AASCU’s Red Balloon Project, launched in the summer of 2010, challenges colleges and universities to re-imagine undergraduate education. Our institutions face a difficult future, with declining state support, rising expectations and rapidly changing technology. The financial condition of the states, exacerbated by the great recession, has led to dramatic declines in public funding, and a concomitant rise in tuition. Some experts worry that further tuition increases will meet increasing resistance from students, parents and policymakers. Yet ironically, at this time of disinvestment in public higher education, expectations for greater numbers of graduates is rising, noted in President Obama’s call for the U.S. to be first in the world in college graduation, and in the Lumina Foundation’s goal that by 2025, 60 percent of American adults will have high-quality degrees and credentials.

But looming larger than either declining resources, increasing expectations and rapidly changing technology—will confront our institutions with challenges never before experienced. In response to these challenges, AASCU began the Red Balloon Project, an initiative to work together to re-imagine undergraduate education. The Red Balloon Project was named for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which in 2009 created a contest on the 40th anniversary of the birth of the Internet. DARPA placed 10 bright red weather balloons at random locations throughout the United States and challenged individuals or teams to find them. The winning team found all 10 balloons in eight hours and 52 minutes. For us, the red balloon contest was also an analogy for how we must work together to solve complex problems.

AASCU’s Red Balloon Project represents an opportunity for AASCU institutions to work together to address the dramatic educational challenges of the 21st century. Since the launch of the project in summer 2010, we have witnessed an outpouring of creative ideas and initiatives. In the Red Balloon Project, AASCU serves as the facilitator, the convener, the connector and the disseminator for the many creative ideas and strategies that are being tested. Examples of the work now underway are found in the descriptions below. We have been privileged to watch a group of bold and innovative leaders undertake the incredibly difficult work of institutional transformation. Yet we are enormously encouraged by what they are doing. The innovative strategies and approaches that are being tested will create new visions of how public colleges and universities can realize their historic missions in the new world of the 21st century.

AASCU’s Red Balloon Project represents an opportunity for AASCU institutions to work together to address the dramatic educational challenges of the 21st century.
graduate Education

“If we must do more with less, then we must do more differently.”

—William J. McKinney

Summer Academic Technology retreat was scheduled for tech-savvy faculty, staff, and students in June 2010. This retreat group voted to focus their efforts on reforms in two of the six topic areas—namely, Course Redesign and Instructional Design. As a result, this group generated a total of seven academic technology goals.

In Phase II, in order to engender the support and participation of faculty, staff, and students, the provost and associate provost partnered with the Academic Senate Executive Committee. In August 2010, the associate provost, provost, and president hosted a Red Balloon Brainstorming Dinner with Senate Executive Committee members to garner faculty interest and participation. During the fall, the newly convened RB Steering Committee met regularly to plan a campus-wide Red Balloon Launch featuring keynoter, George Meahlly, in October 2010.

After the fall campus launch, participants were invited to join a Task Force to begin work on generating innovative solutions. Approximately 89 faculty, staff, and administrators joined the four RB Task Forces, each meeting four to five times during spring 2011. The final combined report from all four Task Forces produced 40 specific recommendations for change in all four categories, along with identifying responsible offices, timelines, and costs.

This final Red Balloon Recommendations Report was presented to the President’s Cabinet, with the majority of recommendations either approved or adopted for possible consideration. In Spring 2011, this report was released to the campus.

Overall, our Red Balloon process yielded many positive recommendations, bolstered morale, increased campus dialogue and collegiality, provided a platform for supporting innovation, and offered a window of hope for many across campus. Partially as a result of this initiative, both the Fresno State and San Jose State University campuses are now exploring additional campus-wide processes to continue to support and inspire innovation. In sum, this model shows promise for other campuses interested in fostering innovation.

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne
William J. McKinney, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

At IPFW, the Red Balloon Project provides a powerful means through which to focus our shared governance process on the multiple challenges facing our institution. As I participated, and listened, during the July 2010 Red Balloon launch,
three major themes began to show me a clear path for my own institution’s future:

• We must be the agents of change, or else we will be changed by others.
• If we must do more with less, then we must do more differently.
• Fundamental change is about our faculty, our students and our staff. It is not about the chief academic officer.

At IPFW, we were already seeing how the economic downturn, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE) and the flagship campuses, were becoming agents of change. We needed a means through which to lead and to change on our terms, so I invited our University Senate leadership to lunch and explained how I thought the Red Balloon Project could benefit IPFW in this time of unprecedented change. From this lunch grew an idea for a series of open campus forums to be jointly programmed by the Senate leadership and my office. The forums would become the centerpiece for a process of re-imagining, and thus “Re-imagining IPFW’s Academic Future” was born.

If we were going to really “re-imagine” our academic future, we could not expect success by using old methods alone. Four open forums per semester would be a great start, but only a start. We needed a broader reach. We sought the advice and expertise of Information Technology Services, the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, and University Relations. We branded the re-imagining process, created a blog, and designed podcasts to be uploaded to iTunesU. I even ventured into Twitter (@WJMcKinney). By September 2010, we held our first open forum.

As of this writing, many projects have taken on a life of their own. The Faculty Affairs Committee of our University Senate has adopted the language of re-imagining and has undertaken a year-long examination of promotion and tenure in the new normal. We launched an innovative mobile computing project that now involves more than one-third of our full-time faculty. At IPFW, the Red Balloon Project is a means to a set of ends that we define on our own campus, through our own process of shared governance.

Jacksonville State University
Rebecca O. Turner, Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs

The Red Balloon Initiative at Jacksonville State University lifted off at the beginning of fall 2010. Inspired by the AASCU Academic Affairs summer meeting just a few months earlier, my colleague, Alicia Simmons—director of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment—and I led a small group of administrators to study the literature on learning organizations, learning-centered campuses, students of today, instructional approaches using technology, faculty scholarship, systematic planning, change management and continuous improvement. This study led to a unified commitment to focus our Red Balloon Initiative on the development of a learning-centered campus community that used information and technology to improve student learning.

With the support of key administrators, the university’s initiative soared when more than 30 faculty, staff and administrators were invited to lead Red Balloon Discussion Groups using tools developed and provided by the leadership team. Discussion group leaders displayed enthusiasm for their role in leading their groups, whose composition represented a cross section of faculty, staff and students throughout campus. The groups were asked to read suggested literature (posted to our JSU Red Balloon Initiative website) to inform their discussions as they answered the same 12 questions.

JSU’s Red Balloon Initiative led to campus-wide Discussion Groups that focused on characteristics of a learning-centered university community, core university values and university goals, vision and mission. A variety of reference materials were posted on our Red Balloon web page, along with instructions to provide specific feedback to the leadership team.

Feedback from the groups was included in a report titled, “Red Balloon Discussion Group Feedback,” and was seriously and deliberately considered in the next administrative process, developing the university strategic plan for 2011-2016. All Discussion Groups met, deliberated and reported before
the end of fall semester 2010, and some Discussion Group leaders and team members became active members of the Strategic Planning Committee. The outcome was a Strategic Plan that integrated our learning-centered focus and provided a framework for the university’s continuous improvement, planning and budgeting for the next five years, all with a focus on student learning.

We look forward to expanding our Red Balloon Initiative on campus and beyond. As an organizing framework for Jacksonville State University, the Red Balloon Initiative is off to a very good start.

Scott Richmond, a reference and instruction librarian at SUNY Fredonia, puts up a display on the Red Balloon Book Dialogues in Reed Library.

Millersville University of Pennsylvania

Vilas A. Prabhu, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

The three influential forces [challenging higher education today] identified in the Red Balloon Project—declining funding, rapidly changing technology and rising expectations—serve as major drivers for Millersville University of Pennsylvania’s transformation agenda—and are fundamental to our Case for Change. Declining funding is more apparent than ever before in our history, with an effective cut in state appropriation of 23 percent for 2011-12. The gap between revenue and expenditures continues to widen as we face further uncertainties in the economic environment. These drivers provide the urgency and rationale for our institution’s recently formulated definition of transformation: “Transformation at Millersville University is an understanding of our past while we undertake a thorough or dramatic change—a metamorphosis—of this University at the start of the 21st century.”

The three framing elements of our transformation process—Student Success, Increased Advocacy, and Effective Structures and Services—use the common drivers in the Red Balloon Project and our institution’s Case for Change to catapult an agenda for student success at Millersville. The definition will be used to recommend bold strategies to transform how we address issues of student success: remodeling advising and mentoring roles; designing curriculum that is interdisciplinary, globally focused and reconsiders the role of general education; using technology to inform pedagogy and learning; applying high-impact practices; strengthening our civic responsibility via programs like the middle college model; and adding to scholarships and awards offerings.

The awareness of the need for change led to support the redesign of the core curriculum’s public speaking course using open source textbooks and a blended learning format. The concept of the “new normal” has increased collaboration across divisions—fostering creative responses to help faculty, academic leaders and staff enhance accessibility to innovative pedagogy and delivery techniques. In one case, the Community of Digital Innovation (CODI) members created Camp IDEA (Innovative Digital Education & Assessment) as an interactive experience to integrate faculty use of pedagogy to facilitate learner-centered instruction in an online setting.

External drivers require our institution to be more nimble and responsive to the external environment. AASCU’s Red Balloon Project fosters our institution’s intrinsic desire to meet external demands, such as the one to close the achievement gaps of underrepresented students, while addressing the changing demographic environment. This project serves an instrumental role as Millersville proceeds through a fundamental metamorphosis focused on student success.
When the State University of New York at Fredonia became involved in the AASCU Red Balloon Project, academic leaders were interested in engaging the campus in discussions about context, purpose and directions for higher education. Amid considerably diminished resources, greater expectations for student learning and intense public scrutiny, faculty and staff had a clear sense that things are rapidly changing—but had less clarity about why and how changes are occurring and, most importantly, what active roles they might take in charting the future.

Our approach had two goals, based on campus culture and our mission as a public, regional liberal arts university. The first goal was to engage faculty and staff in learning about some of the influential perspectives in U.S. higher education; the second was to build on that knowledge to focus more deeply on planning for the learning environment at SUNY Fredonia.

The first goal was accomplished through the Red Balloon Book Dialogues, a six-session book club that presented books to an audience that probably did not have time to read them. Selected by the University Senate, the books addressed topics such as student learning, use of technology, faculty roles, and the value of the humanities, arts and sciences. Sessions included detailed summaries of the books and opportunities for discussion and application.

Fredonia was also engaged in three broad planning processes that built on the book dialogues in practical ways. An inclusive strategic planning process has led to new goals about the community of learning on campus. The general education committee has developed a plan to revise general education, and a task force successfully led an initiative to define distinctive learning goals that span general education, majors and co-curricular programs. Several faculty members have undertaken course redesign projects that will be models for blended courses. Having George Mehaffy come to Fredonia, in addition to having several Fredonia faculty and staff participate in AASCU meetings, made a tremendous difference in our campus’ sense of connection to the issues of higher education. Understanding the big picture and talking about our place on the landscape has led to new energy, deeper understanding of issues and a stronger sense of purpose in our work.

“The concept of the ‘new normal’ has increased collaboration across divisions—fostering creative responses to help faculty, academic leaders and staff enhance accessibility to innovative pedagogy and delivery techniques.” —Vilas A. Prabhu