Five National Conversations Impacting Higher Education

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As I was thinking about what I would like to share with you tonight, I thought perhaps it might be interesting for you to pause for an hour or so and think about higher education like a Provost and perhaps even a President thinks. Maybe you already do, but it is a slightly different perspective, perhaps a little less "in the trenches" and a bit more of the aerial view.

So tonight, I would like to overview five national conversations taking place today about higher education; I am confident these conversations are also happening in your states and on each of your campuses.

1. **Taking Student Success Seriously**

One of the hottest phrases in higher education today is "student success". It is impossible to attend a conference or pick up the Chronicle without reading about it. What is meant by student success? To boil it down to three words, it is commonly referring to retention and graduation rate, although Vincent Tinto (1993), George Kuh et. al. (2005), John Gardner et. al (2005) and others will quickly add that it really is about providing excellence in education which manifests itself in retention and graduation.

But what is pushing our focus on student success? It is really about boosting productivity in US higher education (Cota, Jayaram, & Laboissiere, 2011). Education plays a critical role in the economic competitiveness of our nation. American's economic health depends on additional college trained workers. We are already lagging behind other developed countries and we risk falling even further behind.

For over 40 years access to higher education has improved and college enrollments have swelled from nearly 9 million in 1980 to over 20 million today. Yet while enrollments have more than doubled, overall college completion rates have increased very slightly. Only about ½ of all college students in the U.S. earn a degree or certificate within 6 years. The struggles of low income and first generation students are most troubling, where only ¼ complete this credential (Jones, 2011).

Today we produce about 2.5 million college graduates each year. President Obama has challenged us to produce 40% more college graduates by the year 2025. For each college/university, this would mean a 3.5 percent increase in graduates each year over the next decade. That's a daunting task for a couple of reasons. First, it means that universities need resources to take on these additional students and we all know that story about state funding these days. The second is that we are currently graduating only 40% of the students who come to us as freshman. This means that we really would need to admit about 10% more students than we do today in order to get to 3.5% more graduates (Cota, Jayaram, & Laboissiere, 2011).

The facts are clear. Despite our success in improving access to college, we have been unable to convert those gains into higher completion rates, especially among the low income students who most need the economic payoff that comes with a degree.

If we hope to graduate more students, we must focus on improving success in and outside of the classroom, particularly during the student's first year, where retention is the most challenging. To accomplish this we are challenged to think about the unique developmental needs of each year of the undergraduate experience and tailor our services and approaches accordingly.

George Kuh (2005) in his book, *Student Success in College*, helped us to understand that Year 1 is about acculturation---helping students to connect, feel "at home" and come to not only understand but also love the campus…with its resources, traditions and practices. To address acculturation needs, the first year experience has been developed where living/learning communities, early alert and first year advising centers, and first year seminars provide a comfort zone and create a firm backbone for freshmen as they (at times) flounder or doubt their ability to succeed.

The sophomore and junior year experience is about alignment….making sure students have found the right major becomes paramount. Along with this comes connecting students firmly to faculty who can teach and mentor them. Setting rigorous academic expectations including what George Kuh called "deep learning" experiences such as undergraduate research, service learning, and study abroad are part of this experience. Co-curricular opportunities for leadership development are also very important for the alignment years (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner et. al, 2010).

Year 4 is about launching….helping students to hone their job-ready skills and getting them ready to go. This is where we prepare students through powerful culminating experiences such as a senior capstone, and provide real life job experiences through student teaching or an internship. In addition, continued refinement of job seeking skills and networking with employers and alumni ensure that students leave ready for the world of work (Gardner, Van der Veer, et. al., 1998).

The whole idea is to dissect the undergraduate experience and during each year, provide intentional programming that attempts to get at the heart of student's needs. The ultimate goal being deep learning, student engagement, retention and graduation at or near four years.

In a nut shell, that's student success.

2. Are Undergraduates Learning Anything?

January of this year a book was released called, "Academically Adrift" by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011). The book details a study of more than 2,000 students who entered 24 different four year colleges in the fall of 2005. The colleges are geographically and institutionally representative of the full range of American higher education. Three times (fall of 2005, spring of 2007 and spring of 2009) these 2,000+ students were asked to take the Collegiate Learning Assessment or CLA, a widely used essay test that measures reasoning and writing skills. Alarmingly, they found that 36% of the students saw no statistically significant gains in their CLA scores between their freshman and senior years. And that's just the beginning of the book's bad news.

The scholars also found that students devote only slightly more than 12 hours per week to studying, on average. That might be in part because their courses simply aren't that demanding. The authors found that students simply aren't asked to do much. Half of the students did not take a single course requiring 20 pages of writing during their prior semester, and one third did not take a single course requiring even 40 pages of reading per week. Many students reported that they were not pushed as much (academically) as they thought they would be.

Another finding of the book is that racial and ethnic gaps in CLA scores persist, and even widen, in the case of African American students, over the course of four years of college. Black students improved their scores at lower levels than white students.

In the statistical analysis that sums up their book, they identify two significant college-level variables. First, all else equal, students' CLA scores are more likely to improve if they report that faculty members at their college have high expectations. Second, students' scores are more likely to improve if they say they have taken at least one writing-intensive course and at least one reading-intensive course in the previous semester. These observations boil down to the lesson that colleges must find ways to build cultures of academic rigor.

The authors suggest improving curriculum and instruction and they go back to something that many of us studied in our teacher education courses…Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Principles of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education…remember those 7 categories?

- Student-faculty contact
- Cooperation among students
- Active learning
- Prompt feedback
- Time on task
- High expectation and
- Respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.

These principles, by the way, were the basis for forming the five benchmarks used by the NSSE survey, NSSE, which stands for the National Survey of Student Engagement has become the bible for measuring student success and retention.

- Academic challenge,
- Active/collaborative learning,
- Student-faculty interaction,
- Enriching educational experiences and
- Supportive campus environments.

What is great about this news is that you are the pros and well positioned to provide campus leadership on how to teach. The less heartening news is that most universities/colleges are not setting rigorous enough standards and are not challenging students adequately to bring about deep learning. Simply put, we need to push students harder through rigorous courses that require them to read and write.

This leads to another, related question, what should students learn? In 2005 the Association of American Colleges and Universities did an extensive study of employers, faculty, staff and alumni asking "what qualities and skills do you want in college graduates?"

The list they came up with has been adopted by colleges nationwide and is ever popular because it is elegant and simple.

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world…gained through study in the sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages and the arts.

- Intellectual and practical skills including inquiry and analysis, creative and critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information, media and technology literacy, and team word and problem solving.

- Personal and social responsibility including civic knowledge and engagement, local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and foundation and skills for lifelong learning.

- Integrative learning, the ability to synthesize information and apply learning to new settings and complex problems (AACU, 2005).

Bottom line….never apologize for challenging your students….set the bar high and then support them so they can master the learning. Provost and Presidents are constantly asked to talk about the quality of education offered at their institution and they want …need to be able to say, we provide a high quality education. Students leave with the skills and knowledge required to be successful.

3. The Privatization of Higher Education

According to the College Board (2011), in the past five years, the average cost of in-state tuition and fees at public colleges has jumped 35% — after adjustment for inflation. In the past 25 years, the average cost of tuition and fees has risen faster than personal income, consumer prices and even health insurance.

For academic year 2008-2009, the average cost of tuition, room and board at a public university was $12,283; for a private school, the total averaged $31,233.

During the same period, the amount of federal direct aid — money that doesn't have to be repaid — has declined, forcing more students to borrow. Nearly two-thirds of college graduates leave school with debt, up from less than half in 1993. And among those with loans, the average debt has jumped from $9,250 in 1993 to $19,200, a 58% increase after adjustment for inflation.

The cost of higher education is shifting from public support to students and their families. The share of institutional budgets provided by tuition has shifted from 22% in 1985 to nearly 50% today. In many states including my own, students are now supporting more than 50% of the cost of higher education.

I don’t need to say a word about the sorry state of public support for higher education. You all are living it in your home states every day. But just to sum up, in the 2011 fiscal year,

- 12 states decreased state support for higher education by 11-25%;
- 22 states decreased state support for higher education by 1-10%...my state was one of them;
- 9 states were essentially flat---no increase but no decrease; and
- 7 states increased state support by up to 5%....almost always in the form of salary raises.

Under great scrutiny by legislators, many universities are called unproductive and suffering from "cost disease". Truthfully, something that we rarely talk about is how much does it really cost to educate a student? Researchers at the University of Wisconsin drew on the Delaware Study data and estimated the cost-to-degree figures at $60,000 to graduate a student with a four –year degree and $25,000 to graduate a student with a two-year degree (Harris and Goldrick-Rab, 2010). They made no distinction between public and private.

According to **a study released by the Pew Research Center**, 57 percent of Americans say higher education in the U.S. fails to provide students good value for the money they and their families spend, and 75 percent of those surveyed said college is too expensive for most Americans to afford (Fischer, 2011).

Pew's sample included 2,142 adults age 18 and older.

What is interesting is that the majority of college graduates, 86 percent, say college was a good investment for them personally. Adults who graduated from four-year colleges believe they are earning $20,000 more as a result of having gotten that degree, the study said, while those who did not attend college believe, on average, they are earning $20,000 a year less.

My fourth conversation….

4. **Who are our Students?**

Did you know?

- 4 out of 10 or about 40% attend community colleges
- Almost another 4 out of 10 or 37.5% attend public, four year colleges
- And the rest, 23% attend either private non-profits or for-profits (Chronicle, 2010)

Half of our students are independent…they are on their own, and half are dependent, still leaning on mom and/or dad for support.

In part, because so many students are on their own, undergraduates are not generally as wealthy as popular depictions make them seem.

25% of students have families that earn less than $20,000 per year and another 22% have families that earn between $20,000 and $40,000 per year. Combined, that's 47%... Not surprisingly, most of these students attend community colleges.

Only 20% of students come from families that earn $90,000 or more per year.

35% of students are part-time and contrary to popular belief, the majority of part-timers are under 30 years of age. However, 42% of part time students are age 30 or higher (Chronicle, 2010)

The Chronicle (Lipka, 2011) featured the entering class of 2011 and described today's students as "ambitious and harried, pro-environment and pro-gay rights, and waylaid by a bad economy." Polled

during their first few weeks of the fall semester, more freshmen than ever before reported having above average academic ability and "drive to achieve" But fewer than ever reported high levels of emotional heath.

Among other highs in the survey were student's expectations that they would communicate regularly with professors (38%) and would study abroad (31%). Students also acknowledge the impact of the recession with 62% saying it significantly affected their college choice, which meant staying closer to home or living with family. Freshmen felt the main benefit of college was to increase their earning power (Lipka, 2011)

Our students are becoming more diverse in every way. Research suggests that racially diverse educational environments are a good thing because they are associated with positive intellectual and social outcomes for all college students. Frequent interaction across racial lines and discussion of racial and ethnic issues positively predicts student retention, intellectual and social self-concept, and overall satisfaction with college. Today diversity is considered an integral part of educational excellence (Antonio et. al, 2004).

Because of these findings, colleges across the United States exert every effort to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of their student bodies. Student s who study at racially diverse institutions of higher learning have a broader understanding and openness towards diversity in society, become better citizens, and are more likely to have friends of other races after college than students at racially homogeneous colleges and universities.

Finally, my fifth conversation and one that hits a little closer to home for many of you,

5. The New Normal of Teacher Education

Our country evolved from normal schools in the late 1800s to university-based teacher education in the 1900s. At their peak in 1900 there were more than 330 normals enrolling over 115,000 students. Their programs were typically a year-long and emphasized pedagogy and in-school training (Levine, 2011).

The rise of high school and advent of accreditation brought them to a close or converted many normal schools to regional public institutions. Many teacher education programs moved to public four year institutions. Today the university-based teacher education programs that replaced the normal schools are being broadly criticized. Critics say the modern programs have lost touch with practice.

Increasingly the response from policy makers, philanthropists and some educators has been to eliminate or reduce the role of universities in teacher education and to move to shorter, more practical and more clinically based program. For example, 48 states have alternative certification which dramatically reduces the length of time and amount of coursework to become a teacher.

Some school districts are creating their own teacher education programs, sometimes with universities as partners and sometimes without. They are either granting their own degrees or have universities grant degrees for their programs. These graduate level programs tend to emphasize practice over theory, clinical education over academic instruction, pedagogy over content and facilities of expert teachers over university professors.

There are for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that have entered the teacher recruitment/preparation field. Teach for America is the best known which recruits high ability college graduates, provides a five week intensive summer training program, and places them in high need schools as full time teachers. In 2010, Teach for American inducted 4,500 new corps members.

The Bush Foundation, located in Minneapolis is investing 40 million dollars in a project they are calling Next Universities. Next stands for Network for Excellence in Teaching and involves ffourteen teacher education programs in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. Working with the Bush Foundation, these institutions are transforming the way they prepare teachers and are guaranteeing the effectiveness of teachers who graduate from their redesigned programs. To accomplish this goal, each teacher education institution will overhaul how they recruit, prepare, place and support new teachers and how they work with their K-12 partners. While SDSU is not a partner, the University of SD is and as their Dean of Education said, we truly did throw the baby out with the bath water. We are starting over.

Together, these initiatives and others like them constitute the new normal, in a sense, the revival of the normal school model of teacher education. Part of the problem for universities is to keep the good of our model…for example the research and theory base, but become more nimble in blending theory and practice and rethinking employment of, and professional development for teacher educators. Another challenge is misperceptions. Teacher education standards are not as low as commonly perceived and today's student pursuing a teaching degree are highly comparable to their peers in other fields. Finally, we all need to be accountable and by this we mean that we cannot send out weak teachers. If they don't cut it, they should not be credentialed to teach.

The research makes one thing clear: with three strong teachers in consecutive years, students' achievement soars. This is the challenge, and the opportunity, that faces our states. We need to be consistent with all teachers, in all classes.

So…what can you do with all this information?

Three thoughts:

First, be leaders of change. In other words, Change starts with you. It's so interesting to me that no matter where one sits in the university hierarchy, the power seems to be somewhere else. For example, as a faculty member I always felt my dept head held all the power, then I become a dept head and found out it was the dean…then I became a dean and thought it was the provost. Now I am a provost and I understand clearly that the power rests with the faculty. I guess my message is that you have more power and influence than you think…and those "above" you want you to use it. Feel empowered to change. Start with changing/improving your teacher education program. We want you to and we want you to propose changes for your program/dept/college that improves the quality of our graduates. We want you to do things that make our product…our students… successful. That's the bottom line. If you can provide evidence that improvement quality results, you will not only be looked upon favorably, you will be adored.

Second…While the pressure is certainly on to do research and be incredible scholars, don't forget that our primary mission is to educate. Continue to grow in your role as a teacher. Be good at it and then help all those hundreds of faculty who have no idea how to do it. It's a very real problem on our campuses and quite frankly, we need help. You can help because you know how to be a good teacher…that's what you are all about. Offer your expertise and services. Get involved in teaching improvement programs….help new faculty learn how to teach…do whatever you can to improve the quality of teaching on our campuses.

Third, and related to both of the previous…be rigorous. Never apologize for pushing your students to excellence. Never apologize that you require them to learn. And never apologize for making your students read material and write in your classes. They should…it's part of learning and it is what we hope they will continue to do once they leave our campuses. Set the bar high and then provide plenty of support for them to achieve your learning outcomes. Be approachable, provide tips and suggestions and give early feedback so they feel supported and know where they stand. And wherever they land on the true grading scale, that's what they earn. Not all students should get an A or B…some earn a C or a D and some simply don't pass. And it's ok.

Let me conclude by saying that the longer I am in higher education and the more senior leadership positions I have the privilege to hold, the more I understand and appreciate the role of faculty. Faculty are the academic drivers of the university. They are the "go to" folks to get any job done. I always remind myself that graduates most likely won't remember who was President and probably never knew who was Provost, they may or may not know their Dean…but they will remember who taught them and who advised and mentored them, and who listened and encouraged them and congratulated them, and that's you, our faculty.

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