



Transforming the Value Proposition for Higher Education
Hesburgh Lecture

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President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University

“The first fruit of a liberal education is to free a person from ignorance, which fundamentally means freedom to think, clearly and logically. Moreover, allied with this release from stupidity...is the freedom to communicate one’s thoughts, preferably with clarity, style and grace... A liberal education should also enable a person to judge, which in itself presupposes the ability to evaluate...To evaluate is to prefer, to discriminate, to choose, and each of these actions presupposes a sense of values. Liberal education should also enable a person to situate himself or herself within a given culture, religion, race, sex and to appreciate what is valuable in the given situation... this, too, is a value judgment and a liberation from valuelessness, insecurity and despair at times. Liberal education... should confer a sense of peace, confidence, and assurance on the person thus educated and liberate him or her from the adriftness that characterizes so many in an age of anomie.”¹ (Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, The Hesburgh Papers)

Writing about the “Moral Purpose of Higher Education” in the early 1970’s, Notre Dame President Father Ted Hesburgh eloquently addressed the values that animate liberal education, which is the undergraduate foundation for all of higher education. Critical thinking, persuasive communication, insightful judgment, cultural competence --- these and other values supposedly infused throughout the liberal arts curriculum liberate the student from inchoate fear, prejudice and the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies social change.

The 2016 presidential election proved to be a triumph for a candidate who played to the fears and sense of despair among some of the nation’s least well-educated citizens. Based on the majority of non-college-educated voters who supported President-elect Trump, we might even say that the election was a clear failure for higher education. How did this happen? How did higher education in the supposedly most advanced nation in human history lose its narrative and become marginalized in the wave of fear and resentment that Trump rode to victory?

¹ Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., *The Hesburgh Papers: Higher Values in Higher Education* (1979: Andrews and McMeel, Inc., New York), p. 116.

Hesburgh was at his peak in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and in some ways that social and cultural era has parallels today: widespread dissatisfaction with "the establishment," a fear of America's loss of international prestige because of being bogged down in an unwinnable war, alienated young people, racial strife, and the emergence of a political demagogue with roots in the anti-intellectualism of the McCarthy Era, a man who harbored a long sense of grievance against college-educated elites. President Richard Nixon's defeat of Hubert Humphrey, and later George McGovern, might now be seen as foreshadowing the pathway to President Trump.

But there's a big difference in both politics and higher education between the Hesburgh era and today's revolution. For one, 2016's real revolutionaries are largely reactionaries, not liberals --- liberals ironically became "the establishment" in the last decade, which was part of Clinton's problem --- and the reactionaries embraced a demagogue running on blatant racism, misogyny, nativism and fear of "the other." These are all symptoms of educational failure. At the same time, there is no Ted Hesburgh today --- there are certainly wise and courageous presidents speaking out here and there --- but there is no singular great voice strengthening the backbone of American higher education, daring to stand in the bully pulpit of reasoned opposition to expressions of hatred and threatened repression, no prominent moral and intellectual leader asserting the role of higher education as the central pillar of principled intellectual debate about the means and ends of government and the responsibilities of elected officials to be good stewards of the freedoms and rights guaranteed to all people, not just the party in power.

Instead, for at least most of the last decade if not longer, American higher education has been adrift, itself, in a devolving eddy of self-pity, whining about over-regulation while obsessing about bracket placements and rankings, pandering to political and philanthropic overlords while remaining largely silent on the great social issues of our times. We have lost the great narrative of American higher education as the counterweight to government excesses, as the bastion of free thought and speech, as the public intellectual voice of the society.

We have allowed the story of higher education today to become one about value, to be sure --- monetary value, dollars and cents as surrogates for quality and more important moral values. It's not just about the incredible wealth of some universities, though that is part of the perceived value today, at least in rankings. Even more, it's all about the economics for the consumers, whether the student finds the experience of higher education to be of value, or valuable, not in terms of the person we help him or her to become, but rather, whether the graduate gets a well-paying job. PayScale has shoved aside the Philosopher King as the arbiter of the worth of college.

How will higher education ever reclaim the high ground as an essential civic pillar and persuasive public intellectual voice?

We cannot do this by tinkering at the margins. Higher education needs a deep and pervasive transformation of its value proposition for the American public and the global society we serve. And this "value proposition" should be, unabashedly, about real civic, social and moral values, a concept that Hesburgh warned was on the wane in his time, whose weakness has led to our marginalization in the national conversation about the kind of society America wants to be.

Economics, in terms of the return on investment for a college degree, is certainly a legitimate part of the value proposition, we must agree that our students should have rewarding careers based on the results of their college education. But ROI stated only in monetary terms cannot be allowed to obscure the critical importance and vitality of other civic, social and moral values such as the development of deep cultural competence in our students; profound respect for human beings in all of our diverse glory; enlargement of global perspectives as the best antidote to myopic nationalism that builds walls rather than opening opportunities for international solidarity and real leadership on the great issues of human civilization such as peacebuilding, relief of poverty, educational opportunities especially for girls and women who are so often denied essential literacy skills, eradication of disease, and solutions for climate change; and an understanding that a commitment to peace and justice is not mere political correctness but truly essential for the future of our global village.

We must redouble our advocacy to convince a skeptical public that these kinds of values are, in fact, the basis for stronger communities and a more equitable economy where everyone can thrive. We have to expose the danger of a political viewpoint that encourages cage fights among people who feel marginalized and disenfranchised by wealthy intellectual elites, or who have been led to believe the lie that “the other,” whomever that may be, is stealing their jobs and poses a threat to their security.

How will we go about accomplishing the transformation of the value proposition for higher education? We must work through issues that are both pragmatic and philosophical about higher education today.

Pragmatic issues:

Let me start with that which is pragmatic, which I define as the things we can fix with our own hard work and smart thinking.

1) Access --- how will we make it possible for more people to participate in higher education?

The election exposed the fault line that runs deep between college-educated Americans and those who have not gone to college, a sort of “Starbucks v. Speedway” divide. Gross stereotypes afflict both sides of the education gap, arrogant elites versus know-nothing bigots. Both stereotypes belie the truth that a healthy democracy depends on citizens who can learn and analyze facts, make political and social choices grounded in knowledge not bias, participate in the economy as advanced workers in a range of occupations, and who can contribute to the development of the community through enlightened civic leadership.

Higher education, in fact, can and should be accessible to millions more people than we currently enroll. There’s a tremendous irony right now in that many if not most colleges and universities are struggling to fill seats, and yet, millions of Americans remain outside of higher education. Too many institutions, particularly wealthy privates and flagship state institutions, claim a desire to welcome more low income students of color and yet fail to change the interior circumstances of costs, culture, educational programs and pathways that would enlarge the pipeline and ensure success for these students.

Meanwhile, other institutions --- community colleges, open access public institutions, smaller non-elite private colleges --- that are significantly less wealthy dare to enroll large numbers of low income students and color and we wind up being roundly criticized by media and policymakers because these students do not progress through college according to traditional measures of persistence and completion.

A recent study we did at Trinity showed that among our cohort of similar small, private, historically women's colleges, some now coed and many Catholic, the proportion of Pell grantees and students of color was 50% or greater in more than half of the cohort (at Trinity, 95% students of color, more than 80% Pell grantees), while among a group of public institutions in the Washington region the proportion of Pell grantees and students of color fell below 20% for most, below 10% for some. In a fact little known outside of our group of schools, small private colleges often bear a disproportionate burden of education for marginalized students, often as a legacy of our religious roots in social justice, but because of our size, fragility and relative obscurity (most of us do not have football teams!) we are invisible in the national discussion about access.

We've been saying for years that the United States must reach a goal to have no less than 60% of American adults with college credentials, and yet we're stuck at about 40%. There are about 20 million students in college right now. About 40% of all Americans have some postsecondary degrees or credentials. To meet the national goal of getting 60% of all Americans to have a college degree, we'd need to enroll about twice as many students, about 20 million more than we have right now. While we spend a lot of time worrying about the shrinking demographic of immediate high school graduates, in fact, the problem really is not too few students, but rather, not enough seats configured in the right way to get more Americans into college.

We need to stop talking about "college kids" as if late adolescents were the only people studying Statistics and Psychology today. We need to rethink the stereotype of the "four-year college" --- National Student Clearinghouse² data tells us that the actual real amount of time it takes undergraduates to complete degrees is more than 5 years on average.

The U.S. Department of Education's own data set tells us that 75% of all undergraduates have "non-traditional" characteristics³ by age, family responsibilities, employment, full-time or part-time status, and other important characteristics. The Lumina Foundation⁴ tells us that:

- 75% of college students "commute to class while juggling parenting, working and both"
- 40% of college students attend part-time; but only 25% of part-time students graduate
- 50% of college students are self-supporting, working on average 19 hours per week

² National Student Clearinghouse, [Time to Degree: A National View of the Time Enrolled and Elapsed for Associate and Bachelor's Degree Earners](#) September 18, 2016

³ National Center for Education Statistics, Demographics and Enrollment Characteristics of Non-Traditional Undergraduates 2011-2012, September 2015 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

⁴ Lumina Foundation, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student>

Moreover, even more interesting, there are about 30 million people out there who started college but never earned degrees⁵. We have done a terrible job of analyzing why people stop out of college other than through anecdotes and limited data that some institutions gather. For the most part, we just keep looking for new students to enroll without examining the hemorrhage on the other end of the pipeline.

So, what does this mean for fixing the access problem? Colleges and universities broadly --- and here I'm looking at you, the Ivy League and other elite institutions and state flagships as well as more open publics, community colleges and small privates like my own broad-access Trinity --- ALL of us need to come together, talking across institutional sectors and leaving our competitive instincts at the door, to develop a comprehensive plan for greater access for students of all ages, economic and social backgrounds, and abilities. It's not a "dialogue" as academics love to do, but an intensive strategic planning process that should have real operational results for every single college in the nation. This process should include consideration of issues such as:

- Shifting from an institutionally-focused framework for planning academic programs and services to a model that starts with a deep understanding of who the students are and what they might actually need to enroll and succeed in college, including more serious and sustained analysis of the impact of what we used to call "non-traditional" factors on patterns of attendance, e.g., age, parenting and family obligations, work obligations, commuting, scheduling, prior credit, and other life factors;
 - This analysis also demands a far more analytical study of the millions of students who have stopped out of college; we need to figure out how to get them back to complete credentials that could work for them in a cost effective way;
 - This analysis also needs to consider the question of how to do a better job accommodating students who are academically under-prepared but who could thrive with the right educational models, and not just the old, tired and ineffective idea of "remediation" that is increasingly discredited; is there a place in every single collegiate institution for some students who need a different pathway through learning? Is there a more cooperative model for this across institutional types beyond the idea of articulation from community colleges?
- With a deeper understanding of who the students actually are who need access, adapting curricula, delivery systems and campus services for students who attend in dramatically different patterns than the traditional models; this means an openness to significant changes such as:
 - The simple things: having offices and campus services open and accessible outside of the standard work week (Monday-Friday, 9-6), which means staffing patterns need to change, which is not always easy; addressing issues like

⁵ The Hechinger Report, [Number of Americans with college degrees growing more slowly than advocates want](#), November 19, 2015

bookstore hours, parking and transportation, child care and access to healthcare and advising/academic support services at non-standard times; recognizing and supporting students who suffer hunger, homelessness and domestic violence;

- The necessary things: make the admissions processes less byzantine, simpler and more transparent, and the same for financial aid; make these processes accessible to students and families for whom English is not their first language, for independent students, for students with children who wonder how they will balance all of the demands;
- The hard things: examining the general education curriculum and course schedule to determine whether the credits required, content delivered, schedule format and delivery method are worthwhile for the students, or simply sustaining the jobs of faculty who want to keep teaching certain courses on a schedule that is convenient for the teachers; repeat for the major programs; challenge the norms around credits and credentials, push the question of competency-based and experiential learning credit, consider new formats to accelerate completion without sacrificing quality in teaching and learning;
- Even more complex things: shortening time-to-degree by changing credit requirements, or elongating expectations of time-to-degree by purging the outmoded idea of “four-year-college” and accepting that many if not most students will take longer to complete if we retain the standard 120 credit expectations for baccalaureate degrees, e.g., and similar for other degrees;
- Reconsideration of assets and resources for change: beyond the simplistic “put it online” answer to accessible delivery in non-traditional formats, go deeper into technology to develop new opportunities for teaching and learning that will sustain engagement while making it easier for students to continue enrollment and engagement wherever they are; faculty resources must be willing to adapt even more to new delivery systems and non-standard times and formats;
- Perhaps the hardest of all: rooting out the inhospitable corners of campus cultures that foster cruel exclusions (e.g., Greek houses), spawn attitudes where sexual abuse and assault thrive, or give life to racial or ethnic or religious bigotry; all of these behaviors drive students who are “other” away, contribute to diminished academic performance and degrade the values of the academy.

2) The other side of access: Reformation of the cost/price structure

Even if we do all of the things I’ve described to make colleges and universities even more broadly accessible to more and different students, it will amount to nothing unless and until we reform the cost/price structure. We have become entirely too expensive for most people to bear, even with generous financial aid, debt burdens are impossibly heavy, and in fact, tuition discounting has become overwhelming and harmful at least for many private colleges. We are

sinking under the weight of an enterprise that has become too costly to sustain --- and by cost I mean the expense side of our ledger, and not just tuition prices.

While fully understanding that many costs are fixed and impossible to reduce, in fact, every budget has opportunities for expense reformation that can control costs more effectively. We do have to reconsider building programs, executive compensation and technology investments that quickly become obsolete. We do need to do a better job reducing expenses for activities that are ancillary to the purpose of the university --- dare I mention coaching salaries and stadiums? I know I'm crossing into territory about which I know nothing, except to note that everything must be on the table in developing a new pricing model to make our institutions more accessible to more students.

And, finally, what about the great wealth of some universities? Regardless of whether the new political climate might bring some pause to regulatory excess, the moral question is what is the right thing to do with so much wealth? Far be it from me, with my \$15 million endowment at Trinity, to suggest that Harvard might share a bit, but seriously, why wouldn't the large endowments consider creating a new foundation for college access that could benefit students broadly throughout higher education?

Philosophical issues:

In 1974 Hesburgh wrote:

*"In a world of sudden and cataclysmic change, simple sanity requires some constants... in the welter and abruptness of change, we have lost our grip on these constants. We would all admit in the quiet of our consciences that justice is better than injustice, love better than hate, integrity better than dishonesty, compassion better than insensitivity, beauty better than ugliness, hope better than despair, faith better than infidelity, order better than chaos, peace better than war, life better than death, knowledge better than ignorance... We will be neither educated, nor wise, nor even able to cope with change, to navigate through life, without these constants, these values. As change heightens, as indeed it will, I would hope that higher education will include for everyone a long and longing look at these values, as a measure of what we are or are not becoming as a people, a nation, a world."*⁶

How will we reclaim the public intellectual voice of higher education? A journalist recently asked me why college presidents are so darned reluctant to have anything to say about the important issues of our times? I jokingly said that I'd be happy to show him my pay stub to demonstrate that I have nothing to lose in speaking out; perhaps others have more at stake. But of course, it's more complicated than our personal sense of security. While some presidents do have a lot to say, too many others do remain silent. I've discussed this with some presidential colleagues. Some say that they feel constrained by their boards or their political situations, particularly for state institutions; others say that they don't feel a president should express opinions on public issues because that would be interpreted as intimidating those who disagree.

⁶ Hesburgh, pp. 193-194.

How can we teach our students about advocacy in the public square if we are so timid and so quick to excuse our own silence? Our students learn by the example we set. Father Hesburgh wrote in 1976 that the best gift a president can give to students is the gift of good example. He wrote, "*There are great moral issues facing young and old alike today... the young [should] perceive clearly where we elders stand on issues like human rights, world poverty and hunger, good government, preserving the fragile ecosphere...*"⁷ I would add, today, where we stand on issues like Black Lives Matter, the deportation of undocumented children, religious bigotry and repression of religious expression, objectification and degradation of women, and freedom of press, speech and assembly in a nation whose new leaders threaten new restraints.

While respecting the individual campus challenges, I disagree with those presidents who advocate silence as a form of some sort of politesse, a discretion that makes sure that everyone remains comfortable. That, to me, is the height of political correctness. We need to risk being politically incorrect at times, in the best possible ways. We need to roust our faculty and students out of their comfort zones, to give voice to the values that our mission statements and vision documents claim as our entire reason for being.

In the next four years, if not eight or more, this country and higher education will be challenged in ways we've not seen since perhaps the McCarthy Era to demonstrate courage and conviction on behalf of the fundamental values of our society --- free speech, free press, equality of educational and economic opportunity for all people, racial justice, the right to profess every religion and to wear religious clothing without fear of reprisal, the right to enjoy the blessings of liberty without fear of being attacked because of skin color or nationality or language or customs. We must be courageous advocates for our students who are at risk right now, particularly for our undocumented students and our students of color who continue to suffer so much racial hatred. We must stand up for equal rights for women, starting at home on our college campuses; we can hardly be advocates for justice in the world if we ignore the shameful stain of sexual assault on campus.

We university leaders need to leverage the power of our research, publication and convening engines to move the voices of the scholarly community out of their own too-narrow echo chambers into the center of the public square. The important work of our faculty on a broad range of issues --- from climate change to economic inequality to immigration reform to healthcare access to combatting racism and other forms of oppression to globalism and international policy and so much more --- should be shared more broadly, not just among kindred spirits in the faculty lounge and professional meetings. We need to be courageous in asserting the truths discovered through objective research and analysis to counter the unfounded opinions and myopic biases and outright prejudice that warp our politics and its results in public policy.

The promise of America has always been grander than our reality, but we had hoped in the last half century to have moved past the kind of racial, ethnic and religious bigotry that we are now seeing run rampant with the approval, role modeling and rhetoric of the person who is now about to become the president of the United States. The election was a shocking result but perhaps it's a necessary result to force higher education to reclaim its public voice.

⁷ Hesburgh, p. 14

We have to teach our students that self-governance among citizens of a free society is not a zero sum game; that in order to help those in need we do not have to take opportunities away from others; that we should take greater care in developing solutions that do not pit people against each other, breeding the anger and resentment that fueled the presidential campaign. Ultimately, our job is to educate the citizen leaders who will build the future of civilization, and we must find a way to teach them how to be far more effective in constructing a truly good society than we have been able to create thus far.

We college presidents are not curators of museums to some glorious past for human history; we are stewards of humanity's future, and the current circumstances require us to exert far more moral courage and intellectual scope than we have ever dared before.

In the mid-1970's, Father Hesburgh prophesied that by the Year 2000, higher education would focus far more urgently on global interdependence, challenging our students

“....to be world citizens as they seek solutions to problems of human rights, ecumenism, food, fuel, shelter, health care, urbanization, pollution, crime, terrorism, development, education....to be made conscious of the possibility of creating a better world than the one they are inheriting, one with liberty and justice for all, not just Americans...”⁸

We're now 17 years past the Year 2000. If he were here today, Hesburgh would not waste time with anger or disappointment at how little progress we've made. Instead, he would call us out, demanding that that we get on with the critical work of improving education to create a far better world. His words would be urgent: there's no time to lose.

⁸ Hesburgh, p. 194