

February 10, 2017

To: Jerry Falwell Jr.
Chair, Task Force on Higher Education Reform

From: William G. Tierney, Pullias Center for Higher Education,
University of Southern California
Adrianna J. Kezar, Pullias Center for Higher Education,
University of Southern California
Laura W. Perna, Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy,
University of Pennsylvania
Matthew J. Hartley, Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy,
University of Pennsylvania
Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Higher Education Research Institute,
University of California, Los Angeles
Gary Rhoades, Center for the Study of Higher Education,
University of Arizona
Michael A. Olivas, Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance,
University of Houston
Clifton Conrad, Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary
Education
University of Wisconsin-Madison
John J. Cheslock, Center for the Study of Higher Education,
Pennsylvania State University

Re: Priorities for Higher Education in the United States

As Directors of Centers for Higher Education who have been conducting research on higher education for a generation, we are writing to offer our collective wisdom regarding the most formidable challenges confronting public and private higher education in the United States. From our perspective, maximizing the effectiveness and the efficiency of our country's finite resources should draw extensively on the robust contemporary scholarship and literature on higher education.

In this document we identify 7 keystone challenges now confronting higher education, and address the role of the federal government in addressing these issues. Underlying these key challenges should be a commitment to preserving 3 core principles of higher education in the United States:

- Academic freedom and free inquiry;
- Institutional autonomy to create the best local solutions that are accountable to the citizenry; and
- The distinct but interrelated roles of the federal government, state government, and accrediting agencies.

We would be pleased to provide any fact-based evidence and research that will be useful to your committee in its deliberations.

1. Increase higher education enrollment and attainment

To meet labor market demands and ensure international competitiveness, the U.S. needs a more well-educated citizenry. College participation and completion rates in the U.S. now lag behind those of our OECD competitors. The U.S. cannot reach the required level of educational achievement without raising attainment among individuals from lower-income families, those whose parents have not attended college, African Americans and Latinos, as well as white working class and rural students. We need a renewed commitment to promoting college attainment for adults, including veterans and displaced workers.

By allocating resources to higher education, the federal government makes a vital investment in the future economic and social prosperity of our nation. Improving higher education creates numerous economic and non-economic benefits not only for individual participants, but also for our communities and the nation.

2. Promote the diversity of the nation's higher education system and students

The educational benefits of a diverse student body are clear and well documented. Our country needs to support programs that increase college participation and completion of citizens from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups, and increase support for programs aimed at increasing college readiness, participation, and completion of inner-city youth. We need policies that enable international students, faculty, and researchers to fully participate in the nation's higher education institutions. The intellectual prominence and the economic power of our universities lie in considerable part to our international students and faculty and they must continue to feel welcome on our campuses and in our country.

We need policies that recognize and continue to advance a key strength of the U.S. higher education system: the diversity of its postsecondary educational institutions. We need to maintain the mission of religiously affiliated institutions, as well as the secular stance of public institutions of higher education. The federal government should reemphasize the contributions of other key sectors of higher education such as minority-serving institutions and community colleges.

We must address with all due speed the quandary of challenges facing undocumented youth who qualify for DACA. In good faith these individuals have registered with the government. They have the potential to be productive participants in our society. The federal government must resolve their situation as quickly as possible so that these individuals are able to assume a productive role in our country.

And we need to ensure that government policies and practices do not limit or discourage free debate and discussion about the important issues of our times. The

nation's colleges and universities must be places where individuals of all backgrounds and political beliefs can come together to share different viewpoints and perspectives in order to learn from each other.

3. Increase college affordability for individuals from low-income families

The federal government plays a critical role in ensuring that insufficient financial resources are not a barrier to college attainment. Research consistently demonstrates that need-based grants – particularly Federal Pell Grants – are especially beneficial to college enrollment, persistence, and completion of low-income students.

Federal loans provide students – many of whom do not have the collateral or credit history to otherwise receive loans in the private market – with needed funds at a low interest rate. Loans, however, do not work well for all students. Continued attention is needed to address the difficulties that loans create, especially for students who do not complete their educational programs and for students who borrow too much or too little. Student debt is a growing challenge that needs to be addressed through a combination of need-based grants, loans, and institutions controlling their costs. More must be done to streamline and simplify the complexity of the student financial aid system, and the financial aid application process.

4. Protect consumers

Every individual who attends a postsecondary institution must be provided a quality teaching and learning experience that empowers them to become a productive citizen. Far too many students are unable to get the courses they need (slowing their academic progress) or are offered substandard teaching and learning environments. Too many end up with no degree – or a degree of questionable value. “Trust us” is not a reasonable response for any postsecondary institution, especially those with low completion rates and considerable levels of student debt and default rates. The U.S. government's job is to protect consumers from fraud, and needs to strengthen the adage of “trust, but verify” by providing appropriate regulatory oversight. In particular, several recent cases of fraud by for-profit institutions demonstrate the need of the federal government in protecting vulnerable students from predatory practices.

5. Ensure physical safety for all students

Students cannot learn when they are not safe or when they are worried about their safety. Underreporting limits our knowledge of actual rates of sexual assault or violence on campus: too many female and male college students are victims of these crimes. The federal government plays an important role in ensuring campus safety through its enforcement of Title IX.

A second threat to the safety of our nation's college campuses is gun violence. Campus shootings have become far too common, and each new incident raises

fear and anxiety among students, faculty, and staff on all campuses. The federal government needs to promote safety on campus through gun control.

6. Encourage innovation at the campus level

Higher education institutions in the U.S. are challenged to serve more students, and serve more students with a wider range of needs and backgrounds, while also reducing the cost to individuals and taxpayers. Technological innovation is clearly required, but identifying, implementing, and evaluating innovative practices requires incentives and resources. The federal government should encourage colleges and universities to identify productive and effective innovative practices by providing needed financial resources as well as relief from regulations that discourage experimentation. The federal government should also promote partnerships between technology entrepreneurs, researchers, and educational institutions. Programs like the Fund for the Improvement of Higher Education (FIPSE) have historically played an important role in promoting innovation and should be expanded.

The federal government also encourages innovation by supporting the collection of data that describe and document educational experiences and outcomes at the K-12 and postsecondary levels over time. Research that tests the effects of particular educational policies and practices on outcomes for students, higher education outcomes, and society, is crucial. The original purpose of federal involvement in education was for data collection. The federal government was the only entity that could collect data across states to inform state policy and foster improvement and innovation. Data collection has lapsed in recent years and a recommitment to inform policy is critical.

7. Promote research and development

Since World War II the United States has been the world's leader in groundbreaking research that has led to economic, social, and cultural development. The majority of that research has occurred in America's research universities and has been funded by the federal government. Research demonstrates the strong positive relationship between basic science and a country's vitality. China has recognized the importance of higher education by providing significant financial resources to improve the research infrastructure of its universities. Other nations recognize that US education is superior in fostering innovative thinking through its emphasis on a liberal arts education and interdisciplinary studies, not just technical skills or training.

To remain competitive, the United States needs to reinvest in basic and applied research, ensure continuing support for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and other organizations that help foster the liberal arts and social sciences. The government needs to maintain tax policies that encourage charitable giving to colleges and universities.

The U.S. also needs to embrace foreigners who wish to study, teach, and conduct research here. A noteworthy share of recent Nobel prize winners who teach on our campuses are immigrants. To make the U.S. unwelcoming to immigrants is to jeopardize America's superiority in scientific advancement.

Based on our experiences and a view to the future, these are the 7 key topics facing postsecondary education in the United States. We welcome a conversation with your committee about how to best address these issues.