

DIVIDED WE FAIL: A REPORT ON NATIONAL FORUMS CONCERNING PROBLEMS FACING HIGHER EDUCATION

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Over the past couple of years, there has been much written about the problems facing higher education: declining public support, rising tuition rates, ballooning student debt, and a tightening job market. Spurred by the release of the report, *A Crucible Moment*, by AACU and the U.S. Department of Education, the National Issues Forums Institute, with the assistance of the Kettering Foundation, agreed to conduct forums across the country to determine how the general public viewed this issue, and what they thought the best solution was.

To prepare for the forums, the Kettering Foundation researched the issue and wrote an issue guide that described the problem and presented three alternative approaches to addressing the issue. In researching the issue, the foundation looked at the changes that had occurred in higher education over the past 75 years. Here is an overview.

Prior to the U.S. entry into World War II, higher education in this country was an elitist enterprise. According to the 1940 census, only 4.6 percent of the population, ages 25 and above, had a bachelor's degree, and they were predominantly male, white, and from upper income families. But that changed dramatically after the war through the enactment of three governmental programs: the G.I. Bill that enabled over two million veterans to go to college; legislation to establish the Pell Grant, providing access to higher education for students from lower income families; and the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, making financial support available to all students who needed it.

College enrollments began to grow at a rapid and steady rate. State colleges became universities; branch campuses became separate institutions. Universities throughout the nation expanded facilities, faculties, and academic programs with steadily expanding public funding. The United States boasted of having the best-educated workforce in the world. The economy grew steadily, raising income levels for each segment of the society at similar rates. President John F. Kennedy described this phenomenon as a “rising tide lifts all boats.” Economists began to describe higher education as a “public good,” in which a public investment benefits all of society. Sociologists began to talk about the “American Dream,” in which any student, regardless of family income, could get a college degree, find a well-paying job, and be a productive member of society.

This very positive environment for higher education continued for 30–35 years; but by the late 1970s, the tide began to turn. There were a series of factors that seemed to shape attitudes toward higher education. They included changes in the job market by automation in both the factory and the offices, and the outsourcing of jobs to lower wage countries that limited job opportunities and income growth for the middle class; changes in the federal tax code that enabled higher income individuals and corporations to pay less taxes and helped produce a concentration of wealth and resulting income inequality that has rarely been seen in this country; and an emerging attitude of self-interest on the part of young people that led some to describe it as the “me generation.”

Economists began to see higher education in this environment as a “private good” that primarily benefits the individual, rather than society. Legislatures in each state, faced with competing demands for funding, and, perhaps, influenced by this attitude, began to reduce their support for higher education. While the rates of public funding may differ by state, the trend has been the same over the past 25 years or so. Institutions, faced with fixed costs and rising demand,

have raised tuition rates. In fact, over the past 25 years, tuition has increased at a rate four times that of average family income.

So what have students and their families done? They have borrowed money, raising the outstanding balance of student loans to more than \$1 trillion. And to make matters worse, many students are finding fewer jobs available in their locale and/or field of study.

The question now is, what can and should higher education do to reverse these trends and recapture the public support that it once enjoyed? A review of the literature revealed three options that have been proposed. Each has its merits, as well as drawbacks. But each needs to be considered. They are:

- A. Higher education should concentrate greater resources on educating students for jobs that are most available, particularly jobs in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. And focus greater research in these areas to recapture U.S. leadership in technology. And to keep our economy growing.
- B. Higher education should concentrate on helping students develop the skills that will allow them to be successful in a variety of fields, skills such as the ability to communicate, to analyze, and to work effectively with others, while strengthening values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others. The argument is that a high percentage of students end up in jobs and careers that differ from the fields in which they majored, and, therefore, these broader skills are most valuable to them.
- C. Higher education should concentrate on lowering the cost for attendance through a more aggressive movement toward online instruction, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to go to college.

The Kettering Foundation produced an issue guide based on its research that described the problem and evaluated the three options. The National Issues Forums Institute then published the issue guide, entitled “Shaping Our Future: How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?,” and launched the process of conducting forums at a press conference with the U.S. Department of Education in Washington on September 4, 2012.

In the sixteen months through December 2013, a total of 115 forums were held involving students, faculty, parents, and community leaders. A special thanks to Harry Boyte and the American Commonwealth Partnership, to the American Democracy Project of AASCU, and to the Democracy Commitment for their assistance in conducting the forums. Forums were held on college campuses, in public libraries, in churches, in retirement villages, and a variety of other settings.

The participants had the issue guide to read prior to the forum they attended and approximately 1.5 hours for discussion and deliberation under the guidance of a moderator. Forums typically involved 10–15 people, with each participant given an opportunity to speak. After evaluating each of the three options, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked for their conclusions. The questionnaires were analyzed by the Public Agenda Foundation in New York and a report was issued.

This report, entitled “Divided We Fail,” will soon be available for public consumption. There were five observations that were drawn from the responses of the participants:

- 1) Colleges should offer students a rich and diverse education, but that may not be practical in today’s job market. While they recognized that preparation for a career was important, participants felt that a college education should be broad, rich, varied,

and exploratory. Nearly 90 percent of respondents to the questionnaire strongly or somewhat agreed that college should be “where students learn to develop the ability to think.” Yet many worried that career preparation was becoming the be-all and end-all of higher education.

- 2) Science and technology are crucial to the country’s future, but the movement of students in that direction should begin in elementary and high school. Pushing students toward STEM fields at the college level would be unwise. There was a broad conviction among the participants that our country will actually be more innovative and successful in science and technology if college students pursuing these fields have broader and more diverse education. Many were worried about too narrow a focus here.
- 3) Everyone should have a *chance* to go to college, but nearly 60 percent of respondents agreed that college is not for everyone and continually pushing for more students to graduate from college will end up weakening academic standards. Many of the participants also worried that the country doesn’t provide very good options for students who aren’t ready for or don’t want to enter traditional four-year college programs. Also, many were not aware of what is happening in two-year schools where there’s so much innovation in this area lately.
- 4) The high cost of college is putting the American Dream out of reach for too many families.
- 5) Higher education can’t succeed unless families and K–12 education do their part. What happens in these dimensions can be more powerful than anything colleges and

universities do later. Higher education is simply too late to address the educational hurdles facing students who are poorly prepared.

There were also a number of significant questions that participants raised that warrant careful consideration. A sampling of those questions are:

- 1) What does it mean to be well educated? Many of our leaders have underestimated the value many Americans place on college as a time and place where students receive a rich and broad education—something beyond specific job training and the ability to earn a high salary.
- 2) What does it mean to be prepared for a world of work that changes continually? Many participants were troubled by the idea that the kind of education that benefits a student over a lifetime may not be the kind of education that will help him or her get a job right out of college.
- 3) How do we make higher education more affordable—for students and the public? Can we lower costs without jeopardizing what citizens value most? The conversation needs to be moved from the State House, Congress, and expert panels to include more citizens who have a vested interest in the issue.
- 4) What do we mean by “equal opportunity” in higher education? Do we have a system of higher education that offers an equal chance for all, or are we developing a two-tiered system where affluent youngsters can enter a selective, full-time, residential institution while lower income students have access to open enrollment institutions for a part-time, non-residential experience?

Overall, the primary conclusion that emerged is that there is a consideration disconnect between leaders in the public arena at both the state and national levels and citizens (students, faculty, parents, and community leaders) who have a vested interest in the goals and programs of higher education. Divided, there is little chance that these issues can be resolved to the benefit of our society. Increased deliberation on this issue is needed.