

President to Presidents 2011

The AASCU Edge

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American Association of
State Colleges and Universities

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Thank you for giving me this incredible honor to address you, this audience of my colleagues with their spouses and partners—this audience of friends—during AASCU’s 50th anniversary celebration.



My title for this lecture, “The AASCU Edge,” signals what you can expect to hear from me. I present today an argument for AASCU’s “edge” in all of that word’s meanings—edge as advantage, edge as precision, and yes, edge as an increasingly precarious pathway to higher education for our students. The Annual Meeting theme sets the tone and the content for this lecture. We begin with celebration, then challenge, third leadership—present and future—and close with celebration again.

I begin by asking, what are we celebrating, and why? This meeting is our formal vehicle to acknowledge and commemorate AASCU’s 50 years of consequential service to U.S. public higher education. In celebrating AASCU, we celebrate each of our colleges and universities. What is the unique but also shared vision that underlies our institutions? What are the values that differentiate us from other higher education institutions, public and private? Who are our students and what voices do they represent? The answers to these questions provide the rationale for our celebration.

What we celebrate today, by acknowledging AASCU’s 50 years, are our some 420 institutions that first and foremost are committed to “Delivering America’s Promise.” And we deliver that promise—the promise of education for personal and professional betterment, for

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a public good as well as a private gain—to those who are historically underserved, even as the cultural and racial backgrounds of those historically underserved have changed over AASCU’s 50 year history. We deliver on the promise of “access, affordability and educational opportunity,” which results in “personal, societal, cultural and economic” benefits for approximately four million students today—more than half of all students who attend public four-year colleges and universities.

AASCU’s anniversary celebrates colleges and universities that share a learning-and-teaching culture and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions’ economic progress and cultural development. Our institutions have visions and values that translate into commitments to serve as stewards of place in our communities.

We celebrate colleges and universities that have always understood their role as providing private benefit, but that have never lost sight of the public good underlying our vision and values. We understand—we know—that our colleges and universities educate the workforces that make our regions function. We know we create political and economic stability by providing access to the middle class for millions of citizens. We celebrate today the reality that AASCU institutions of public higher education are critical for the futures of millions of individuals in the U.S. and for the collective public good.

This celebration provides the chance to remind ourselves of the unique edge of AASCU institutions, because in the midst of the pressures of change, the financial conundrums we struggle with, and the daily “stuff” (I couldn’t identify a more technical term) of managing, it is easy to forget about these core values.

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The cheers and celebration of this anniversary occasion occur against a more somber backdrop of challenge affecting AASCU institutions. Our celebration takes place within an environment marked by a retreat from societal recognition that public higher education produces a public good; and, concurrent with that, we have experienced disinvestment by the states in public higher education. We fear an inexorable threat to the capability of AASCU institutions to continue to deliver on the promise of access and affordability.

The historic contract that the public has had with AASCU institutions is frayed, and some would argue it has been virtually torn asunder. The public's commitment to access and affordability, which was unwavering for many generations of students, has lost its potency; and in some parts of the country—including, for example, my state, California—has been supplanted by massive growth of and public funding for the correctional system. Fear has replaced hope as a driver of public support. We also see the signs that self-interest has replaced shared obligations, and individual goals have replaced collective responsibilities.

Affordability, a key value of our institutions, is in peril. AASCU institutions have historically provided access to students who may not have otherwise found higher education possible, and today in the 21st century, the fast-growing but mistakenly named “minority” populations are turning to our colleges and universities to unlock their new opportunities. But as we strive to uphold our longstanding commitment to these students—these students of color—not only have we needed to raise our tuition to make up for the loss of state revenue, federal support, so critical to our students, is in jeopardy.

Federal and, often, state policy, privileges and supports private, and even for-profit, institutions with public monies. Many public dollars also now support high-cost education for selective elites. My university, for example, a leader among public universities in the number and amount of Pell Grants, is easily eclipsed in Pell Grant dollars by our for-profit competitors. Let me offer some sobering statistics that were recently published:

- The best predictor of college graduation is family wealth. While 82 percent of the wealthiest graduate, the same is true of 36 percent of the upper-middle, 17 percent of the lower-middle, and just 8 percent of the bottom economic tier.ⁱ
- While Pell Grants and other aid sources have increased over time, they have not kept pace with college costs; they now cover a smaller portion and are in jeopardy.ⁱⁱ Increases in Pell dollars have ameliorated some of the impact of our tuition increases. But Pell Grants now are threatened. The poorer the family, the larger the unmet need for financial aid.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Couple these facts with data showing enrollment of so-called minority-group college students increasing annually, and now comprising more than a third of all students.^{iv} Recent projections suggest that by 2019, “minority” students will comprise 38 percent of college students.^v It is a fair assumption to anticipate that many of these students are unlikely to come from the wealthiest families.
- Couple all of the above with the following: The more education one has, the bigger the paycheck.

Comparing high school graduates, college graduates and those with master's degrees, high school graduates earn on average \$27,000, college graduates earn \$48,000 and those with master's degrees earn almost \$62,000 annually.^{vi}

These data suggest that without affordable AASCU institutions, minority, now new majority, and lower socio-economic individuals will be denied access to a college education, and I, frankly, fear the nation risks devolving into a class- and cultural-divide.

I have long described my university as the pathway to the middle class in Southern California. It is a university that allows Southern California to work despite the significant economic and opportunity inequities that exist, because my university offers hope in the form of access to the middle class. Without hope, there is no future.

It is imperative that we, as AASCU institutions and as their presidents, renew our commitment to access and affordability so that new voices can realize their dreams through our colleges and universities. Nothing less than the nation's future is at stake.

Last year in the President-to-Presidents Lecture, Freeman Hrabowski talked to us about the value of dreams. AASCU's vision and our own institutional visions include nurturing, sustaining and supporting the dreams of access and affordability, a long-held promise extended to the newest members of the nation. We are surrounded, too, by forces that demand change in how our universities do their work, and yes, in how we as presidents of AASCU institutions go about the work of leading in these perilous times. So let me turn to the leadership pathway to assure our future.

Our Annual Meeting program highlights the skills and leadership traits AASCU presidents will need to be effective. Around us are messages that the role of the president is changing, that success requires a new skill set, that dramatic change is inevitable, and that our institutions' futures depends on presidents with these new skills.^{vii} Often there is an accompanying assertion, probably correct, that many new presidents are unprepared for key aspects of the presidency, including fundraising, risk management, capital improvements, budgeting and entrepreneurial ventures. Change in our roles is evident in a recent AASCU survey that indicates that 50 percent of presidential time is now used on external issues. And, let me remind you, we are presidents in a YouTube and Twitter era.

While I find the formal descriptions of the needed skills and knowledge compelling, I also believe there are other factors—skills, attributes and, most importantly, values—that are essential for strong leadership now and in the future at AASCU institutions. Because these factors receive less attention, let me add my voice to those describing the profile of the perfect AASCU president for our changing world.

First, we as AASCU presidents, individually and collectively, must agree and act upon an understanding that the traditional presidential pipeline is insufficient. Our jobs as presidents must focus on the development of future leadership talent from all communities. Change has been appallingly slow and virtually nonexistent for communities other than those typically represented. The development of future leadership talent must become “top of the mind,” for each of us individually and collectively, to ensure future leadership that includes those historically left behind.

Second, managing change is at the heart of a president's role. While it has always been part of our work to manage change, change today is more intense and more rapid, often more difficult to manage, and coming from new sources. But conversations about our work in leading change rarely describe how to successfully accomplish change.

I believe that managing change well begins with an understanding of presidential power. When I first became a president, I often came to a point in conversations with my staff and cabinet in which I would ask with humor, "You mean I can do that?" And they would respond with humor, "You are the president; you can do anything you want!" But I knew, and soon they understood as well, that every time I invoked presidential power, I was using "power over" rather than building "power with." I knew that over time, using "power over" would erode my ability to have "power with." More importantly, I knew that I would lose my ability to bring together the members of my campus community to address the changes necessary to achieve my vision for the university and, most of all, to sustain and make elements of that vision part of the texture of the institution, part of the air the campus breathes, or in other words, to outlast my presidency. Sharing power creates powers with and among others who equally care about the president's vision for change.

Early in my presidency I learned another very important lesson about managing change from one of our colleagues, Jim Barker, president of Clemson (S.C.). He described the process of managing change as a balancing act between the "covenant of change" and the "covenant of tradition." I realized from his

comments that while I would need to both push and pull change, I would also need to honor the current environment. I would need to balance aggressive initiatives and efforts with periods of rest and consolidation. I would need to be purposeful in slowing change as well as in pushing change.

I also have come to understand that presidents who push for change are sometimes better served by simply going about the work of change, rather than making numerous public pledges for change and descriptions of public processes to achieve change.

Other skills necessary for the successful AASCU president are no less important. Successful leaders, for example, have effective communication skills. This includes being a good listener, a skill that we presidents sometimes forget because we are so often the center of attention; and showing respect for other points of view, including those who oppose ours. Our work also requires the ability to act with civility within an environment that is often less than civil. We must also conduct our work with integrity, and we as individual leaders must take action—both personal and institutional—based on impeccable personal moral standards. Every time one of us acts without respect, with incivility or with failing moral standards, we all suffer, but more importantly, our segment of higher education and our students suffer.

And finally, I would assert that it is absolutely essential to have a passion for making dreams happen. Students come to our colleges and universities looking for opportunity, for open doors, for access to the lives they want. We, as AASCU institutional leaders, must be prepared to lead amidst the economic, demographic and social change that is unfolding around us. We

must revitalize the AASCU edge, the opportunity for students who would not otherwise find higher education possible—to dream. At no time in history has this mission been more important to our country.

I can easily distill what I believe is essential for future presidents. It's all about acting on one's values, my colleagues. It's all about ensuring that the voices of those previously excluded or under-served *are* included and *are* heard now and in the future. Our leadership requires that we act on the values that define this association—access, affordability, stewardship of place and a focus on student-centered learning.

Finally, let me close by returning us to celebration. Despite the challenges to our visions and values, this anniversary allows us to pause and celebrate the many gifts we receive while being allowed to lead our colleges and universities.

First, we each share in the gift of setting the priorities, of articulating what is important to our institutions. We are allowed, even expected, to tell others in our university community what is important! A president also is given the gift of being allowed to set the tone for how the institution will respond to the challenges and management of change. I always thought I understood what scholars meant when they described the “tone of a leader.” But it was only after becoming a university president myself that I began to *really* understand the impact of presidential tone—and I mean understand in more than my head, understand in my gut and in my soul! Leadership tone, in the face of transformative change, becomes the compass by which an institution may steer itself, because a leader's actions, words and demeanor *set the tone* for how others will respond to change. If we want others to remain calm and reasoned

in the face of change, we as presidents must be calm and reasoned. If we want others to respond with optimism and a “can do” attitude, we must model that response. If we expect those around us to embrace the challenges that accompany change, then we must set that tone.

Now allow me to become more personal as we celebrate the gift we have received from our leadership. I have also received the gift in making a difference on my campus through changes in campus buildings, campus reputation and campus culture. Yet another is the gift of creating and sustaining a team of individuals who became my partners in the work of the university. I have also received the gift of being allowed to make a difference in my region—of being a steward of place, of ensuring that the intellectual resources of the university are applied to regional needs and issues.

And, perhaps above all for me personally, I have enjoyed the gift of walking on my campus and seeing students who represent every race, ethnicity, religion, culture and lifestyle choice, with diverse physical and socio-economic characteristics, and seeing them work together effectively in student government, in clubs and organizations, and in their lives as students. I know these students are the bulwark of success necessary for my region’s future. In other words, what I have received is the gift of knowing I have helped to instill and nurture dreams, of knowing I have helped in delivering America’s promise.

I have also been given the gift of working in this association—on the board, at meetings like this one, with colleagues like all of you and in special programs like the New Presidents’ Academy.

Being president of an AASCU institution has been, for me, among the most enriching roles imaginable. I have experienced the AASCU edge. Today and tonight, let's celebrate AASCU and what we do at our colleges and universities. But tomorrow, let's appreciate the gifts of leadership that we have been given while we bear in mind the challenges to our ability to deliver America's promise. Tomorrow, tomorrow, I ask all of us to renew our commitment to preserve access for all to affordable public higher education. From our hearts and minds, and leadership actions, we must act to preserve the AASCU edge—Delivering America's Promise.

Endnotes

ⁱ*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Almanac Issue 2011-12, August 26, 2011, p. 46.

ⁱⁱIbid, p. 46.

ⁱⁱⁱIbid, p. 47.

^{iv}Ibid, p. 4.

^vIbid, p. 32.

^{vi}Ibid, p. 48

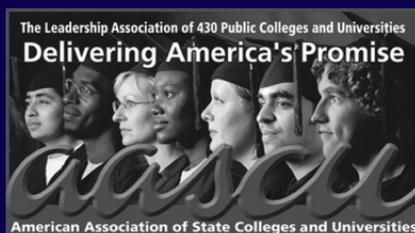
^{vii}White, Byron P. and Peter D. Eckel (2011), *Collective Foresight: The Leadership Challenges for Higher Education's Future*, American Council on Education.

Delivering America's Promise

AAASCU's membership of more than 400 public colleges and universities is found throughout the United States, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We range in size from 1,000 students to 44,000. We are found in the inner city, in suburbs, towns and cities, and in remote rural America. We include campuses with extensive offerings in law, medicine and doctoral education—as well as campuses offering associate degrees to complement baccalaureate studies. We are both residential and commuter, and offer on-line degrees as well. Yet common to virtually every member institution are three qualities that define its work and characterize our common commitments.

- We are institutions of access and opportunity. We believe that the American promise should be real for all Americans, and that belief shapes our commitment to access, affordability and educational opportunity, and in the process strengthens American democracy for all citizens.
- We are student-centered institutions. We place the student at the heart of our enterprise, enhancing the learning environment and student achievement not only through teaching and advising, but also through our research and public service activities.
- We are “stewards of place.” We engage faculty, staff and students with the communities and regions we serve—helping to advance public education, economic development and the quality of life for all with whom we live and who support our work. We affirm that America's promise extends not only to those who come to the campus but to all our neighbors.

We believe that through this stewardship and through our commitments to access and opportunity and to our students, public colleges and universities effectively and accountably deliver America's promise. In so doing we honor and fulfill the public trust.



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