

Executive Summary

Creating a New Compact Between States and Public Higher Education

A Report by the AASCU Task Force on Making Public Higher Education a State Priority



A Legacy of Support for American Public Higher Education

Throughout our history, Americans have placed their confidence in public colleges and universities to strengthen and revitalize our communities, states and the nation. As the U.S. builds an economic foundation in the second decade of the 21st

century, it is clear that our national economic security must be sustained through a workforce with the knowledge, skills and creativity to adapt to an ever-changing global marketplace. To achieve this future, policymakers must look to the successes of the past—opening the doors of opportunity by providing access to an affordable, high-quality public higher education.

Eroding State Support for Public Higher Education

In recent decades, state financial support for public higher education has declined on a multitude of measures. The status quo of the higher education financial model—declining per-student state funding, escalating tuition rates, and increasing student debt—is inadequate in today's knowledge-based economy and for our nation's changing demographics and workforce needs. The U.S. faces a paradox in which state policymakers' strong rhetorical support for public higher education is misaligned with the support it receives as a state investment priority. The state-to-student college cost shift will soon put an affordable college education—along with the aspirations of millions of people to join the American middle-class—increasingly out of reach.

Establishing a New Compact Between States and Public Higher Education

A new compact between state government and public higher education must be created to fully leverage the capacity of public colleges and

universities to fortify the economic security of our states and nation, as well as the democratic foundation that underpins our society. The new compact must represent a shared commitment to broaden college access, make college more affordable, improve student outcomes and ensure academic quality. Higher education leaders and state officials must work collaboratively to craft a shared public agenda predicated on mutual understanding, trust and accountability.

Challenges Higher Education Must Address to Establish a New Compact

College leaders must address public higher education's change-averse reputation, especially as it involves online and other alternative educational delivery models. It is essential that institutions embrace innovative program delivery models that can educate more students, enhance learning outcomes and reduce instructional costs. College leaders must also respond to misperceptions policymakers may have about higher education and develop a shared understanding of critical higher education priorities in their state.

Four Commitments Higher Education Leaders Can Make Toward a New Compact

Higher education leaders can take the following four actions to reassure state policymakers of their commitment to an affordable, accountable and high-quality public higher education system. Establishing a new compact will require dedication to these obligations as well as an equal commitment by state policymakers to provide consistent and sustained financial investment and support for the policy needed to achieve shared state goals.

- *Make Institutional Accountability the Foundation of a New Compact.* An institutional orientation that fuses accountability and performance for taxpayer-provided monies and students' tuition dollars must serve as the foundation for a new state-university compact.
- *Build an Institutional Agenda Linked to State Needs.* Work actively with state policymakers to shape an ambitious, forward-looking state agenda tied to state needs.

- *Address College Affordability Concerns.* Amplify efforts to help policymakers better understand the cost of higher education; factors that influence costs; institutional efforts to control costs; and the state's role in providing institutional operating support and need-based financial aid to keep college affordable.

- *Convey Institutional Outcomes.* Communicate institutional and system-wide outcomes and achievements using the most accurate data available in order to build trust and support among policymakers and the public.

Accounting for State Political Dynamics in Forging a Higher Education Agenda

Understanding the larger context within which political and higher education leaders operate is essential to crafting a new compact. Elevating higher education as a state budgetary priority ultimately requires tough choices and actions by political leaders functioning in a political environment. Higher education leaders must understand this landscape and be willing and able to assist political leaders who are navigating within it.

Seven Strategies to Elevate Public Higher Education as a State Investment Priority

College leaders and advocates can utilize a number of strategies to strengthen the relationship between public universities and state government, fortify higher education's ability to serve the state and encourage increased state investment in public higher education.

- *Align Messaging with the State Agenda.* The messages sent by the public higher education community to state leaders must be simplified, emphasizing the integral role these institutions play in building the state's future.
- *Communicate the Public Good of Public Higher Education.* College advocates must make the case for public higher education as a public good that yields broad economic and social returns on state investment.

- *Encourage Others to Speak for Higher Education.* Utilizing the voice of key beneficiaries of public universities, especially business leaders, to discuss the value they derive from an affordable and high-quality public higher education system, can bolster efforts to increase state investment.

- *Utilize a Strategic Institutional State Relations Program.* An institutional state relations program carried out in cooperation with the state higher education system's efforts is an effective means of conveying an institution's mission, policy priorities and commitment to serving the state.

- *Establish a Public Engagement Master Plan.* Creating a new compact requires a comprehensive plan for engaging all constituencies, not just those confined to the state political and policymaking sphere, therefore, establishing a public engagement master plan should be an institutional goal.

- *Champion the Vital Role of Public Comprehensive Universities.* Those who advocate on behalf of public comprehensive universities should communicate the essential role these institutions play in educating the populations that will drive our future economy and their efficiency in generating high-quality and comparatively low-cost degrees.

- *Emphasize Collaboration and Cooperation among Education Sectors.* Meeting the growing needs for higher education requires contributions from every sector of higher education and strong collaboration between postsecondary and K-12 education.

Acting with Urgency in Establishing a New Compact

The time to act is now. The economic and societal implications of establishing a new compact between states and public higher education are enormous. Creating a long-term state higher education investment strategy is not a matter of simple institutional self-interest, but rather a requirement for ensuring state and national economic competitiveness and a vital democracy.