

Opportunities for All:

A National Campaign For Educational & Economic Impact

By Robert L. Caret



As chancellor of the University System of Maryland (USM), I am proud to join with my AASCU colleagues in active support of the “Opportunities for All” initiative. The University System of Maryland and eight of the USM’s constituent institutions are AASCU members. And *every* USM institution fully supports the twin goals of Opportunities for All: helping more students and their families recognize the tremendous value offered by public higher education, and helping more political, business and community leaders grasp the critical contribution state colleges and universities make toward successful economic and workforce development in their region and state.

AASCU is among the nation’s foremost public higher education advocacy organizations, representing more than 400 public colleges, universities, and public higher education systems. As a truly representative association, AASCU claims rural, metropolitan, comprehensive, Historically Black Institutions (HBIs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and state higher education systems.

This diverse and inclusive membership makes AASCU the ideal organization to coordinate this national campaign. But we need widespread

participation from our nation’s state colleges and universities to make this effort effective. I encourage all of you committed to public higher education—committed to the success of America’s state colleges and universities—to join with us. This national focus, with our unified efforts exceeding the sum of our individual parts, is more essential than it has ever been.

While the relatively mild economic downturns of the early 80s, 90s and 2000s prompted cuts in the budgets of state colleges and universities throughout the country, the Great Recession of 2008 saw these budgets not simply cut, but slashed. In fact, studies indicate that—as a direct result of these budget actions—states today spend about half as much on higher education on a per capita income basis as they did in 1981. The burden of these cuts has been shouldered both by our institutions—in the form of budget reductions, hiring freezes, maintenance deferrals and other actions—and by students, in the form of higher tuition, fewer course offerings and reduced student services. More disturbingly, it is estimated that if we continue along the current course, we will soon reach the point where several states will spend essentially no public money on their state universities, with the rest investing significantly less.

Clearly the time has come for the nation's state colleges and universities to band together in a coordinated effort to speak with a unified voice in support of the special and unique role played by public higher education. We must do so not for the sake of our own financial stability (as vital as that is), but rather for the sake of the students, the states and the nation we serve.

The democratization of higher education is one of the greatest achievements of post-World War II America. It propelled our economy, built our middle class, and helped make us world leaders. This was all made possible by the powerful notion that higher education is a "common good" and, as such, worthy of substantial public investment. And it was always public colleges and universities at the forefront of this mission. With a focus on teaching and learning, a dedication to research, and a genuine commitment to serving traditionally underserved student populations, these institutions became the economic, cultural and social drivers for their individual states and the nation as a whole.

With our core values of affordability, accessibility, quality and responsibility, state colleges and universities stand as the nation's most effective pathway toward making higher education available to anyone who is willing to work hard in order to be successful.

Nationwide, about 75 percent of students in college attend a state college or university, mostly—but not exclusively—in their home state. Clearly, if the country is to achieve the goal of elevating the educational attainment of our citizens, it will be public higher education that drives us. But just as clearly, it will take a nationwide, state-by-state re-commitment to our state colleges and universities to make that possible.

Even with costs increasing over the past several decades, the relative affordability of our state colleges and universities is clear to see. According

to the National Center for Education Statistics, for the 2013–14 academic year, the annual cost for undergraduate tuition, fees, room and board was estimated to be \$15,640 at a public institution. While this cost is higher than advocates for state colleges and universities would prefer, those same costs at private institutions came to more than \$40,500.

In addition, beyond the relative value, public higher education offers a tremendous return on investment. As the U.S. Department of Education has

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made clear, education beyond high school has never been more important and a college education is the best investment a student can make in his or her future. Today, a college graduate with a bachelor's degree is not only far less likely to face unemployment, but also earns on average 66 percent more than an individual with only a high school diploma.

And it is not only return on investment to the students we serve that makes public higher education a worthy investment—we also offer a return on investment to our partners in state government. It has long been projected that in the near future the vast majority of job openings will require postsecondary education or training. A new report recently released by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce—"America's Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots"—indicates that the future has arrived. As noted in *The Washington Monthly* in early July, the study finds that 73 percent of the 11.6 million jobs gained in the U.S. economy since 2008 went to individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher. And these workers with a bachelor's degree or higher have taken nearly all of the jobs in high-

skill occupations added in the recovery from the Great Recession. In addition, for the first time, four-year college grads make up the largest share of this country's workforce. Finally, while the share of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher make up just over a third of the total workforce, these workers earn almost 60 percent of all wages.

It is states that have made education—especially public higher education—a funding priority that are poised to thrive in this knowledge

economy. I am fortunate that Maryland is one of those states. At the same time, we do not operate in a vacuum. It is in the long-term interest of Maryland—and the entire country—that a commitment to supporting public colleges and universities takes firm root and grows throughout America.

AASCU President Muriel Howard has very eloquently observed, "[A] single voice can easily get lost in the crowd. When many voices join together, they become hard to ignore." That is the aim of this collaborative, nationwide initiative: for all of us to form a chorus—or better yet, a choir—extolling the role and the unique ability of state colleges and universities to provide Opportunities for All. **P**

Robert L. Caret is chancellor of the University System of Maryland.

OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ALL
America's State Colleges
and Universities