On Higher Education: Where We Stand

We are delighted to join the Leadership Series at Forbes.com. We thought we’d begin by introducing ourselves:

David Skorton:  I am an academic physician who has been a faculty member at the University of Iowa and Cornell University and, since 2006, president of Cornell.  My academic focus has been general internal medicine, cardiology and engineering, the latter two for the last thirty years.  I have conducted research in the use of computational techniques in medical imaging and image processing and have provided medical care to adolescents and adults with congenital heart disease.  My growing interest in college education and student welfare derived in part from my experiences with young patients.  In my “spare time,” I am a perennial student of languages (currently plodding along in elementary Arabic) and indulge my passion for music (I had a Latin jazz radio program on KSUI-FM at The University of Iowa for over four years and am an avid, if not quite concert-ready, flute and saxophone player).  As a citizen, professor and president, I believe that leadership comes with the obligation to participate actively in public discourse.

Glenn Altschuler:  I have spent my professional career at Cornell University as a doctoral student, administrator (with responsibilities for continuing education for two decades, and more recently, for external relations) and professor of American Studies.  I consider myself one of the last of the academic generalists:  I study history, politics, popular culture, law and higher education in the United States and continue to get great fulfillment from teaching and advising undergraduates.  To give myself time to play poker, watch baseball games, take in plays in New York City, Niagara on the Lake, Canada, and London, eat good food, and schmooze with friends, I do not keep a cell phone, an iPad, or a computer at home.  Like David Skorton, I am committed to public engagement:  I have appeared as a talking head on television, authored a column in the Education Life section of the New York Times, and written over seven hundred essays, book reviews, and opinion pieces, the vast majority of them for newspapers and web sites in the United States and around the world.
We are passionate (though by no means uncritical) partisans of higher education in the United States and abroad. Contemporary colleges and universities, we want to emphasize, have taken on myriad functions and responsibilities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition to their traditional roles as custodians and disseminators of knowledge, they are centers of research and discovery; gateways to the professions, providing training and technical expertise; protectors and promoters of prosperity and national security; cultural centers in towns large and small; and outposts for hard thinking about the essential components of a “good life.”

These days our colleges and universities face daunting challenges. The academic marketplace is changing, as online education emerges and more institutions abroad strive to become world-class. Some critics doubt whether the degrees we confer are worth the prices we charge for them. And the financial crisis, which reduced endowments and state and federal government support, threatens higher education’s existing funding models.

We believe that robust colleges and universities are essential if the United States is to stimulate research and innovation, spur economic growth, sustain meritocratic values, and search for the defining qualities of beauty, justice, and truth.

In higher education, as in so many aspects of our national life, business as usual will no longer get the job done. In future blogs, we will lay out our views about what’s needed. Here’s a preview of where we stand on some of the issues:

- **Student Health and Well-Being**: “In loco parentis” is gone, but faculty and administrators need to act more decisively to address physical and mental health, hazing, especially but not exclusively in fraternities and sororities, brain damage from concussions and other athletic injuries, and alcohol and substance abuse.

- **College Affordability**: The naysayers are wrong. College is worth the price, as measured in employment outcomes and lifetime earnings. Sensationalist stories about defaults on student loans (which tend to be concentrated in “for profit” institutions) have exaggerated student indebtedness, which stands on average at slightly above $25,000 per individual. Nonetheless, tuition is increasing at too high a rate – and burgeoning administrative costs can and should be controlled.

- **Public Engagement**: All non-profit colleges and universities – public and private – have a responsibility to “give back” to their immediate communities and society at large. The applied sciences initiative of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg may well be a template for 21st century collaborations between research universities, the private sector and government.

- **New Technologies**: New technologies can make information, “course-ware,” and college degrees available to millions of Americans and others. Nonetheless, with some important exceptions, we should use online learning more as a supplement than a substitute to residence-based learning.

- **The Role of Government in Higher Education**: For college to be affordable to anyone qualified to attend, for public institutions to flourish, and for universities to remain centers of research and innovation, state governments and the federal government must invest
more in higher education than they do now (even in hard times – and especially in hard times). In turn, colleges need to be more cost-efficient.

- **Academic Health Centers:** Often not recognized as an integral part of the higher education infrastructure, academic health centers are the sites for medical education, research and the delivery of much of the undercompensated care in our nation. The relationship between the government and these centers must be reconceptualized – from both sides.

- **Immigration:** Many of us have lost sight of the important contributions immigrants have made – and are making – to our culture and our economy. Higher education is one of many sectors which will benefit from comprehensive reform of our immigration policies.

- **Internationalization:** Educating talented students from abroad, expanding exchanges with faculty from other countries, and engaging in outreach in agriculture, medicine, nutrition, and other disciplines is one of the most effective forms of “soft diplomacy” the United States can deploy.

- **Arts and Humanities:** Although it is obvious that the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) contribute mightily to economy growth, it is equally important to recognize that the world’s thorniest problems will not be solved nor will our nation be secure without an understanding of ethics, cultures other than our own, and what it means to be fully human.

- **Public Education:** The economic crisis has put our system of public higher education at risk. The window for corrective action (to stave off a devastating long-time impact on accessibility, affordability, and quality) is closing.

We will be back in touch with you on one of these topics around the time our fall semester begins.