The Equal Opportunity Project: Reclaiming the American Dream

The Equal Opportunity Project, led by Professor Raj Chetty of Stanford University, examines the decline of the American Dream. Traditionally defined as children surpassing their parents in earnings, the study postulates that the achievement of the American Dream, also known as income mobility, is attributed to “lower Gross Domestic Product growth rates and greater inequality in the distribution of growth.” A child born in 1940 had a 92 percent chance of making more money than his parent. A child born in 1980, only a 50 percent chance.

A major aspect of income mobility is access to higher education. The Equal Opportunity Project demonstrates that some AASCU schools—including California State University, Los Angeles, State University of New York Stony Brook and the City University of New York system—offer some of the best bottom-to-top upward mobility rates. Bottom-to-top upward mobility rate is the difference between students whose families fall in the lower quintile of income and those who end up earning in the top quintile of income, as compared to their fellow graduates. In the past decade-plus, however, the upward mobility rate has seen a downfall, likely because of reduction in state support, tuition increases, or lack of sufficient support services on campus.

The study demonstrates that family income does not necessarily affect a student’s potential—rich and poor students, provided with the same schooling, have the same potential for success. However, as students from low-income families are vastly underrepresented at top-tier colleges and universities (students with parents in the top 1 percent are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League school than those in the bottom 20 percent), it is all the more essential that AASCU works to make a college education accessible and possible for all.

Changing the number of low-income and first generation students, said George Mehaffy, AASCU’s vice president for academic affairs, will change the trajectory of those students’ lives and those of their families, further democracy, and improve our economy and global competitiveness.

2017 State of the States

In the first quarter of 2017, AASCU published its annual Gubernatorial State of the State Addresses and Higher Education, reporting on legislative activity on education in each state. Some highlights include:

- Six states (Ala., Md., Va., Wis., R.I., Vt.) announced programs to assist with student debt relief and loan refinancing.
- Sixteen states addressed in-state workforce development and job assistance for graduates of state colleges who will work in-state.
- Fourteen states will focus, or continue to focus, on goals on the education pipeline—preparing students for college and career from as early as kindergarten.
- Thirteen states announced programs or assistance in the STEM and health-related fields.
- At least 17 states will launch or increase programs to make higher education more affordable and to make loans less of a burden.

The publication is available under the policy tab on www.aascu.org.
AASCU Announces 2017 American Democracy Project Civic Engagement Award Winners

AASCU’s American Democracy Project (ADP) recently honored three outstanding leaders in civic engagement during the 2017 ADP/TDC/NASPA Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting (CLDE), held June 7-10, 2017 in Baltimore, Md.

The Barbara Burch Award for Faculty Leadership in Civic Engagement was awarded to Shala A. Mills, chair and professor of political science at Fort Hays State University (Kan.). Mills has been extensively involved in AASCU programming, serving as the national manager of the national blended course consortium and as the national coordinator for the global challenges project.

The William M. Plater Award for Leadership in Civic Engagement was awarded to Philip Rous, provost and senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). Shortly after becoming provost, one of Dr. Rous’s first acts was committing funding for a new campus initiative in response to calls for higher education to integrate commitments to civic learning and democratic engagement into every aspect of institutional life.

The John Saltmarsh Award for Emerging Leaders in Civic Engagement was awarded to Danielle Lake, an assistant professor of liberal studies and inclusion and an equity faculty associate at Grand Valley State University (Mich.). Lake has demonstrated a commitment to advancing the civic learning of undergraduates by helping develop the university’s first CBL/Design Thinking course on campus.

The 2017 CLDE conference is a partnership between ADP, community college members of The Democracy Commitment, and NASPA—Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education. The conference is intended to strengthen and deepen the civic learning and engagement work that these associations are all committed to across their institutions—both public and private. Over 600 participants attended this year’s conference.
One of the themes future historians of public life in early 21st century America will ascribe to our turbulent age may well be disillusionment with expertise. The epistemological foundations of social consensus—historically built on facticity, science and technocratic specialization—have been increasingly eroding in the face of personal opinions, political a priori and convenient anecdotes. In an era when significant minorities in the world’s most scientifically advanced society are questioning science itself, escapism from expertise in matters of social and economic policy should come as no surprise. Nowhere else is the democratization of public policy more evident—or arguably more damaging—than in higher education, where politicians and interest groups not only assert their own arguments, but also their own facts, to advance their arbitrary agendas.

Amid this cacophony of utter confusion about where we are, let alone where we should be headed, on the vexing challenges of access, quality and costs in higher education, William Bowen and Michael McPherson—two of America’s leading lights in the field—have produced an extraordinary little primer that brilliantly addresses virtually every relevant facet of the policy choices we confront. Not only do the authors diagnose the condition of the higher education landscape in astonishing detail and with pithy clarity, they manage to devote a good portion of this tiny gem of a book to a thoughtful discussion of proposed solutions. Given the range of complex issues it presents and artfully dissects, the book’s elegant brevity is nothing short of spectacular. This is an accessible and remarkably ambitious book that seeks to correct public misperceptions, rebut facile political remedies, and reform some of the Byzantine ways of higher education policy. And it largely succeeds! Who knows, expertise may have a chance after all.

— Barmak Nassirian

AASCU’s new Task Force on University Partnerships will look at what comprises successful partnerships in the broadest possible terms, including collaboration with the private sector, the non-profit community and governmental entities.

The task force, chaired by California State University Channel Islands President Emeritus Richard Rush, met in Washington, D.C., from June 13-15. There were 14 college presidents, chancellors and senior administrators at the meeting representing 11 state university campuses throughout the country, as well as the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area.

Former U.S. House of Representatives Leader Richard Gephardt spoke to the group and stressed the importance of education, training and research in today’s global economy. He emphasized the need for university leaders to communicate in order to build and maintain successful partnerships with the private sector.

The task force discussed the increased significance of universities developing successful partnerships with communities and the private sector in today’s challenging economic and political environment. Partnerships can leverage the assets of public universities in pursuit of economic growth and community wellbeing, as well as provide high-impact learning and research opportunities for students and faculty.

They also talked about the need for policy and administrative frameworks that facilitate university partnerships. The task force will continue their work this summer and will release a handbook on partnerships later this year.

Members of the task force are:
- Michael Benson, president, Eastern Kentucky University
- John Cavanaugh, president and CEO, Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area
- Scott Cole, vice president and general counsel, University of Central Florida
- Sue Henderson, president, New Jersey City University
- Daniel Holsenbeck, senior vice president for university relations, University of Central Florida
- Stephen Jordan, president, Metropolitan State University of Denver (Colo.)
- Daniel Little, chancellor, University of Michigan-Dearborn
- Doug Mell, executive director of university communications and external relations, University of Wisconsin-Stout
- Robert Meyer, chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Stout
- Steve Swan, vice president of university relations, Western Washington University
- Cynthia Teniente-Matson, president, Texas A&M University
- San Antonio; and Susan Zimmerman, provost and vice president of academic affairs, State University of New York, Cobleskill.

Thomas Harnisch, AASCU’s director of state relations and policy analysis, staffs the task force.
Digital Polarization: A New ADP Initiative

More than 250 AASCU schools from 46 states are participating in AASCU’s American Democracy Project (ADP). One of ADP’s signature programs, the Digital Polarization Initiative, focuses on building student web literacy at a time rife with undersourced stories and so-called “fake news.” Digital Polarization includes:

- Algorithms by which social media filters “suggest” pages and products that align with our already established interests, thus creating an “echo chamber” effect.
- The rise of “fake news,” sometimes in the form of complete falsehoods, sometimes in the form of underreported, poorly researched stories with only a small foothold in fact.
- Online harassment, bullying and attempts to shut down minority opinions.
- State sponsored hacking campaigns and weaponized transparency, using information access to further an agenda.

With the Digital Polarization Initiative, students participate in an interschool project to fact check, annotate and provide context to the different news stories that show up in Twitter and Facebook feeds.

“You can’t just look at the page you land on. Who’s funding the organization?” said Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, national manager for ADP. It is important to examine, she added, whether the picture being painted by an organization or even a news media site is accurate.

The Digital Polarization Initiative, or “DigiPo,” is being led by ADP’s inaugural Civic Fellow Mike Caulfield of Washington State University at Vancouver. In essence, Caulfield said, we need to teach people to be better readers.

“People I knew would see these things that are being spread by bots, by Russian operatives, and they would re-share it, no matter how ridiculous it was,” he said, chuckling. “And the craziest thing to me was, knowing these people, I knew that they were smart. But they were being almost effortlessly manipulated.”

Caulfield and his team have created a wiki for the DigiPo program, as well as course lessons on news analysis, fact checking and more.