

**Testimony to the National Advisory Committee  
on Student Financial Assistance  
September 30, 2011**

**Paul Lingenfelter:** Thank you so much. Before I turn to barriers, I'd like to say just a few things about need. In 2008, our association wrote an open letter to both presidential candidates, urging them to make higher education a national priority, urging them to focus on the need for higher levels of degree attainment. Some of my members said, "OK, Paul, so we need 16 million more degrees by 2025, and we will get only 1 million from normal population growth. What makes you think that's possible?" We did a little back of the envelope analysis, which went like this: "If we increase the high school graduation rate by 10 percentage points gradually over 16 years from 68 to 78 percent; if we increase the college participation gradually over 16 years from 55 to 65 percent, and we increase the college graduation rate gradually over 16 years from 30 to 40 percent in two-year institutions and from 60 to 70 percent in four-year institutions, how many degrees will that give us?" That would give 4.3 million more degrees. That's 4.3 million out of a total of the 15 million we need. So the obvious point was to look at the adult learner. We have 8.4 million adults between the age of 25 and 34 with some college and no degree. Those are young adults, and if half of those working adults achieved a credential, that would give us an additional 4.2 million degrees. We have another 8.8 million adults, slightly older, from 35 to 44 with some college and no degree. If we help just a third of that group complete a credential, we'd get another 2.6 million degrees. And then we have 22.7 million adults in the workforce with a high school diploma and no college. If we got just 15 percent of those to enroll and graduate, we'd have 3.4 million more degrees. So to reach the national goal for educational attainment, 30 percent of the incremental degrees can reasonably come from the traditional college age group and 70 percent must come through better education of adult students.

Occasionally, there are people who question whether we need all of this college attainment. I've found some numbers pulled together by Tony Carnevale that address this issue in a compelling way. In 1973, about the time I started my career, we had 66.4 million jobs in the United States held by people with a high school diploma or who had actually dropped out of high school. That was 66.4 million out of 91 million, 72 percent of the workforce. In 2009, we had 64 million jobs held by people with a high school diploma or less than a high school diploma, fewer than in 1973, and those people now account for 41 percent of the workforce. So in the past 35 or so years, all the job growth in this country has been for people who have some college or postsecondary associate, bachelor's or higher degree. Both the proportion of the workforce with higher levels of degree attainment and the economic rewards for having more education have expanded dramatically. The premium for having a bachelor's degree over a high school diploma now is 85 percent in lifetime earnings. So it's very clear that we have a need, and that the nontraditional student is very much a part of it.

**IMPERATIVES FOR  
POLICY & PRACTICE**

**Assess What It  
Will Take to Meet the 2020  
Degree Attainment Goal**

**Understand the  
Importance of the 2020  
Degree Attainment Goal**

Rather than talking about barriers, I think I'd like to say a few words about solutions that will help us get the achievement we need. The barriers will become obvious in these comments. The first solution is to end denial and accept the fact that more educational attainment is vitally important to the future of every American and to our collective future as a country.

Second, I think we need to be serious about authenticity. The tradition in higher education and in elementary and secondary education has been to be fairly fuzzy about defining learning objectives, knowledge, and skills. We have taught students in whatever way fit local norms and the ideas of individual teachers and schools, we identified the students who were most successful, we got the percentage we thought we needed into college, and life was good. To get educational attainment at scale, we're going to have to be much more explicit and intentional about our learning objectives. To be strategic and more successful as educators, we must know what we want, we must be able to measure progress along the way, and we must learn ways of getting more of the educational attainment we seek. From this perspective, the advent of college core-based standards for college readiness, degree qualifications frameworks for postsecondary education, and much more intentional assessment of student learning and improvement of instruction are absolutely essential.

The third solution is to use limited resources more productively. One thing we have to do is assess and give credit for prior learning. And we shouldn't charge the student or the government a premium price for assessing learning that somebody else generated. Second, we need to provide efficient, convenient, coherent, well-structured learning programs for students. Such programs will require focused student effort, and will make focused student effort rewarding, not onerous and not inconvenient. We also need to end excessive time and credit for degrees. We have students who are enrolling in and achieving far many more credit hours than are required to get a degree, and students that are taking far longer than necessary. We need to focus student aid on financially needy and academically engaged students. We need to reduce expenditures where either financial need or student engagement is marginal. We need to focus student aid on institutions which serve students well, that have respectable attainment rates and legitimate, verifiable learning outcomes.

At this time in our history, the most valuable institutions will be those that generate real learning from average or disadvantaged students, not those that generate learning from those students for whom learning is, frankly, easy. The least valuable institutions are those that take the money and the time of average and disadvantaged students without yielding any real success. And that's an issue we have to confront.

## **IMPERATIVES FOR POLICY & PRACTICE**

**Stress that Educational  
Attainment is Vitally  
Important to Our Future**

**Articulate More  
Explicit and Intentional  
Learning Objectives**

**Focus Student  
Aid on Needy Students  
Who Are Engaged**

**Distinguish  
Between Most and Least  
Valuable Institutions**

## **IMPERATIVES FOR POLICY & PRACTICE**

### **Encourage Academic Preparation and Focused Study**

Finally, what can the federal government do? At this interesting time in our history at least some of us are becoming quite critical of governmental solutions to problems. I think part of the key for both federal and state governments is to focus on what each of them can achieve effectively and well, and to divide labor among different levels of government and among institutions in a way that works together to get us toward our goals.

At the federal government level, it's highly critical that we maintain the Pell maximum award at its current level. It is the foundation for low-income students. I've always thought of Pell as the program that enables a low-income student, with part-time work, to pay the cost of living while getting a higher education. States and institutions are then responsible to supplement Pell for such students to enable them to pay the cost of tuition. In too many places, Pell is being used for tuition costs and students are not completing degrees because they are enrolling in too few courses and working too many hours.

The highest predictor I've seen for failure in nontraditional students is the inability to focus on a program of study that is close to full-time or reasonably full-time. If you take one or two courses at a time, the odds of getting anywhere fast are zero and the odds of getting anywhere at all are not much greater than zero. I think we need to define full-time study as full-time study.

The federal government can provide incentives and supports for state aid programs that encourage academic preparation and focused study. The Academic Competitiveness Grant (ACG) program was a well-intentioned idea that addressed an important need, but was infeasible to operate effectively at the federal level. States can do that work; some of them are doing it quite well. A federal program that encouraged states to blend financial need and incentives for academic preparation in providing student aid would be very helpful.

Finally, the federal government has a critical role to play in developing the information resources and messages that help the nation understand and focus on the need to expand educational opportunity and attainment. For almost 10 years, I've been quoting a bit of analysis produced by this Advisory Committee on the college participation rate of students who are in the bottom quartile of socioeconomic status and the top quartile of academic achievement. That kind of data needs to be available at a granular level in every state in the country. The Common Education Data Standards now under development are critically important to meet this need. Some important things don't require a federally managed program, but they do require federal leadership to inspire a national movement. We need a shared national agenda in order to work together in a coherent fashion on the elements essential for the educational attainment needed by traditional students and nontraditional students alike. Thank you.

### **Adopt Common Education Data Standards and a Shared National Agenda**

**In response to a question:**

**Paul Lingenfelter:** Our fundamental problem is that we don't have very good ways of measuring our fundamental product. Student learning is the product, and we use credit hours as both the means of financing institutions as well as measuring what students have achieved. We don't have very good ways of knowing what it costs to generate learning. It clearly costs a different number for different students. The way we've designed our system, it's just exactly backwards: we spend the most money on the most talented students and the least money on the students who need the most help. We're not going to get everybody to the same place—we don't need everybody to be at the same place; difference is okay. But we need more student learning out of our entire population. We've got to find ways of delivering that at the institutional level, and we've also got to find public policies that support that. I'm a big fan of prior learning assessment, I'm a big fan of competency-based credentials, but we don't have common agreement on the assessments and on many things that are quite important. We do for some fields—we do a pretty good job with nurses and engineers—but not for some other things. There's just a whole range of issues that are interrelated. I think the key is getting some agreement about learning outcomes and finding a way of generating more of them.