



CFA WHITE PAPER

“Quality Higher Education for the 21st Century

Draft Statement of Principles

Perhaps the most widely accepted belief about higher education today is that our nation will need more college-educated people in the future than we have now or than we are on track to produce. This belief, given greater urgency by the most recent economic recession, has increasingly led to calls for transforming higher education and for embracing a wide variety of “innovations.”

Without question, improving higher education should be a goal of everyone — the public, elected leaders, businesses, and those who work to provide that education.

But as conversations about specifics develop, it is crucial for discussion about change to be guided by principles that will lead us toward real improvement in American higher education. Wholesale embrace of change without careful thought and deliberation can take us in the wrong direction — not toward reforming higher education but, in fact, toward deforming precisely those aspects of American higher education that have made it the envy of the world.

There are surely no simple answers, no one model, and no “magic bullets” for meeting America’s needs for broadly accessible quality higher education; but we, the undersigned, believe that the following principles can provide a helpful rubric for both developing and assessing proposals for innovation or restructuring in the future.

1. Higher education in the 21st century must be inclusive; it should be available to all who can benefit from it and who want the experience.

Demographic projections make it clear that the United States will not return to world leadership in higher education attainment without increasing higher education opportunities and success for all sectors of our increasingly diverse society.

A vigorous democracy and a thriving economy in the future demand that we give this principle full attention when we consider proposals for change, seeking out changes that will enhance educational opportunity and success for all, including low-income communities and communities

of color, and rejecting any that may have unintended negative consequences for access and success. We simply cannot risk a return to 19th century circumstances when education was rationed on the basis of race and economic status.

For this principle to be realized, higher education also should be recognized as a right and a public good rather than as a privilege and primarily a private good. High tuition, inadequate financial aid, and burdensome levels of student debt are more acceptable when we collectively focus on the advantages higher education brings to the individual, but our current approach of increasing the personal costs of college restricts access for individuals and dampens the broader social and economic benefits of higher education.

2. The curriculum for a quality 21st century higher education must be broad and diverse.

Our economy demands innovation and creativity. Nations that reduce college education to “job training” condemn their graduates to a path that leads to career obsolescence. As careers are replaced by technology or industry reorganization, narrowly trained college graduates will find themselves in the same position as 19th century artisans who saw their skilled work taken over by mechanized factories.

Colleges and universities that provide access to broad general education and skills give their graduates the ability to be lifelong learners who will be more flexible in adjusting to shifts in the job market.

The value of a broad and diverse curriculum extends beyond economics. In the increasingly interconnected world of the 21st century, we will need more people who understand its history, who can think outside of narrow boundaries, and who have the knowledge tools to function in a culturally diverse environment.

Our democracy also needs a broadly educated citizenry. Broad civic participation cannot flourish when a liberal education is reserved for the elite, and narrow training is provided for everyone else.

3. Quality higher education in the 21st century will require excellent faculty who have the academic freedom and the institutional support they need to do a professional job.

College teaching is a highly competitive field, often with hundreds of qualified applicants for a single position. Most colleges and universities thus enjoy a very rich pool of quality applicants for teaching positions from which to choose.

Once quality candidates are hired, however, universities must provide all faculty with the resources and opportunity to stay current in their respective fields and to develop the most effective methods for teaching their subject matter.

Faculty must also have the academic freedom to make educational decisions about what to teach and how to teach it in the best interests of their students and of quality education. As in health care, where doctors (rather than governments or insurance companies) have ultimate authority in

medical assessment and prescription, faculty members must be able to exercise their professional judgment about what should be taught in their areas and how it best should be taught.

The increasing practice of hiring faculty into contingent positions, which are not eligible for the protection of tenure that allows for full and free exercise of professional judgment, is not an “innovation” or an “efficiency” that will serve higher education well in the 21st century.

4. Quality higher education in the 21st century will incorporate technology in ways that expand opportunity and maintain quality.

Technology that enhances learning is a welcome addition to the 21st century higher education experience. The current public conversation about the use of technology in higher education, however, suffers from a lack of depth and subtlety.

Too often the discussion begins with the unexamined assumption that “technology” and “the internet” are not already being incorporated into higher education in significant ways. Anyone who has spent any time in a university recently would dispute the assertion that underpins many demands for “innovation” in this area.

Even more significant, the technology debate would be improved if we made a more careful distinction between education and the transfer of information. Undoubtedly, the internet has already revolutionized the latter in universities and in the wider world. But education, which involves the development of higher-level skills of assessment, critique, and expression, is a complex process that is often more challenging to produce in digital formats.

This latter point is related to another common assumption made when discussing online education — that it will save vast sums of money.

When online technologies are used for higher levels of teaching rather than simply for drill or transfer of information, cost savings quickly evaporate. In fact, many faculty who are proponents of and experts in online education argue that teaching a good online course is more labor-intensive and thus more costly than more traditional formats.

In short, the role of online formats and other technological innovations in higher education are vastly more complex than the current public discussion would suggest. Issues of access (will some students be shortchanged simply because they don’t own a good computer or have access to high-speed internet?), success (will online formats work for under-prepared students who also deserve a chance for success?), equity, and quality need a deeper analysis if we are to have the kind of higher education we will need in the 21st century

5. Quality education in the 21st Century will require the pursuit of real efficiencies and the avoidance of false economies.

Not every cut in costs in a business — or in a college — is a real efficiency.

Many of the cuts colleges and universities have made during this current economic crisis — cutting classes, increasing class sizes, closing departments, slashing curricula, and reducing support services for students have helped campuses balance their budgets in the short-term, but the long-term costs of these cuts have not been adequately acknowledged or discussed.

In fact, the economic pressure to cut budgets and the political pressure to define all cuts as “efficiencies” currently makes it almost impossible to open a conversation about the hidden costs of various cuts.

We propose that the public discussion of increasing efficiency and productivity in higher education start here: a real efficiency that should be pursued will not only cut costs but also enhance or at least not harm the principles of a quality higher education for the 21st century outlined in this document.

6. Quality education in the 21st century will require adequate public funding and that means a substantial increase over current expenditure levels.

Money will not solve all of higher education’s problems certainly, but adequate public investment in an enterprise so crucial to the country’s future well-being simply must be provided.

Cheerful assurances that “we can do more with less” may be helpful in the realm of politics, but they do not move us toward achieving quality higher education in the 21st century.

In fact, failure of leaders in higher education and in government to highlight the currently perilous level of public investment in higher education does the country a grave disservice, for it allows the public to believe we can achieve world leadership in higher education or even maintain our current levels of achievement by simply accepting the status quo.

7. Quality higher education in the 21st century cannot be identified with a simplistic set of metrics.

Simplistic measures of success in K-12 that are the legacy of No Child Left Behind have not served our country or our children well. Unfortunately, graduation rates, in isolation, appear to be gaining ascendancy as the national measure of higher education success.

This trend is disturbing because a national drive toward that goal — to the exclusion of others — can threaten important principles, including inclusiveness and access that are crucial for the kind of higher education we will need in the 21st century.

A more fruitful direction would recognize that educational success, like human health, is a complex systemic process that requires a rich data picture (of both qualitative and quantitative measures) for full assessment. For higher education to flourish, all our leaders — in government and in education — must avoid the lure of reductionist measures and simplistic goals that will foster a false sense of progress now but bitter disappointment at the results in the future.

Conclusion

Change in American higher education in the 21st century is both inevitable and desirable. Change is, in fact, a commonplace in every college and university worthy of the name.

Historically the result has been a rich and diverse set of programs, course offerings, and teaching formats characterizing American higher education. Instead of seeing that rich diversity as a “luxury” we can no longer afford or as a “problem” to be fixed, we should see it as a strength that should be preserved and fostered. It is the environment in which higher education research and teaching flourish best.

Preserving the best and continuing to innovate in productive directions will not happen through simple “solutions” or “quick fixes.” Often proposals that look too simple are; and they are often better for profits and consulting businesses than they are for students.

As we examine proposals for change in higher education in the coming decades, we should build on the traditions, principles, and vision that have characterized American higher education at its best. We believe that using the principles discussed here to inform the national conversation can lead us toward an American higher education system in the 21st century that will serve our nation well and be a source of pride.

We invite comments and discussion about these draft principles