutional priorities, addressing regional and economic development demands and interests by policy makers, developing more effective pedagogies and assessment processes, adapting effectively to changing student (and faculty) demographics, and responding to anticipated and unanticipated social and epistemic trends will all require sustained innovation. As Michigan State's Simon said, "The pressure on all of us is to continue to change very rapidly." Her solution was to create institutional capacity for what she called "serial innovation" or the ability to innovate continuously throughout the institution in a range of areas, not one particular area, such as technology transfer, teaching writing to undergraduates, or internationalizing the student experience. Innovation also is required in multiple dimensions of teaching and learning, as well as in administrative areas that increase efficiency and effectiveness, and finally, in the ways that institutions fulfill their public purposes, including economic development, workforce development, and research and



scholarship. Developing this capacity campus-wide will require systems and processes that encourage, foster, and support innovation throughout the institution. In some instances, implementing these efforts will require important yet minor change. However, for other institutions, such change will require a shift in culture.

Part of developing the capacity to innovate is to continually develop new streams of revenue. Given trends in public funding and growing costs, higher education may best be served by developing the ability to support itself. While long the *modus operandi* of independent institutions, the scope and scale of self-support predicted by the public institution presidents is unprecedented.

*Look beyond higher education.* Leaders can try to prepare for an unknown future by looking in atypical places. Higher education historically struggles to move beyond the “it-wasn’t-invented-here syndrome.” Unlikely sources of insight are often looked down upon by higher education because we (or they) are different. However, because they are different, they offer new perspectives that can reveal much. Several sources of new approaches to emerging trends include:

- **Our youth.** For better *and* worse, the young are redefining our future. Nowhere is this more evident than in their use of technology to facilitate social networks and information sharing. In essence, they are defining what Ramaley of Winona State University called the “co-creation of knowledge.” Such shared and user-driven efforts may be the foundation for how knowledge will be transmitted, if not developed, in the future.
- **Other countries.** As other nations develop and seek to enhance their own systems of higher education, they are adapting to the global marketplace in many ways more rapidly than U.S. colleges and universities. Roundtable participants often mentioned China. “Currently, [the Chinese] are looking to replicate our system, but they are pouring so many resources into it. Then they are going to innovate and move beyond us,” worried Machen of the University of Florida. Other nations are investing more heavily in their higher education institutions and creating favorable public policies that encourage their development, and giving those institutions the freedom to innovate as they realize that higher education is essential to the knowledge economy.
- **The private sector.** Although critics often lament that universities have lost their way and are trying to become “more like businesses,” in some ways corporate America may be better poised than higher education to address some of the demands of the changing world. Corporations intentionally invest in R&D to improve their products, their management, and their production processes. They more readily create partnerships, even with their own competitors. And they invest in developing the leadership abilities of their people. Campus leaders may do well to take notice. Said Maxwell of Drake University about systematically looking at corporate processes: “It reinforces how unusual we are in how we organize our-

---

Leaders can try to prepare for an unknown future by looking in atypical places. Higher education historically struggles to move beyond the “it-wasn’t-invented-here syndrome.”

---

selves, how we manage ourselves, and how long we've been doing things the same way. Given the success that other sectors are having in managing themselves differently, I suspect we're going to need to continue to take a hard look at the way we do things.”

## Conclusion:

# Three Deceptive, Simple Questions

---

The reality is that the clarity of crystal balls is poor. Conversations about the future inevitably result in more questions than answers. Try as we might, foresight is fleeting. A conversation such as the one captured in this essay broached many questions; participants tackled some of them but avoided others. Their complexity varied, as did their relevance. However, the conversation circled back repeatedly to three fundamental questions. On their surface, as one participant commented, they are “deceptive yet simple.” Yet, given the challenges of peering into the future and making changes now to best prepare for that future, no quick answers exist.

- Who are we going to teach and serve?
- What are we going to teach and study, and what methods will work best?
- How are we going to pay for it?

Although basic, these questions cannot be answered simply, not by presidents in conversations with their peers, not through a campus’s one-time board retreat, and not solely through the next strategic plan. However, it is imperative to answer these deceptive, simple questions, and each campus must find its own means to address them. The work of leaders is to develop processes that continually put these questions in front of key stakeholders and collectively progress toward answers. The challenge is that by the time they are answered, the future has changed, adding new opportunities and different constraints that require institutions to go through the process of asking and answering once again.



# Appendix: Participants at the April 2007 ACE Presidential Roundtable

---

## **Key Trends and Their Implications for Year 2027: A Presidential Conversation to Develop Collective Foresight**

The individuals listed below participated in the April 2007 ACE Presidential Roundtable held in Washington, DC. Their titles and affiliations reflect those at the time of the discussion.

Lawrence S. Bacow  
President  
Tufts University (MA)

Steven G. Poskanzer  
President  
State University of New York at New Paltz

Stephen M. Curtis  
President  
Community College of Philadelphia (PA)

Judith A. Ramaley  
President  
Winona State University (MN)

George M. Dennison  
President  
University of Montana

Lou Anna K. Simon  
President  
Michigan State University

Philip A. Glotzbach  
President  
Skidmore College (NY)

Martha A. Smith  
President  
Anne Arundel Community College (MD)

James Bernard Machen  
President  
University of Florida

Linda M. Thor  
President  
Rio Salado Community College (AZ)

David Maxwell  
President  
Drake University (IA)

Jerry Sue Thornton  
President  
Cuyahoga Community College (OH)

Lee T. Todd, Jr.  
President  
University of Kentucky

Bette A. Landman (Facilitator)  
President Emerita  
Arcadia University (PA)

David Ward  
President  
American Council on Education

James Renick  
Senior Vice President  
Division of Programs & Research  
American Council on Education

**ACE Staff and Observers**

Ellen R. Babby  
Vice President, Advancement and Planning  
American Council on Education

Marlene Ross  
Director, ACE Fellows Program &  
Deputy Director  
Center for Effective Leadership  
American Council on Education

Madeleine B. d'Ambrosio  
Vice President and Executive Director  
TIAA-CREF Institute

Claire Van Ummersen  
Vice President  
Center for Effective Leadership  
American Council on Education

Peter D. Eckel  
Director, Programs and Initiatives  
Center for Effective Leadership  
American Council on Education

Jeanie Watson  
Consultant

Terry W. Hartle  
Senior Vice President  
Division of Government & Public Affairs  
American Council on Education

Byron P. White (Scribe)  
Associate Vice President  
Community Engagement  
Xavier University (OH)

Jacqueline King  
Director  
Center for Policy Analysis  
American Council on Education





*With generous support from*  
TIAA-CREF institute



American Council on Education  
The Unifying Voice for Higher Education

One Dupont Circle NW  
Washington, DC 20036-1193  
(202) 939-9300  
[www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu)