

Panel Discussion

IMPROVING EDUCATION OUTCOMES: IN COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES, AND BEYOND

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While most of the attention of the public, the policymakers, and this conference is on improving our K–12 education system, our higher education also needs attention. Higher education is undergoing dramatic changes that have to be considered in conjunction with the demands on and the changes in the K–12 system. Similarly, there are common needs of the two systems, and lessons from higher education should be considered in any K–12 reform proposal.

Not that long ago, the vast majority of college undergraduates were 18 to 22 years old, lived on campus, and were full-time students. It is estimated that students with these attributes account for less than 20 percent of today's undergraduate population. In addition to their graduate education and research missions, higher education institutions have had to change to serve this very different population.

At all levels, the job of educational administrators has changed and will continue to change. Competent management of educational institutions by principals, superintendents, deans, and presidents is no longer sufficient. Just as in the corporate arena, bold leadership is necessary. Educational leaders must be willing and able to take risks, make decisions, and recover from and learn from failure. They must be eager to measure what is important. They must be aware of all of the sources and uses of funds available to them. They must eagerly accept responsibility and accountability.

In the midst of these tight economic times, the focus of society's attention concerning all elements of education at all levels has shifted from one of support and encouragement to one of cost-cutting and

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accountability. This shift of emphasis has occurred most notably in the eyes of elected officials and business leaders.

It is the responsibility of K–12 leaders and higher education leaders to reverse this trend. We need collectively to do a better job both of being effective and efficient managers of resources and in aggressively making the case for adequate resources. We need to make clear the connection between education and economic and social prosperity.

Higher education institutions have played a leadership role in providing the human capital that has created our successful information and knowledge-based economy. One element of the success story has been the increasing number of women, ethnic minorities, and non-U.S. citizens who have taken advantage of our higher education system and then contributed to our economy and our society, in general.

The workforce of the information society will need even more participation from these previously underrepresented groups. High school counselors and teachers will need to be better informed of career opportunities, and will need to direct the best and the brightest more proactively toward areas of national need and the potential for personal achievement. Since the tragedy of September 11, there have been proposals to limit severely the number of non-U.S. students in our colleges and universities. Many of these proposals have serious, harmful unintended consequences for our society. Education leaders need to play an active role in ensuring that our workforce draws upon all sources of talent, regardless of their country of origin.

Our system of higher education is the envy of the world. On the other hand, our K–12 system is apparently in need of reform. Are there lessons from higher education that may be applicable to K–12? There are three aspects of our higher education system that seem to be crucial. First, there is tremendous competition among the suppliers of higher education, and consequently, choice for the consumer. Second, merit-based compensation is a major component of the higher education reward system. Third, market forces (both internal to higher education and beyond) lead to compensation patterns that are based on academic discipline and areas of expertise. Public policymakers should assess what lessons can be learned from this for our K–12 system.

Finally, this conference has highlighted a range of economic analyses of various educational and related reforms. Because of the complexity of educational delivery systems and measures of educational outcomes, the research often has had to make simplifying assumptions. My plea to researchers in this area is to do all that is necessary to avoid the easy-to-study problems and concentrate on the important questions. Your audience, the populace, and the public policymakers cannot afford anything less.