



**Confronting Myths, Exploring Realities:  
American Higher Education in 2016**

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American higher education is a remarkable enterprise. Where else are you likely to find great sports and contemporary entertainment, hotels and restaurants, research laboratories and hospitals, health clubs and lectures on Aristotle all within a few blocks on the same campus? I am always amused when some politician or pundit starts railing against college as being somehow irrelevant or frivolous since the enterprise of higher education is a multi-modal industry powering millions of jobs in thousands of cities and towns across the United States. Oh, and by the way, educating more than 20 million students in a remarkable array of programs. While some critics love to chant the mantra that higher education is a distressed industry about to collapse at any minute, in fact, we are all part of one of the most robust economic engines of modern society, and you, our admissions officers and college counselors are the stewards of the gateway to this fantastic universe of learning and intellectual advancement and economic productivity.

To be fair, of course, we have our problems. Prices in some places are too high, debt loads for some students are too heavy, enrollment for many of us is very challenging, states all over are disinvesting, the liberal arts are under fire by the job training crowd. But how much of the problem is perception rather than reality, and how much is easily remedied or demands complete transformation?

We just finished building a beautiful new academic center on our campus at Trinity Washington University, replacing an 80-year-old Science building. It was not some frivolous “edifice complex” project. We are not a wealthy school. The great religious women who founded Trinity were always very frugal. We’ve built just one building in each generation. We took half a century to plan this new laboratory and classroom building. We needed to replace antiquity to improve our instructional environment --- climate controls and indoor plumbing helps learning! Wonderful alumnae gifts and other grants paid for most of it. Already our students are saying, dazzled by the new labs and classrooms, that they are motivated to study harder, to come to class

and maybe they'll be science or nursing majors after all! In the process of developing the plan for our new building I certainly learned, as many presidents do, that it's important to know how to discern what to keep and renovate, what to tear down and discard. This is the challenge facing higher education right now: we are not universally terrible, nor are we wholly good and effective. We need to decide what part of the enterprise to renovate, and what needs to be torn down and completely rebuilt, or wholly re-conceived for the future.

In order to do that kind of planning effectively, we have to scan our environment and consider what is real and what is illusion, what is fake and what is genuine, what is mythology and what is reality. Today, for this discussion with this great group of college admissions officers and counselors gathered at NACAC, the focus on mythology and reality about our students, their lives and the purpose of their college experience seems especially pertinent. I want to talk about just three of the greatest mythologies about American higher education today: the myth of "college kids;" the myth of college as the land of equal opportunity; and the myth that the liberal arts are dead.

### **Myth #1: College "Kids"**

How often do we hear ourselves and others talking about "college kids"? Our rhetoric perpetuates an outmoded stereotype of the late teenager freed from the bondage of living at home, carousing and binge drinking all night, living with wild abandon in residence halls where anything goes, calling home to replenish the Amex card while getting ready for the winter ski trip or semester abroad in some exotic European enclave. (By the way, this mythical college kid attends something called a "four-year college," an entity that no longer exists if we are to believe National Student Clearinghouse<sup>1</sup> data about the actual real amount of time it takes undergraduates to complete degrees --- more than 5 years on average.)

To be fair, there certainly are some such "kids" still on our campuses. But the reality of most college students is very different. Our students are, for the most part, adults with adult responsibilities. The U.S. Department of Education's own data set tells us that 75% of all undergraduates have "non-traditional" characteristics<sup>2</sup> by age, family responsibilities, employment, full-time or part-time status, and other important characteristics. The Lumina Foundation<sup>3</sup> 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

Dan Greenstein of the Gates Foundation<sup>4</sup> has done a lot of work on this topic as well, and he has produced an excellent chart showing the vast diversity of today's college student --- "Not Your

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<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Demographics and Enrollment Characteristics of Non-Traditional Undergraduates 2011-2012, September 2015 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Lumina Foundation, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student>

<sup>4</sup> Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Postsecondary Success, <http://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/areas-of-focus/incentives/todays-college-students/>

Parents' College Experience" he calls it. [Greenstein's chart](#) shows that 45% of college students are 22 or older, 62% are working while in school, 28% are parents. (Gates has also just issued a new paper on its [postsecondary success priorities](#).)

This profile of today's college student --- older, working, attending in different patterns, with parenting and family responsibilities and myriad concerns --- is radically different from the old movie stereotypes of college students. Gidget doesn't go to college anymore. And yet, a great deal of federal and state regulation, popular media commentaries, and even institutional curricula, policies and practices continue to assume only the most traditional student model. Whether we're talking about the IPEDS graduation rate based on first-time-full-time traditional students, or the federal College Scorecard, or the ways in which some magazines and media outlets create rankings of colleges (you know who I'm talking about!), the outmoded ideal of the full-time 18-22-year-old living on campus and supported by mom & dad prevails in our national mythology of college life and measurements of college success.

What does this mean for you, college admissions officers and high school guidance counselors?

You are a very diverse group, and some of you are probably thinking, hey, wait a minute, those "outmoded stereotypes" are MY students, don't knock 'em. Others may be thinking, well, yes, my university has a lot of those different kinds of students, but my performance is judged based on how many first-time full-time full-pay freshmen I bring in, so let's not distract from the main premise of my work.

And yet, shouldn't you be in the forefront of the discussion of the changing shape of the American college student population? How does the changing student population change your work? How are new demographics reshaping old institutions? What are the implications and consequences of a student population that increasingly defies old measurements?

Let's talk self-interest. 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. Think of that: how much more successful could you be as Admissions professionals if you had more varied market focus, improved tools to reach new populations, and the right mix of academic products and services to attract entirely new segments of the American population?

There are about 30 million people out there who started college but never earned degrees<sup>5</sup>. What are we doing about these stop-outs? Shouldn't we be focusing a lot more of our marketing and admissions time and budgets on helping stop-outs to re-enroll? Students don't "drop out" --- I hate that phrase ---- because they are hopeless cases or disinterested --- maybe a few do, but for the most part, students stop out because of changed life circumstances. For women, who are the

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

majority of all students, having children, raising families, supporting spouses is a major reason why they stop out of the college completion trajectory. Interestingly enough, there was a time when “returning women” were a hot property in higher education, back in the 80’s and 90’s when such students were often elite women who started in traditional colleges and stopped out for marriage and family. How is it that our respectful language about “returning women” changed to “college drop outs” when the population became more diverse, lower income, more students of color who need different pathways to completion?

At my institution, [Trinity](#) in Washington, we know these issues quite well. Like many of the nation’s women’s colleges, our enrollment plunged when coeducation swept the land in the 1960’s and 1970’s. And, like many of our sister schools, we broadened our focus to include women of all ages, creating new delivery formats along the way. We called ours the Weekend College, which is now our coed School of Professional Studies. We embraced the need for institutional change, undergoing a paradigm shift in our student population that was very controversial at the time but also transformative in a remarkably positive way not only for Trinity but also for our students. Given our location in northeast Washington, D.C., our expanded focus on women of all ages included the women who run the federal government in the metro DC area. As more and more professional women came into Trinity’s Weekend College to complete their long-deferred baccalaureate degrees, they discovered our traditional daytime women’s college for their daughters, and enrollment in that unit surged.

In 20 years, Trinity’s overall enrollment tripled, and the undergraduate daytime women’s college has grown from just about 300 students in 1990 to more than 1000 today. We found new life for our historic mission by broadening the idea of that mission to new populations, and the result strengthened the entire institution. And oh, by the way, along the way the face of our student body changed from about 95% white, Catholic and middle-to-upper-middle class to about 95% black and Hispanic, 80% Pell Grantees, working women of all ages with high ambitions for success, low income women who aspire to achieve greater economic security for their children and families.

A Middle States reviewer once remarked that keeping our mission to women was more radical than if we had just gone coed. We have several thousand students attending Trinity in undergraduate and graduate programs, including a few men in some programs. But even our traditional-aged women are part of that wave of “post-traditional” students who are nothing like the old days. They work; they have children; they commute; they are self-supporting. But they want what I wanted when I went to Trinity and what students of all backgrounds crave everywhere: economic security, social success and the upwardly mobile status of being a college graduate, all part of the great American Dream.

What are you doing as admissions officers and counselors to make the great American Dream accessible to more different kinds of students than any prior generations?

## Myth #2: Bastions of Equality and Opportunity

Which brings me to myth #2: that our nation's colleges and universities are bastions of equality and opportunity. Really?

We are stewards of the ultimate American Dream of economic and social success. We cultivate the persistent story line that higher education is the great levelizer of American society, that anyone can succeed so long as he or she has the grit and fortitude to persist and prevail in college. In this mythology, if there are any problems about access for students who are different --- by race, by gender, by social class, by ability, by sexual orientation or other characteristics -- - we can just tinker at the edges and ---voila! --- we admit a few more different students and we can keep calm and march forward without much disruption. I watch some college presidents congratulate themselves for moving their Pell Grant percentage from 6% to 10%, and then making a big deal about that marginal change.

In this mythology, the only real change is in the individual opportunity extended to a relatively few fortunate students; those students must change rather completely in order to demonstrate their gratitude for the opportunity, but the institutions remain relatively unscathed by any expectation of change in themselves. So, for example, we hear a lot of talk about getting elite institutions to admit more "high achieving low income" students, a phrase freighted with all kinds of mythologies, the principle myth being that such students are then somehow transformed by the privilege of being among the elite, and the heck with everyone else. Not only does that theory leave millions of otherwise quite well-qualified students outside with arms outstretched through the high bars of the elite gates, but it also strips the fortunate few of their own identities as they seek to become like all others in the groves of academe.

In *A Hope in the Unseen* journalist Ron Suskind documented the journey of a young African American man who graduated at the top of his class from one of D.C.'s most marginalized high schools into a major Ivy League university. In a passage that still grips me, the freshman, Cedric Jennings, wanders through the bookstore of his new elite university.

He is overwhelmed by all that he sees there. Suskind goes on, and I quote:

*"He looks to his left. Martin Gilbert's new biography of Churchill, A Life is piled five feet high, topped by a tilted copy, sticking Churchill's bulldog mug right in Cedric's face.*

*Oh God, he thinks, I should know who he is. He grabs the book and flips through. "Churchill," he whispers after a moment, committing it to memory. "Prime minister of England during World War Two." Then he gently replaces the book, looking up to make sure no one has spotted him."*<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere have I found a parallel tale of a white student stumbling upon, say, a biography of Frederick Douglass, grabbing the book and furtively skimming some pages while saying, oh God I should know something about who he is. The burden in the narrative of college access is always on the outsider student who is coming from a different place to join the mainstream and blend in quickly, to learn the cultural cues and symbols, to be able to nod knowingly at the mention of Churchill and not invite ridicule by looking blank at the reference. Like so many students of color and students who feel marginalized for other reasons --- poverty, disabilities, first generation experiences --- Cedric Jennings read the cues for success and desperately tried to

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<sup>6</sup> Ron Suskind, *A Hope in the Unseen* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), p. 184.

arm himself with just enough information to try to get by, yet often feeling like a fraud underneath. Many students from different racial groups and backgrounds experience marginalization in college because they don't know the cues, feel excluded because of the subtle and overt ways that tradition reinforces old collegiate customs that often are deeply discriminatory. Churchill's old mug looms in all corners of the quad. This contributes to the completion conundrum as students stop out without expressing the reasons why. Far from being level, higher education's playing fields are steeply tilted toward reinforcing privilege.

Institutions, themselves, practice many behaviors that reinforce the arcane codes of privilege. We are trapped in an exhausting race for prestige, constantly worried about our competitive edge, watching the rankings like Caesar's high priests reading entrails, hoping to gain a little edge here or there even as thousands of students fall off the edges as we push for lower and lower "selectivity rates" to push our rankings a little bit higher. What is a "selectivity rate" but simply a measure of how many students are rejected? How did that become a surrogate for quality?

Rather than focusing on the lucky few, shouldn't we be asking about the tens of thousands falling off the margins? What is the risk of opening our doors wider? Oh, I know the answers -- opening our doors wider risks falling graduation rates, lower net revenues, higher financial aid costs --- all of which ultimately risks our rankings, our credit ratings, and, in some places, risking our preferred chosen markets among the comfortable American classes who are still not so keen on mixing it up after all these years.

Equality of educational opportunity --- one of our bedrock American values --- gets trampled in the race for rankings and prestige. While institutions say that they wish they could have more diverse student bodies, in fact, there is a considerable mismatch between the rhetoric and the reality of policies and programs that would be welcoming and supportive of significant changes in student populations.

Wait. Didn't I say earlier, in talking about Myth #1 about "college kids" that the student body of higher education has become remarkably diverse? Yes, I did. And herein lies the paradox of higher education today: while it's true that the aggregate profile is skewing ever more clearly in favor of students with non-traditional characteristics, in fact, that profile is not at all true across all institutions, and there is an increasing divide in our industry between the colleges and universities that are truly diverse and those that remain bastions of the old elitism --- and a number of institutions feel caught in the middle, wanting to move up the ranks of privilege while looking fearfully at the wave of change cresting on their heels.

At Trinity, as we went through the paradigm shift in our student demographics through the 1990's and early 2000's, we experienced a great deal of controversy and pushback from our various historic constituencies. Faculty complained that "they can't do the work here" while some alumnae proclaimed that they would not donate any more money until we stopped accepting so many black students. At meetings of the Women's College Coalition, some of my sister presidents looked at Trinity's experience with horror --- why provoke so much controversy, why invite the anger that comes with great change in race and social class?

Why not? Didn't our mission, rooted in social justice, call us to do just that as a matter of moral imperative? Fortunately, we had some great good women pushing us to do the right thing, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who founded Trinity. They reminded us that the whole reason

we were founded was to make a higher education accessible to women who were otherwise excluded as a matter of social justice. Their call to act for justice helped to re-center our focus, and over time the transformation of Trinity became the wellspring of our new success. We moved from being defensive to proud in our welcome of students of all ages, races and backgrounds. And we became stronger than ever because we did the right thing and were not frightened by the risks.

More recently, we have been part of [TheDream.US](#), a marvelous organization opening a pathway to college degrees for thousands of undocumented students who cannot get federal financial aid. With the support of scholarships from TheDream.US and private benefactors, we have enrolled scores of Dreamers who are exceptional students and very ambitious women who can and will be strong leaders in their communities in the future. Some people in this country would deny such students the opportunity for a great higher education; I don't understand that, it's just wrong morally, socially and economically. American higher education collectively is wealthy enough to find a place for every single Dreamer who has the talent and ambition to succeed in college.

Trinity is a relatively small university with a slender budget, but we figure out each day how to make the dream of a higher education possible for several thousand low income students of color. If we can do this, so can much larger and wealthier institutions. Higher education needs to confront its own hypocrisy about race and social class in admissions and college life, both academically and socially. We must do this because it's morally right, of course, but also, because the future of this nation depends on it. We know that, already, the majority of babies born in this nation are among populations of color. We know that the national population will be a racial plurality by 2050. We also have to know about these trends in higher education enrollment, from the National Center for Education Statistics Projections to 2023<sup>7</sup>:

- Hispanic enrollment will increase by 34%
- Black enrollment will increase by 25%
- Asian enrollment will increase by 11%
- White enrollment will increase by 7%

Now, to be fair, certainly many colleges and universities are working at many different levels to address issues of race and social class, diversity of student characteristics and the demand for increased equality of opportunity. From the University of Oregon to Princeton and all across the nation in every direction, institutions are grappling with historical markers of racism in the names of buildings and sexism in traditions of campus societies and standing up against homophobic state policies and so many other forms of discrimination against persons because of who they are. We see significant institutional initiatives like the Georgetown Memory Project to acknowledge and begin to amend for the historical sin of institutional profit from slavery and sales of slaves.

And yet, symbols of progress are belied by other entrenched practices and attitudes that need more than earnest reports and orotund presidential pledges to do better. Women continue to suffer horrific abuse on some campuses and the perpetrators of sexual assault still do not suffer just consequences at some places. Just this week we've heard tales of bananas thrown at some black students at one prestigious university, and another is dealing with a racist Snapchat

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, [National Center for Education Statistics Projections to 2023](#)

message sparking outrage. The academic year is young; give it time! Tweaking admissions numbers to admit a few more black or Hispanic or low income or women or gay or transgender or disabled or students who are different in other ways makes not a shred of difference in the long run if those students find the campus to be a hostile, alien place that rewards conformity and humiliates personal difference.

How do we close the gap between the myth of equal opportunity on our campuses and the realities that discourage some students from full participation in all of the benefits of a great higher education? How will we engage in the true transformation that a changing student population demands to ensure ultimate success?

But even after tackling those dispositional and ministerial changes necessary to make our campuses more carefully aligned with our new student populations, we still face an even greater hurdle, a barrier that clearly represses equality of opportunity --- the cost of college and the related issue of debt burdens for too many students.

We academics who generally claim an enlightened world view are remiss if we fail to understand the issue of college cost as a matter of social justice for our students. Financial barriers to attendance can have a chilling effect on the achievement of equality of educational opportunity. We are fifty years past the time when snarling lines of protesters tried to block access for black students at some universities, but today, the metaphor of the snarling barrier plagues many different kind of students, and particularly low income students of color, when they open their bills, when they try to navigate the labyrinth of financial aid, when the bursar hounds them about bringing down their balances or they cannot register again, when they visit the bookstore only to find, to their shock, that the Math 101 textbook is a \$300 “bundle” enriching some software company. Access is an empty promise if the student cannot afford the tools of success. How many college stop-outs walk out of the bookstore and away from the campus never to return?

At Trinity, we do as much as we can to control our expenses so that student prices and fees are as low as possible. We keep tuition low and we discount heavily; more than half of our full-time students from DC effectively have “free college” because we create packages that cover tuition without loans; we have some generous benefactors to help. We have open source textbooks and rented books, we have long operated a food pantry and will provide Metro cards to those who need them. And yet, the need is so great. I once was among those who believed it was a myth that cost would keep a student from going to college. I used to promote the idea that there is a college for every student that is also affordable according to the student’s means. But in recent years, I have seen so much carelessness about expenses in many universities, so much disdain for the whole idea of controlling the factors that drive up student costs, that I have reassessed my position considerably. I still believe that every person who wishes to obtain a college education can find an affordable college option. But the wealth gap among institutions has grown so large that access to an affordable institution is not necessarily access to equality of educational opportunity.

How can those colleges and universities that have great means use their wealth to help close the economic gap that stops so many promising students in their tracks?

### **Myth #3: Liberal Arts Are Dead.**

So, why do we care about any of this? Why is this important? We get to the last great mythology, the most serious danger to our enterprise: the idea that what we have done for centuries might be, actually, irrelevant, that the foundation of university teaching and learning in the liberal arts might now be considered passé, that we should, instead, refocus the idea of the university on job training, on developing apparatchiks for those jobs that pay well enough to boost our profile on the federal government's college scorecard.

It's interesting to me that we've heard a great deal of rising criticism of the worth of college and the purpose of the liberal arts at the same time as we're seeing the rise of more previously marginalized low income students of color into higher education. This strikes me as part of the problem about equality of opportunity ---- shouldn't my students from southeast DC have as much right to ponder Hamlet and trace Socrates' arguments and debate Freud's theories as the rest of us once did? What justice is there in denying the new students in higher education access to the old masters? There's an insidious form of elitism that wants to provide broad access to college for workforce development reasons while rolling up and hiding the old canvases, denying our new students the deeply personal intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment aims of the whole idea of the university.

Questions about the relevance of a college education have seeped into the American consciousness. At the same time, an urgent countervailing demand is to find ways to enroll more students by finding a way to reduce tuition costs and debt burden. Last week, at the same time as Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden was in Los Angeles touting free community college, the group Public Agenda released a poll that revealed that the public is increasingly disenchanted with the idea that college is essential; the percentage saying college is essential has dropped by 13 percentage points since 2009, from 55% to 42%<sup>8</sup>. That same Public Agenda survey reported that 69% of those polled say that many people who are otherwise qualified to go to college do not have the opportunity to do so, which supports some of my earlier comments in this talk. It's also important to note that the majority polled 59% believe that colleges are mostly self-interested and not really interested in students.

So, on the one hand, we have politicians touting expensive programs to make college even more affordable and accessible for even more people, and we have the people saying that they're not sure it's necessary. At the heart of the two competing views of whether college is necessary and worthwhile, or not, is a fundamental question of what college is all about. And for most people, when they talk about "college" they mean undergraduate education, and from there more often than not they mean devoting years of your life and a great deal of money to study in the liberal arts.

Politicians and pundits who love to disparage liberal learning point to reports such as those produced by the Georgetown Center for the Workforce that tout the top-earning majors --- mostly those in engineering and computer science. But the negative rhetoric about the importance of study in the liberal arts often ignores the difference between general education and major program enrollments, and places entirely too much emphasis on ranking disciplines by salaries. If we went only by salaries, we'd have no teachers or psychologists, only petroleum engineers. What a world that would be! And the plain fact is that business, healthcare,

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<sup>8</sup> Public Agenda, [Public Opinion on Higher Education](#), September 12, 2016

psychology and biomedical sciences have dominated the list of degrees awarded since 1970, so in fact students really are majoring in disciplines with direct workforce pathways.

In a recent column in the Washington Post, [Business and Economics Writer Steven Pearlstein](#) wrote,

*“It’s worth remembering that at American universities, the original rationale for majors was not to train students for careers. Rather, the idea was that after a period of broad intellectual exploration, a major was supposed to give students the experience of mastering one subject, in the process developing skills such as discipline, persistence, and how to research, analyze, communicate clearly and think logically.”*

Pearlstein went on to write,

*“In today’s fast-changing global economy, the most successful enterprises aren’t looking for workers who know a lot about only one thing. They are seeking employees who are nimble, curious and innovative. ...The good jobs of the future will go to those who can collaborate widely, think broadly and challenge conventional wisdom — precisely the capacities that a liberal arts education is meant to develop.”<sup>9</sup>*

Quite often, when we unpack the criticism of college curricula, we find that the issue is not really a fundamental problem with the liberal arts, at all, but rather, serious concern about a delivery system that remains deeply rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of academic disciplines and departments, seat time in traditional classrooms and the accumulation of credits without any real validation of the actual outcomes. Given our earlier consideration of the remarkably post-traditional composition of our student bodies, and the increasing demographic changes on the horizon, shouldn’t we be doing more to revise, reformat and renovate the traditional formats, pedagogies, degree requirements and delivery systems for undergraduate education?

This year in the United States, the presidential campaign provides all of the evidence we need of the urgent importance of a college education and the ongoing imperative to sustain the platform in liberal learning. We have a candidate for president who once exclaimed that he “loves the uneducated” who support him in large numbers, and that candidate feeds on the fears and anxieties of large segments of the American population.

We have both candidates often accused of distorting the truth, and there is a large need for the electorate to be able to read, listen, understand, parse and discern what is the actual truth. Effective democracy demands well-educated citizens.

We need the context of History to understand why today’s demagogue threatens our liberties while offering hollow promises of security. We must have the insights of Sociology to understand the corrosive effects of chronic poverty, inequality and racism on our communities and public policies. We must remember the warnings of Plato about the ignorance of those inside the cave, and the questions about who will police the police to safeguard the liberties of the republic are as fresh as today’s headlines. We surely must know the difference between the

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Pearlstein, [Meet the Parents Who Won’t Let Their Children Study Literature](#), The Washington Post, September 2, 2016

enlightened social contract of John Locke and the fearsome alienation of the world governed by Hobbes' Leviathan. We must be able to teach our students about the fundamental moral imperatives of Ethics even as those who aspire to public leadership seem to have skipped those classes entirely. We must sustain general education in the sciences as an antidote to those who would deny a global threat as real as climate change.

Education is the best, most effective antidote to fear and demagoguery, the protection we need to stand up against all of the chicanery and deception and outlandish statements that mock the intelligence of the people of this nation.

American higher education is, or should be, the great counterweight to government in our free society. We are not just one among many industries. We are not curators of museums to old knowledge and past glory. We are the stewards of our dynamic national values of freedom of thought and speech, the freedom to create and explore, the liberty to experiment and question and challenge and develop new ideas for old problems. In recent years, higher education has been so beleaguered, so self-protective, so self-interested in many ways that we have allowed others to seize our narrative, to dumb-down our purpose, to bend the arc of our great promise for a free and just society toward more mundane objectives for commerce and industry. A great college education cannot be merely about what job the graduate will hold upon graduation and how much that job pays (certainly worthy considerations, but not the ultimate goal), but rather, about the economic, political, social and moral choices that educated person will make across his or her lifespan.

This year we have heard politicians calling for revolution, and we have seen the various campfires along the edges of the battlegrounds. The most fundamental question is whose revolution, and to what end? Rather than hunkering down behind our ivy-covered walls, shouldn't American higher education be out there at the forefront of shaping the new American revolution? Shouldn't we be the ones stripping the misfiring muskets from the hands of the old guard and arming the rising generations with the real weapons of social success, the ability to read critically and to keep learning, to explore and measure risks, to challenge the conventional and create new solutions, to stand up against the demagogue and have the courage to exert powerful leadership in favor of justice for all and peace as essential for human freedom and fulfillment.

This is not some old mythology. This is still the best promise of American higher education, and the best hope for our collective future.

How will we make sure we realize this promise more completely?

Thanks for listening.