

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



*A HIGHER
EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL
THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP
SERIES*

2012-2013 Series:

Responding to the Commoditization of Higher Education

Chapter **10:** **The Intersection of Intent
and Action:**
The College Completion Paradox



The Intersection of Intent and Action: The College Completion Paradox


Dr. Brian Noland: President of East Tennessee State University

The Great Recession has forever altered the landscape of the American higher education system, as institutions are increasingly operating in an environment marked by shrinking state support for operations, rising tuition costs, fluctuating commitments to financial aid, and constant institutional efforts to garner essential resources while concurrently reducing operating costs. While these pressures are unrelenting, the demands on higher education to serve the multiple missions of teaching, research, and service have amplified as states increasingly turn to the academy to serve as a driver of innovation and economic development. These pressures are inflated by the growing state and federal focus on productivity, college completion, and heightened calls for accountability.

Over the course of the past three years, much attention has been afforded by state and national organizations to the completion paradox. From the advent of Complete College America to the emphasis of the National Governors Association on college completion, state systems have experienced a paradigm shift as the focus theoretically moves from the academy's historic access mission to one of college completion. In states such as Tennessee and Indiana, state funding mechanisms have transitioned to an output orientation, the results of which remain fluid and under development.

As institutions struggle to adapt and respond to these uncertainties, policy leaders have urged institutions to adopt public agenda goals that are centered on developing policy mechanisms whereby institutions work strategically to meet statewide, rather than institutional goals. At the core of this clarion call is the public desire for institutions to focus on meeting the nation's growing demands for higher education, which are amplified by the declining stature of the United States as a world leader in human capital production. Policymakers and elected officials have taken this call as an opportunity to challenge post-secondary institutions to re-evaluate and modify their missions so that they meet the educational, economic, and workforce demands of the nation.

“Policymakers...challenge post-secondary institutions to re-evaluate and modify their missions so that they meet the educational, economic, and workforce demands of the nation.”





PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Over the past year, a variety of national reports have detailed the difficulties facing our institutions. From California to Florida, states are struggling with difficult policy choices, and retrenchment has once again entered the lexicon of higher education. As presidents, we are attempting to develop workable solutions to many of the following tensions:

- Support for full-time students provided by state appropriations has declined significantly over the past two decades, while the percentage paid by student fees continues to climb faster than inflation.
- The combination of increasing student fees and federal financial aid policy accenting loans constitutes an important burden on access for low and middle income families.
- Many, if not most, states are facing serious revenue downturns and a competition among agencies for scarce resources. In such times of crisis, higher education has historically not enjoyed a high priority position relative to other state needs.
- At the same time that state support is declining, most states face the possibility of increasing demand as a result of increasing numbers of high school graduates coupled with growing numbers of displaced workers seeking advanced job training and retooling.

While the policy pressures noted above are palpable, there is a concomitant realization that in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, our nation's intellectual edge and creative ingenuity can only be sustained through ensuring that more Americans have access to a post-secondary education. With few exceptions, it is critical for all Americans to attain some level of education beyond high school in order to compete in the global economy. As demonstrated through countless research studies, increased educational attainment results in higher personal income, a better-skilled and more adaptable workforce, fewer demands on social services, and higher levels of community involvement. At a time when higher education is increasingly important, many Americans are unfortunately being left behind. While overall educational attainment levels have increased over the past two decades, considerable disparities exist across racial and ethnic groups, and in most states these gaps are widening.

Given these conditions, it is highly improbable that "business as usual" will get us where we need to be. The leadership of the academy must become more aware of these disparities, but we also must understand what is likely to happen if they are not addressed. Several key trends emphasize this point:

- The U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse. By the year 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau projects a 77 percent increase in the number of Hispanics, a 32 percent increase in African-Americans, and less than a one percentage point increase in the White population. Clearly, the majority of the growth will occur among the populations that are traditionally the most underserved by our current post-secondary system.
- We are losing ground internationally, particularly with respect to our younger population which represents the future workforce. Based on data from the last full census, 26.5 percent of Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher. The nation ranks 5th with respect to this statistic internationally, and the gaps are closing. In fact, we are one of only two nations in the OECD in which our older population is better educated than our younger population.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

- Far too few of our students successfully navigate the educational pipeline. Data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems indicate that nationally for every 100 ninth graders, 70 will graduate from high school on time. Of those high school graduates, 44 will enroll in college in the next year, and only 20.5 will graduate in a timely manner.

Such data are at the heart of the completion agenda and legislation such as the Complete College Tennessee Act. While the completion agenda has dominated the discussion at the statehouse, many across our institutions, particularly the faculty, question its merits in fear that it will water down quality. During a recent faculty senate meeting, I received countless questions related to grade inflation as well as perceived pressure to pass marginal students in fear of budgetary retribution. While such fears are understandable, they are unsubstantiated. From my perspective, the completion agenda is at the heart of regional institutions such as ETSU, institutions that embrace the mission of stewardship of place. While many would balk at the legislative charge subsumed with the Complete College Tennessee Act, ETSU will ultimately embrace this challenge, for in essence, it is not new. While completion may be the mantra of the moment, I submit that it is merely a call to amplify our mission to provide opportunities for students in our respective service areas to realize the dream of a college degree.

During my tenure as Chancellor of the higher education system in the state of West Virginia, I volunteered at a rural elementary school in Southern West Virginia. I was struck by a particular experience that continues to fuel my desire to advance the cause of access to post-secondary education. One morning, I went to the elementary school and read for an audience of third graders who then proceeded to overwhelm me with their unmistakable curiosity and excitement about the prospect of going to college. I departed from this school and traveled to the local high school to give a presentation about the importance of college. While there, I encountered students who were clearly uninterested in continuing their education. I was confounded by their perspective that college was not for them—particularly at a time when a college degree means more than ever for future career advancement. Somewhere between elementary and high school, those students lost the spark for learning and the intrinsic excitement of the educational journey.

It is here that institutional leaders must rise to the challenge of ensuring that all Americans have the opportunity to share in the dream of education. As institutions, we must re-examine our policies to ensure that the doors of college access are open to all. Attention must be paid to the rising cost of college, particularly at a time when the ability of families to pay for college is increasingly strained. The tension is pronounced for institutions such as ETSU, which have historically served as the access vehicles for region.

This fall, we will begin a strategic visioning process (the Committee for 125) that will position the institution to play a leadership role in the access and completion agenda. One of the areas we will examine is the mix of institutional financial programs offered at ETSU. Such programs represent a commitment of scarce resources to advance college access. The challenge for our University is to examine the extent to which our institutional aid programs balance both the demand for access as well as the state's emphasis on completion. Presently our aid programs call for students to complete a minimum of 12 hours per semester, which mathematically does not foster on-time graduation. In addition to structural issues, we will examine questions related to who receives institutional aid and



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

the extent to which such aid is distributed by income level. While we may not be able to make broad promises such as the Carolina Covenant, we can and should adjust aid packages so that maximum investments are made in those students with the greatest need and potential for academic success, rather than simply discounting tuition for those students who would have attended ETSU regardless of the receipt of an award.

As part of the Committee for 125 initiative, we will also review our work with our partners in secondary education to intensify our efforts to address the inadequate level of college preparation for students across our region. Regional disparities in the quality of K-12 schooling, lack of rigorous course-taking, low standardized test scores, and the low rates of high school completion diminish the chances for all, but these challenges are more pronounced for low income and rural areas such as those in East Tennessee. Such P-20 efforts will be centered on curricula alignment, early identification of college readiness, early remediation of academic deficiencies while students are enrolled in high school, and enhanced professional development via faculty exchanges.

The centerpiece of these efforts is the institution's Northeast STEM Innovation Hub, which recently received funding as part of the statewide effort to enhance college access and completion. ETSU faculty will provide a wide array of activities, projects, and initiatives to boost science, technology, engineering, and math skills designed to increase student learning. In conjunction with local leadership, ETSU has been at the forefront of the establishment of a new STEM platform school in Kingsport/Sullivan County, and our faculty will support the success of the school through STEM program planning, including creating new programs using best practices and models; extensive teacher training and professional development; STEM curriculum support; stakeholder network development, including new partnerships/incentives to support the STEM school; and STEM learning opportunities for educators from community organizations, STEM professionals, and parents. By fostering regional partnerships, ETSU's STEM Hub will engage in a number of activities to advance STEM resources in Northeast Tennessee, including: engaging partnerships with business and industry, providing professional development programs for educators, developing partnerships with informal science centers and museums in the community, creating K-16 connections, and supporting teachers to develop new STEM curricular and instruction.

This effort represents one of many that will evolve over the course of the next decade as ETSU turns its focus to the completion agenda, an agenda whose success will ultimately be measured by our ability to address the inequities that are presented when only 20.5 out of 100 ninth graders obtain a college degree. Given the critical role that higher education plays as a facilitator of human capital development, as an instrument of economic development, and as a guarantor of civic literacy and democratic principles, the completion agenda presents an opportunity for higher education to build support among civic, corporate, academic, and political leaders to support this end. If we are successful in moving the dial, we can re-establish faith among policymakers to enhance support for our institutions. The decades of shifting the funding responsibility away from state appropriations and toward students' resources have not been the result of a well-planned or thoughtful policy discourse. The conversation on completion presents an opportunity for such discourse, and only time will tell if we are successful in our pursuit to establish a new public agenda for higher education.



Dr. Brian Noland became the ninth President of East Tennessee State University on January 15, 2012.

Prior to coming to East Tennessee State University, Dr. Noland spent five years as Chancellor of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, a 10-person board that oversees the state's post-secondary education system. From 1998-2006, he worked for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and was promoted through the ranks to become Associate Executive Director. Among his responsibilities while at THEC was implementing the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship program. He also was a faculty member in the Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University.

Dr. Noland received his B.A. in Political Science and M.A. in Public Policy Studies from West Virginia University and holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Tennessee–Knoxville.

Dr. Noland is married to the former Donna Fox of Greeneville, Tennessee, and the Nolands have one son, Jackson.