MEETING THE COMPETITION:

College and University Presidents, Faculty, and State Legislators
View the New Competitive Academic Arena

A REPORT BY PUBLIC AGENDA

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PREFACE

The Futures Project has focused its energies on studying a far-reaching topic: the growing competition between colleges and universities, a competition that has been exacerbated by the explosion of new providers—such as for-profit degree-granting universities and colleges, virtual programs and institutions, and corporate universities. Adding to the competitive pressures are the impact of information and communication technology, of globalization and, perhaps most significant, the transformation underway as political leaders move toward market forces, and away from regulation, as the means of structuring higher education.

To understand these changes we have analyzed a wide array of reports and studies; visited institutions around the world; consulted with higher education experts; met with presidents, rectors and vice chancellors; listened to faculty and students; and conferred with governors, legislators and ministers of education. This research has resulted in a series of published reports, available at www.futuresproject.org. The Futures Project is now preparing policy proposals for political leaders designed to help create a thoughtful, workable higher education market. We are also preparing recommendations for colleges and universities as to the strategies they might employ in order to survive and even thrive in the new climate.

As our research has progressed, it has become apparent that growing competition has frayed the mutual understanding, or compact, between higher education and the public. As higher education institutions have focused more and more on competing for students, funding and prestige, there has been an erosion in the unspoken but powerful mutual commitment that has, until now, ensured that higher education operated in the service of the public that supports it. We thought an essential beginning for thinking about how to renew that compact was to take a more precise temperature of college and university presidents, state legislators, and faculty so that we could understand how they felt about these issues.

In order to accomplish this, we asked Public Agenda, a New York-based research and education institution founded by Daniel Yankelovich and the late Cyrus Vance, to work with us to develop a series of focus groups for college and university presidents, faculty members, and legislators charged with overseeing higher education in their states.

The conversations that resulted from this project were candid, honest, and searching. These leaders got beyond the set talks they sometimes give in public formats, and engaged in a searching dialogue with us and with their peers on pressing issues. With near universality, the respondents reported that they had learned a great deal from the sessions, and in the process of discussion had come to a greater clarity about their own thinking and the problems that higher education faces.

This report, authored by John Immerwahr, details some of the themes that emerged from those conversations. It gives us a glimpse of an uneasy community, whose leaders are fully aware of and disturbed by the issue of growing competition, but who are only beginning to craft a response to it. As you will see, the interviews revealed strong consensus on some issues and sharp differences on others. Clearly the task of renewing the compact has only begun. The country has an urgent task ahead, to maintain and rebuild the consensus. This report shows us some of the challenges that must be faced.

Frank Newman

Frank Newman
Director, The Futures Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many observers believe that America's higher education system is undergoing a powerful transformation, driven by the emergence of new competitive forces. New technologies have broken down some of the traditional barriers, so that colleges and universities once confined to a single geographical area now compete internationally. New competitors—especially the for-profit providers like the University of Phoenix—have also entered the mix, steadily increasing the number of choices open to students. While the high prestige universities may not be competing with the University of Phoenix, they increasingly find themselves in a virtual "arms race" with each other, constantly scrambling for higher rankings, better students, better faculty, winning athletic teams, and more research funding.

To what extent are university and college leaders and governmental leaders who set the system's policies ready for the challenges raised by the new competitive arena? At the request of the Futures Project, we set out to develop some hypotheses about this question by holding open-ended confidential group discussions with 47 college and university presidents, faculty members, and state legislators. We heard six main themes emerge in these candid and thoughtful discussions.

1. **Growing awareness of competition.** Our respondents were intensely aware of growing competition in the academic arena. The shape of the competition varied widely, depending both on the participant's region and the nature of the educational institution, but our participants had a strong sense of mounting pressures from for-profit and virtual institutions, new technologies, and the expansion of competition from existing institutions.

2. **Caught in the squeeze.** While our participants saw positive opportunities in the new competitive environment, many were worried about the convergence of two factors: limited public revenues and a growing number of new competitors, especially the for-profits. The main concern was that new competitors would "cherry pick" the most profitable programs, leaving important but less profitable programs and functions "naked and alone."

3. **Academics versus legislators on the need for greater flexibility and autonomy.** While almost all of our participants feel that higher education institutions must become increasingly innovative and flexible to survive in the new environment, we found a deep division between academics and the legislators who regulate them. The academics feel that their institutions are much more nimble than many people realize; one of the biggest obstacles, in their view, is government bureaucracy and

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micromanagement. Many of our academic respondents wanted greater autonomy so that they can respond to the new competitive environment. The legislators we interviewed reject this vision unless there is some way to guarantee accountability. In their perception, the universities—especially the four-year institutions—are deeply conservative, and largely seek greater autonomy as a way of avoiding pressures to change.

4. Controversy about assessment and accountability. We also found a deep division between the legislators and the academics on the topic of accountability. Some of our legislators were reluctant to give higher education greater autonomy until the legislators had better measures of performance. Our legislators were frequently attracted to the idea of using outcome assessments as a way to measure how much students were actually learning in state higher education institutions. Outcome assessment, however, is highly controversial in the higher education community. While some institutions are working hard in this area, others clearly are dragging their feet. Some of our presidents said that while they agreed with the goals in theory (and in public), they were deeply skeptical of the whole approach.

5. Competition for the best students. Institutions (and regions) now compete intensely for the top-end students. One of the symptoms of this competition is a sharp controversy about merit-based financial aid. In this case, the argument is not between academics and legislators, but within each of these communities. Critics of merit-based aid describe it as a "sop to the middle class." Others defend it as a way to stop regional "brain drain." Some of our college presidents also see its necessity as a way to attract outstanding students.

6. Disadvantaged students left behind. No one, however, is competing for educationally disadvantaged students, many of whom come from poor and minority households. The community colleges and regional four-year institutions that educate these students paint a disturbing picture. They feel that they are asked to overcome tremendous obstacles—especially as a result of inadequate high school preparation—with inadequate funding. These respondents also argue that the country still approaches higher education with an outmoded model, based on a demographically obsolete vision that the typical college student is an 18-21 year old who attends full time.

If the people we talked to are typical of the broader community, we would hypothesize that the higher education community is only in the initial stage of shaping a response to the new competitive arena. While there appears to be wide recognition that things are changing, the community is only beginning to work out the solutions. State legislators and university presidents seem to be deeply divided, with no clearly accepted model of autonomy and accountability. While the competition for top students heats up, no one seems to have a very clear idea of what should be done for those at the bottom.

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No one, however, is competing for educationally disadvantaged students.

INTRODUCTION

Public Agenda Chairman and Co-Founder Daniel Yankelovich has observed that, in many cases, collective thinking about a complex issue moves through three broad phases. The initial stage is consciousness-raising, when people first become aware of an issue; here the issue moves from being of concern only to a few specialists or experts to something that is defined by the entire community as a serious problem. The second stage, which he calls "choicework," is the painful process of wrestling with alternative responses to the problem. This is, as Yankelovich sees it, the most difficult stage of the process. Unrealistic thinking and miscommunication often characterize the initial phase of the choicework stage, since it takes an extended period of time for people to begin to confront the alternatives and their tradeoffs. Only after this difficult work has been done is the community ready to move on to the final stage, when the participants try to form a consensus or compromise around specific approaches.

> On some issues, major players (especially legislators and academic presidents) are still completely talking past each other, with no common framework.

The goal of this project, done for the Futures Project, was to assess the thinking of the higher education community on one important area: the response to vastly increased competition in the higher education arena. To examine this issue we conducted a series of open-ended interviews with college and university presidents, faculty members, and legislators who oversee higher education. One hypothesis emerging from this research is that the higher education community may be only in the early levels of Yankelovich's choicework stage. Virtually all of our respondents realize they are in a new competitive world, with new forces and constraints. While the problems that need to be solved are clear, the debate itself has not taken a final shape. Our interviews gave us a snapshot of the community in the process of starting to think about choices and responses. On some issues, major players (especially legislators and academic presidents) are still completely talking past each other, with no common framework. In other areas, people acknowledge deep problems but have not yet articulated realistic choices for dealing with them.

METHODOLOGY

Many of the Public Agenda projects on leadership views are designed to probe beyond the superficial responses that leaders often give in speeches and in public appearances. We wanted to create an environment where leaders would speak freely and confidentially, exploring new ideas and revealing deeper reasons for views that are defended in public. In order to do this, Public Agenda and the Futures Project worked together to create confidential group interviews where leaders could explore and debate ideas among themselves. Our

research was thus, of necessity, qualitative rather than quantitative. As in all qualitative research, however, the observations presented in this report should be considered hypotheses for further exploration and research. Our findings are tentative for two reasons. First, we talked to only a small number of legislators and academics. While their comments are extremely interesting, they are not necessarily representative of the views of the larger population of educators and legislators. Second, we did not present our respondents with closed-ended questions, allowing us to compare their responses to similarly worded questions. Instead, we drew out themes and issues from their open-ended remarks.

Our observations are based on seven group interview sessions with 47 individuals, conducted between November 2001 and May 2002. For the most part, we went to previously scheduled conferences and recruited a small number of individuals to attend a group interview at some time during the conference. The groups usually consisted of four to ten individuals and lasted from two to three hours. Since the conferences attracted specific populations, the groups were usually homogenous in character and often the individuals were well acquainted with each other. The names of the respondents are printed in the appendix. The composition of the groups was as follows:

❑ State legislators who serve on committees that oversee higher education (two groups). The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) helped us to draw these groups together.

❑ Presidents of Research I universities. This group, co-hosted by the Millennium Project at the University of Michigan, was held at the annual meeting of the Association of American Universities (AAU).

❑ Presidents of regional universities in New England. Special meeting convened with the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE).

❑ Presidents of regional universities in the western states, as part of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Commission Meeting.

❑ Presidents of community colleges, who were attending a meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).

❑ Faculty members from a variety of institutions, all of whom were attending the annual conference of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE).

At each of the sessions a moderator led the group discussion through a workbook. This workbook, developed in conjunction with the Futures Project, contained a series of policy problems and various responses to

those issues. (See www.futuresproject.org for a copy of the workbook.) The specific policy options were used to stimulate thinking and discussion. We were often more interested in the free-flowing discussion that emerged, rather than the specific responses to the options we posed. The respondents were assured that their individual comments would not be attributed to them, and for the most part the conversations were extremely candid. Many of the respondents said things that they clearly would not say in public. The sessions were taped and the quotations in the report have been somewhat edited to enhance readability. In some cases we have altered the quotations to mask the identity of the speaker.

VIEWS ON THE NEW COMPETITION

1. Growing Awareness of Competition

We began each of our sessions with a completely open-ended question, asking respondents to tell us about some of the main issues facing higher education in their environment. Many of our respondents spontaneously raised the issue of intensified competition as one of the major issues with which they struggle on a daily basis. But while competition was a problem for nearly everyone, the shape of the competition varied greatly depending on a variety of factors.

For the selective and prestigious institutions, one of the big issues was an intensified competition between their institution and other similar universities. One of the most vigorous areas of competition is for prestige. As one Research I president explained:

> The competition is intense, driven by our boards, by the states, and by the applicants (they all have copies of *U.S. News and World Report*). The state government considers what our position is. And it is pushed by the craziness about lists: who is in the top ten, who is in the bottom ten.

These presidents also talked about competition for high-quality students and bidding wars for faculty members, especially those who could bring in big research grants.

While the universities at the top are engaged in fierce competition to stay there, other academics talked about "mission creep," as their institutions attempted to make themselves more competitive by moving up the prestige ladder. A faculty member characterized it this way:

> There was a big push at my institution to move up from tier three to tier two, and eventually tier one. Our historical mission is to serve the community around us, but going to a higher tier will shoot that mission out of the water. How will we do this? Increase the quality of publication. The myth is that we are a

teaching-oriented university. So we can teach four courses a semester, but now the administration says we need five articles in six years to get tenure.

For our respondents from regional institutions, the competition often centered on the idea of building "market share," especially of students in profitable programs. Several of our respondents from four-year institutions told us they were now competing much more actively with the two-year institutions in the same regions. Here are some typical comments of presidents of four-year institutions:

> A lot of what has been mentioned ties into a major trend, the rapid emergence of two-year schools. In the old days the four-year schools were the only game in the state. I wonder if the expectations haven't changed. More people are willing to accept a degree from wherever they can get it in the shortest period of time.

> We track this closely. From competing with two or three other institutions, now we are competing with 18 or 19 competitors of all kinds.

Competition between regions was another big issue, both for academics and for state legislators. One regional president said:

> This is the most competitive higher education market that any of us have seen. The competition is not so much within the state as between the states and the rest of the country. We are losing market share.

The new technologies, especially distance education, are allowing regional institutions to compete on an international scale. One community college president described the situation in these terms:

> Many of us by charter are defined as local institutions, but the competition has forced us to behave as though we are national institutions. We now compete knowing that our own borders are porous, so now we have to make everyone else's border porous, too.

Virtually everyone is talking about the emergence of new competitors, especially for-profit enterprises such as the University of Phoenix. So far, most of the individuals we talked to feel that the for-profits are mostly operating in specialized markets. One president said:

> There is an impact on our institution, not on our core mission, but for adult, employed students who aren't able or willing to come to us. They have to come to us, but Phoenix goes to them, wherever they are. Our extension operations are badly damaged by Phoenix. Today it is hard for us to break even there, when it used to be profitable.

Another university president admitted that Phoenix was now training much of the support staff at his own institution:

> The University of Phoenix admits that they train much of the support staff for the universities here, and most of that is because of access issues, in terms of time and place.

Another university president saw the impact even closer to him:

> I have a confession: my daughter sold out and now she teaches for the University of Phoenix in their distance education program. They trained her for a year before she even logged on; we can't quite do that.

Competition was not nearly as significant a factor, however, for legislators and academics from less populated parts of the country, or from academics who serve primarily disadvantaged students. As one community college president remarked, "No one is competing for our students." As one legislator explained, "We are a big rural state, and a poor state, so the new competitors don't come into our state."

2. Caught in the Squeeze, Limited State Revenues and New Competitors

One of the worries most on the mind of our respondents was the potential danger of a situation where traditional higher education institutions face a combination of declining funding from state and federal government, accompanied by more intense competition from new competitors who will "cherry pick" the most profitable programs. The fear is that important but unprofitable programs and functions will be lost in the scramble to compete in a newly aggressive marketplace.

Historically, higher education has developed a funding system that, as virtually everyone agrees, has produced the finest system of colleges and universities in the world. This structure has been subsidized principally by two sources of income. On the one hand, the state and the federal government have poured massive amounts of money into higher education. On the other hand, student tuition payments provide a large source of flexible funding. This system has allowed colleges and universities to use "profitable" operations to support other "unprofitable" operations such as support for the fine arts and the liberal arts, scholarships for disadvantaged students, research, and community services. While some of these operations may be controversial, nearly everyone we talked to agrees that many of them serve a public purpose.

Limited state support for higher education. Most of our legislative and academic respondents felt that both sides of this equation were now under threat. Everyone agreed that state budgets are strained (this is even more the case now than when these conversations took place). Institutional presidents feel that, as a result, state governments are

> As one community college president remarked, "No one is competing for our students."

increasingly demanding more and more from their public university systems while drawing back from their willingness to fund operations. As the presidents tell the story, the institutions are increasingly being asked to provide their own funding in a competitive marketplace. As one president put it, "We have become public-located institutions, whereas before we were public-supported institutions." The quotations, all from university and college presidents, speak for themselves:

> A state supreme court decision has mandated a higher level of funding for K-12, and this has accelerated our stepchild status. So we are left trying to scramble for the leftover resources. The state is reluctant to do anything to raise revenue, and faced with the fact that they are forced to spend on K-12, the situation for higher education is tough.

> We are facing a decline of collective public investments, and a demand to find future resources from other arenas (students and their parents, or gifts and grants from private sources, or programs, or expanding federal research supports).

> We are experiencing expectations for high-end training in health care, technology, and other areas, but the funding models don't match the realities.

"Cherry pickers." As our academic presidents tell the story, the decline in state revenues is serious enough in its own right, but becomes even more alarming when the heightened competition from traditional and nontraditional competitors is factored into the mix. What really scares many of our respondents is the fear that other competitors will cherry-pick by offering programs for the most profitable markets. Because they are free of many of the high-cost functions of traditional universities (e.g., research, financial aid, student services) the new rivals can compete much more aggressively in these markets. While the new competitors skim off the profitable programs, the fear is that public institutions will be left only with the least profitable operations. Some of our respondents described the problem this way:

> What I worry about most are the technology competitors and the private providers. They are coming in to rip off the plum markets—just like they did in health care—and they are leaving the state to deal with indigent care. They are cherry picking.

> A number of people in the public and private sector have figured out that education is a place to make a buck. Certainly the for-profits have seen it that way. I also see a growing ambiguity about where one institution begins and another ends, and some of these institutions are doing things that community colleges have traditionally done.

As the presidents tell the story, the institutions are increasingly being asked to provide their own funding in a competitive marketplace.

The fear is that public institutions will be left only with the least profitable operations.

I think we are decoupling public education from the public. For my institution that is heresy. I think we are too far in this direction already.

If we unbundle those pieces, people will start asking whether each piece makes sense. So maybe only the football team makes sense, not the other sports. In the same way, all of the other parts of this rich educational experience will get lost. As CEO you'll say, if you can't sell this to me it doesn't make sense, so everything that doesn't make money will be jettisoned. Everyone will be a Phoenix, where they don't have sports, services, or quads. How can a traditional university ever compete against that?

There are two related fears. One concern is that for-profit institutions, unconstrained by the public mission of traditional universities, will be able to compete aggressively for profitable students and programs, drying up traditional revenue sources for existing higher education universities, endangering the public mission. The other fear is that traditional higher education institutions themselves will have to emulate the for-profits, and shed much of their public mission. One way or the other, our respondents are worried that valuable public services, traditionally offered by public higher education, will be lost. A faculty member asked:

> Do you view your president of your university as a CEO, and are you running your university like a for-profit corporation? So, for example, is Texas A&M going to compete that way against the University of Texas? If we go that way, we will run into the same thing that happened with the postal service. FedEx and the other competitors skimmed off the most lucrative parts, leaving the postal system with the less profitable parts of the business.

One potential casualty of increased competition could be the traditional higher education focus on liberal arts and the humanities. One of the legislators expressed a concern about companies that are becoming interested in setting up their own training programs instead of hiring students from colleges and universities.

> One of the things that troubles me about companies bypassing the undergraduate degree is that there is a lack of the humanizing element that goes along with the arts and sciences. Students who go directly to the companies miss that. That is an educational goal that I think we have to be consistent about and that we need to keep pushing. If you don't have this exposure to these quality of life values, you will lose something. I begin to sound like I am selling liberal arts colleges.

A faculty member from a rural state put it this way:

The possibility of losing departments would be the real risk of competition. My own institution is in a small state, with little industry, but we have tried to preserve the core of a real university. We have many graduate programs in traditional areas that are also rather obscure. We have resisted paring ourselves down to make room for more profitable things that we might do. I want to make sure that the public interest gets into the institution, and I don't trust pure market forces.

Other respondents stressed the threat to research and the training of new scholars. In effect, they see aggressive competitors like for-profit institutions as parasites that require the host organism (the traditional universities) but will eventually kill it. One president put it this way:

> Most of the new models of higher education are dependent on the traditional public and private universities to produce knowledge, faculty, and learning resources, and so if you talk about Phoenix or one of these others, we are producing the material that makes those institutions possible. If we all went to the University of Phoenix model, there would be no new faculty generated. There must be a public policy understanding that the universities don't just turn out courses, they also generate faculty and knowledge and other elements.

Other respondents stressed additional important services that would be vulnerable to increased competition, such as financial aid, sports, or community service.

> Does the University of Phoenix have athletic teams, offer programs for the community, or provide scholarships? I feel like we are being responsive to the community all of the time. I wouldn't mind dropping some of the things we do for the community, but they are so vested that we cannot drop them. Indeed, some have even outlived their usefulness.

> The for-profits have a significant advantage because they don't have a public purpose. University of Phoenix will say, "We have a public purpose." But they have a 40% return on their investment. Their purpose is to deliver shareholder value.

Although the problem is clear to virtually everyone, there is no real consensus about the solution. Several of the people we interviewed seemed to think that the only real solution would be for state governments to turn the cash flow back on. As one president said: "Many of these things will only be solved if the society recommits to these values and makes a massive investment in public higher education." Others express pessimism that the financial spigots will ever be turned on, at least at any time in their professional lives. As

> I want to make sure that the public interest gets into the institution, and I don't trust pure market forces.

another president said, "there is declining support from states everywhere, and I don't see it turning around."

3. Academics versus Legislators on the Need for Greater Flexibility and Autonomy

How well positioned is higher education to meet these competitive challenges? We found a deep division between university presidents and state legislators on the question of whether universities need to be more flexible and autonomous in order to respond to competition. Indeed, even the way these two groups describe the problem is so different that it is hard to imagine they are talking about the same thing.

Many of our legislators acknowledged that some higher education institutions are responding well to new challenges and developing innovative entrepreneurial programs, while still remaining faithful to their public mission. Community colleges tended to get high marks from many legislators. But the legislators we interviewed were strongly critical of other institutions, especially some of the four-year institutions. As our legislators perceive the situation, many four-year institutions are highly conservative and resistant to any kind of change at all. They were constantly telling us anecdotes about university intransigence. Here are a few comments:

> The public higher education system wants to continue to live in the world of the past, and hope that at least their campus will not be part of the changes going on around it.

> Every school comes up and says if I had 25 million I could do this great program. I ask them, "If the program is so great, is there nothing that you could cut to pay for it?" They never have an answer to that one.

> If you think it is hard to create a program, try to close one down.

> They will fight tooth and nail against instituting some change, but then when you want to undo that change, they will fight just as hard to keep it.

The university presidents did not accept this premise at all. Several of the presidents defended academic resistance to change as a virtue, and argued that legislators are frequently trying to impose quick fixes so they can have something to show at election time.

> It is true that our lag time is substantial by standards of other elements of society. Legislators work with a very quick time horizon; they hardly look beyond the next election. And the business community is more agile than we are. Our individual innovators are wonderfully creative, but as institutions we change slowly. You need to ask yourself if that is good or bad;

we don't just blow with every wind. We filter out a lot of the irrelevant pressures and respond to secular changes.

A quick response is often a bad response. Does anyone think we don't have the best higher education system in the world? Part of it is the decision-making process that we have. I know it can be frustrating as well.

The academic presidents, for their part, had their own war stories about over-regulation and micromanagement from state government. Some of our presidents argued that higher education's lack of flexibility was not the fault of public colleges and universities but should be blamed on government interference and mismanagement. Several presidents remarked that they wanted to compete more vigorously and make their institutions more flexible, but that they were prevented from doing so by their state governments. Here are some typical remarks:

If the rules of the world are marketplace and competition, let me at it, and I will whip them all. But what I am hearing is, "You have to play by one set of rules; others have different rules." For example, I am not permitted to offer programs in our biggest city. There is only one university in the country that is not permitted to offer programs there, and that is our own state university. All of the privates and everyone else can get in there. It is an urban area where there is a market for programs that would support our other programs. University of Phoenix wouldn't even be there if we were in the mix.

We would be willing to take a lower state appropriation and have more ability to attract students and private gifts, rather than continue this ridiculous system. I could grow my institution, but there is no incentive to do that, since all the money that would come in would go back to the state. I would get no more money to hire faculty or to expand facilities. How is that incentivizing me to improve?

We are so inextricably tied to the other state functions that if you pull us out, it causes them to go crazy. I said, for example, let me take my university out of the state health plan. I knew I could write a much better plan for my own institution. The legislature told me, "no way; you are paying for all of the smaller agencies. We can't run without you in the pool."

Several of our presidents complained vehemently about the amount of time and energy that is consumed dealing with state government in basically unproductive reporting and oversight:

I was spending a third of my time as an administrative officer writing reports. It is all about escalating demands. We are constantly dealing with whatever is the question of the week in the eyes of the state legislature. The system heads respond to

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that problem, and then the staff spends weeks writing reports that no one reads.

I look at the number of dollars and the countless hours that are spent at the commission on higher education. You sit through two days of meetings, of which maybe one half-hour is directly applicable. Look at the amount of money and time and full FTEs positions spent on accountability issues. I'd like to see if that resource could be redirected into delivery of educational services.

> Their concern...is that more autonomy for higher education should be coupled to greater accountability.

For their part, however, many of the legislators we interviewed took a completely opposite perspective. On the one hand, they denied that the universities lacked sufficient autonomy to meet competitive challenges. Indeed, some legislators said they felt that if universities were given more autonomy, they would only use it to resist change and to preserve the status quo:

The assumption is that right now they don't have flexibility, but I think they have that flexibility.

There is a lot of money available for universities to create programs for industry. The reason they don't do these things is not because of the legislature, but because they can't get it through their faculty.

Many states have already made moves to substantially deregulate higher education, and some of the state legislators we interviewed had supported these measures. On the other hand, some of the legislators we interviewed were clearly concerned that the pendulum might swing too far in the direction of deregulation. Their concern, which we heard in a variety of ways, is that more autonomy for higher education should be coupled to greater accountability. These legislators were clearly frustrated by current systems of accountability, which, in many cases, did not give them a way to know what universities were really doing.

I am not overly impressed with the board of regents; their motto is "I'm just a girl who can't say no." Every time someone comes up with something, they approve it.

In our state, the board of regents meets four times every year. The criticism of the central administrators is that they manipulate these people to their own ends. They don't give them the information until they actually get to the meeting, and they ask them to vote on it immediately. The universities do everything they can to get past what little accountability there is.

> My first concern is this: what do you do if a president really
> screws up? There have to be some consequences. If you give
> them freedom, there also has to be a way to sort it out if they
> screw up, without punishing the school and the state.

> We are the stewards of the people's money, and we have to
> make sure that it is spent for the good of the people.

When considering the idea of extending greater autonomy to
universities without also attaching greater accountability, one of our
legislative respondents physically grabbed the microphone and said into
it, "No, no, no." He wanted, as he told us, to make sure that we
understood his position.

4. Controversy about Assessment and Accountability

The controversy between legislators and academics also rolls over into
a debate about outcome assessment for higher education. Many
experts and accrediting agencies in higher education are now arguing
that colleges and universities should be assessed by measuring learning
outcomes, not by the traditional input measures (how big is the library,
how many Ph.D.s on the faculty, etc.). This approach made a lot of
sense to some of the legislators we talked to, since it seemed to
provide some of the accountability that they feel is missing currently.
Several of the legislators wanted to see much better assessment
mechanisms that would actually measure how well the universities
were doing in producing the desired outcomes.

> We have a good system of higher education, but we don't
> know what we want from it. What I want is a clearly
> articulated plan where we can define the outputs and then
> measure how we are doing. At that point we can incentivize
> the universities for performance.

> I like the idea of an assessment culture.

> We stressed assessments in K-12. We publish the results for
> every school down to the grade level, so you can track what
> teachers are doing as far as added value. I will tell you this: the
> schools react to it and it drives discussion in the community.

One of our legislative respondents reacted negatively to the complaint
made by higher education that outcome assessment would encourage
colleges and universities to focus all of their energy on "teaching to the
test."

> What is fallacious about teaching to the test? When I was a
> teacher, I assumed that if I have covered the material in the
> course, I had taught to the test.

Disagreement within the higher education community. The whole field of outcome assessment is highly controversial among the academics we interviewed. There were some, from all sectors, who were enthusiastic about a shift away from measuring inputs toward a focus on student learning and outcomes. The community colleges seemed to be most active in this area and, as one community college president pointed out, the state legislature had been appreciative of community college efforts in assessment in contrast to the perceived recalcitrance of the four-year institutions. Even the community college presidents admitted, however, that the changes were being implemented only slowly and partially.

Other academics, however, were much more skeptical about the whole concept of outcome assessment. We saw the most resistance among some of the presidents of four-year institutions. Several said that while outcome measures made sense in theory, they did not see any practical way to implement such measures in many of their units. A few of the presidents told us (confidentially) that they defended outcome assessments in public but, in actual practice, gave low priority to efforts to actually implement them. Their comments give the flavor of this lack of support for assessing outcomes:

> My enthusiasm for outcome assessment diminished when one accrediting agency came to our campus and reviewed one of our professional schools. They learned that we had a 100% pass rate of the board exams in that field, nonetheless they came up with a list of things we had to do better, most of which were expensive—it had very little to do with the outcomes.

> It is not politically correct to say this, but I think we spend far too much time talking about outcome assessment and worrying about it. Our graduate education system is the envy of the world and no one questions the outcomes of our graduate education process. Why is that? It is built on a model that works: the faculty-student mentor-mentee. The evidence for its success is all around us. I would rather focus on ensuring that the educational institutions have the characteristics which make it more likely a student will learn what we are trying to teach them.

> A lot of the assessment efforts are counterproductive to the objective of learning. There is such a desire to measure, that it is being pushed down to the level of the quantifiable—which is almost antithetical to the concept of learning. I see these accrediting bodies come in and talk about outcomes. On a theoretical level I agree with them, but what they are actually measuring is so simple and silly that I want to tell them they ought to go to a trade school, rather than to an institution like ours.

As one community college president pointed out, the state legislature had been appreciative of community college efforts in assessment in contrast to the perceived recalcitrance of the four-year institutions.

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I think we spend far too much time talking about outcome assessment and worrying about it.

This is not one of the things I get up in the morning and worry about. There is no way to ultimately measure outcomes. The best thing would be to hire Arthur Andersen and let them demonstrate that we are achieving our outcomes, and have everyone leave us alone. The major measure for the professional schools is whether your graduates are sought after.

We also asked our respondents how they felt about the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). These surveys do not measure educational outcomes as such, but they do provide data on student perceptions that can be used to track institutional progress and to compare one institution to another. Generally the legislators thought this approach had some interesting possibilities. Reaction among the academics was mixed. Some were totally opposed to using this kind of data at all. As one faculty member said:

> I can't take off my social science hat. It is very hard to predict behavior from a self-report test. That is one problem our field has struggled with for 50 years, and I am reluctant to bet on a measure like this, unless or until it is has been validated.

Significantly, other academic presidents said that their institutions were using NSSE and they found it very helpful as a way of assessing their own internal efforts. But at the same time, they were vigorously opposed to publicizing the results and having the tests used as a way for consumers (or legislators) to compare institutions. One president explained it this way:

> We have used NSSE for awhile, and we find that it is an immensely helpful tool for us in understanding what we are trying to do. . . . But if there is any movement to make the results public information, we will pull out of it. Then it will just be another ranking system and it will be useless. Now we are using it for all of the right reasons. It would be a terrible idea to make these surveys public. Then *U.S. News & World Report* will use it as one more way to rank us.

Mixed message for faculty members. Many of the faculty members said they felt an inconsistency from their own administrations. While they heard administrators talk about outcomes such as student learning, in reality the emphasis seemed to be on publication. It is hardly surprising that faculty seem confused, since more than a few of the presidents admitted they were not completely candid about their own views of outcome assessment. The faculty remarks reflect this ambivalence:

> We have a president who says the right things but it doesn't translate through the provost and the deans down to where you live. It doesn't matter what the president says, you live in your

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department; if your department doesn't value it, you are dead in the water.

We have lost a lot of top level administrators. All of them have gotten their next job by increasing things other than student learning. They don't get those jobs by what they have done for student learning, but on their accomplishments in fostering research productivity or funding. So there is no reason for them to hold our feet to the fire.

At research universities teaching doesn't get the attention that it deserves, for example, in a promotion and tenure committee. All they care about is how much did you publish, how much research money did you bring in—that is what counts for tenure and raises. At the state university, the way you get funded is by the number of students, not by how many go on to become CEOs or go to graduate schools; there is nothing in those formulas about teaching quality. There is little inside the university about good teaching. The person who gets the raise is the one who brings in the most indirect money.

Increasingly, the model is publication. It is doing a disservice to stress teaching to our faculty if they are not going to get promoted on the basis of good teaching. I have to be a realist. I have some junior faculty in my department. They aren't going to get tenure if they do four pieces on the scholarship of teaching and only one scholarly research article. It is not that the department won't support them, but the college will shoot them down.

So far, in other words, the legislators and academics we interviewed seemed to be at somewhat of a stalemate. Many of the university and college presidents said they wanted more autonomy so that they could be more competitive. The legislators are reluctant to grant additional autonomy without some measure of accountability. While the legislators talk about assessments, some of the presidents are dragging their feet. Meanwhile, the faculty is confused and frustrated by the mixed messages that bombard them.

5. Competition for the Best Students

Another area where the competition is heating up is the effort of more prestigious colleges and universities to attract stronger students. Legislators, for their part, are eager to keep their best students in the state, and also to attract out-of-state students to come into the state (and bring their dollars with them). Some of these issues surfaced when we discussed the topic of need-based versus merit-based financial aid.

There is no question that the amount of merit aid has increased dramatically in the last few years. Need-based aid has clearly fallen

behind in its ability to cover the costs of college, and much of the slack has been taken up by student loans. As one of our educators reminded us, a Pell grant used to pay for most of the average cost of a state education. It now pays for only a fraction of that cost.

Some of our legislators and academics are highly critical of this shift, and argue that the trend toward merit aid is nothing more than a ploy to buy middle-class votes. In the eyes of these critics, merit aid is a politically driven middle-class entitlement that siphons away funding from those who really need it. Here are a few of the remarks we heard:

> The current class of people who aspire to statewide office are persuaded by their consultants that merit aid is a political selling point.

> How can a state justify giving a student who wants to go to a private school $9,600 of state aid? That same aid would pay for many poor students.

> I have seen the portion of need-based aid go down. Some of our marginal students don't want to take loans, so they work more, which gives them less time to study, which creates a Catch-22 for them. Something here has to stop; otherwise we are cutting off a whole segment of the population.

> In the K-12 schools, we call the gifted and talented program, "middle-class title I." It is a way to give extra money to some kids just because you want to give them extra money. It is the same concept with merit aid in higher education.

> The shift is under the rubric that the middle class is hurting. We have a model where we reward people who are already achieving because they can afford to, as opposed to helping people who could achieve if they got some help.

Our legislators were quick to admit that these programs are politically popular, but they also defended their support for some merit programs. Several legislators argued that supporting merit aid gave them space to also support other programs for the disadvantaged.

> Sometimes we can't get a majority to support this until we have a merit element. We see the need for this need-based aid but to get the support we may have to include merit as well.

> It has to do with the legislature; you have to get support, and that is what they call politics. So I think having a bit of a balance in order to get public support is not the end of the world. We have to play the game a little bit.

Something here has to stop; otherwise we are cutting off a whole segment of the population.

We have to play the game a little bit.

Some of the legislators also stressed the need for merit aid as a way to prevent talented students from moving to other states. As the legislators see it, students who go to college in a different state are much more likely not to return to their home state. One strategy for playing this game is to offer merit aid to talented students. Here are comments by legislators:

> I think there is a tremendous fear on the part of legislators of brain drain. We have taken countermeasures to try to prevent it.

> When my son graduated from high school, twenty of the top thirty students in his class went out of state. All had merit scholarships to places like Yale, Harvard, and Michigan. If the system in your state is income-based, the kids who graduate at the top will go out of state, since they can get merit somewhere else.

While many of the academics saw the unfairness in taking money away from those in need, they also saw the relation of merit aid programs to academic prestige and status. One president spoke warmly of the positive impact on his campus:

> The trend to award merit scholarships has certainly raised the public perception of the quality of the university, and that is a good thing.

A faculty member, highly critical of merit aid, connected it to a broader competitiveness between universities:

> The driver for merit aid is the same as that pushing our institutions to be in a higher tier than we already are (if we are in tier three we want to be in tier two). We are all being evaluated by some journalist somewhere who then publishes a ranking list. Everyone says it is a terrible measure and then says look how we did. . . . The administration is under enormous pressure to make our student body look good compared to other institutions. . . . But those who understand our traditional mission get furious when they see money taken from general teaching and put into the honors program.

6. Disadvantaged Students Left Behind

While the high-end colleges are competing for the best students, what happens to the students at the other end of the spectrum? Many of our respondents felt that while all of the attention was being devoted to scrambling for academically gifted students and for profitable programs, more disadvantaged students were being lost in the shuffle. Traditionally, these students are served by community colleges and by regional four-year institutions. One community college president said:

But those who understand our traditional mission get furious when they see money taken from general teaching and put into the honors program.

Many of our respondents felt that while all of the attention was being devoted to scrambling for academically gifted students and for profitable programs, more disadvantaged students were being lost in the shuffle.

So many of the students we serve are poor. Those who are seen as competitors aren't interested in the poor, because it brings too many burdens.

The president of a regional four-year university said almost exactly the same thing:

I don't see the other providers rushing in to serve low-income students. These students are a target market for us because of our mission as public institutions, but they aren't a revenue generator.

Several of our respondents felt that the traditional providers of education for the disadvantaged were themselves being pushed to seek new, more profitable markets. Some of the four-year institutions are becoming more selective, leaving more of the disadvantaged students to the community colleges. One president of a four-year institution said:

The strength of the community college system is that it does provide a point of access, but among many policy thinkers the assumption is, the two-year colleges will do all of the work and the four-year colleges will be more selective. Community colleges can be a point of access, but as four-year schools become more selective, the difference can also increase the stratification.

And even the community colleges are feeling pressure to serve different groups of students. One former community college president described the change this way:

Fifteen years ago, there was a focus on transfer in community colleges. Our major role was to get people to go to a four-year college. What I see now is a tremendous refocusing by public policy leaders to make community colleges a workforce development tool. This doesn't necessarily even mean an associate degree, but it is really an interest in workforce development. That is where the money and support are. I think it is a dangerous trend that will contribute to the growth of the underclass and the further stratification of society.

Those who are familiar with the situation in community colleges and some of the regional universities stress the difficulty in educating these students. The complaints are much the same that one would hear from the principals of inner city K-12 schools. Poorly prepared students, high transience, and inadequate language skills are only a few of the difficulties. Here are some sample remarks from community college presidents:

Open access is who we are and what we believe in; the issue is achievement and attainment, but I think about how [much] farther we could take people if they really had a rigorous high

Those who are seen as competitors aren't interested in the poor, because it brings too many burdens.

But among many policy thinkers the assumption is, the two-year colleges will do all of the work and the four-year colleges will be more selective.

Open access is who we are and what we believe in; the issue is achievement and attainment.

school background. So many of our students are not even reading at the fifth-grade level, and what is even more amazing is how many of them we actually can take through the system. We aren't just a second chance, but really a first chance.

Language of origin is a big problem. We have 104 different languages, and that really puts pressure on freshman English classes. We need to find a new pedagogy.

Distance education is not the solution. Some observers have seen distance education as one way to help reach disadvantaged students. Our respondents felt that whatever promises distance education held out, it was unlikely to provide a solution to the problem of access.

Retention rates in general education courses for distance learning are terrible, due in part to the fact that the legislature and the public are more interested in undergraduate education. Higher education has to do not just with knowledge but with student development, and that is done best in an institutional setting.

> Our respondents felt that whatever promises distance education held out, it was unlikely to provide a solution to the problem of access.

The myth is that this will allow us to reach more people for less money; actually it takes much more time. As a faculty member teaching DL (distance learning), I have to limit the number of students I have; I can't teach 35 students.

We go with the data, with the idea that a large number of disadvantaged students need additional academic support. How do you teach a basic English class online to someone who, in the first place, has problems with text-driven information? And how do you provide the support they might need? How do you work with the learning disabled student? In many cultures it is high contact that works. Are we segmenting our market into those who are linear, autonomous learners and those who can't take advantage of what's there?

> So why do you take the hardest to reach and most distressed people in the system and provide the least resources for educating them, and put all of your resources into educating the best of the best?

Lack of funding for disadvantaged students. There is clearly an irony in the fact that the institutions charged with teaching the most difficult students also receive the least funding. One legislator said it this way:

So why do you take the hardest to reach and most distressed people in the system and provide the least resources for educating them, and put all of your resources into educating the best of the best? It is not just the financial resources, but also the attention.

One of the community college presidents pointed out that her institution received less money than either K-12 or the four-year college:

K-12 gets $6,500 per year to prepare a student. When those students show up at my doorstep in the community college, I have to provide them with three years of math, reading, and writing. I get funded at the level of $4,000. Maybe we need to look at a different funding model, if the college is providing the education that the students never got. If we have to make up for that deficiency, maybe we should get paid what they get paid.

Need for a new model. The problems we have just discussed are serious enough in their own right. As some of the educators tell the story, however, these problems stem from a more fundamental conceptual issue. As they see it, our society approaches questions about higher education from a traditional standpoint that doesn't apply to the experience of many disadvantaged students or the institutions they attend. Many leaders went to college right after high school and attended full time for four years. Indeed, many of their children are following the same pattern. Today, however, this model fits only a minority of the students actually enrolled in higher education. Despite this change, our thinking about higher education is still preoccupied with the traditional approach, even though it no longer matches new demographic realities. Some of the community college presidents expressed it this way:

> The structure of higher education was modeled around what I always called "the Princeton undergraduate model" of a traditional student who goes to college for four years. But our student demographics have changed dramatically and so has the way we need to think about students, especially their mobility. All of the ways we deliver education are modeled on an obsolete paradigm.

> For example, all the news stories are all written about the best of the best. Serving disadvantaged students has to come to the top of the policy agenda. It has to become a priority, and we are a long way from getting there.

One president pointed out that most of the financial aid models are not adequate for part-time students:

> Part-time students are our bread and butter, yet we still don't have a decent model for funding them, so we squeeze many students out of the pipeline who may be right on the edge of being able to support themselves.

Concepts such as outcome assessment are also predicated on a more traditional model, as several of our presidents pointed out:

> When you look at outcome assessment, at best we would assess only a small part of our population, those who were there for the entire process. If you look at all of the students

Serving disadvantaged students has to come to the top of the policy agenda.

enrolled, there are some ten million community college students, but only 4.5% of those get a degree each year. It isn't really helpful to evaluate graduates, but we don't want to say that because it sounds like heresy, and we aren't heretics.

These ideas about outcome assessment are important, but they suggest a climate and a size of institution that is irrelevant to what I am talking about. How do I get 7,000 students to start to think about portfolio development when half of them can't speak English?

Years ago Clark Kerr predicted that higher education has absorbed two recent "tidal waves" of students. The first group was the returning G.I.s after World War II, and the second was their children, the baby boomers who flooded higher education beginning in the sixties. Kerr, and many others, also predicted a third wave, which is just hitting higher education now. This group, however, will have a much heavier representation of minority members who will also be seeking to use higher education as a gateway to the middle class. The hypothesis that is emerging from our research is that higher education does not yet have a model for how to absorb and accommodate this group, especially in the light of growing competition.

> Higher education does not yet have a model for how to absorb and accommodate [the third tidal wave], especially in the light of growing competition.

AFTERWORD

Previous Public Agenda studies have documented a virtual unanimity among academic, legislative, and business leaders that the United States has the finest higher education system in the world. For their part, colleges and universities have basked in the glow of that leadership position for a number of years, and legislators have often taken great pride in their local institutions. Yet the interviews we conducted for this study with academic presidents, faculty members, and state legislators reveal a growing awareness of a new set of challenges to American higher education's preeminence. As these leaders tell the story, America's higher education system (especially the public institutions) is beginning to wrestle with the implications of a number of dramatically changing circumstances.
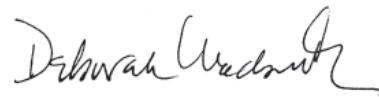
As we have seen, legislators and educators anticipate the convergence of three powerful trends. The first is a growing strain on state funding, such that higher education will increasingly be pitted against other state institutions such as K-12 and the corrections system for limited public resources. The second is growing competition within higher education, both from traditional institutions and from the emergence of new providers, especially the for-profit educational institutions. The final trend is a dramatic influx of young people who will be seeking higher education in the decades to come. This population will be more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations of students, and will require a variety of different kinds of support from the institutions they attend, such as additional financial aid or remediation to make up the deficits of inadequate K-12 education.

Any one of these three trends would be a significant challenge by itself, but their joint confluence raises even more serious questions. The fear – shared by many of our participants in one way or another – is that colleges will be caught between new demands and inadequate resources, and that the public goods traditionally provided by higher education will be the victim.

The research also reveals a strained relationship between academics and the legislators who oversee higher education. Many of the college and university presidents we interviewed were struggling to find some locus for accountability–some culprit responsible for bringing higher education to such a pass. Some expressed a hope, almost nostalgically that the country as a whole would rise up calling for a massive reinvestment of public money in higher education. And others pondered whether the problem after all wasn't a failure of good public relations - the need to remind legislators and the public of the value of our system of higher education as a national resource.   While the legislators are also concerned about the problem, our report suggests that they often fault higher education – especially the four year institutions – for their sluggishness in responding to new conditions and for their resistance to change and innovation. Thus while the new conditions will require an even closer partnership between educators and legislators, at the moment the relationship seems fragile and testy, sometimes characterized by mistrust and miscommunication.

Public Agenda's founder, social scientist Daniel Yankelovich has written extensively about an evolutionary process that individuals progress through as they engage with complex issues. He describes it as a journey that begins with awareness of an existing problem, then moves on to a wrestling with alternative solutions, ultimately to reach some consensual resolution. Leaders interviewed for this study are at the start of the journey. They are acutely aware that a problem exists and they are beginning to see its urgency. But, there is little evidence to date that the academic community and their legislative partners have begun to form a clear response to the convergence of these challenges. Indeed, our interviewees exhibited some of the characteristics that all groups display when they are just beginning to face the hard work of confronting real choices.

Legislators and academic leaders might want to think about the story of health care reform in America as an example of what can happen when key players are slow to acknowledge the need for reform and permit "others" to do the reforming. It's pretty clear that absent self-reform, the traditional decision making role that had been enjoyed by physicians has been taken over by "other" institutions, such as the insurance companies. The key participants in higher education would do well to take responsibility for developing and discussing some creative choices - choices that correspond to their values and their notions about the best solutions in a very changed set of circumstances. The dialogue won't be easy, for all participants will need to confront some real trade-offs and conflicts. Reform will come, however, with their involvement or not, as change will be driven by the unremitting demand for more, and more effective, higher education by a new generation of Americans seeking to use higher education as their entryway to the American dream.

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