

Smart Leadership for Higher Education in Difficult Times

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3. Expanded access to public higher education: challenges for the twenty-first century

Charles B. Reed

When the 2009 Higher Education Leadership Conference was first convened, higher education leaders from across the United States were asked to talk about the challenges ahead for colleges and universities. The question before us: What is the “new normal,” and how will colleges and universities need to operate differently than we have in the past?

At this point, we are almost all in agreement that colleges and universities cannot afford to maintain business as usual right now. In fact, the only thing we know for sure about the “new normal” is that things are going to continue to change, and we are never going back to the way things were 25, 50, or 75 years ago.

To understand where we are headed, consider the following about the United States economy, workforce needs, and demographics. First, the importance of a college degree is higher than ever. We’re facing a crisis in the United States because of our failure to get enough of our young people into higher education. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities has reported that in Japan, Korea and Canada, more than 50 percent of young adults hold college degrees. In the United States, only 41 percent of young adults hold those degrees.

Recognizing this shortfall, President Obama in his 2009 State of the Union address set a goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. The reasoning was that we must have more of our young adults earning degrees if we want to enjoy the same kinds of economic success and stability that we have experienced during previous decades. This marked the first real admission by an American president that we are no longer the global leader in higher education access and educational attainment. Furthermore, this statement indicated that we can no longer continue doing business as usual in the world of higher education policy. As many of us have believed for a long time, we must do more than simply argue at the federal level every two to four years about how much

to increase Pell Grant maximum awards or the aggregate subsidized loan cap for undergraduate students. This limited discourse has resulted in stagnant progress for our nation while much of the rest of the world has developed new and more innovative policies for helping students earn degrees.

However, while we set our sights on this important goal, our country is undergoing a major demographic shift. In California, a majority-minority state, the student population is growing fastest among traditionally underserved groups, such as people from ethnic minorities, those for whom English is a second language, or those who are the first in their families to attend college. This trend is expected to continue across the United States in the next few decades. To meet President Obama's higher education goal, we are going to have to reach this rapidly growing segment of our population. We need to figure out how to enroll more of these hard-to-reach students in college, and help them succeed once they get there. That is why the future of access in higher education essentially boils down to how well we can serve the underserved.

But it gets more difficult: With the current economic slowdown, both public and private universities are facing a situation where resources are tighter than ever. This means that we are called upon to serve more hard-to-reach students with fewer resources. And at a time of recessionary cutbacks, many institutional budgets are facing more than just "a little cut here and a little snip there." Some universities – especially public institutions, which are inextricably tied to the state's budget – are losing entire portions of the budget, while at the same time being asked to do more with less.

On top of all of this, college affordability is down. The College Board has reported that tuition and fees are going up for both public and private universities, and it is rising faster than ever. In these difficult times, we need to remember who will suffer first and most from the effects of our belt-tightening: the young people who are traditionally under-represented in our student population.

Put together, all of these factors add up to a very difficult situation for helping more young people earn college degrees. At the 23-campus California State University (CSU), the largest four-year university system in the country, we are confronting these issues head-on, day after day. With nearly 450,000 students, 48,000 faculty and staff members, we are one of the most diverse and most affordable university systems in the country. And as the primary source for baccalaureate degrees for California students, we will need to serve California's rapidly expanding populations of underserved and minority students. Yet as a part of a state that is facing a budgetary crisis, we are currently managing one of the toughest budget situations we have ever encountered. That is why we have had to manage this

challenge with a multi-faceted approach that focuses on understanding our incoming students and managing our limited resources with the most efficiency. The following describes how we are attempting to tie together all of these challenges and come up with a coherent plan for the future.

K-12 CURRICULUM

To begin to address these challenges, we believe we need to extend our reach beyond higher education, to look at reforms in the K-12 system. One almost universally acknowledged fact is that many students in the K-12 system are not being properly prepared for higher education. All educators – and that includes those in higher education – need to do a better job of getting kids ready for college sooner. Our role is to be clear about what our expectations are for incoming students, and to get out into high schools and middle schools to make sure that students have the right information and the right coursework.

This task begins with teacher education. It is the responsibility of the entire university to prepare teachers. Teacher preparation needs to be on the front burner for our presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs. Everyone has to realize the importance of producing great teachers – not just good teachers – so that children learn what they need to know to succeed from grade to grade and into college. The quality of education that those students receive is a measure of how well prepared they will be when they arrive at our colleges and universities.

At the California State University, which prepares 60 percent of California's teachers and nearly 10 percent of the teachers in the country, this issue is of paramount importance. We became the first university system in the country to conduct a comprehensive first-year teacher evaluation study for all of our teaching graduates. Our surveys show that we do a good job, but we know that we still need to make progress in reaching a different population. We need to be innovative in how we reach these students and families, many of whom have never been to college and who do not speak English as a first language.

For example, we are working closely with "Just for Kids," which has statistical data on schools across the state. They have compared schools with identical characteristics, and are able to show which schools are having better success at teaching students. We have given that information to our provosts so that they know which schools need more professional development. Then we are able to model what those good teachers are doing for the other schools.

We are also working to find ways to encourage more college students to

go into teaching, especially in math or science. We are looking at ways to make teaching more attractive financially, and we are working to develop more opportunities for those students to have hands-on math and science experience that they can pass along when they become teachers.

Additionally, we are making it simpler for more future teachers who come from non-traditional backgrounds to complete a teaching credential. Our CalState TEACH program offers a unique opportunity for qualified candidates to earn their teaching credential without attending traditional college classes. The curriculum is delivered online using web, print and CD-ROM materials. The prospective teachers share ideas through web-based “class discussions,” and get professional feedback through on-site coaching from mentor teachers and CSU faculty. More than 700 prospective teachers were enrolled in the program this year, and nearly 3,300 have completed the program since it was created in 1999.

Continuing with our efforts to work with K-12 schools, we are committed to ensuring that students are offered a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, beginning as early as sixth or seventh grade. By high school, students need to have Algebra I, Algebra II, and trigonometry. We should not be wasting their time (or ours) by offering dumbed-down “almost math” or “someday it will be math” offerings. We supported the governor and the State Board of Education’s adoption of Algebra I as the math standard for all of California’s eighth graders even though it was not a popular position to take. We must set high expectations and standards for our students – and when we do, they will almost always surprise us by meeting those expectations.

Students also need more disciplined work on oral and written communications. The employers that hire our graduates consistently tell us that they want students who can communicate well in a variety of settings, both orally and in writing. That is why we must preserve reading and writing assignments across the middle and high school curriculum.

Despite these and other efforts, when students begin college-level work, many are still under-prepared. The California State University shoulders a tremendous amount of responsibility when it comes to remedial education. The numbers of incoming freshmen needing some kind of remedial help in math or English hover at around the 50 percent mark. We honor our responsibility to help those students. However, to whatever degree we can, we want to help them get the assistance they need before they get to the university. They should not have to spend their college time and money doing the work they needed to do in high school, and the state should not have to spend that money either.

In response to this challenge, we have worked with the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education to create

a voluntary test known as the Early Assessment Program, or EAP. The test incorporates our placement standards into the California Standards Tests for English and math. It is designed to help 11th grade students get a “snapshot” of their math and English proficiency. If the EAP shows that that a student needs more work, they can use their time in 12th grade to brush up on the skills they need for college.

We have created many opportunities for high school students and teachers to get extra assistance in these areas if they need it. For instance, we have two websites, www.csumathsuccess.org and www.csuenglishsuccess.org, to help students prepare for college readiness in those subject areas.

In 2009, for the fourth consecutive year, the results from the EAP showed an increase in the overall number of students tested. Of the 466,303 11th graders who took the California Standards Test in spring 2009, a record 369,441 (79 percent) also took one or both of the CSU’s Early Assessment tests. This is good news for us because it means that students are voluntarily choosing to be tested so that they can assess their college readiness. The end result is that these students will get the help they need in a timely fashion, and they will not have to waste their time on remedial courses once they come to us. This should enable them to arrive at our campuses ready to succeed.

Finally, while my colleagues and I have been working closely with K-12 educators about how to bridge the transition between high school and college, we have repeatedly encountered an idea that sounds radical but may not be as extreme as it sounds: get rid of the 12th grade, and send students straight to college. The reality is that for most students, the 12th grade year is simply a waste of time. We could save our schools and our students a year’s worth of school by making sure that their time is meaningful in 11th grade and then moving them straight ahead. Although we are nowhere near moving forward with this idea, we believe it should be on the table as a possible solution for the “wasted year” problem that drags students down at a critical point in their education.

CSU OUTREACH EFFORTS

As we move on to talking about the transition between high school and college, we need to look more closely at the outreach efforts that universities have undertaken. One unfortunate reality about colleges and universities in this rankings-driven age is that universities tend to be focused on prestige, not on serving students. Often this translates to “outreach” that does nothing more than lip service to the groups of students who truly

need advice and support to get to college. Instead we need to focus on our greatest challenge: helping underserved students, ethnic minority students, and low-income students to graduate from high school, start college, graduate, and move into the workforce.

The United States Census Bureau has found that of every 100 white kindergartners, 93 graduate from high school, 65 go to college, and 33 get a bachelor's degree. Of 100 black kindergartners, 87 graduate from high school, 50 go to college and 18 get a bachelor's degree. Of 100 Latino kindergartners, 63 graduate from high school, 32 go to college, and 11 get a bachelor's degree. This breakdown offers a stark illustration of the discrepancies in degree attainment, and the need to significantly raise the number of black and Latino students who get their degrees.

But the simple fact is that reaching out to underserved students requires more than simply holding the door open. Universities need to reach out to their neighborhoods and find out who the real incoming students are. They need to start as early as fifth or sixth grade to give students a sense of purpose and direction from a young age. They must also go into the communities populated with underserved students and actively assist them with college preparation.

For these kinds of outreach efforts, the greatest burden will fall on our regional serving institutions. These institutions will have the most important role to play because of costs. Most of these students can't just pack up and move to a dorm in Michigan, for example, or Connecticut. Although many nationally ranked institutions have the capability to offer large financial aid packages that could make a move more feasible, many students still choose to stay local because of family or other work responsibilities.

At the California State University, we have been working on the challenge of reaching underserved students for several years. A main focus of our work has been reaching out to students in places where they live and gather.

CSU Super Sundays

One of our most successful efforts has been the "Super Sunday" college information sessions we hold at African-American churches. This unique initiative was formed in 2005 through a partnership with local leaders of church, civic and business organizations and the CSU working together to promote a college-going culture among African American students. Every year, on two Sundays in February, leaders from the CSU and local communities gather at churches to send the message from the pulpit about the lifetime value of higher education and the need to begin preparing for

college while in middle school and high school. Following Super Sunday services, CSU outreach staff and church education counselors provide information about college applications and financial aid. Students are also introduced to CSU Mentor, the online application website for prospective students.

The sessions have expanded each year to include companion events that fill the weekend. In 2009, we reached 72 churches, with congregations totaling 92,500 people. The total applications received also indicate that we may be having an impact: Applications from African American students have gone from 8,700 to 12,300 over the four-year period since we began.

Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)

Another traditionally underserved group is students of Latino heritage, particularly those who are English learners and who are the first in their families to attend college. In 2006, the CSU created a statewide partnership agreement with PIQE (the Parent Institute for Quality Education), an organization that helps parents of Latinos and other underserved students prepare their children for higher education. Through the PIQE program, parents complete a nine-week class about how to help their children succeed in school and prepare for college. Many participants have never graduated from any school. When they finish, the children of the participants get a college ID card showing that they are conditionally admitted to the campus, as long as they complete the college requirements. The CSU has committed \$1.7 million through 2009 to support PIQE's parent involvement program in the CSU's 23 campuses.

Additionally, we are working to reach students from the underserved Asian groups – Vietnamese, Hmong, Pacific Islanders, and others – at Asian-American community centers, which are some of the best places to reach parents and families.

College Planning Tools

To help students prepare for college admissions – especially those with limited access to college planning assistance – we have developed several additional tools. CSU Mentor (www.csumentor.edu) is a free online resource designed to help students and their families learn about the CSU system. The program helps students select a CSU campus to attend and create a plan to finance higher education. It also allows them to apply for admission online.

We have featured CSU Mentor widely, especially on our “Road to College” tour, a statewide campaign that empowered students, parents,

teachers and counselors with information about how to prepare for college. Our customized 40-foot biodiesel tour bus loaded with laptop computers traveled to high schools, college fairs and the CSU's counselor conferences throughout the state. At each stop, students, teachers, and counselors explored the CSU's 23 campuses, learned about the admissions process, received information about financial aid, and talked to CSU experts.

We have also developed a widely popular and award-winning "How to Get to College" poster. This poster outlines the coursework and preparation that students need to prepare for college beginning in sixth grade, along with resources for applying for financial aid. We have distributed over three million posters. They are currently available (for distribution, and for viewing online) in English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Hmong, Russian, and Tagalog.

Additionally, the CSU is part of the statewide Troops to College initiative, which is an academic outreach and enrollment plan to help California's 60,000 veterans attend colleges and universities.

Through these and other outreach efforts, we appear to be making a difference. This year, in the priority application period for enrollment, the CSU saw a total increase of 20 percent in first-time freshmen applications over the prior year. Driving this increase is a nearly 40 percent rise in applications by Asian American students, and a nearly 30 percent rise in application by Latino/Latina students. First-time freshmen applications among African American students also rose by 17 percent.

However, while the CSU has done much to increase student access and degree attainment, particularly among low-income students, we cannot be content with maintaining current levels of progress. Closing achievement gaps at every level of the educational pipeline will require each university to accept greater responsibility for setting high expectations for student success. This will require better use of data to diagnose and confront the causes for student failure; more proactive advising; more aggressive outreach to students in academic trouble; and more attention to student financial aid that will help students cut back on work to be able to focus on education as their primary priority.

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL CHANGES

Once we successfully reach these students and help them make their way to college, we need to consider internal changes that will help us better meet the needs of our students. At the CSU, for example, we are not dealing with the traditional 18 to 22-year-old students:

- The average undergraduate age is 24.
- Only 8 percent live on campus.
- Approximately 61 percent are dependent on parents.
- About 12 percent are married.
- Nearly one-quarter have dependents.
- Three out of four have jobs, and almost 18 percent work more than 30 hours per week.
- Nearly 35 percent are in the first generation in their family to attend college.

These types of incoming students will be likely to need non-traditional assistance and support. For example, they may not need the regular advising services in terms of which courses to take, but they may need special support in finding classes that meet their schedule, identifying times to use university computer labs, and exploring various sources of financial aid to allow them to continue their education.

To meet these students' needs, one of the most obvious changes involves offering more classes on evenings and weekends. This can serve the dual purpose of helping us reach more students who have full- or part-time work responsibilities, and helping us make better use of our facilities. Additionally, we need to offer more courses with an online component that would allow students to "attend" class remotely, from their home or place of work.

But we also need to start thinking outside the box about how to make important changes that will allow us to serve more students and run our operation with greater efficiencies. Some ideas include:

- Rethinking the 120-credit hour standard and reducing the credit requirement where appropriate;
- Moving the baccalaureate degree to three years when feasible;
- Improving the community college transfer process to avoid duplication of coursework and save students time and money;
- Offering more university-level courses at community colleges that may be closer to where our students live and work;
- Charging different tuition for different disciplines to reflect expected income and ability to pay back student loans (that is, business should cost more than teacher education).

One frequently overlooked element is the need to be aware of how our institutions are viewed externally by policymakers and the public. For example, along with many of our university colleagues, we have criticized short-sighted state policies such as mandatory sentencing laws that have

sapped critical state funding away from universities and into the state prisons. However, when we continue to portray ourselves to state policymakers as victims, the resulting reaction is often less than sympathetic. In California right now, there is no extra money to be found, whether we deserve it or not, and so by painting ourselves as victims we do little to earn respect in Sacramento. Instead we need to become more positive in outlook and more entrepreneurial in focus, continuing to build and earn support from our business and community backers.

One way to help the public understand the importance of what we do is by demonstrating our institutions' productivity and importance to the economy. For example, a survey that the CSU did in 2005 showed that our university system had a direct economic impact on the state of \$7.46 billion. For every \$1 the state invests in the California State University, the CSU returns \$4.41. That's a four-fold return on investment. We continue to emphasize these points when promoting the university among policymakers and supporters. While our results are large given the size and scope of our university system, every college and university will by definition have some economic impact on its community – an impact that the institution should attempt to quantify and share.

Unfortunately, for colleges and universities facing budgetary challenges, the short-term solution is almost always to raise tuition. In 2009 the College Board reported that college tuition and fees rose across the board, and the price tag is rising faster than ever. Those price increases appear even bigger after adjusting for inflation. Plus – and this is even harder to justify – public universities are using about two-thirds of their grant money for merit rather than financial need.

To the outside observer, these price increases reflect careless spending rather than need. When people learn of these fast-paced tuition increases, public sentiment turns against our universities, and this will hurt us in the long term. To combat this we must reprioritize our aid money to ensure that it goes to the neediest students. Additionally, we must be more transparent about our needs in terms of additional support for helping these students, as well as the steps we are taking to improve efficiencies and become more productive. If tuition increases are reasonable, incremental, and justified in terms of the additional help they provide for needy students, they will be better understood and accepted by the public.

FEDERAL ISSUES: TITLE I EXPANSION

We also need to take a deeper look at the role of federal funding for the neediest students. The conundrum that we are facing is that we are mostly

operating with reduced budgets, but we need to enroll more students who need additional help.

The answer may lie in a form of federal assistance that was first proposed more than 30 years ago. In the early legislative history of what is now the Pell Grant program, Congress envisioned what would have been a two-pronged federal aid process for economically disadvantaged students who were headed to college: grants to the students (which became Pell Grants), and grants to the institutions to help educate those students.

This institutional aid program, authorized in 1972 but never funded, was known as the “cost of education allowances.” It was based on a similar concept found in Title I funding for K-12 schools: the widely accepted premise that economically disadvantaged students cost more money to educate than students from wealthier backgrounds. Title I was created to provide supplemental federal funding to elementary and secondary schools with above average numbers of lower-income students. In a parallel effort, these “cost of education allowances” were designed to provide supplemental resource support to colleges and universities where large numbers of Pell Grant recipient students were enrolled.

The irony now is that not only is there no federal support for institutions in this area, there are actually widespread disincentives for universities to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds – especially the lower-cost state institutions that serve the most students. Current national ratings systems such as the popular *U.S. News & World Report* rankings indirectly encourage universities to reduce their lower-income student enrollments by rewarding higher graduation rates, admissions selectivity, and other variables that promote institutional prestige above common purpose. Many state authorities have also begun prioritizing very simplistic institutional measurements such as graduation rates without any regard for the aggregate numbers of graduates or the socioeconomic status of the students educated at the various institutions.

A federal Title I-type program for higher education:

- Would provide a flat institutional grant per lower-income student to every college and university that meets a minimum enrollment of 20 percent;
- Would provide a federal grant to higher education institutions the same way that schools receive federal grants to help the Title I students;
- Would help admit, retain, and graduate our Pell grant recipients (who would continue to receive Pell Grants).

If this institutional grant program were put back on the table, the effect would be profound all across the country, and perhaps most notably in

California. More than 600,000 California students receive Pell Grants, and approximately 123,000 of those students are at the California State University alone. With more federal dollars to help our universities support those students, we would be better equipped to offer them appropriate counseling, remedial education, and computer support services at every step along the way. The ultimate goal, of course, would be to help more students earn degrees, make their mark in the workforce, and bolster the economy.

Making a big commitment like this is not such a far-fetched idea. In fact, given President Obama's goal for returning to higher education preeminence by 2020, there is no better time to put this idea back on the table. If we are going to solve the problem of reaching more economically disadvantaged students, this administration needs to provide federal funding for these "cost of education allowances."

While this idea has been advanced by the California State University, it has earned support from national higher education leaders, as well as from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and from the College Board in its recent report, "Rethinking Student Aid." Our hope is to continue to promote the idea and make a national push for a renewed federal commitment to institutional aid.

CONCLUSION

Earlier this year, the higher education community celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which provided a major boost to American higher education by creating land-grant colleges. When the Morrill Act was signed 150 years ago, the United States was going through similarly tough economic times. However, President Lincoln and some far-sighted lawmakers knew that investing in higher education would reap rewards.

Today's dilemmas require a similarly far-sighted commitment on behalf of American students. These proposals, especially for a college-level Title I program, are not simply pie-in-the-sky ideals. If we don't address the needs of our underserved students by establishing a new direction for higher education, we will neglect the needs of a massive segment of our country's population. This will harm the students, the economy, and eventually our own institutions.

If we are going to meet President Obama's goals for higher education, we are going to have to make a serious investment in our students and in the universities who serve them. That is why we must understand the needs of our incoming students, adapt our services to help meet their needs, and give them greater opportunities to complete their degrees and find success

in the workforce. By understanding the current educational environment and adapting to it, we will ensure success for our students, strengthen our universities, and give more fuel to the economy with young people who are prepared for success in the workforce.