

A TIPPING POINT?

SHEEO Higher Education Policy Conference

Paul E. Lingenfelter

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You may be wondering how the SHEEO staff picks after dinner speakers for this meeting. We brainstorm ideas, looking for someone humorous, inspiring, and perhaps a speaker who will talk about something interesting but a little unfamiliar to the group. Then we recruit, and sometimes we fail.

Against these criteria, *my* first choice was somebody else. But when the suggestion was made, I decided it would be a good opportunity to share a few thoughts with my friends. Understanding the situation, I will be brief!

If you have ever worked for a state coordinating or governing board or for SHEEO you understand ambiguity.

State government has us clearly labeled: We are higher education, just another self-interested lobby group.

Campus folks also have us clearly labeled: We are government – if not quite “the enemy,” certainly to be kept at arms length, not to be trusted.

Our role “in the middle” has generated all kinds of gallows humor. Steve Portch, former SHEEO in Georgia, says we are like the javelin thrower who wins the toss and elects to receive. Ken Ashworth, a long time SHEEO in Texas, has written the book *Caught between the dog and the fireplug: How to survive public service*.

While the ambiguities are uncomfortable, ambiguity is at the core of our responsibilities.

At the highest level, the interests of government and the interests of colleges and universities are the same – the public interest. But as you know well, decisions in particular situations get complicated and ambiguous. Our core responsibility is to challenge ourselves, higher education, and government on behalf of the public interest. And, while it would be nice to imagine otherwise, we must do this work without any extraordinary wisdom or righteousness.

Despite the tensions and ambiguities of our work, I believe both the public interest and the fundamental objective for public policy in higher education are crystal clear. The public interest is unequivocally the advancement and wide-spread dissemination of human knowledge and skill. More educational attainment is always better than less. While our pro-education objective is unambiguous – the complicated job is to find ways of helping public policy and colleges and universities maximize both the quality and the scope of educational attainment – within the constraints of the possible and while acknowledging and serving other human needs.

As you may have noticed from the program, I've titled these remarks "A tipping point?" The title is hopeful, the question mark is a hedge. But I strongly believe we are on the verge of real progress on our core agenda.

You may be thinking: The economy is in shambles, many states are bankrupt with no end in sight, and it *still* is easier to change the course of history than to change a history course. How can Paul *possibly* be optimistic about educational progress? Let me try to defend my optimism.

1. The first reason for optimism is a prediction that didn't come true. In 1997 Arthur Levine, a decent scholar of educational history, told me it was time for educational reform to lose steam. Historically no reform moment has lasted more than ten years, he said, and by 1997 *A Nation At Risk* had had its run.

We haven't made great progress in the past dozen years, but the steam is not out of educational reform. Ten years has turned into twenty-five years; and like the "little engine that could," educational reform is still puffing away. Why? I think the answer is clear – the external economic and social forces pushing for improvement are unrelenting. They will not go away.

2. Second, we have been building a stronger foundation for progress in higher education. The 2009 SHEEO Annual Report, presented at the Annual Meeting and now on our website, lists 19 recent publications and initiatives on improving postsecondary attainment. (We decided to keep this list to one page in a small font; it is far from comprehensive.) SHEEO is responsible for some of this work, but most of it has been done by others. We are part of a strong and growing community working for educational advancement. This movement is *still* gathering steam. Many of these reports are redundant, which is a good thing. They reflect a growing consensus on what must be done.
3. Third, we now realize that the educational bottom line for America must incorporate both access and student success. The work of educators is no longer about access to a sorting process – it is now much more about capacity building, helping students gain knowledge and skill. Community colleges are critically important to this agenda. I am pleased with the attention and resources they are receiving, and I am encouraged to see them increasingly embracing the challenge.
4. Finally, the President of the United States has helped to make greater postsecondary educational attainment a national priority. The Spellings Commission and No Child Left Behind of the Bush years contributed to the foundation for progress I've described, and I am grateful the Obama administration has decided to build on the entire foundation. The nation is still debating fundamental educational issues, but slowly and surely the clash of opposing ideas is leading toward synthesis and shared commitments.

On February 24, 2009 President Obama articulated a goal – every citizen should graduate from high school and achieve some postsecondary credential. His explicit goal is that by 2020, the U.S. will once again be in a position of world leadership in postsecondary attainment. The

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Lumina Foundation has estimated world leadership will require 60% of our people to hold postsecondary credentials by 2025. An earlier NCHEMS analysis employed by SHEEO set the mark at 55%.

In essence, all of these goals are the same, and they are equally ambitious and challenging. The work ahead for SHEEO and for all of us will surely be focused on four central issues:

- Academic quality and the assessment of educational attainment
- Data systems
- Relationships between K-12 and postsecondary education
- Finance

The SHEEO annual report for 2009 outlines work ahead in each of these areas. We will have extended opportunities to discuss each of them during this conference. Let me try to set the stage for our conversations by highlighting a few issues in each area.

Academic quality and the assessment of educational attainment

Five years ago the Business – Higher Education Forum issued a report, written by Jane Wellman, entitled “Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education. In brief, it said institutional faculty are responsible for defining learning objectives for academic programs, assessing the extent to which students achieve them, and disclosing the results to the public. It also said accrediting associations should improve public communication about standards for learning outcomes at the baccalaureate and associate degree levels.

Today, the LEAP initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities has broadly defined objectives for a baccalaureate degree, the Voluntary System of Accountability advanced by APLU and AASCU includes assessments of learning, CHEA and AAC&U are collaborating in an effort to promote the assessment of learning, the Lumina Foundation has launched discussions on the potential for explicit qualifications frameworks to advance the quality of American higher education, and OECD is doing a pilot test of an international assessment of higher education learning outcomes.

In this environment the responsibilities of states and the relationships among states, the federal government, accreditors, institutions, and institutional faculty all demand attention. A rigorous focus on academic quality is absolutely essential as we strive to increase degree completion. No student holding a flimsy credential has been well served.

Data Systems

Who would have thought ten years ago that public interest campaign could assemble 400 educational leaders and members of Congress in a Washington hotel to promote the improvement of educational data? The Data Quality Campaign has captured a lot of public attention and has successfully promoted the investment of hundreds of millions of federal dollars in the improvement of state data systems. Decision-makers are paying serious attention to this issue, even though most of the improvement still lies ahead.

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I expect the U.S. has the world's most sophisticated cross-sectional higher education data system, but it falls glaringly short in monitoring the progress (or failure to thrive) of individuals through our colleges and universities.

I am grateful that the Gates Foundation, our largest philanthropy, and the U.S. Department of Education seem determined to fix this problem. Working with their help, our job now is to develop a longitudinal data system for postsecondary education that protects privacy, is efficient and effective, and provides solid information on educational attainment along with good clues on how to get more student success.

Relationships between K-12 and postsecondary education

In most states higher education and K-12 education have been disconnected rivals for limited public resources. While the laws of nature have not changed, both sectors are gradually acknowledging their interdependence and responsibility to work at common purposes.

What are these common purposes? And what are our responsibilities as postsecondary leaders? Coming to agreement with the Chief State School Officers on common core academic standards for "college and career ready" and a practical means of consistently assessing achievement would be a good place to start. Along with this we need to support the work of Achieve to promote the college preparatory curriculum as the pathway most likely to help students reach these standards. Developing P-16 data systems that enable us to monitor and improve student performance is also essential. And finally, improving the preparation and continuing professional development of K-12 teachers and school leaders is an unfulfilled national priority. We need to find better ways of making progress on this agenda.

Finance

I went to Google to see what would come up in response to the quote "Money isn't everything." I found: "Money isn't everything, but it ranks right up there with oxygen." And "Money isn't everything, but without it college students would lose touch with their parents." I'd like to suggest a new quote: "Money isn't everything, but how we use it comes close."

While it always has been so, our community is gradually beginning to accept that higher education will never find enough money to make educational improvement effortless or even easy. We are beginning to understand that essential educational progress will be impossible without increasing productivity.

Fortunately, some good ideas are emerging as we forego the comforts of believing the only problem in education is lack of adequate money. The innovations of the Center for Academic Transformation are gradually spreading across the country, even to prestigious institutions such as Carnegie Mellon. We increasingly recognize that well-designed, coherent, efficient academic programs help students succeed and save them money and time. We are becoming less forgiving of wasting precious resources in higher education (as well as in health care, the environment, and the private sector of our economy.)

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I don't believe we will attain the level of educational attainment we need in the United States without real increases in the public investment. But I am equally convinced that educational progress is impeded by unremitting complaining about money. The money dialogue too quickly becomes a veiled argument about what faculty and staff are paid and how hard (or not hard) they work. We need more dialogue about what we are trying to achieve as educators, and less about pay and working conditions.

Let us demonstrate that better results are our top priority and show how we are using the dollars we have to achieve them. If the absence or loss of money is thwarting progress, let us show how and why. Then we may have less difficulty persuading the public that more dollars on the margin will generate benefits worth paying for.

What causes “tipping points?”

Finally it is time for confession. I've not read the *The Tipping Point*. But I won't let that stop me for venturing a few closing comments based on the Wikipedia review of the book! Apparently Malcolm Gladwell argues that “tipping points” happen when a few people combine to create a social epidemic. They are: connectors (who span many different worlds), mavens (information specialists), and salesmen (or persuaders). I'd like to see a social epidemic advancing educational attainment, but that might be excessive hope, even for an optimist.

Dick Elmore, a Harvard faculty member, suggests another metaphor for progress, punctuated equilibrium. This is the process of biological evolution, as explained by Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould. Equilibrium is the normal state in nature, but every so often forces come together to generate stepwise, progressive change. The equilibrium punctuators disturb the status quo and generate progress.

Regardless of the metaphor, and regardless of the speed, it is time to change the educational status quo. It is good to be associated with the connectors, mavens, and salesmen in our community and in this room, and I am convinced our efforts are generating real progress.

It is now time to call it a day. Tomorrow morning we can resume building up steam, fomenting a social epidemic, and punctuating equilibrium. Thanks for your attention and friendship.