

# Welcome to the **Re-Imagining** the **First Year of College Project**

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Three ominous predictions or trends are shaping the work we are about to launch. First, the demographer William Frey of the Brookings Institution recently predicted, based on demographics, that college graduation rates would start to decline in 2020, and if nothing is done, graduation rates would not again reach 2015 levels until 2050. That, of course, would have catastrophic results for our economy and our society, as well as for millions of Americans who would face a bleak future.

The second recent prediction comes from Ed Trust. There, optimism is expressed about what appear to be rising graduation rates. Yet the Ed Trust report reports that there are persistent racial gaps that exist in the graduation rate data. The Ed Trust report concludes that those racial gaps will remain for the rest of this century. For the rest of this century . . . another 85 years.

And a third disturbing trend was reported recently in The Presidency, a publication of the American Council on Education. According to this study, college enrollment rates have been declining since 2008, dropping 3%, anticipating perhaps William Frey's prediction about graduation rates. Yet among low income students, those in the bottom 20% of family incomes, the decline between 2008 and now has been 10%, the greatest sustained decline in college-going for the poor in 40 years.

Dropping graduation rates. Persistent racial gaps. Declining enrollment of the poorest students. So is demography destiny? Will those trends continue? What responsibility do we bear for the current situation? Are we victims of the current circumstances, or are we

contributors and co-conspirators? Can we do anything to alter those trends? Or are our institutions impervious to alteration? Say it another way. Are we content with the current circumstances? Do we think it is natural for more than 40% of the students who enter our institutions will leave without degrees? Do we have any culpability for those wretched statistics? Or are we resigned to watch generations of students live lives of despair and hopelessness? And here is the most troubling question of all. Are we comfortable with the status quo, as long as the status quo makes us comfortable?

As we launch this project, we are beginning a journey whose outcome cannot be predicted. We know our goal: increasing student success on our campuses, especially for low income, first generation, and students of color. We know at least some of the basic directions we should head. But we are uncertain about the many twists and turns our journey will take, the high points and low points along the way. Yet all of you, 44 AASCU campuses, had the courage to stand up, to walk with others on a journey of uncertainty, yet a journey of high hopes and magnificent aspirations. I believe we are undertaking the journey of a lifetime, perhaps the most consequential journey we have ever undertaken.

And yet we face enormous odds. What shall be our reaction to circumstances that seem so dire? I think we have two choices. One choice is best illustrated by a journey that happened almost 100 years ago, in a land far away. In World War I, a British army officer, Thomas Edward Lawrence, began working with Arab counterparts to attack the port of Aqaba on the Red Sea, held by the Turkish Army. The battle plan called for Lawrence and a group of Arab tribesmen to cross the dreaded Nefud Desert, which even the Bedouins considered impassable, to attack the Turks from the one place the Turks didn't expect. In the film "Lawrence of Arabia," here is the scene as they attempted that dangerous, indeed almost suicidal desert crossing.

—Scene from "Lawrence of Arabia"

*Crossing the desert, the group realizes that Gasim is missing.*

*One leader declares the Gasim will die. "It is written."*

As you just saw, when Gasim was missing, one of the leaders of that expedition accepted what was, with the fatalistic observation: It is written. Despite the seemingly far stretch between the world of Lawrence of Arabia and those of us in American higher education, I wonder how often we express that same thought, particularly about the structures and policies and practices of our institutions. We probably don't say explicitly: "It is written." But we act as if it is. We see things that are clearly wrong, or things that could be improved upon, or things that should be but aren't tried, and far too often, in our own way, we express a sentiment similar: It is written.

"It is written" could be seen as a recognition of reality. Our modern expression today would probably be: "It is what it is." But "it is written" expresses a sense that nothing can

be done. It is a statement of acquiescence, of surrender. It is, ultimately, a statement of hopelessness. But it is also a statement of weakness, an excuse to do nothing.



I understand the instinct. Our institutions are large and complex. Concepts of change are challenged by a host of forces committed to the status quo. It's understandable that in the face of such entrenched policies and practices, we might feel helpless and hopeless. Indeed, over the years, I recall my share of "It is written" moments. And in addition to the seeming unchallengeable, rigid structures that we confront daily in our institutions, we hear of larger forces, beyond our own institutions, that seem to reinforce the "It is written" philosophy.

Yet as a fellow traveler, and as one who cares deeply about this particular travelogue and how it will end, let me suggest that all of us who undertake this journey together need to be united around one conviction, one guiding principle, one deep commitment that can illuminate our journey and remind us of its amazing possibilities. I hope our project and our work will respond to our challenges in a different way, the way that so many years ago, T. E. Lawrence responded.

—*Scene from "Lawrence of Arabia."*

*Lawrence rides into camp with Gasim on the back of his camel. Before taking a drink offered by Omar Sharif, Lawrence says: "Nothing is written."*

Nothing is written. I hope that is our response. It doesn't matter what has been done in the past. We must not be shackled by past practices and outmoded policies. We must be willing to challenge prevailing assumptions and deeply held beliefs. We must be willing to ask hard questions, to risk being unpopular, to question conventional thinking.

So let me start our journey together by not only suggesting that nothing is written, but also by being explicit about some core beliefs, beliefs which others and I who planned this project used to animate and direct this project.

1. No more pilots. No more small tests. No more trials. We know what to do. We have a large body of research that demonstrates that we know what to do to improve student success for all students, particularly low income, first generation, students of color. We now need to take things to scale. We don't have a knowledge problem; we have an implementation problem.

But in fairness, when I say WE know what to do, I really mean the field knows what to do. But each of us, on our own campuses, knows some things but few of us have a broad enough view to know all of the most promising practices. We each grasp a different part of the problem.

2. So the second belief is that we are smarter collectively than we are individually. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of solitary expert. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of crowd-sourcing. Nothing illustrates this better than the article in the journal *Nature*, comparing the scientific accuracy of entries in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Wikipedia*. The error rate was roughly equal. I argue that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a 20<sup>th</sup> century model, the solitary expert who prepares the entry for *Encyclopedia* while *Wikipedia* is a 21<sup>st</sup> century model, where hundreds if not thousands contribute to a single entry to *Wikipedia*. And that notion of crowd-sourcing defines who we are, a collection of 44 campuses that are joined together as a learning community. As the project staff, we don't have the answers. As individual campuses, you don't have the answers. But I am willing to make a bold assertion. I believe that all of the answers we need to increase student success in dramatic ways in American higher education are found in this audience, and in the larger gathering of this Academic Affairs Winter Meeting, through our collective experience and wisdom. I believe that collectively, we know what to do. I believe that if we implemented all of the practices that we collectively know about, we could dramatically increase rates of retention, engagement, and graduation success. The question is whether we have the courage to do what needs to be done to improve student success.
  
3. How do we optimize the environment for success by all students, all the time? At its heart, this isn't an educational question. It's a deeply moral question. How many students have to fail, not because of them but because of us, before we say enough? How many students do we have to take in, and then fail, with massive debt and loss of hope, before we ask what we might have done differently? Peg Miller, former editor of *Change Magazine*, was fond of saying: "As parents, we don't send you our best children; we send you our only children. And we expect that as professionals, you will do everything in your power to help those children succeed." What might we do differently, in programs, policies and practices, to increase student success on our campuses?
  
4. Students aren't excused from their own responsibilities in this formulation. But students aren't customers. That's a terrible analogy. They are not buying a commodity from us. The better analogy, albeit with its own problems, is the analogy of patient and physician. In the doctor—patient relationship, massively uncertain circumstances often cannot predict success. However, the optimal outcomes are achieved when the patient and the doctor work collaboratively to achieve the best outcome possible. In education, the professor and student who work together collaboratively usually achieve the greatest educational outcome.
  
5. This is the largest and most ambitious project in AASCU's 50+ year history. So for all of us at AASCU, the stakes are very high. But frankly, the stakes are much, much higher for our students, our country, and our institutions. This may be the most important work any of us have ever undertaken, for students, for our country, and for our campuses. There's no question about the impact of student success for students. Students without a college degree are often doomed to a life of limitations. In many different ways—career,

earning power, outside interests, personal fulfillment, and a host of other measures—a college degree is life-altering. For our country, the number of students with college degrees predicts our future success in a global economy. For our democracy, more college degrees predict a stronger democracy, as citizens with college degrees vote more, contribute more, volunteer more, and participate more in countless ways in our democracy. But in a moment of self-interest, if students pay more for institutional costs than the state does, and students either don't come or fail quickly, who is most at risk, our students or our institutions?

Let me be clear. My hopes for this project are bold and ambitious. Together, you and I and all of the people we are inviting to join us on this journey are going to transform our campuses as we work to create the environment, the conditions, in which many more students will be successful.

I am also committed that this will be a journey of joy, of discovery, and of fellowship as we travel together to identify and enact the most promising practices.

To undertake this effort successfully requires that we make enormous numbers of changes, big and small, on our campuses. But the ultimate focus of our efforts, I believe, must be on culture. What are the silent but often profoundly influencing assumptions we make about our students, our institutions, and about the nature of education? What are the unspoken belief systems that have shaped our policies and practices? At AASCU, we did a study in 2005 about graduation rates, dis-aggregating our 420 institutions into 12 clusters of similar institutions. Then we sent 12 accreditation-like teams, one each to highest graduation rate institution in each of the 12 clusters. We kicked tires, looked under rocks, and concluded from the study that high graduation rates were the product of principally two factors: leadership at many levels within the institution focused on student success, and an institutional culture where substantial numbers of the community members believed that it was their job to help students succeed and graduate. Several of you in this room were involved in that study, and Dave Dowell, provost at CSU Long Beach, credits his involvement in that project as the start of a 10 year effort at institutional renewal that earned CSU Long Beach a national award for the improvement of undergraduate education (get name of award from Anne). We did a similar study a year later focused on Hispanic student success, and that study produced similar findings.

Leadership and ownership for student success. Key ingredients for creating a campus focused on student success. I'd add one more ingredient, the built environment of your campus. How does the physical structure of your campus contribute to or detract from student success. Can the physical environment shape our behavior and our attitudes? One of my favorite stories is about Churchill and the Battle of Britain. At the very end of the battle, in May of 1941, a German bomber dropped a bomb that destroyed the House of Commons. An argument raged for the next 5 years about how to rebuild the House of Commons. Some wanted to make it bigger, as it was a cramped space even then. But



Churchill insisted that it be built exactly the same size as before, arguing that the cramped quarters offered “that intimacy . . . of debate and discussion, that freedom and that sense of urgency and excitement” during the fractious and often heated parliamentary debates. Churchill said: We shape our buildings, and in turn are shaped by them. And that is where we find ourselves. We have created our institutions and in turn our institutions now shape our behavior.

It takes extraordinary effort to break out of the restraints we have created for ourselves, to challenge long-standing beliefs, to confront policies of failure, of ignorance, or simply policies that have been in place so long no one can remember why they were established in the first place. But break out, challenge and confront we must, if we are going to increase student success on our campuses. We have no choice. If we don’t do something, students will continue to fail in distressing numbers, student learning outcomes will remain far below where they should be, and too many of our students will be in danger of dying of terminal boredom. Einstein’s definition applies: insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The single most damning criticism of us and our institutions comes from the NSSE data, and persistent reports by our first year students about how disappointed they are about how LITTLE is expected of them when they come to our campuses.

So let me give you a brief description of the project as we envision it over the next three years and our hopes for the outcomes for this first national gathering?

First, the project. It’s a three year project, starting January 2016 and ending December 2018. 44 AASCU campuses, representing the diversity of AASCU institutions: large, small; urban, rural; HBCU; HIS; some enjoying great student success, some struggling with student success. We have two funders, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and USA Funds. We have a cadre of corporate partners who are involved right now in preparing RFPs for how they could be of help for our 44 participating campuses. You’ll hear more about them from Anne Mandeville at our lunch on Saturday. We have an amazing cohort of national experts who are with us throughout this weekend, many of whom helped shape this project through their work on the National Planning Advisory Committee. I’ll introduce them to you in just a moment. And finally, we have a fabulous crew, the AASCU staff, who are going to be deeply involved in every aspect of this work. I’ll also introduce you to them in a moment as well.

One key concern that animated this project was the observation that campuses are constantly piloting and experimenting, but far too often, that’s all that happens. Projects never go to scale. So to encourage innovation at scale, we’re asking that you undertake innovations simultaneously in 4 “buckets”—1. Institutional Intentionality, 2. Curriculum, 3. Faculty and Staff, and 4. Students. Now I’d be the first to tell you there’s nothing magic or sacred about those buckets, but that scheme probably includes, in one way or another, all

of the major areas of innovation. Let me give you some examples of innovations in each area:



- Institutional Intentionality
  - \* Administrative structures
  - \* Budgeting
  - \* Data and Data Analytics: Predictive analytics, use of data in scheduling and advising, etc.
  - \* Collaborative, not individual. Creating opportunities for crowdsourcing, collective projects, etc.
  - \* Creating a supporting environment for innovation
  - \* Building a culture of obligation
  
- Curriculum
  - \* Personalization. Software that takes each student on a different journey
  - \* Course Re-Design: Blended courses such as the ones we are working on. Interdisciplinary courses, gateway courses, etc.
  - \* Pathways: Reduced choice, math alternatives, First Year Seminar, Orientation, Summer Bridge
  - \* Degree maps
  
- Faculty/Staff:
  - \* Incentives for teaching in the first year
  - \* Research about first year outcomes
  - \* Collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs
  
- Students
  - \* Non-Cognitive Factors: belonging, mindset, etc.
  - \* Advising: Professional, linked to data, intrusive, etc.
  - \* Career Focus: purpose, ethnography of work, early field experiences
  - \* Reduction in choices

Three key issues emerge from this list. The first is that implementation is critical. It's one thing to say you have intrusive advising. But exactly what does that mean on your campus. Do you have professional advisors? Do you have a predictive analytics system available in real time to each advisor for each of their advisees? Does the campus have career maps to tell when a student is off track? Does the campus have pathways that allow students to easily navigate through a complex curriculum? And does that campus offer enough classes that a student can complete a degree in 4 years? It turns out that despite the fact that we have identified 4 buckets as if they are separate collections of innovations, in fact many of these innovations are deeply linked to one another.



The second key issue is that the list I just gave you is not a conclusion, but a start. During this conference, through crowdsourcing, we will enrich, edit, elaborate, and enhance this list of innovations to provide each of the 44 campuses with an array of choices for which innovations you undertake in each of the 4 buckets.

And then for the next three years, we will be refining, extending and elaborating each of the innovations, focusing on the experiences and details of implementation, the obstacles and success, so that at the end of three years, we have two things: On each of the 44 campuses, vastly improved metrics for student success. And for all 420 AASCU campuses, we will have produced a detailed guide to the identification and implementation of the most promising first year practices, practices that we hope will be noted and used by all of American higher education as the optimal ways to increase student success.

Along with the 44 campuses, and our set of national experts, we will be joined by a set of corporate partners. As I look out across the landscape of innovation, I believe that many of the innovations we are committed to undertaking cannot be done by institutions themselves. We need the talent, the implementation expertise, and the technology support that so many innovative practices require. In other words, we need the support of corporate partners. We have offered a RFP (Request for Proposals) to a number of our corporate sponsors, some of the same folks that you see who help support our academic affairs meetings. For this project, we anticipate that our corporate sponsors will become corporate partners. Right now, many of those corporate sponsors and potential corporate partners are with us, listening to these discussions, and seeing how they might assist us in reaching our goals, either as individual corporate partners or as a consortium of corporate partners. I think our project, and your work, will be greatly enriched by the addition of these corporate partners. Some of them may want to work with a small group of RFY institutions. Others may be more ambitious. The corporate partners RFPs are due to AASCU in late February. Then we'll have a panel of experts review the proposals to recommend which ones we select.

While we're busy selecting corporate partners, we'll also be working with the 44 teams to support campus planning efforts. Jo Arney will be working with team leaders to identify potential collaborations among RFY institutions, when we discover that a number of you are interested in a particular innovation. We'll be able to convene groups, locate expertise, and figure out other ways to be of assistance. We'll also be building a website that serves two functions: an internal website for our collaborations, and a public website to begin showcasing institutional successes.

We'll be working with our partners at the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) to further understand your individual campus circumstances. AIR will also help us track metrics for success for the project, particularly progression metrics that track student success.





So let me conclude with an aspiration. My ambition for us is much larger than just our 44 campuses. I want our work to be a beacon for guiding the transformation of undergraduate experience in all of American higher education. Because I believe, with all my heart, that this group of campuses, and you as the leaders in this project, have the power to identify and enact the policies, programs and practices that will create the 21st century model of higher education. We can and must create institutions where students of all kinds and from all circumstances will arrive to find an environment that honors students for their strengths, not fails them for their weaknesses; institutions that are deeply committed to guided learning, active engagement, and a true spirit of inquiry. We have the power to re-create our institutions, dare I say re-imagine them, as places of intellectual curiosity and discovery, of nurturing and support, and as places that challenge all of us to be our very best. We hold the power, and we have no excuse if we do not seize that power now.

So let us ride out together across this complex and sometime bewildering landscape of higher education. Let's savor these special moments when we are united in a commitment to alter the way that students enter and proceed through our institutions. Let's take joy in this journey of exploration and imagination. And most of all, let us embrace a philosophy that we have the power to make changes that will alter the lives of so many of our students. My hope is that nothing is written, until we write it together.