

“The Chance of a Century: Fulfilling the Public Trust in a Time of Crisis”

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It has been my honor to serve this past year as President of NEASC, a position that has revealed to me in unexpected ways the many accomplishments and unique challenges of education today. The history of this organization is intertwined with those accomplishments and challenges as it carries out its mission of ensuring an acceptable level of “effectiveness, improvement, and public assurance” on the part of member institutions. In this sense, NEASC is an arm of the public, serving to assure that public that our schools and colleges comply with the standards of quality so necessary to prepare students for civic life and professional accomplishment. This role has become ever more important as we anticipate growing economic crises around the world.

The previous six months have ushered in a time of extraordinary upheaval and uncertainty. That uncertainty has been characterized by escalating terrorism, war, the precipitous collapse of major global institutions, and the plummeting of public trust in major sectors. This so-called once in a century storm is constraining economic growth and stability, resulting in the crippling of many industries, massive job loss, and the creation of untold misery and distress for countless communities.

Few educational institutions will be untouched by this set of factors. State and local school budgets are retrenching, family financial ability to handle school tuition is threatened, donors to private education are strapped and institutions are scrambling to adjust. At the same time, this crisis presents an unusual opportunity. While one cannot deny or minimize the dislocation that is bound to occur as resources shrink, we have an important opportunity to go beyond tinkering with change around the edges. We can rethink how we are organized, how we are linked across different sectors of education, and how our student learning and research efforts can be more effectively designed to conserve and deploy needed resources in a new world of learning.

Most of us have already begun efforts to reassess how we are organized and what we can do to redesign our core efforts to greatest effectiveness. These times and our public insist that we go farther, beyond efforts to date. How can this association and its network of experts play a role at this crucial time? Certainly, the umbrella of accreditation ideally positions us to take greater advantage of the robust information-sharing we enjoy and to benefit in additional ways from our mandated on-going reviews. But we may fail to take full advantage of the unique opportunity that accreditation and its many links and sources of information afford us.

We have, through our well-developed system of peer review and information-sharing an opportunity to be aware of how competitors and allies alike shape curricula, solve problems, exploit opportunities and improve on their past failures and successes. We also have the opportunity to identify ways of reducing duplication, sharing resources, and honing institutional effectiveness.

Two years ago, with a speed and decisiveness rarely seen in higher education, schools and colleges, moving faster than government relief, immediately opened their doors to students and faculty from colleges and universities closed by Hurricane Katrina. We can address uncertainty and crisis with ease when walls created by competition

come down — walls built high and fortified by elitism, bureaucracy, competitiveness, tradition and entitlement. Cooperation of this kind need not be a once in a century occurrence.

We have been fortunate in that demand for education has grown stronger in every generation. The vigor of that demand in this country rests in part on the perceived openness of education to all learners. At Brown University, we are especially proud of the fact that Horace Mann, an 1819 graduate of Brown, advocated and advanced the cause of universal schools free to students and supported by public funds. Later to become President of Antioch College, he wrote passionately and persuasively about the need for universal education. While his theory that such a policy would in itself keep the domination of capital in check may be disproven by the current crisis, he nevertheless understood that education was one of the most important means of preserving a free society in which individuals could exercise their will on a well informed basis. Insisting that education “prevents being poor,” Mann wrote in his 1848 Twelfth Annual Report as Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education: “Education..., beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men, — the balance wheel of the social machinery.”

In coming years, how will the public assess the effectiveness of this “balance wheel”? Already, we see signs of a public growing ever more concerned about whether the balance wheel is working as effectively as it should.

The self-governing process that calls on practitioners from every dimension of the educational enterprise to determine whether institutions are meeting the goals of their institutions and adhering to accepted norms for education helps us examine how well we are developing the “vast treasures of human talent” in the service of society. Our ability as educators to determine the standards and judge the quality of this enterprise is all important. While stakeholders are right to pose questions and identify areas of needed improvement, we must fight to preserve the idea that the expertise for education lies with those educated to, experienced at, and prepared for the task. There are many who would minimize the unique responsibility, knowledge and expertise of educators but we must not be among them.

Who is best qualified to address the issues confronting our schools? Those who have long contemplated the problems and solutions across the various sectors of education. Those who have the wherewithal to mark out the passage from theory to practice and to provide the means for students to make that journey successfully. Those who take responsibility day after day and hour upon hour to observe what works well and what does not; what holds up over time and what does not; what produces the right outcomes and what does not.

In the current environment, we will surely hear more calls for radical, sometimes irrational, and unproven change in the way we function across the spectrum of education. As educators we must demonstrate greater capacity for change if we are to hold onto the responsibility for shaping education. I said at the outset that these times offer an unusual opportunity to demonstrate our capacity to lead this effort. Let me now tell you why I say that.

We all know that it is difficult to inspire deep change in education. We also know that, as an industry, we are deeply and often unproductively segmented. This fact often

strangles our ability to offer our students the full range of educational opportunity they might enjoy.

Recent congressional forays into how private institutions manage and allocate their assets and revenue bring home a point that we often forget: no matter how we are financed, we are all public institutions. We serve the public and are accountable to them for how we conduct our institutions. Even as we fight to minimize the impact of the financial crisis upon our institutions, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our fitness to govern ourselves and to determine how best to honor our public role. At the university level, we can use this moment to rethink the lines that divide public from private, two year from four year, rich from poor.

In the past decade, we have seen countless universities traverse the oceans to enter into relationships with universities abroad but which lack the will to cross the city in which they find themselves to link arms with local institutions. Competition, while a useful tool for stoking loyalty and establishing difference, should not force us into silos where we needlessly duplicate resources — resources that could be used to better serve the public and expand access to education. Linking dissimilar institutions with cultures that have grown up over decades and centuries is never easy, but the effort is well worth it when it leads to usefully combined assets, greater opportunities for our students, and economies that inspire greater public confidence in how we serve the public good.

There are countless ways in which this could occur. A greater effort at shared services could bring lower demand areas into broader availability for students. Shared equipment, technological and library resources, and joint planning for the purchase of such items could enable redirecting resources to strengthen academic areas. Shared administrative expertise and even shared positions should be considered far more frequently. Reducing impediments to cross enrollment and joint degrees would add much to the value we offer our students. Most of all, fewer barriers generally across sectors would be demonstrative of our strong commitment to the public trust.

The accreditation platform can itself be a source of leadership for such times, tackling some of the deeply entrenched problems that frustrate public policy makers. A recent report in the NY Times pointed, for example, to the fact that the enrollment of women in Computer Science has actually declined over the past years. Existing curricular and retention strategies in math and science have resulted in all too many students foregoing the opportunity for careers in science and engineering. Schools and colleges, working in a more coordinated, concerted way can mount an intensive, coordinated effort to address such issues in a far more effective manner than we have seen to date.

Recent efforts by Congress to identify ways of forcing some not for profit institutions to expend a greater share of their revenue from endowments has fueled great anxiety among private institutions. And with good reason. We need not have any confidence that Congress would be better able to allocate such resources. However, these efforts and the widespread support that they appear to enjoy is a warning to us that if we do not address the public's concerns about inefficiencies, lax standards, uncertain outcomes and spiraling costs, we will be facing even more marked deterioration of public trust.

Since we are a profession of learners, let the decline of other sectors be instructive to us. Those that have not heeded signs of a growing public skepticism have

often come to the brink of self-destruction. Pick your example: the drug industry, the automobile industry, the financial sector. There is much that is unique about education that can save us from a similar fate if we pay attention to the tools at our disposal.

First, unlike most sectors, we thrive on information sharing and this conference is a sign of the robustness of this feature. We ask our peers and competitors to assess how well we are carrying out our mission. I believe that a next logical and necessary step is for us to place those assessments and our response to them before our public. Whatever our warts, the public deserves to know what they are and how we plan to address them.

Second, we might use our well developed arteries of communication and information sharing for a new level of cooperation: setting goals for shared facilities, technologies, curricula, and expertise. Is it necessary for every institution to offer the same resources when many can increasingly be accessed remotely through technology? At the college level, competitive vanity rankings work against the public interest when institutions must demonstrate that they are independently and often unnecessarily investing large sums in libraries, vanity projects, extravagant services, and capital rich buildings. Competitive efforts to demonstrate such expenditures can ultimately stifle innovation, differentiation, and, of course, cost effectiveness.

I have just returned from Accra, Ghana, where I met with a group of university leaders from across Africa. These inspiring leaders spoke of the needs of their countries for highly educated leaders. In a race against time, they have urgent and practical concerns for their nations where the demand for education is unremittingly inadequate. Nowhere was this demand made more dramatic for me than when I drove through the countryside one morning. In every village we passed, pre-school and school-aged children could be seen leaving home early in the morning to walk considerable distances to sit in thatch-covered areas to have access to education. In one school I visited, children greeted their teachers with thunderous applause, so overwhelming was their pride in and fondness for those who are bringing to them the light of learning.

In the United States, we may be losing some of that raw excitement about learning. Other nations look to the United States as evidence of what education can achieve for national prosperity in the context of civil society. Once, too, other nations looked to the United States for excellence in automobile building, financial strength, and middle class prosperity.

As I end my tenure as president of NEASC, I return to my own campus persuaded that we have an unparalleled opportunity to avoid the pitfalls of other industries. By lowering barriers to economies, fostering greater collaboration across and within educational sectors, cost-sharing across institutions, and opening our practices and flaws to the public, U.S. educational institutions just might escape the fate of other sectors that have fallen victim to massive failure.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to serve this body. I have been made wiser for the guidance and instruction I have received at the hands of volunteers, trustees and, especially, Jake Ludes, our esteemed Executive Director.

Thank you.