

AASCU Academic Affairs Winter Meeting
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Plenary Session: “Higher Education’s Role in Meeting National Policy Imperatives in Education”

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- Three months out of a deanship at this point
- Tap into the strong wind instead of being buffeted by it
- Sits on several boards, Wells Fargo and others, that provide an interesting read on economic policies and trends say

Economic realities

- High unemployment in next 3 years, keeping economic growth slow
- Weakness in the housing market
- Interest rates rising over time because of alarming levels of federal debt
- Slow return will continue to be slow
- Federal stimulus will run its course, and these funds haven’t made up for the loss of federal funds. The political situation in Washington is still focused on debating the role of government. We have a “soft revolution” with the Tea Party saying we haven’t begun to cut enough out of governments.
- States have tried to raise taxes, but most have cut money to K-12. Only four have increased appropriations for HE, based on stimulus funds. Most have cut, based on revenue shortfalls.
- Moving from Washington to the states, there are many new legislators with limited knowledge of issues in education. They are increasingly conservative, more likely to cut funds (even if that reduces equality and access). These factors are not likely to change much in the near term.
- So we are asking, “what does leadership look like in the new political reality?”
- Emergence of common core standards, brand new assessments, very aggressive teacher effectiveness agenda, and ambitious goals on college completion (not access in).

Core Standards

- Evolved from efforts to understand what it means to be ready for college, but HE community wasn’t closely involved in this
- Push for national texts, national curricula continues in the background.
- Many states have adopted these and agree that if students complete them, they are ready for college and should be admitted.
- Related to ideas that global competitiveness relies on standards of learning.

Assessments

- Will be aligned with general education requirements in all of our institutions
- Needed for linking K-12 with higher education?
- Race to the Top initiative: all states applied for this as a way of meeting budget deficits. Governors/states proposed things they were going to do when the money was waved in front of them. Among their priorities were linking administrative records of teachers to records of

students in the classroom. Never mind the problem of the measuring a dynamic, ongoing relationship: this begs the question of where those teachers were prepared.

- Ambition: increasing the total percentage of Americans with college degrees in almost no time
- In this economic and political context, much higher graduation rates for the students we have now as well as though we don't yet have or those who will be much harder to serve and graduate, given their preparation today.

These policy issues reveal assumptions about HE role in responsibility for improving K-12, whether we want to be or not. The shift is toward data with a K-16 orientation.

Implications for AASCU Institutions

- “World-class” knowledge institutions will be boutiques
- Parents understand that credentials differentiate their children.
- Policy community is increasingly skeptical: uncontrollable costs, but outcomes are declining.
- Perceived lack of interest in the compelling issues of the day, including education
- Policy community has no idea about how much work is actually going on in this sector, particularly in AASCU institutions. That skepticism is strengthening the argument for new accountability measures in HE.
- For decades, this community has said, “We know what we’re doing. Keep the appropriations coming.” But the cuts are huge.
- Narrowing and simplifying of the story of how to improve outcomes—simply link them to a test—has been continuing. They want to trace student achievement through data sets that link these to teacher preparation programs/institutions.
- The National Center on Teacher Quality and *US News* are trying to determine who should continue to prepare teachers.
- This won't stop with teacher education if we hand over measurement to people with agendas who overlook decades of research.

New Policy Conversation

- Changes in policies and structures that affect classroom-level strategies are under discussion: alignment of assessments, relation of revenues and expenditures to performance, delivery systems that link K-12 and higher education.
- Creation of a “shared” education infrastructure is on the agenda, which sounds good if we are *in* the conversation but frightening if we are left out of disengaged.
- We can't wait for the policy community or groups of reformers to come to us and ask us what we think. That's not going to happen.
- Generational shift about who is making policy decisions vs. who is running the institutions. We are just a much more experienced and seasoned bunch of folks than those who are making decisions about us. They feel that there are still big gaps in performance, so we need to fill those.
- In the private sector, they've done their homework. They have done their homework, especially with regard to non-traditional students and their schedules, lives, and needs at the margins.
- So much of how we're set up—from the schedules to the size of the desks—is for people ages 18-23.
- Meanwhile, we still think also a lot about research. Many institutions are trying to flex those research models, based on a Cold War idea of the purpose of universities. Do we need more

research institutions? There is real interest in seeing greater investment in closing the achievement gap.

Closing Comments

- Talk about innovation at the course level is good, important. But we need to think about innovation at the decision-level and operations of our institutions. If we cannot speed up the processes by which we get to a judgment, competitors are going to eat our lunch.
- We need to work with greater purpose, efficiency, speed. We will “decide” our way out of relevance because it will take us too long to move.
- The public sector is especially risk-averse and slow.
- The business model of institutions might need to be changed.
- The competition has blown the lid off of admissions, the calendar, spaces.
- We need to take more time with student learning.
- Use resource constraints as opportunities to push for bolder change. Give faculty the motivation to make a difference in critical areas, using course releases for agenda. Confront the possibility that some long-standing models (such as tenure) will need to be reimaged. No other part of the economy maintains such deals, and we need to come to grips with reality.