

The Educational Policy Institute's Week in Review

# Commentary 2007



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	4
<b>ACADEMIC PREPARATION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
The Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ....	6
Getting What We Asked For.....	13
Climbing the “College Ladder” .....	16
Does P-16 Work? .....	19
The Teaching Challenge.....	22
Beyond Access .....	25
Counseling as a Reform Agent .....	28
A Marshall Plan.....	32
Remembering the Alamo .....	35
Testing To Death .....	37
Ensuring Diversity in Higher Education.....	41
New Opportunities in Aboriginal Education .....	43
<b>POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION POLICY.....</b>	<b>46</b>
The Lure of Short-Term Thinking .....	47
Answering the “Hard Questions” .....	50
Distracted By Multi-Tasking .....	53
Wanted: A Patron Saint for Young Universities .....	57

The Education Crisis of 2012 .....	60
Time Running Out on an American Success Story .....	64
<b>FINANCIAL AID.....</b>	<b>67</b>
The Problem with Pell .....	68
Talking Across Disciplines .....	72
Be Careful What You Wish For.....	75
A Slippery Slope.....	78
The Hill is Alive (Finally).....	81
Need to Know.....	85
Does Money Matter?.....	88
Interest-ing Policy Options.....	91
Stop the Insanity! Please! .....	95
Hillary Taking Charge in Postsecondary Education .....	99
The Biggest Decision of the Year .....	102
<b>INTERNATIONAL POLICY &amp; PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>106</b>
Learning as a Strategic Investment.....	107
Daring to be Different.....	110
When Europe Comes Alive .....	113
Regional Development and the Role of the University .....	116
Understanding what they know .....	120
Rankings.....	123
The THES Rankings and the Dawn of Global Higher Education Data Standards.....	127
Foreign Affairs One School at a Time .....	131
International Comparison Not Kind to the US.....	134

<b>INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY.....</b>	<b>138</b>
Competing for Quality .....	139
How Do You Define Student Success? .....	142
Rankings, Rankings, and More Rankings... .....	144
Making PSE Accountability Work.....	147
<b>MISCELLANEOUS .....</b>	<b>150</b>
Progress of a Sort.....	151
Outcomes from Retention 2007 .....	154
A Potpourri of News .....	157
Let's Celebrate: EPI Turns Five!.....	161

## PREFACE

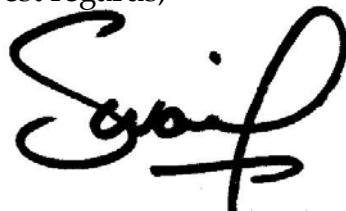
February 4, 2008

Welcome to our second annual Commentary collection from EPI's Week in Review. Throughout 2007, Alex Usher, the Vice President of EPI and Director of EPI Canada, and I have labored through a dedicated writing vehicle each week to try to shed some light on a particular issue that we think is both timely and interesting. Only you, our readers, know for sure if we succeeded. But we continue to enjoy writing these pieces, albeit not at the time that they are typically due for publication.

In the 2006 compendium, we simply listed the articles in chronological order. While this was simple and logical, it didn't necessarily make it an easy read for the reader. Thus, we conformed this year and published our weekly pieces in topical order, starting with a section on articles related to academic preparation issues, followed by postsecondary education policy, international policy and practice, financial aid, institutional quality, and a miscellaneous "catch all" section where the pieces didn't fit so uniquely into the other categories. Of course, some articles fit nicely into two or three categories, but we did the best we can.

In total, we covered significant ground in our postings this year, and we hope that readers will be able to reflect on these in a historical manner. As always, we invite our readers to send us ideas for future postings EPI's Week in Review.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Watson Scott Swail".

Watson Scott Swail, Ed.D.  
President & CEO  
Educational Policy Institute

## **ACADEMIC PREPARATION**

*January 12, 2007*

## **THE LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



It seems appropriate, as we prepare to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in the United States, that today I focus on issues of access and opportunity.

It was almost 44 years ago. August 28, 1963, to be exact, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the infamous march on Washington. The march followed years of protests and violence across the south, and was coordinated to bring national and international focus on the plight of Black men and women and others who were impacted by prejudice. As King once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The march almost never happened. Earlier that year, President Kennedy introduced the Civil Rights bill to Congress that would provide Blacks and others "the kind of equality of treatment which we would want for ourselves." But movement was slow in the years since Brown vs. Board of Education and Kennedy's legislative attempt and people were becoming restless. When informed about the possible march, Kennedy tried to convince the coordinating groups not to do it. "We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol," said Kennedy. "Some of these people are looking for an excuse to be against us; and I don't want to give any of them a chance to say 'Yes, I'm for the bill, but I am damned if I will vote for it at the point of a gun.' Kennedy

wasn't alone. Many supporters were also worried that a march would turn into a riot. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI Director, attempted to preempt the March and had worked diligently to denigrate Dr. King. All efforts failed.

Public officials expected 100,000 people to show up to the March on Washington. On August 28, the day of the march, officials estimated the crowd in excess of 250,000. The District of Columbia essentially shut down. Two Washington Senators games were cancelled (they should have cancelled more; the Senators went 56-106 that year). Attendees were 80 percent Black, and included well-known figures Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Charlton Heston (yes, the actor-former NRA-head Heston), Marian Anderson, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Josephine Baker.

Forty-four years later, what we most remember is King's *I Have a Dream* speech, which I've posted below. The image of King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is embedded in our consciousness, as are his words. In his speech, Dr. King said that they had come to Washington to "cash a check" on the promissory note signed by framers of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. "This note was a promise that all men - yes, black men as well as white men - would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The immediate years following the March were difficult. Only two weeks later a bomb killed four young Black girls in a Birmingham church (Spike Lee brought this story to the screen in 1997's "4 Little Girls"). President Kennedy was assassinated only three months later. In March of the following year there was "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama. One week after the Selma incident, President Johnson said this:

*A century has passed--more than 100 years--since equality was promised, and yet the Negro is not equal. A century has passed since the day of promise, and the promise is unkept. The time of justice has now come, and I tell you that I believe sincerely that no force can hold it back. It is right in the eyes of man and God that it should come, and when it does, I think that day will brighten the lives of every American. For Negroes are not the only victims. How many white children have gone uneducated? How many white families have lived in stark poverty? How many white lives have*

*been scarred by fear, because we wasted energy and our substance to maintain the barriers of hatred and terror? (President Johnson, March 15, 1965).*

President Johnson made civil rights and education a priority. In 1964, he continued Kennedy's work and convinced Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. One year later the Higher Education Act was enacted. But the struggle continued. Dr. King was assassinated in April of 1968, followed only two months later by the slaying of Senator Robert Kennedy.

One can argue how far we have come. Did the March on Washington and King's *I Have a Dream* speech have any impact on race and opportunity in America?

Forty-four years later we now have a day to celebrate this man who, although not perfect, had the leadership ability, direction, and faith to lead a movement and show us how we can make a difference. We surely haven't solved inequity in this country or in any other country. There are still large gaps in educational and societal opportunity. But we've moved closer; we've done better. Perhaps we still have a march of our own to focus on. We've done well in opening the doors of education and opportunity, but we need to do better. We need to teach better so students can "learn" better. We need to show youth of all races, ethnic groups, and income levels that true opportunity exists so they can aspire toward a better future. Through that we all benefit, as does the world. We need to work to ensure that students have a legitimate chance of success in our society; in our world. Let freedom ring.

We have much work to do, but on Monday, January 15, we can take the time to look at the life of an individual who chose to make a difference. Perhaps King said it best and simplest:

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?' "

Martin Luther King, Jr. led by example, and as we continue to work toward better educational opportunities for all citizens of this world, we should take the time to remember his legacy on Monday.

## I HAVE A DREAM

*Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963, Washington, DC*

*I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.*

*Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.*

*But 100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.*

*In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men - yes, black men as well as white men - would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

*It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds."*

*But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley*

*of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.*

*It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hoped that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges. But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "for whites only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

*I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come*

*from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.*

*Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today my friends - so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.*

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

*I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification - one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*

*I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*

*This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.*

*This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"*

*And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.*

*Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.*

*Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.*

*But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.*

*Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.*

*Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi - from every mountainside.*

*Let freedom ring. And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring - when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics - will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

*February 23, 2007*

## **GETTING WHAT WE ASKED FOR...**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*

The National Assessment Governing Board, or NAGB, released test results yesterday on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), better known as the Nation's Report Card. NAEP has become well known over the years because, outside of the SAT and ACT college admissions tests, it is the only true national test that allows us to compare students across the United States.



The report that came yesterday is that, although students are taking a more rigorous curriculum, test scores in mathematics and reading are not increasing. And that concerns lawmakers.

Massachusetts Commissioner of Education David Driscoll, who sits on the NAGB board, said "I think we are sleeping through a crisis." And he may be right.

The results are in part an outcome of the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in early 2002 by President Bush and up for reauthorization this year by Congress. A major component of NCLB is to support (or coerce) state governments to improve its data capacity and report the "Annual Yearly Progress," or AYP (we love acronyms in the US), of students in elementary and secondary education.

The NAEP findings, if accurate, smell of grade inflation and watering down of curricula. Why else could we see a leveling in scores since the last NAEP assessment in 2002, especially when the courses are supposedly more rigor-

ous and the grade point averages of students higher than before? That mathematics principal seems pretty straightforward to me. If the dependent variable is constant, and the two main independent variables have increased, then there has to be something else going on. In this case, the quality of education, not to be equated with rigor, is potentially at play.

Even the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, said yesterday that if students are taking more challenging courses and earning higher grades, "we should be seeing greater gains in test scores." But we aren't.

The nation has been asking for more data on education for the past decade. President Clinton tried to get a national test in place, built largely on the NAEP, but couldn't push it through the Republican Congress, who emphasized that the federal government should stay out a state issue. But only a few years later, that same Congress rubber stamped the newly-minted President's plan for national testing that far surpassed what Clinton had posed.

Today we have 50 states and several jurisdictions working under the umbrella of NCLB and redefining how they measure the academic progress of over 55 million students in 110,000 schools in 10,000 school districts across the country. But they don't use NAEP. They use whatever they want to, making comparisons difficult at best. We know this personally at EPI because we're attempting to make sense of AYP of students with special needs in states across the country, and it isn't easy.

But data are coming, and we must ask the simple question: are we prepared for the answers we may get from these assessments? I believe many states have been worried about this issue for years, which is why many were reticent about national testing and AYP. They really didn't want anyone to know about their dirty little secrets. Education is a multi-billion dollar business, and if academic outcomes are equated with the resources put into the system, it doesn't look very good. The new data that come from NAEP, and additional data from NCLB advances over the next few years, have the potential to show how poorly we really do with students, and how there is a potential for systems to "play the data."

Conversely, and the point I try and make to professionals, is that these are the data we need to push educational reform. If we don't know where the challenges lay, how do we know what to fix? The NAEP report released yesterday clearly shows that there is a critical issue to tackle. In the words of Secretary Spellings, "We have our work cut out." And we do.

Data collection and the use of data are clearly important for improving education. It is the foundation of the No Child Left Behind Act. Today we will continue this conversation with our first [EPILive](#) program. EPILive is our web-based talk show on educational issues, and today we welcome Aimee Guidera and Nancy Smith of the Data Quality Campaign, which is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of educational data collection and use in the 50 states. Providing a state perspective is Bethann Canada of the Virginia Department of Education.

If you would like to engage with these individuals at EPILive, join us at 1pm EST today. EPILive uses webinar software and requires telephone dial-up for audio, and participants can ask questions via a chat mechanism on the site. Joining the discussion does require a [quick registration](#) process that should be done in advance to ensure we can email you the appropriate logon and phone information.

*March 2, 2007*

## **CLIMBING THE “COLLEGE LADDER”**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



I have a pet peeve. And it involves all those state and provincial coalitions or organizations or strategies that use the term "K-20." The "K-20" partnerships, like those found in GEAR UP and other programs, which are supposed to engage practitioners at the secondary and postsecondary levels to provide a seamless transition and opportunity for students, make postsecondary education more or less inevitable.

I apologize in advance for those organizations that are making a good go of it. And I'm sure there are plenty (and please email me with that information for my very, very short list) of school districts and local-area colleges that are doing a magnificent job. But I'm thinking that most of them are a sham. After researching these and related issues for the past 15 years, I don't see much of a collaborate effort. But "K-20" sure sounds good.

This past September, the [American Youth Policy Forum \(AYPF\)](#) released a compendium of programs ([The College Ladder](#)) that afford students the opportunity to pursue their postsecondary education while in high school. Now, this is K-20 from my vantage point, because students, either with counseling or self-counseled, choose to pursue these options. These "SPLOs," or "Secondary-Postsecondary Learning Options," as coined by AYPF, include programs such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Dual Enrollment, Tech Prep, and early college programs.

Okay, These programs are important, not just for the elite of our high schools, but for all students to gain an idea that the twelfth grade isn't the end of the road. The problem we have in many schools is that students often see their senior year as a waste of their time. By the start of the senior year for some students, the SAT/ACTs have been written (in the US), the college visits have occurred, and they are already focused on where they are going. Others, of course, haven't a clue by March of their senior year.

True K-20 systems would reduce this waste of human resource and engage students to an educational process linked to their future career. If you ask most secondary students, they don't quite see how their education is relevant to the real world. How does struggling through trigonometry help someone who is more of a liberal arts type? Of course, you and I know that high-level mathematics is about critical analysis and thinking, but youth don't get that. So there exists this struggle to make high school relevant, and having a systematic linkage to postsecondary options--including workforce and trade options--is particularly important for at-risk students--those students who particularly don't see the utility of a good education (assuming they have access to a "good" education).

These SPLOs can be an important component of the educational process, and provide four important opportunities for students. First, they provide an opportunity for students to visualize their future. Students who take these types of courses or programs aren't looking at today--they're looking well beyond their high school diploma, and that's a good thing. It makes high school matter. Second, SPLOs offer students an insight into what postsecondary education is like. Students gain a better understanding of the rigor required and can develop those skills in a safe, less-threatening environment. In many cases, students can get the chance to take these courses on a college campus. Third, students typically get college credit for these courses, reducing the number of credits required while actually in college, reducing the time-to-degree for students.

I remember attending the Advanced Placement Awards Program at the College Board's National Forum several years ago. If you ever want to work on your inferiority complex, attend one of these events. The kids they put on

stage will knock your socks off (and I wrote “sox” the first draft, so there you go). Some of these high schoolers had taken 15—yes, 15 Advancement Placement courses and tests. What does that mean? These students enter college as sophomores—half way through their sophomore year. Now, this isn’t the average student, quite obviously. But for other students, if they can take 1 or 2 dual enrollment programs, they get a leg up on their postsecondary education. And this leads to the fourth reason. By taking SPLOs, students reduce the cost of postsecondary education because their time in PSE is reduced, as per the AP example above. And that reduces the stress on the student, parent, institution, and taxpayer.

I hope we get to a place where K-20 is real and tangible. I don’t see it yet, but perhaps some readers will enlighten me. I’m still at a place where I bristle when I hear some policymaker or administrator extolling the virtues of their K-20 program. A quick peek behind the wizard’s curtain reveals the same old stuff, typically. But in lieu of this, let’s hope that these SPLOs can continue to gain ground and revolutionize our high schools, making them more relevant for all.

If you’re interested in this topic area, please join us today at 1pm for [EPILive](#) on the web, featuring AYPF’s Betsy Brand and Jennifer Lerner, plus Daniel Voloch of the College Now program at Hostos Community College in the Bronx. We’ll be talking about “The College Ladder” publication and implications for youth policy. Click here to sign up for today’s free web-based event. And join us next week (March 9) for a conversation about diversity and affirmative action with Proposition 209 architect Ward Connerly and legal analyst Art Coleman of Holland and Knight LLC.

*June 29, 2007*

## **DOES P-16 WORK?**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



I had the opportunity to present at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's P-16 Summit yesterday morning in Austin, TX. The conference brought together 600 stakeholders from around the state to discuss how to "do" P16 better.

The P-16 discussion has grown in the last few years with the acknowledgement that there needs to be a more seamless transition between K-12 and postsecondary education. This is certainly true. Of course, the conundrum is trying to encourage both sectors to play well together. K12 often looks at higher education as "know-it-alls," while higher education looks down its nose at K-12 as those people who can't teach children anything. Both are flawed views, surely. Especially when one realizes that it is, ultimately, higher education is responsible for training the nation's teaching force.

I've always been somewhat cynical of "P-16," or "P-20" initiatives. Not because they shouldn't be done or aren't potentially very important, but because they seem to become just another educational cliché that in the end does very little. I could be wrong. But I do see a lot of people throwing these terms around with very little to show for it. In true definition, P-16 is a fine concept:

P-16 is the shorthand term for a student-focused, comprehensive and integrated system that links all education levels from preschool (P) through postsecondary. It is a powerful framework for citizens and policymakers to use to

improve teaching and learning and thus better prepare students for living, learning, and working in a changing world. (Mid-East Tennessee P-16 Council ([www.p16.org](http://www.p16.org))).

Who can't agree with the above? It is ultimately what we would like to see. The most important part of P-16 is the alignment of standards and expectations for education throughout the education continuum, from pre-school to and through postsecondary education. At one level, this seems like a simple concept; on another it is a sea of complexity to align two disparate systems. Adding complexity is the true diversity of higher education. K-12 is fairly simple: mostly public, but some private, but they all walk the same walk. Not higher education. It is, for all intents and purposes, all over the place. Over 3,000 two- and four-year, public and private institutions in the United States alone with diverse missions and roles. And it's entirely elective, while K-12 is mandatory until the age of 16.

To date, 31 states are involved in a P-16 collaborative. The goals of these efforts include:

Every child ready for school by age 6

Every child proficient in reading by age 8

Every child proficient in geometry and algebra by age 13

Every learner completing a rigorous core curriculum by age 17

Every learner expected to complete the first two years of college by age 21  
(Van de Water & Krueger, 2002)

The only one I argue with is the final bullet. I do not necessarily believe that ALL students need to complete two years of postsecondary education. This would exclude trades which are typically 9 month programs and apprenticeship programs. We are best focused on preparing all students for postsecondary studies, but not requiring or demanding postsecondary study.

The truth is, higher education has become more of a credential need than a skill requirement. I argue that some students who have excellent high school

experiences are more prepared than some BA graduates: it's all about the rigor of the program. If we did high school better, we could ramp down our educational arms race. This was noted in a recent article on Ph.D. degrees, where critics feel that the terminal degree is being watered down. We've said this about every degree in the education continuum.

Nonetheless, the success of P16 collaboratives come down to a few elements, the first two, and perhaps most important, being powersharing and communication.

Powersharing is the term we use to describe how the K12 and postsecondary systems come to terms with the joint process of P16 collaboration. Each group must be assured that they have an equal standing in the arrangement. Otherwise, the initiative will not prosper. P16 isn't a process where one side is trying to take advantage of the other; rather, it is an arrangement where both levels are trying to align their systems for a seamless transition for students.

Communication is required to ensure the powersharing structure is working and that all stakeholders have a voice in the conversation. The successful states, such as Georgia, have created state-wide offices for the P16 collaborative. This is mostly a communications device.

Also important in any of the collaboratives is ensuring that safety net programs are in effect. If all students are required to learn at a high level and proceed to PSE, then their needs to be safety net programs to protect those who have not yet developed the skills to succeed academically compared to their peers. This is critical to the success of a P16 effort.

And finally, it comes down to quality. If the P16 collaborative focuses on quality of education and of system alignment, the P16 has a much greater opportunity to work. Thus, a successful P16 collaborative needs to ensure appropriate powersharing, communication, and quality of all inputs.

For what its worth.

*July 13, 2007*

## THE TEACHING CHALLENGE

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



There is much I could talk about this week (especially on Friday the 13th) at the Congressional level. The House passed the College Cost Reduction Act of 2007, only to have it vetoed by the President (since that's all he does now). But I previously spoke on the content of the Act (["The Hill is Alive"](#)), so I'll not bore you with the details.

This week I point to an article we highlight in our Week in Review by David M. Herszenhorn of the New York Times titled ["How Hard Can It Be to Teach? The Challenges Go Well Beyond the Classroom."](#) This caught my fancy, especially as a former middle-school teacher in my home town of Winnipeg, Manitoba and in Hampton, Virginia.

Herszenhorn describes the difficulty of teaching, not as much from the academic perspective, but the knowledge of what it takes to "teach" students who, especially at the younger grades, can't put too many pieces together at the same time. It is a process of reductionism, or as my California colleague David Roth would say, it is about "deconstructing" knowledge.

Teaching is tough work, and I will always side with teachers about conditions and the taxing work they do. My brother argues that teaching is an easy job; heck, they get 2-3 months off. That much is true, but if I calculate all the time spent developing new curricula, grading papers and assignments, phoning parents and keeping up with students, let alone coordinating the "Odyssey of

the Mind” clubs and the technology clubs, and also my adjunct teaching to teach teachers to teach better (which was a professional obligation), I was a pretty busy guy as a teacher. My wife, the former German teacher, left teaching in part because of the “evening” expectation and responsibility of teaching. Good teachers don’t leave their work at the office.

Still, we don’t teach well enough in the US or in Canada, from my perspective. Perhaps I’ve been out of the classroom too long (1993), but I don’t see enough “good” teachers and good teaching in the field. I see “great” teachers along my research travels, but not enough of them. Herszenhorn quotes the Chancellor of the NYC Public School system, Joel Klein: “The most important thing in education is the quality of teachers.” And this is undeniably true. Take away everything else, and the quality of our teaching force is critical to the development of our youth and our economy.

But other factors participate, too. Klein continues: “The two major ingredients are what you get paid and a combination of working conditions and job satisfaction.” As a teacher, I enjoyed teaching, but there were “conditions” that made my job very difficult. When I was teaching in Hampton, my lab (I was a technology teacher) was not air conditioned. Let me give you a visual. Hampton, Virginia, where the June average temperature is in the 90s with a humidity rate of about 150 percent (OK, my math may be off). But I basically taught in a sweatshop, until I lobbied and finally “won” air conditioning in my final year of teaching. I was fortunate that I was a good lobbyist at the time, a skill that not everybody has or appreciates.

We’ll get better teachers if we raise the profession via salaries and conditions. Teaching is one of those vocations that borderlines on a “profession.” Every teacher believes it; almost no parent does. It doesn’t hold much esteem in the public, which is truly too bad, because, beyond a pediatrician, what other group of people hold so much sway with the development of your children? But this is an issue where the teaching “profession” has some responsibility, because it has allowed that perception to permeate society. But teachers need to take a stand, and hopefully the NEA and the AFT will do more than just act like the Teamsters outlet.

In December the [National Center on Education and the Economy](#) released a report called "[Touch Choices or Tough Times](#)." I commented on this in my column [A Revolution in School Reform](#) (December 15, 2006). I strongly urge Week in Review readers to check out that column again and also the report, because it presents a foundation for how we can improve teaching and learning in the United States, and I think in Canada, too.

Of course, if only we have the political will to do so.

*January 5, 2007*

## **BEYOND ACCESS**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



Here's an interesting stat: at current rates of growth, the number of students in post-secondary education world wide will double in less than ten years. In other words, by mid-next decade, outside of sub-Saharan Africa, global participation rates in higher education will be roughly the same as they were in the United States in the mid-1980s.

At one level, this is excellent news. It signals the emergence of a global, educated middle class which can only be good for prosperity, stability and democracy. But it also represents a serious economic challenge for policy makers.

The reason Americans and Canadians never heard that "giant sucking sound" from Mexico when NAFTA was signed was simply that while Mexican workers were cheap, they weren't all that productive because of their low levels of education. As a result, most American and Canadian workers never faced any competition from Mexico.

To be blunt, that won't be the case any more. As the worldwide supply of bachelor's graduates increases dramatically, there will be immense downwards pressure on wages more or less across the board.

What's the right policy to deal with this? One policy response - the one most western governments seem to have settled on - is to work towards expanding access in their own countries, in order to allow more people to compete at the

highest levels in the global economy. This is laudable from an egalitarian point of view and is of inestimable value to "new entrants" to the graduates market. But it is worth making the point that if the problem is a glut of graduates, adding to that supply simply makes the general problem more acute.

So expanded access is at best half a solution - and, it is worth noting one that implies declining returns for governments and individuals alike. Where we currently think of educational investment as a "can't-lose" slam-dunk, in future education will be a much lower-percentage jump shot. That will make it very hard to ask individuals for higher tuition and harder, too, to justify public investment as a "good investment". In other words, the global expansion of higher education could paradoxically mean some very hard times for colleges and universities.

Or at least, that will be the true if we can't clearly make the case that our students are getting a much-better quality education. Now it is almost certainly the case that our students are receiving a better education than their developing world counterparts. Simply put, these new Asian higher education systems - some of which literally did not exist thirty years ago - simply do not have the trained staff, or the research or managerial infrastructure to provide anything like a North American or European-quality education to anything more than a tiny elite of students. Yet.

But there is no reason to be complacent. Asian universities are in a similar position globally to the domestic position of universities in Texas or Alberta forty years ago. They aren't much to look at right now, but given that they are located in economies with immense long-term growth potential, it is simply inevitable that by mid-century - if not sooner - they will almost certainly have caught up in every way that matters.

So it is imperative that we think about quality in higher education - and how to measure it - very hard. Quite simply, it is the only way to ensure that public higher education continues to be a relevant and attractive investment.

Unfortunately, this second half of the equation has yet to make itself felt seriously in policy circles. True, the Miller commission in the United States, of course, put the issue centre-stage for the better part of 2006. But already, the

energy behind the quality movement seems to be dissipating in the face of populist subsidies masquerading as access measures. Whether it is student loan interest subsidies in Washington or education tax credit rebates in Manitoba, governments seem much more concerned about how much public money they can give away to families and young voters than they are about engaging seriously with the issue of quality and quality measurement in higher education.

We may have fifteen years or so to ensure that our education systems maintain their present lead over those in the developing world. We will all pay an enormous price if we allow our governments to ignore this task.

*January 26, 2007*

## COUNSELING AS A REFORM AGENT

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



This past Monday, the [American Council on Education](#), in partnership with a number of other organizations, hosted a summit titled "[Advancing College Readiness: Higher Education's Role in Improving America's High Schools](#)."

According to the InsideHigherEd article reference in this week's news below, the summit 'outlined the role higher education leaders should plan in ensuring that high school graduates learn the right skills and graduate ready for college in the workforce.'

Obviously, higher ed has an important role in "reforming" K-12 education, since it prepares the instructional staff and administrators of all public and private schools in this country. But even Mike Kirst, the former Stanford professor, found it interesting that this summit on improving college readiness focused almost exclusively on higher education without the involvement of the K-12 sector. Kind of funny, but not at all surprising.

There are many things that need to be done to remedy the woes of public education in the US, let alone Canada and other countries, and the Marc Tucker report I wrote about a few weeks ([December 15](#)) back is an important step toward making progress. But a second report issued this week by [TERI](#) (The Education Resource Institute), a Boston-based non-profit loan agency, reported that, despite interventions by TERI and other organizations, Boston-area students were ill-prepared to access and succeed in higher education.

TERI's VP and a friend of EPI, Dr. Ann Coles, noted that any progress must involve the full cooperation of K-12 and higher education, which is significant given Kirst's comments at the ACE summit.

The TERI report offered a series of recommendations for progress, including "aligning standards," and "expanding opportunities" for exposure to college, and even offering financial literacy guidance. But I still think most of these things miss the point of why students don't progress to college: they don't know why they should go.

When I conduct seminars on the issue of student access and retention, I almost always ask participants to think back when they were undergraduates, let alone high school students. I ask them to think about how they felt at that time. Were they intimidated by their new surroundings? Did they know what they wanted to do and how they were going to do it? I find that most people can use their own history and the histories of their friends and fellow students to provide a better understanding of the barriers to education for today's students. The issues have changed, but not as much as most of us would like to think they have.

A big part of this comes down to middle and high school counseling. We do a really poor job of counseling students in their formative years about the world after high school. I firmly believe that most students come out of high school, if they are lucky to get that far, without a grasp of what they want to do "when they grow up." I often refer to Paula Poundstone's joke: "Do you know why old men are always asking children what they want to do when they grow up? They're looking for ideas." There's some truth in Poundstone's statement. Many of the students go to college because they're supposed to. For many, their parents went, or their older brothers or sisters went. So, there existed a pathway and expectation to follow. Still, many of these students don't know why they are going. For first-generation students, it gets more complex, because they don't even have the legacy to follow.

So, perhaps the most important thing we could do in secondary education—aside obviously than "imparting knowledge" on our children, is helping them find out who they are and what they want to do on this earth. This is a significant concept that we pay little attention to in the education field.

A short two years ago we conducted a study for the [Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority](#), better known as MOHELA ([Click here](#) for the study, also referenced in the side bar). Quentin Wilson, the former commissioner for higher education for the state and now associate director at MOHELA, hired us to study counseling and conduct focus groups of counselors around the state. Our findings are in the publication.

Missouri counselors were quick to note that they spend a lot of time on "non-counseling" activities, such as addressing student tardies and dealing with other social issues. While these activities are important, they don't get at one of the most vital aspects of counseling: academic planning and career development. How can we expect students to process the importance of higher education if we haven't conducted significant career counseling and exploration with them? The TERI report outlines some recommendations, and the ACE summit focused on some real issues for improving academic preparedness and college access, but if we don't get our hands around the counseling issue, we won't see significant improvements of college access AND success.

Just as there is a push now for financial literacy training, which gets my solid vote, we need to establish a priority for career exploration. This requires the destruction of two main barriers: first, we need to provide lower the ratio of counselors to students. Currently, there is approximately 1 counselor for every 488 students in public schools in 2003-04, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In the District of Columbia, the ratio is 1:1301 and in Wyoming it is 1:222. The American Student Counselors Association recommends that an appropriate ratio is 1:250. The first step is getting more and more qualified counselors into our schools.

The second step is to revise the curricula and school day such that these counselors can have an effect. Numbers mean little if they don't have access to the students. There needs to exist a process where students go through a rigorous exploration process.

Third is to provide the tools for counselors and students to undertake this study. A couple of years ago I had dinner with two gentlemen who were designing an electronic career assessment system for people of all ages. Today it is called [Career DNA](#), and I urge you to take a look. Career DNA, and other

systems like it, can serve as a great resource for counselors, and at least let us force students to undertake a minimum review of their skills, aptitudes, and hopes for the future.

Counseling isn't the end all, silver bullet answer to the access question. But I don't seriously know how we get any further without pushing the counseling envelope further over the next few years. I'm a strong advocate of counseling. Back at [Vincent Massey Collegiate](#) in Winnipeg (think of the days of large hair), I spent much of my free time in the counselor's office. To this day, I remain in touch with two of them, Kirk Kuppers and Kathy Lautens (A "HI" to both of them in the tundra).

Kudos to ACE and TERI and the other agencies forcing this agenda. But let's remember the role of counseling on this trek.

*March 16, 2007*

## A MARSHALL PLAN

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



This week's EPI Live guest is Bill Tierney, Director of the USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) which has recently floated the idea of a "[Marshall Plan](#)" for California Higher Education.

I admit I was skeptical about the idea of a "Marshall Plan" when I first heard it. I think I've heard too many inadequate or simply poorly designed policies passed off with grandiose titles meant to invoke the legacy of large post-war spending programs (seriously, how many times have you heard people propose something and describe it as a "New GI Bill"?)

But I was pleasantly surprised by CHEPA's proposals. They lack nothing in ambition, but - unlike a lot of the nonsense floating around public policy circles in Washington, Ottawa and various state and provincial capitals - they focus squarely on real problems and proposed focused solutions to fix them.

There's a guarantee in there for free tuition - but only for those from low-income families. Three of the eight points in the plan deal squarely with academic preparedness for college: an issue on which both Congressional Republicans (who supported repeated White House attempts to kill TRIO) and Democrats (who tend to act as though access is entirely a financial issue) have less than stellar records. Another deals with the sadly-neglected but very real gaps in advising and counseling at the secondary level - a problem which I

see raised constantly in forums across both countries but which has failed to gain traction anywhere as a political issue.

Most importantly, the program doesn't throw money around where it's not needed. No tuition freezes, no universal grants, no loan subsidies. This is about providing targeted measures to help the least advantage, not spending public money to appease middle-class parents whose children are already in school. Middle-class parents might need help, but they aren't most in need of help....a distinction too often lost by politicians.

NOTE: Anyone needing proof that idiocy is not confined to Washington or that the left is as capable as the right of shoveling money into the pockets of the wealthy (for no good reason) need only take a short visit to the province of New Brunswick, where this week the Liberal government announced in its budget that it would be devoting \$7 million to getting rid of parental contributions to provincial student loans. That's right, folks – a mere 30 years after the Carter Administration made one of its worst domestic policy mistakes, allegedly-lefty Canadians can repeat history as farce by handing money over, no questions asked, to people with no demonstrable financial need. Not enough to make you weep? Consider that this \$7 million in New Brunswick could provide another \$1,000 to every current grant recipient's aid package.)

If I have one minor quibble with the recommendations, it's the last one which suggests providing \$20,000 in loan relief to graduates who perform unspecified 'public service' work. This kind of workforce-contingent student aid is becoming increasingly popular in North America, but on the whole these are misguided attempts to subsidize public service work. If public service jobs are not well-paying enough, should we not increase salaries in them across the board and not just for indebted students. Are public service jobs only for the poor and not the rich? Conversely, are indebted students only worthy of extra subsidy if their interests lean against working in private enterprise?

But as I say, this is a minor quibble. More people should read the Marshall Plan and pay attention not just to the "big ticket" stuff on tuition, but also on the very real and detailed solutions to non-financial barriers as well. It's a welcome addition to the current debate and Tierney and his colleagues deserve congratulations.

Before I go, a note to our Canadian readers - Monday is Budget Day in Ottawa, and while PSE isn't going to be the centre of attention, we do expect at least something small on student aid as well as significant news on federal-provincial transfers respecting (among other things) PSE. If you're an EPI subscriber, we'll be aiming to get you our analysis of the Budget before 9 AM on Tuesday. If you're not, then we hope to have a full document up on the web by late that day.

*March 30, 2007*

## **REMEMBERING THE ALAMO**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



It's an early Friday morning in San Antonio, Texas. I just came back from a walk around the infamous Alamo (or, more correctly, the Mission San Antonio de Valero), which I've done several times in my life, but am always taken by how humbling an experience it is.

The Alamo only vaguely resembles what it was in 1836, when the battle between Santa Anna and the Texans occurred. For those of you not steeped in the history, this is where Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and pals succumbed to intense fighting from thousands of Mexicans. Still, looking at the Alamo reminds us of the battles that have been waged to protect rights and fight oppression, for which the Texans were fighting.

I am here at a special conference hosted by [Innovative Educators](#), a small, for-profit group that orchestrates occasional events in education. Today's conference is focused on Latino students and educational opportunity, an issue at the core of the Educational Policy Institute's mission.

What we understand is that Latino youth face barriers beyond most other youth in America. On average, they live in lesser neighborhoods, go to lesser schools, and are taught by lesser teachers. A much smaller percentage of Latinos graduate from high school, go to college, and graduate than White or Asian students.

Not to run an analogy to strongly, but I wonder when we, as a nation, are going to decide to fight for Latino, Black, Native American, poor White youth, and others who are historically disenfranchised by society? In Canada, we obviously can extend this to Aboriginals and First Nations, in addition to low-income youth.

Our governments -- state, provincial, and federal -- work at an incremental pace, meaning that public policy grows at a rate well below the pace of industry and global change. It seems we can't even get even, let alone get ahead. This is a frustrating issue for some of us policy wonks. In the US, Senator Kennedy is leading the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, but most of us understand clearly that NCLB is hardly the answer. Many practitioners argue that NCLB has made the challenge more difficult from the federal intrusion. Who really knows...

But we need to do something to jump start the conversation. For our part, the Educational Policy Institute, in partnership with the University of Maryland, College Park, is hosting a National Capitol Summit on Latino Youth and Educational Opportunity on Capitol Hill June 13-14. Many scholars, members of congress, and others will be in attendance to discuss the challenges, and hopefully, solutions to the plight of Latino youth. This summit certainly won't remedy the issues, and maybe we won't accomplish much, but it is our hope that our conversation, tacked on to what we are doing here in San Antonio today, will help leverage political willpower to make change not only plausible, but possible.

The registration information will be posted this weekend. Please come back and visit us on Monday and register for this important conversation in the Nation's Capital. We can only make a difference by trying.

Remember the Alamo...

*October 19, 2007*

## **TESTING TO DEATH**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



This summer, [Education Week](#)'s Scott Cech wrote about test scores in 12 states, based on a study authored by Bruce Fuller of UC-Berkeley and the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) at Stanford. [The report](#) finds that while academic progress appears to be increasing in mathematics, the growth rates are below those posted before and during the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Additionally, the study finds that in reading, there has been no closing of the gap by race/ethnic groups since 2003, although scores were closing before NCLB, and only Latino students have continued to make progress in mathematics.

A number of other studies, including one also reported in Ed Week the same week on students in Chicago Public Schools, show outcomes that are all over the place in terms of educational progress.

It seems to me that part of the problem is how we test students and how significant or "real" the numbers are. There is a danger in breaking out only a few pieces of data from a large dataset.

In 1993, AFT president Albert Shanker said that "we need less frequent but far better testing" (ETS, 1999, p. 4). Almost 15 years later, it is arguable that the opposite is true: we have more frequent and less effective testing.

Testing is clearly driving public education in the United States. As I've stated before, this isn't just because of NCLB. Testing was alive and kicking well before NCLB. In 2001, before enactment of NCLB, I conducted a site visit of a school in Olympia, Washington to look at their use of technology in the classroom. The elementary classroom was using [AlphaSmarts](#), a keyboard-based portable tool that allows students to type in classroom notes and assignments. A very cool little device when integrated prudently into the curriculum. However, during the site visit we noticed that the AlphaSmarts were literally packed away in a closet. I asked the teacher why this was the case, and she said that, for the past two months, the AlphaSmarts were packed up in order to focus on the "WASL." The WASL, for those not in the "know," is the acronym for the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, and is Washington's high-stakes test for students (since the mid 1990s). Essentially, teachers were teaching the test.

This isn't just a Washington State phenomenon. We have heard the same stories for the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) in Texas, the CAT (California Achievement Test) in California, and the SOLs (Standards of Learning) in Virginia. With the passage of NCLB in January 2002, state testing only increased. But is it better?

There is nothing wrong with testing. As an educator, I must say that testing for diagnostic and comparative purposes is essential to (a) understanding the learning deficits of students; (b) weighing a teacher's ability as compared to other teachers, as well as to measure the pedagogical competency of a teacher; and (c) measure the progress of schools, districts, and states in particular academic areas. But we do each of these things poorly in most cases.

First, testing conducted today in support of state requirements and NCLB is rarely used for diagnostic purposes, which should be the primary reason for testing. In Virginia, we get a statement each year about our childrens' progress on the SOLS, but I have no indication that any of this information is used to alter the teaching in the schools to focus on the deficits rather than the strengths.

Second, some states, like North Carolina, do use state testing to measure teachers and schools. This, of course, has not been without its critics, who

complain that it is a misuse of student testing. Not necessarily so. It may be a harsh reality, but outcomes are outcomes.

And third, the NCLB effort was conducted, in part, to provide a measuring stick for schools, districts, and states with respect to the academic growth and performance of students. This can be done within states (although the ability to do this is variable across states), but it cannot be done well across state lines because most states use different measures. This was done as a means of political expediency during the drafting of NCLB legislation: states wouldn't sign on to NCLB (nor would the senators and members of congress) if the federal government was to legislate the test that would be used to measure student progress. After all, education is a state responsibility. However, this aspect of NCLB is the Achilles heel of the entire testing phenomena in the US. One of the primary reasons for having the tests can't be delivered—comparison.

I am a firm believer that curriculum really doesn't need to be dramatically--if any--different from state to state, province to province. For the most part, mathematics is mathematics, and chemistry is chemistry. In social studies, there are regional issues, but most US students should be learning about the same national history, and perhaps a whole lot more world history and politics. The study of English and literature is the same: I can't be convinced that the needs in Oregon should be different than those in Maine.

I've harped on this before, but it is an important point. Each state legislates what is to be learned in public and private school. Over the past 15 years, we have started to focus on national "standards" in science and mathematics and other areas, but still, there is incredible latitude in what states can mandate for high school graduation, which, in turn, has a tremendous impact on what is mandated for college admissions.

Because of the variability, the need for an enormous plethora of "tests" is needed. Some states choose to use nationally-normed tests, while others, like Washington State, create their own, which are not normed outside of the state. Thus, with the exception to other tests that students may use, like the ITBS, or the SAT 9 or 10, which are special tests of ability, there is little to compare. If I'm the Superintendent of schools in Washington, I want to know

how my students compare to the world. True, we have the NAEP, but why not use tests that provide a diagnostic service to students?

This isn't just a K-12 issue, either. Earlier this morning, InsideHigherEd.com reported on the US Department of Education's focus on developing learning outcome measures via a series of grants to associations. [The article](#) also notes the pledge by Miami-Dade College to embrace the institution's new "learning outcomes" initiative. If we think that coming up with well-regarded, empirically-sound, and universal tests to measure achievement in K-12 is tough, I'm utterly confused how it is expected to be done at the postsecondary level, which is almost completely unencumbered by any standards in any way, across any discipline or any topic, with the exception of the professional fields, such as engineering, accounting, medicine, and law, for example (which, of course, do use UNIVERSAL tests to measure proficiency, such as the LCAT and MCAT for law and medicine).

But back to K-12 to conclude, the President is now pushing an expansion of NCLB in the current reauthorization, which is unlikely to occur before the next president is sleeping at 1600 Penn. And to make this more difficult, the President yesterday announced that he is willing to veto any NCLB bill he doesn't like, which is understandably meant to corral the Dems but could mire the legislation until 2009.

Is the President right or wrong? That's arguable, for sure. But perhaps the late Al Shankar had it right: we are mired in a system of education that has far too much testing that simply isn't good enough. We'd be better off with less and better testing that is more universal and less specialized for curricula that, for some reason, just has to be different across the country.

Have a nice weekend.

*ps. For those wanting to know Alex Usher's whereabouts, he has been on vacation.*

*March 9, 2007*

## **ENSURING DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



The affirmative action debate has been hanging around the collective heads of public higher education for the last three decades, with the debate coming to a head more recently with the impact of Proposition 209 in California and the expansion of similar legislative actions in a number of states.

Higher education has always had preference for a variety of students: gender, arts, and, most certainly, legacy students. But the aftermath of affirmative action has pushed colleges into a zone which requires the reconsideration of all activities that may suggest preference, especially regarding race and ethnic issues.

While colleges and legal analysts are focusing on what to do in the post-Hopwood world, some of us are still asking whether a move away from affirmative action was a prudent move from the beginning. Is it fair for society to move away from supporting students who have not had an equitable chance at the educational brass ring just because, in most terms, of their real estate?

Some states have experimented with alternative policies. The University of California imposed a "4 percent" rule that allows the top 4 percent of students in state high schools to gain access to the system, while Texas imposed a "10 percent" rule, with the same intent. There is little evidence to suggest that

these measures have been effective. In fact, critics argue that it is unequal in other ways. For instance, because of the 10 percent rule in Texas, a student with an SAT score (knowing that the SAT is a limited proxy) of 1100 may get into the UT system while a student with a 1300 score may not, simply because of where they rank in their respective high schools.

In the end, do these measures do anything differently than affirmative action laws? Do they not provide preference based on race (because of geography) similar to that of original affirmative action regulations? This is a very complex issue and it isn't incumbent on me to sell it as anything but complex. Both sides of the argument have prudent points. How does higher education, let alone the business world, help stop the vicious cycle caused to Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans from our societies inability to provide equal education under the law? Alternatively, where does affirmative action stop? Is there always a preference?

I don't pretend to have any, let alone all of the answers, but today on EPILive we will have a discussion from two of the leaders in the diversity debate. Mr. Ward Connerly, the man responsible for Proposition 209, which in essence outlawed racial preference in California, will join us, as will Arthur Coleman, a lawyer with Holland & Knight in Washington, DC, who works with colleges and universities to help them deal with the diversity regulations. I expect an engaging conversation. Join us today at 1pm on [EPILive](#).

*June 1, 2007*

## **NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



I had the honour this week of attending a roundtable on Aboriginal participation in higher education hosted by the University of Winnipeg. Joining U of W President Lloyd Axworthy and his co-hosts AFN Grand Chief Phil Fontaine and Manitoba Metis Federation Chief David Chartrand at this meeting were senior administrators from twenty Canadian universities, primarily from Western Canada. That such a meeting could attract such a distinguished crowd is enormously encouraging; as someone remarked, this kind of attraction of high-power talent on this topic would have been unimaginable ever five years ago.

But it is impossible to attend such a meeting without the dark history of Aboriginal education rearing its head. It is a history so dark that Canadians continue to try to ignore its full, monstrous implications; the history of Residential Schools.

Residential schools were boarding schools for Aboriginal youth set up by the Government of Canada and run by religious charities for much of the 20th century. Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their families for ten months at a time to attend these schools.

For many years now, Canadians have known that physical abuse and sexual abuse were rampant in these schools. It is also widely accepted that the

schools' policy of banning speech in any language other than English caused immeasurable damage to Aboriginal culture. But it has recently become known that far worse occurred in these schools. In 1907, the Government's Chief medical inspector reported that there were serious outbreaks of tuberculosis in these schools and that the average death rate in these poorly-ventilated schools was over 35%. The result was a death toll in the thousands - perhaps even the tens of thousands.

Not surprisingly, Aboriginal peoples came to view schools - and education generally - with a mixture of fear and suspicion. With the last schools only having been shut in the 1970s and the last ones constructed in the 1960s, educational facilities in many First Nations communities are still the same ones in which many today's students' relatives suffered so many indignities (the very last residential school to be built, just outside Fort Frances Ontario, is now Seven Generations Education Institute, an Anishnaabe-controlled secondary and post-secondary institute).

So at the same moment as higher education was expanding for non-Aborigines, Aborigines themselves were suffering not only from the effects of poor schooling, but also a marked reluctance to even consider education as a valid undertaking because of what had occurred at these schools. These factors, on top of extremely high poverty rates, have left First Nations with university degree obtention rates that are one-quarter of that of non-aboriginals. And so the cycle of poverty continued.

That terrible things happened to Aboriginal peoples in Canada during the period of white colonization does not make Canada unique: similar things happened across the Americas and Australasia. What is unique is the fact that so much of it happened in educational settings, thus poisoning the well from which aboriginal people need to drink if they - like everyone else - are to succeed in the modern world. This has had incalculably negative effects on Aboriginal communities which continue to this day.

Things are looking up, though. As Grand Chief Fontaine noted in his presentation last Thursday, forty-five years ago there were only ten First Nations students in the whole of Canada; now over 30,000 receive federal funding to

attend post-secondary education. It is not enough, but it still represents great progress.

Institutions, too, are beginning to see the light with respect to providing an accommodating setting for Aboriginal students. Last week's roundtable on PSE was attended by ten university Presidents, a sign of high-level commitment to the issue that would have been unimaginable even five years ago. All across the country, new programs and supports for Aboriginal students are being unveiled. New leaders are coming to the fore within institutions to champion Aboriginal students, like Angela Recollet at Laurentian University, who is one of the most remarkable and dedicated people I met over the course of our recent work conducted for our evaluation of Ontario's Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy.

Aboriginal communities are also trying to become providers of higher education through Aboriginal-controlled institutions such as Blue Quills First Nations College in St. Paul, Alberta and the First Nations Technical Institute in Tyendinaga, Ontario (the latter led by another truly remarkable individual, Karihwakeron Tim Thompson). Not many of these will ever gain a status close to that enjoyed by Saskatchewan's First Nations University of Canada, but the services they provide to desperately underserved populations mean that some will inevitably become part of the country's post-secondary in some form or other.

There is a great deal of healing that needs to happen between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Because of the terrible history of residential schools, it is appropriate that much of this healing occur in the education system. Providing Aboriginal peoples with the same opportunities for education as non-Aborigines will benefit all Canadians. We've made a great start over the past three decades to help reduce differences in educational attainment rates and we have never had as strong a group of leaders - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - in our institutions dedicated to improving aboriginal education. Last week's roundtable in Winnipeg signaled a rare opportunity to start moving forward: institutions and governments cannot afford to let it pass.

## **POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION POLICY**

*March 23, 2007*

## **THE LURE OF SHORT-TERM THINKING**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



Education is a tough file for any government to love. Being a labour-intensive industry, costs are always rising faster than inflation (and if they aren't there will be hell to pay with the unions). Improvements are slow and inconsistent. And it takes forever for people to benefit, meaning parents and students are never happy.

So when every once in awhile a big idea in education comes along that seems to promise some low-cost quick benefits and politicians swarm all over them. In Canada, politicians are stuck on one such idea right now: and as such, they risk overdoing a good thing.

The first is labour market-focused education. Right now, most of the Canadian economy is in reasonable shape at the moment, but two sectors in particular are red-hot. The first is the entire Alberta economy, spurred by high oil and gas prices and unprecedented development in the oil sands. The second is the construction industry in the BC lower mainland as the region gears up for the 2010 winter Olympics. Together, these areas have created such an intense demand for labourers and skilled trades-people have not only soaked up most of their own surplus labour but that of other provinces as well, resulting in a large exodus of skilled trades-people into the areas and contributing to shortages of trades-people right across the country.

Economics 101 tells us wherever there is a labour shortage of any kind, the price of labour goes up. Not surprisingly, this has happened and equally unsurprisingly, business has responded by screaming blue murder about how governments aren't doing enough to supply them with this labour and hence are harming firms "competitiveness". This doesn't actually indicate a real shortage of skilled labour, by the way: it just means a shortage of skilled labour at a price management is prepared to pay (this illustrates a little-known fact: when governments talk about education as a means to make the economy "more competitive", what they really mean is that they are over-educating the population so as to create enough surplus skilled labour to keep wages depressed and competitiveness high). I digress. The point here is that for the first time since the late 1970s, vocational education is "in", and in particular apprenticeships have received a real boost, with enrolments soaring 50% or more since the start of the decade in some places.

Apprenticeships seem like a winning proposition to Canadian governments. They are students who cost virtually nothing to educate (they are in public education facilities for only five to ten weeks a year on block-release) and do not require student assistance because they "earn while they learn". Employers get skilled labour; young people get steady pay-checks: what could be better?

There is much strength to this logic, and it is pushing governments across the country to encourage apprenticeships. The only problem is that while apprentices are in the workforce form the start of their apprenticeship, they do not become journeypersons for a minimum of four years in most trades. And when you look four years out, the economic picture isn't so rosy. For one thing, the winter Olympics will be over. For another, the generous tax credits which have been spurring much of the oil sands development will have been phased out. As labour markets in the west cool, many workers will trickle back east where they came from. And it will be into this situation that all of today's new apprentices will graduate. It could get very, very ugly.

It wouldn't be the first time governments over-responded to short-term labour market issues. In the early 1990s, Massachusetts invested heavily in training workers for a biotech boom that never came. In 1998, the Harris gov-

ernment in Ontario spent tens of millions to “double the pipeline” for computer engineers to appease the tech companies who were screaming about having to pay too much for programmers. The result? The first class of the “doubled pipeline graduated in 2003, right into the worst tech slump in two decades.

None of this is to say that apprenticeships or technical education are bad things, or that the state of the labour market should be ignored in education. It is, however, to say that education that is actually worth anything takes time – and that the market is usually faster at solving labour market shortages than the education system is. By the time governments get around to pumping money into a particular form of education and institutions ramp up to create new spaces and students actually go through the program, the economy has moved on and the “shortage” no longer exists.

*April 13, 2007*

## **ANSWERING THE “HARD QUESTIONS”**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



Further travels with me this week involve a visit to the [American Educational Research Association](#) Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois. I'm here with 15,000 of my closest friends. I think I've shaken hands with half of them. AERA is one of those conferences that forces one into a strategic mode just to navigate: sessions at four hotels, over 80 concurrent sessions at each time period. Heck, the conference book is quite literally the size of most city telephone books. It becomes the bible of the week for attendees.

Many of the attendees come for the pure reason of getting a peer-reviewed paper presented--looks nice on the resume. That stated, many of the sessions are somewhat suspect: grad students getting their first play. But once in a while a session pops up that takes your interest. Enter Pascarella and Terenzini.

Ernie Pascarella and Pat Terenzini are two names in higher education that resonate almost among all others. I might add Vince Tinto to that list, Bill Bowen and Derek Bok, and perhaps a few others. But it's a very short list.

For the uninitiated, “Pascarella and Terenzini” (as they are typically referred) are the authors of the seminal academic work “How College Affects Students,” first published in 1991 with a redux in 2005. In both volumes, the two researchers reviewed thousands of research papers in an attempt to tell a sto-

ry about the impact of college on students—a field of study that is understandably broad, but nonetheless important.

So it was a distinct pleasure to hear these two gentlemen speak here in Chicago yesterday afternoon. In fairness, they were joined by John Smart of the University of Memphis and Barbara Townsend of the University of Missouri – Columbia, and while those two individuals did a nice job talking about the issues impacting students and higher education, this was the Ernie and Pat show, for all intents and purposes.

A major point of Pat's was his sense that the study of higher education was moving dangerously away from theory to anecdotal research. He said that in their earlier work, there was a definitive focus on theoretical-based research on college students. And while he praised the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and similar “research” conducted in the last decade, he was worried that too much was focused on non-theoretical ventures, pushing us toward learning without the aid of well-thought theoretical processes.

I'm not sure if Pat is right on this point, but it did make me think about it. More interesting, even as I write this week's blog, an article popped up on my screen from this morning's USA TODAY called “[Usefulness of Education Research Questioned](#).” Too funny. In that article, [Greg Toppo](#) writes about the new political use (or misuse; or complete ignorance) of research for political purposes, with the example of an Education Department study released last year which showed that public school students, on average, do better than private school students. Of course, the Department ignored that study and proposed \$100 million for voucher programs to send public school students to private schools. Great example.

There are two problems here. First is what Pat calls this shift from the theoretical to the anecdotal. And I agree, that can be a dangerous thing for us who try and link the research and policy worlds. If our basic research is based on what we “think” rather than what we “know,” we are surely in trouble. The second problem is the political use of research, as shown in the previous example. If the current administration, which has pushed evidence-based practice so far down the throats of researchers in the US, is willing to ignore its own high-level research in place of political expediency, then what is the

point of any research, theoretical or anecdotal? This is a serious issue for us to content with, because if that latter holds true, then all our efforts must really be reconsidered.

As a researcher, I try to answer the difficult questions (as John Smart stated, we seem to be moving away from these in favor of the simple sound bite research) as well as possible. This is difficult not just because of the complexity of good, empirical study, but also of the business side of trying to find the funding to conduct these studies—no one wants to fund studies that might take 5-6 years to find answers.

But somehow, regardless of the 11,000 papers presented at this year's AERA conference (no exaggeration), we must wonder how much of the research is worth the paper (or pdf file) that it is printed on (and how much toner is used in that process... I digress). Perhaps we need to retool our research efforts in education—not to shy away from ED's focus on evidence-based study—to ensure that the research is usable in terms of molding educational practice in classrooms, lecture halls, and even residence halls. Perhaps (again) this is my call to philanthropic agencies and government agencies (including IES, but certainly not limited to) to allow for creative rather than prescriptive research. All of this research, by the way, would need to be underpinned by theoretical constructs, as Terenzini noted. But then at least we could produce research that, in turn, influenced the development of public policy which, in turn, influenced classroom practice. A novel thought.

So how much should ED spend on vouchers next year?

*May 12, 2007*

## **DISTRACTED BY MULTI-TASKING**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*

There is an increasing consensus in studies about the problems of multi-tasking in humans. Our ability to switch our attention quickly between one thing or another - or our ability to do two things at once -- served our species very well when we were a group of marginal scavengers in the tall grasses of the African Savannah, always on the lookout for both prey and predators. But it turns out that this skill is not so helpful if we really need to pay attention to one single thing. Thus, email can decrease workplace productivity because of the way it interrupts workflow, drivers increase their likelihood of collision fourfold when talking on a cell phone, etc.



Now what's true for individuals isn't always true for organizations, but it is noticeable that managerial practice over the past 20 years has increasingly emphasized the need for organizations to concentrate on fewer activities and to focus on core competencies. In the field of education, two types of organizations are bucking this trend: research universities and polytechnics. The question is: can they continue to do so?

Let's start with the polytechnics. In Canada, at least, these evolved from technical training colleges. These colleges started out doing the oldest kind of teaching in the world: helping students learn jobs that are substantially physical in nature and allowing them the time to learn and practice "how to" do various types of jobs.

Now, however, a number of them are giving technical training of a sophistication rivaling that of university engineering programs and incorporating large amounts of theory along with the practical work. As a result the type of teaching that is occurring is changing quickly – no longer is it simply a matter of helping students “know how to”; increasingly, they are trying to help students “know that”.

The kind of teaching that helps people know “how to” do something is fundamentally different from the kind that helps people “know that”. Though knowledge of both kinds are essentially forms of memory and pattern recognition, the manner in which physical tasks are learned involves muscular learning and motor neurons; the manner in which we “learn that” certain facts exist or are linked together is an altogether more nebulous fashion related to our relatively recent (in evolutionary terms) acquisition of language and writing. We don’t really know what the “best ways” are for both types of teaching, but we do know that they are unlikely to be the same simply because the external stimuli to the brain are not the same.

This leaves polytechnics inhabiting two worlds. They continue to think in terms of helping students know “how to” but they are increasingly in the business of helping students “know that”. The shift in required thinking and instructional techniques is vast, but very little time has been spent thinking about what pedagogical and institutional changes are required in order to make the shift successfully.

It is possible that out of these polytechnics may come some new forms of teaching and learning that are superior even to what we see now in universities. But this is not guaranteed, and failure in this is presumably just as likely as success. Polytechnics need to sort out which world they wish to inhabit and do it well; otherwise, they really will end up being the second-rate institutions they are sometimes unfairly portrayed as being.

At the research universities, those strange Scottish-German-American hybrids which have so consumed the imagination of the world’s educated elite, a starker dichotomy exists. With the exception of certain medical subjects like dentistry or pharmacy, these institutions have always been exclusively in the “knowing that” domain rather than the “knowing how” one, so their teaching

methods at least do not suffer from this kind of split personality. But that doesn't necessarily make their task any easier; as alluded to above, as a society we know far less about how to teach for "knowing that" than we do about teaching "how to". We've been teaching "how to" since we were banging flint tools together in caves; teaching "knowing that" may go back as far as Socrates, but it is really only in the last 150 years that we've even given mass education in "knowing that" a go. What we really know about doing this well is roughly akin to what we knew about disease before Pasteur came along.

Now, given the enormity of the task of learning to do this teaching properly, one might think that people who are engaged in teaching tens of thousands of people might actually want to concentrate on the task of teaching. And at smaller, less research-based universities, this is what happens; at research institutions, however, the business of teaching occupies at best half of the institutions' mental effort. The other half (or more) is consumed by the equally important task of expanding the frontiers of knowledge. Despite the tired sound-bites university presidents trot out about the "best teachers also being the best researchers", the consequences of increased research intensity on teaching quality at research universities quite simply has been negative.

(At this point, some people may point me to the most recent issue of AUCC's University Affairs ([http://www.universityaffairs.ca/index\\_e.html](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/index_e.html)) and point out what wonderful pedagogical work Nobel-prize winning physicist Carl Wieman is doing at UBC these days. To which one can simply reply: yes, it's great work, done by a great researcher – but you'll note that he's more or less had to give up his pioneering physics research in order to concentrate on his pedagogical work).

This doesn't mean that research universities need to get out of the teaching business – indeed, surely part of the brilliance of research universities is the way they bring younger learners into the process of developing new knowledge. But there are limits to these benefits. In countries like Australia, the UK and even the US, where research universities only teach a very small proportion of undergraduates, most students learn in settings where teaching is still the priority. A country like Canada has a problem in the very high proportion of students who study at institutions where teaching is not the number one

concern. Indeed, depending on what one counts as “research intensive”, over half the country’s students might be said to study at such institutions.

That simply can’t be good. At least until we can find some reliable ways to improve our knowledge on teaching effectiveness, all countries – but Canada in particular – needs to decrease its reliance on research universities as places to teach undergraduates. At least until these institutions can learn to multi-task a bit better...

*July 20, 2007*

## **WANTED: A PATRON SAINT FOR YOUNG UNIVERSITIES**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



It was pointed out at a conference I recently attended that of the 100 or so institutions that have survived unbroken in Europe since the middle ages - such as the British and Icelandic parliaments, the Catholic church, etc. - over half of them are universities.

This is pretty stunning stuff, I thought to myself: universities have cockroach-like immortality! Ok, the odd Antioch college bites the dust - but name another North American industry where only one out of 4000 institutions closes each year. Even hospitals shut down more frequently than universities or colleges. Good news for those in the sector, for sure.

Yet as I thought about this a little more, and realized that in fact what we were dealing with here was a biased sample. Yes, some big, old universities have done well through the centuries; but not all of them are considered great centres of learning. The medical school at Salerno once made the city one of the great learning hubs in Christendom; now, the University of Salerno is a collection of California-modernist buildings halfway up the hill to Avellino and is by no means a leading institution even within Italy, let alone Europe.

The problem, historically speaking, is that universities have evolved significantly over time and, broadly speaking, have had three great purposes. The

first was about educating professionals and cultivating the intellect of the bookish children (usually sons) of the local elite. All the older European institutions started that way, as did the US Ivy league schools. Fundamentally, they were small communities dedicated to imparting universal knowledge, as Cardinal Newman (the patron saint of liberal Arts colleges) outlined in his famous book *The Idea of a University*.

The second great purpose of universities is traditionally ascribed to Wilhelm von Humboldt - an enlightenment philosopher, linguist and later Prussian education minister - who conceived of universities as places to advance knowledge, not simply disseminate it. Newman had no time for this argument; as he put it: "If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students". But the idea of universities as producers of knowledge - with a side business in teaching as it were - proved popular throughout the world. Nowhere was this truer than in the United States, whose top universities are clearly far more research intensive than those of any other country in the world and remain objects of longing and emulation in the rest of the world.

But while Newman and Humboldt are sometimes held up as the spiritual custodians of the two halves of universities' bifurcated souls, the fact is that most professors and students around the world (and even in North America) do not actually work or study in institutions that look anything like the ones that either Newman or Humboldt could have imagined. True Liberal Arts colleges are thin on the ground outside the northeastern US. True research universities with limited responsibilities for undergraduate education are rare too; many institutions that seek research university status obtain it simply by getting really big and fat off the proceeds of large undergraduate classes and then plow the money into a few top-end professors and research facilities. Ohio State and York University come instantly to mind, but there are dozens of others that would meet this description, too.

And then there are the hundreds institutions, large and medium (rarely small) that were to all intents and purposes created in the two post-war decades which are neither small nor particularly research intensive and which exist primarily to provide a basic post-secondary education to the children of

the middle-class. The University of Manitoba would be one example of this, as would most flagship state institutions between the Mississippi and the Rockies, or the post-92 institutions in the UK.

Though they rarely receive credit in the pages of US News or Maclean's, it is these institutions which are actually doing the bulk of the work in terms of educating the nation's young adults. They are looked down upon precisely because they are not exemplars of either the tradition of Newman or of Humboldt, the only two standards which seem to mean anything within academe or within the worlds of academic rankings.

The problem is that governments throughout the world created these new institutions to be cheap, mass versions of older institutions and so - unsurprisingly - they get judged as poor imitations of the original. Evidence? Try to name any university anywhere in the world founded in the last fifty years that is actually considered world-class in anything (and yes, by this I mean world-class with respect to research...there are no standards of world-classness in teaching, unfortunately). Waterloo and Warwick come to mind; Tufts, perhaps - though it actually dates back to the 1850s and only seems new because of the radical shift in direction it undertook in the 70s. Apart from that, it's hard to think of any.

What these valuable institutions need is a theory - or perhaps just a theoretician. Someone who can explain the role they play in expanding access and how their success contributes to society. Continuing to measure them by the totally unrealistic standards set by Newman and Humboldt is a recipe for continuing malaise, disappointment and confusion.

In short, they need their own patron saint. Soon.

*August 17, 2007*

## **THE EDUCATION CRISIS OF 2012**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



The only surprising thing about the massive shake-out in Canadian post-secondary education at the beginning of the 'teens was that it took so many people by surprise.

Canada did very well out of the "Asian Long Boom" that followed the end of the dotcom era. Even though the country did its best to shun direct investment from China, Asia's massive demand for natural resources left the Canadian economy in an enviable position; the country could make money doing exactly what it was always doing, with no major changes in public policy or requirement for sacrifices on the productivity front.

As far as education was concerned, both provincial and federal governments effectively managed to limit their major policy initiatives during the Long Boom to just two: "how to churn out lots of skilled trades people" to build the houses and office buildings that accompanied the boom, and "how to keep the middle class happy" by ensuring they had to sacrifice as little as possible through tuition fees.

It took a lot of spurious public-policy work to support these policies. Many, many studies were conducted in various economic sectors that predicted massive demographically-linked labour shortages in the skilled trades looming ahead which – so went the theory – could only be rectified by massive in-

creases in apprenticeships and vocational training. Others suggested that skilled trades were in fact the bedrock of a productive, modern economy.

The real statistics suggested otherwise. Hourly wages in most skilled trades actually weren't rising quickly at all, and that any shortages were largely made up by people working overtime. To the extent that there was a shortage, it was linked not to demography, but to changing economic patterns in the natural resource sector. When resource prices were low – as they were for most of the 80s and 90s – the demand for skilled workers was low and there was little demand to train new ones; when prices spiked, there was a sudden but temporary shortage which policy makers mistook for a sea-change in the nature of the labour force. As for productivity: industries that employed a lot of skilled trades people tended to be those with the weakest productivity growth

### The result?

Massive over-investment in community college and apprenticeship programs that produced graduates for highly cyclical, low-productivity industries. As long as resource prices remained high and the Olympics-related construction boom continued in BC, the danger of this policy was not broadly acknowledged. Only after it was too late was this seen to be a problem.

Meanwhile, things were not much better over in the university sector. While governments were relatively keen to spend literally billions on new buildings and on various types of universal subsidies, very little new money actually was being used to educate the hundreds of thousands of new students arriving in the universities. Worse, apart from Ontario, nearly all the money continued to be spent on undergraduate students – very little new money was set aside for expanding graduate students despite clear evidence from the OECD that one of Canada's key productivity challenges stemmed from the very low production of advanced degree holders.

Why was this the case? Because in the middle of the long boom, politicians began to view higher education spending as a form of "negative tax cuts." Whereas in the late 1990s, the rage was for tax cuts that would benefit the broad middle class, by the 2000s, the political imperative was to find spend-

ing programs that would benefit these same people. Graduate education was too narrow to attract political support; everything instead was to be put into undergraduate education – and here, quantity was to be elevated over quantity. Political imperatives continually pushed governments and institutions to widen participation at the expense of the quality of education. Ontario - and to a lesser extent British Columbia – at least took some steps towards beginning to measure educational quality and put it at the heart of the public policy debates. But the electoral cycle and pure politics made this a tough sell.

In 2010, the Olympics came and went, reducing the demand for skilled labour in the west. In that year, too, tax credits for construction in the oil sands of Alberta ran out, leading to a significant drop in construction and economic activity in Alberta. Thousands of people who had migrated west during the boom began to return east, but labour markets there were no better. Some agitated for the return of the credits, but public sentiment, by now firmly pro-Kyoto prevented it even though the Tories remained in power until 2011. When the Chinese economy began to collapse in early 2012 amidst a wave of banking and securities scandals, energy prices plunged and with it, much of the western Canadian economy.

Enrolment collapsed in trades and apprenticeships, but hundreds of thousands were stuck, mid-program, unable to find work. Many tried to get student assistance, to return to work, but these programs, too, were in trouble. The expansion of grant programs in the mid-2000s was paid for primarily through improved debt collection and low interest rates. As rumblings of Alberta separatism and a global credit crunch took their toll on both employment and interest rates after 2010, the costs of existing student aid programs soared, eligibility was tightened and many were turned away or offered credit only at market interest rates. Pleas for more funding from general revenues were largely ignored and priority was given to the health and pension benefits of the baby boomers who (the oldest of whom turned 65 in early 2011).

Canada, in a word, was screwed. During good times, political laziness and perpetual minority governments had avoided the tough choices required to create a modern, technology-based economy. Educational investment had in-

stead promoted either old resource-based industries or middle-class consumption (the net effect of tuition freezes and tax credits having to a substantial extent been to permit the students' parents to afford more expensive houses and cars). When the resource-based economy went sour, Canada had few alternatives. While a lot of people had received an education, few received the really extensive training required to participate in the few ultra high-tech, ultra-specialized sectors of the economy that actually created real value and productivity gains.

The weak economy meant that for the first time in fifteen years, public finances fell into the black. Money for education was cut, tuitions rose, and student aid was no longer as generous. The high-paid foreign professors who came amid much fanfare when the dollar reached parity with the US dollar in 2008 promptly left when their five-year contracts were up and the loonie, no longer reaping the benefits of high-demand oil, fell back to 75 cents. Canadian universities, which had briefly basked in something approaching world-class status in the late 2000s, began again to feel the sting of mediocrity.

Could it have been avoided? Of course. Wise educational and economic leadership would have resisted the short-term temptations of resource-based riches and focused on providing high-quality education for high-tech futures in a global service economy. More attention would have been paid to graduate programs. Reform and improvement of trades and apprenticeship programs would have taken place, but reckless expansion would not. Student aid would have been spent less foolishly, and the trend towards tuition fee freezes and tax credit hand-outs would have been reversed in favour of a narrower and more effective policy of helping below-median average students with their costs.

It was all at least predictable back in 2007. Canadian governments had the money and the knowledge to change course and invest properly in education for the 21st century. That they failed to do so seriously hindered the Canadian economy for decades afterwards.

*September 14, 2007*

## **TIME RUNNING OUT ON AN AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



There is a lot of talk about anti-Americanism in the world these days. While this has always existed, the foreign policy of the Bush administration has sent esteem for America to new lows in most of Europe and Asia. American products are subject to occasional boycotts, and there's nothing like uttering the words "McDonalds", "Coke" and "Wal-Mart" to indicate the banality of American life. Indeed, in most of the world, attaching the word "American" to any idea is pretty much to condemn it.

Except, of course, in higher education. Because here, Americans have come up with an idea so powerful that there is no corner of the world that is not in its thrall: the modern research university.

Everybody--and I mean everybody--wants one of these. China is in the middle of a project to build 30 world-class research universities in the next two decades. Germany wants ten excellent research universities. Saudi Arabia wants two. Even the French are starting to look nervously over their shoulders at the American model and wonder what elements might be borrowed. No matter where you go in the world, the modern research university is the thing to be -- and it's a genuinely American invention.

I've often wondered why Americans don't take much credit for this. After all, universities are a basic institution of modern life. Very few countries remain

in which the route to affluence and social prominence do not involve some time at a university. And universities, increasingly, are being constructed on the American conception of this institution.

Now, it's true that not everybody gets the details right in the copying. Openness is a key intellectual value of the research university - a quality not found in abundance in either China or much of the Islamic world. Distance from government is another - possibly a problem for the French. And that suggests that these attempts at imitation may well fail. As in any other field of social endeavour, it's not obvious how an institution can successfully survive the translation into a completely different social and political context. It's also not clear how quickly research institutions can be created, either from the ground up (in the Saudi case) or out of existing institutions that have different traditions (in the European case).

I tend to think that the difficulties in this kind of translation suggest that maybe countries should be trying to find more of their own models of development rather than slavishly copying the American model. It's also not clear to me that U.S. style-research universities are even possible without the surrounding eco-system of state universities, state colleges and community colleges that pick up the slack in doing everything that research universities don't.

Be that as it may, I'm clearly in the minority -- others think these institutions are important, and so they are building them. Given that -- and assuming they are at least half-successful -- what then for America itself? One of the problems with everyone adopting American institutions is that America itself no longer seems terribly exceptional.

In the short term -- say, the next twenty years -- Americans should worry little. As I've mentioned in these articles before, building a good research university takes a long time -- and America has a massive lead over everybody else. But beyond that, in a world where many countries have many US-like institutions, America has a problem. It will no longer dominate scientific research the way it currently does. This will lead to an exodus of talented staff and graduate students, and will erode the country's ability to sustain its terrific rate of innovation.

As former Cornell president Frank Rhodes noted in his recent book, places like China have it easy because all they have to do is copy someone else's invention. The task of leaders like the United States is more difficult because they have to keep inventing new things to stay at the front. They have to literally invent the future.

I think the same is true in higher education. The value of the American research university lies in part in its scarcity and it will become less useful as it becomes more ubiquitous. It has had a 50-year run as the most important forum for advanced education, but its usefulness may be coming to an end.

The real challenge in American higher education is not the conservator's challenge of how to sustain the dominant position of the research university -- it is the innovator's challenge of how to replace it with something even better.

## **FINANCIAL AID**

*February 9, 2007*

## **THE PROBLEM WITH PELL**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



This week there has been much talk about increased funding for the Pell Grant program in the United States. For those new to this discussion, the Pell Grant, named after former Senator Claiborne Pell, is the federal government's "foundation" program for student aid, providing need-based aid to low-income students. That roughly equates to those students with annual family incomes under \$48k, with those with greater need getting up to the current maximum of \$4,050, and those at the top end teetering off significantly toward \$0.

The new discussion is interesting because Pell has been largely forgotten for the past four years. Higher education critics have noted that the president has largely ignored higher education during his tenure. And this is mostly true. The president's focus, in education at least, has been on early childhood reading and No Child Left Behind. At some level, this isn't a bad choice if a choice had to be made, because if students can't read, they can't progress through their academic studies and can't go to college. So providing support to help America's children read is important.

But that's assuming there had to be a choice, one or the other. This administration has suggested, through their actions, that there wasn't enough funding to do both. And this was before the war. Now there seems to be plenty of money to sustain an effort that almost everyone believes has failed and that

many American's believe shouldn't have happened in the first place. We can find an extra \$375 billion for the war, and also, in the FY08 budget, provide large increases for the military, but we can't for the life of us provide the necessary funding for education. It's an argument that gets old after a while. We just can't take it seriously anymore.

My back of the matchbook calculations show that President Bush has increased the federal government budget by 44 percent since he took over office, using outlay numbers from the US Treasury. During the entire Clinton Administration period, the federal budget grew by 19 percent. Up until the FY2007 budget, the Bush Administration was very good to education, albeit mostly K-12. But the FY2007 and FY2008 budget, if passed, will be a huge problem for federal education programs. Still, Bush raised education funding 26 percent compared to 19 percent for Clinton. But each year that passes the comparison gets closer. For the record, funding for the Department of Defense has increased 76 percent under Bush, or \$251 billion, compared to 15 percent under Clinton. That's just the increase since 2002, Bush's first budget. Comparatively, the total education budget is estimated at \$58 billion in FY2008.

So we're back to the Pell Grant. It has taken a democratic congress to suggest increasing the Pell Grant after four years of flat funding, which is, for those of you who aren't policy wonks, a decrease each year by the cost of inflation. But now, in the legacy years, Bush stole the stage from the House Democrats, who approved a \$260 increase only days earlier, by suggesting a \$550 Pell Grant increase with additional increases each year to 2012 totaling \$1,350.

I read some blogs and listservs over the past few days and noticed that student services and financial aid people were "dancing in the streets," so to speak, about the movement in Pell. Let's be clear: this was brilliant politicking by the Bush Administration. He has taken control of the Democrats own election issue and now is forcing them to come to the table. Remember, Bush just has to show the way. The Democrat-controlled congress must find a way to actually appropriate all these funds. They have the hardest job of all lawmakers in this regard. Bush wins either way. If the Dems only fund what they

suggested, Bush looks good because he asked for more. If the Dems come to the President's levels, then he wins because he took them there.

But that is the easy part. There still is the little item of how to pay for Pell in wartime. Critics have come out of the closet to say, yes, the Pell increase is good, but not at the cost of eliminating other need-based financial aid programs, which the Bush Administration has proposed. In fact, he is planning on paying for Pell by getting more money savings from the student loan industry and by eliminating the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG), the Leveraging Educational Assistance Program (LEAP), and the Perkins Loan Program. The Margaret Spellings argument is that this is a way to de-complexify the federal aid system, which, undeniably, is overtly complicated. Even we works have trouble estimating and modeling changes in the system. How are parents and students supposed to understand it? Spellings and company figure that pulling these programs together to support a better Pell is a good idea. In theory, I don't argue with them. I think it makes some sense to do what they're doing, as long as they ensure that students are taken care of. I guess that's the hitch for the critics.

Spellings also notes that the Bush Administration is increasing funds for the Academic Competitiveness Grants, which were introduced by Bush last year and provide funds for the first two years of college to Pell recipients who took rigorous course work in high school. Not a bad program, in essence.

The American Council on Education and other organizations have taken stances on the Bush budget. In the InsideHigherEd.com piece on February 6, a number of financial aid stakeholders weighed in on the subject, suggesting that funds from SEOG and the other programs are important and we can't afford to ignore the students that are impacted by these changes.

The gauntlet is down and it is time to deal with the issue of federal student aid. We need to dramatically simplify the system and make it fair for all students. The federal role is to open doors for students who could not do it otherwise and are not properly served by state programs. Thus, low-income students and students with disabilities are historically the target of programs. The Clinton Administration began to move monies to the middle class through the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997, and then we've seen a greater ero-

sion of Pell since. Now that money is back on the table, we need to look at how we can best deliver money to students across the country. The Pell Grant is, in effect, a voucher that students can take anywhere, as is the SEOG. But with the Academic Competitiveness Grant, which is kind of like a super Pell, as some analysts have called it, perhaps this is a better way to go.

I'm sure I'll get some emails on this, and I think both sides have very valid arguments. But we need to get at the table to build a better mousetrap, because this one doesn't work very well, for students, parents, higher education, and most importantly, us policy analysts.

*February 16, 2007*

## **TALKING ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



One of the things that makes working in the field of access and student aid so professionally appealing is the eclecticism of the people who work in it. You can find all sorts of people doing all sorts of things (Australian economist and HECS-founder Bruce Chapman's ability to play Eine Kleine Nachtmusik on his cheeks, for instance, has to be seen to be believed).

Part of the reason for the eclecticism is that the issue doesn't really belong to one specific discipline. Economists and sociologists each come at the issue in a different way. People in the field of education -- in so far as they actually have methodologies distinguishable from sociology -- come at it in a third way. The policy analysis folk who primarily work out of Washington and Ottawa look at the issue in yet another way. And, of course, the people who work on the front lines -- student aid administrators and people working in outreach programs -- have yet another perspective on the issue

In a perfect world, these various perspectives would complement each other and together they would build a coherent picture with respect to access and the policies needed to achieve it. Too often, though, people with different perspectives and methodologies talk past one another and miss opportunities for mutual enlightenment.

I have often thought about this at the annual Student Financial Aid Research Network conferences, hosted through the years by Jerry Davis and more recently by Colleen O'Brien of the [Pell Institute](#) (this year's event is in Portland, June 21-23). While this brings together experts in student aid from across the continent, it signally fails to attract many of the economists who are making significant contributions to our understanding of student aid. A few do manage to make it sometimes (take a bow, Lee Hansen and Terry Bridget Long), of course, but people like Ehrenburg, Carneiro, Heckman, etc, -- all with serious econometric work in the field -- simply don't engage with this group. This is too bad because the econometricians have a very different perspective on issues of access -- and one from which a lot of the policy-studies types could benefit.

This problem hit home to me this week with the publication of Marc Frenette's excellent new paper *Why are Youth From Low-income families Less Likely to Attend University?* This is without question one of the most interesting examinations of access to education ever done in Canada. And, intriguingly, it comes to exactly the same conclusion that Heckman and Carneiro did in the US five years ago: that financial constraints only account for about ten percent of the difference in participation between low- and high-income Canadians.

Care should be taken to distinguish between what Frenette is saying and what he isn't. He is not saying that tuition and financial aid don't matter in terms of access. What he is saying is that at the levels of tuition and student aid prevalent in 2000 (the year in which his source data was collected), finances explained only a small part of the difference in access rates by income. Keeping net costs for lower-income students at 2000 levels is therefore key -- if net costs were to increase, then the problem might get worse.

This is a very important piece which amply demonstrates the futility of focusing only on affordability issues in order to improve access. As with Heckman and Carneiro, though, I have my doubts that Frenette's piece will make much of an impact on the policy debate. It's not just that analysis done using the Blinder-Oaxaca method of Ordinary Least Squares is, unfortunately, a lot less persuasive to policymakers than headlines about tuition or a few great anecdotes about crippling debt. The fact is, most policymakers and policy analysts

aren't economists, and too many of them have trouble evaluating evidence produced on the basis of anything more complicated than bivariate analysis. One rarely sees any advocacy material in Washington or Ottawa which cites the more "complicated" work of Statistics Canada or the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER)

This isn't just a one-way street of course; some economists' work could also be greatly improved if they would engage more deeply with the community. Some econometric work on higher education that appears through the NBER is downright silly because certain assumptions built into the data interpretation are, shall we say, heroic. More contact with the policy analysts and the front line workers would result in much better research.

In short, there is a tremendous amount of good research going on right now. But both the research and its take-up in policy terms could be better if we found better ways of bridging the disciplinary gap. It's true that not everyone has the same methods of inquiry, and that the math nerds and the touchy-feely qualitative types view each other with suspicion. But it's time to get over this, and to find ways to listen and learn from one another. The students who depend on our work to make sure that policy is working well deserve no less.

*April 20, 2007*

## **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



Public Policy is complicated. Really complicated. So complicated that when some well-meaning folk tries to make things better, they frequently end up hurting the very people they wish to help.

The following story is God's Honest Truth. I really wish it weren't. It doesn't paint politicians from my country in a very flattering light. But it's what almost inevitably happens when you try to buy votes with tuition policy.

Here's the scoop: in its April 10 budget, the Government of Prince Edward Island made a surprise announcement to reduce tuition fees at UPEI by 10 percent, or a little under \$500/year. In theory, the move makes university education more affordable, and hence more accessible, especially for youth from lower-income backgrounds.

It's always nice when a Government has its heart in the right place. But hold the applause: while many students will benefit from this policy, several hundred students will actually be poorer after the tuition cut than they were before. Worse, those who will be worse off are precisely those the cut is designed to help: students with large student loan burdens.

To see how this will happen, let's compare how the tuition cut affects two hypothetical students.

Jack comes from a better-off home; his family saved for his education and he works enough during the summer and the school year to avoid getting caught up in student loans. He will be very happy when he pays \$495 less for tuition next fall. He might be a little less happy next spring when he pays his taxes and realizes that his federal and provincial tuition tax credits will be lower by about \$125 as a result of the tuition cut, but he will console himself by thinking to himself that after all is said and done, he is still \$370 better off.

Jill, on the other hand, is not as fortunate as Jack. She comes from a poorer family and as a result took a student loan last year for \$7,000. Of this \$7,000, she only has to pay back \$6,000, which is where the threshold at which the provincial loan forgiveness program kicks in.

At first, Jill is happy to see the lower tuition. The problem starts when she receives her notice of assessment for student aid. To her surprise, it comes in not at \$7,000 but at \$6,505, or \$495 lower than it was last year. This is because for every dollar that tuition is decreased, assessed need (and hence loans) will go down by the same amount.

If she were just losing loan dollars, Jill wouldn't feel so bad. After all, every dollar less that she borrows is a dollar less she has in debt.

The problem is, she isn't only losing grant dollars. Remember, the Government forgives loans over \$6,000. So, last year, despite borrowing \$7,000, she effectively got a \$1,000 grant which reduced her debt to \$6,000. This year, because she's only borrowing \$6,505, she'll only receive \$505 in loan forgiveness and will still end up owing \$6,000. In other words, she's no better off.

This makes Jill mad. The Government promised to reduce tuition for all PEI students, but it's not working out that way. The Jacks of this world – better-off students who don't need loans – are making out OK, but the Jills who are struggling with student loans get nothing.

It would be sad enough if this were the end of the story, but it's not. If you thought Jill was mad when she realized that her remission cut cancelled out her tuition cut, just wait until next spring when she files her taxes. Like Jack, she's going to find out that the reduction in tuition also means a reduction in

tax benefits. Now, she'll realize, the tuition cut doesn't just leave her no better off, it's actually made her \$125 worse off.

So, to recap: The Government cuts tuition by \$495. The better-off Jacks of UPEI – which probably represent around 65% of the population – will come out ahead by about \$370 after all is said and done. The needier Jills of UPEI – roughly 35% of the population – will be worse off to the tune of \$125.

In other words, the benefits of the \$2 million dollars the government has allocated to this program will go mostly to better-off students while leaving the most vulnerable worse off. And I say "mostly" because there is another big beneficiary here: namely the Government of Canada, which will no doubt be pleased to know that it will be dishing out \$300 000 less in tax credits to PEI students next year because of the tuition reduction.

Let's be clear: though the tuition cut has some thoroughly perverse and pernicious effects, I doubt very much that provincial politicians knew that they would be making needy students poorer when they announced it. I think they genuinely wanted to help needy students and thought that reducing tuition would be the way to do it.

A more efficient and effective alternative would be to invest that \$2 million entirely in student assistance. No one would be made worse off and 100% of the benefits would go to the needy and vulnerable.

Mr. Murphy and Mr. Binns still have time to change policies and not make the Jills of UPEI poorer still. Let's hope they do the right thing.

*April 27, 2007*

## A SLIPPERY SLOPE

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



The last few weeks haven't been terribly good weeks for the student loan industry. In fact, the last year hasn't been one to remember if you work at one of the loan agencies or associated institutions. Let's take a brief review...

In May of 2006, Sallie Mae was skewered on 60 minutes for its business practices (oh, and the fact that its CEO is building a personal golf course). Sallie Mae can't seem to keep out of the news these days, not with a potential \$25 billion sale on the block that's made top-of-the-fold newspapers across the nation.

Earlier this year, Nelnet (Nebraska Education Loan Network) was allowed to keep \$278 million in federal subsidies it had received through an exploitation of a loophole in federal rules that allowed it to charge the government 9.5 percent guaranteed rate on student loans.

Last month, the US Department of Education (ED) suspended access to the National Student Loan Data System (or as we wonks would say, the "NSLDS") because of unauthorized access by loan agencies who were using the database for things they shouldn't have been using it for.

And, of course, the last few weeks has unearthed the "real" student loan scandal: improper kickbacks or privileged information to government officials and campus-based professionals. An ED official was placed on leave after finding that he bought and sold \$100,000 worth of stock in a loan company

(Student Loan Xpress). Financial aid administrators at three institutions were suspended after their own stock portfolios were exposed.

This was largely brought to the attention of the media by New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, who has led a charge against ethics violations in New York and beyond and testified before Congress earlier this week. It was Cuomo's office that unearthed the ethics issues at several institutions. In response to these developments and Cuomo's testimony, Senator Kennedy (D-MA), Chairman of the United States Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, requested US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to provide complete personnel files of Department employees to determine whether any ethics violations have occurred. This was followed yesterday by a request from Representative George Miller (D-CA), the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, to the Inspector General of the ED to conduct an ethics inquiry of Department employees.

And still, more students are forced to borrow to go to college and are borrowing more each year to make ends meet; all necessitated by continued double-to-triple inflation increases in tuition charges (sorry, "fees" for our California readers) at our nation's colleges. None of this bodes well for higher education. Basically, it's a bad year to talk about student loans.

We all want the loan industry to be pristine, but it isn't. With the billions of dollars floating around, how could it? But my worry is the aftershock of these developments. Currently, most lenders do their best to help institutions work with students by providing materials and support in a variety of ways. If one talks to financial aid directors at the institutional level, they will say that this support is not only helpful, but almost necessary in order to meet the effort required to support entering college cohorts. In fact, I've had financial aid directors tell me that is the main reason they pick FFEL loans over Direct: to get the support.

The trick here is that there is a fine line between what level or type of support a non-governmental organization (whether non-profit or for-profit) can provide to institutions before they get called on the carpet for providing "inducements" to institutions. Inducements are funds or services provided to institutions, which would normally bear a cost to the institution, which is

provided by the agency in exchange for their business. One can imagine this fine line: can a company provide free literature? Opportunities for professional development? Access to student loan expert advice? Campus-based support? Onsite consulting? Depending on how one couches it, all of these things are either legal efforts of support or inducements.

My organization, The Educational Policy Institute, has done and currently does work for a number of loan agencies, including TG, MOHELA, Edfund, Nelnet, NELA, and even Sallie Mae. In all cases it has been in a professional development model where we gave presentations at conferences or similar activities. In some cases we just work with the organization; others we present to student financial aid professionals. Our work has included studies of the impact of counseling on postsecondary access and the development of an effective practices database (to be released this May).

This latest scandal has the potential to seriously impact how we work with these agencies and colleges. As the leader of a non-profit organization, I'm not worried about our level or work and the contracts we get. But I am worried that we will not be able to conduct work that can help institutional personnel, financial aid and others, in the difficult work that do on a day-to-day basis. As Don Heller recently stated on [InsideHigherEd.com](http://InsideHigherEd.com), "We should be cautious not to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water in responding to this scandal."

Surely we need to tighten up on some requirements. The ethics issues pointed out by the New York Attorney General are truly serious problems and we have to clamp down on these issues. And Kennedy and Miller are also right to look into what is occurring within ED. But the truth is there are aberrant behaviors in this huge industry and we have to take Don Heller's words to heart.

Let's hope the year gets better for the student loan business because this boat can't take much more water.

*June 15, 2007*

## **THE HILL IS ALIVE (FINALLY)**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



There was a potpourri of activity on Capitol Hill this week. From the passing of the College Cost Reduction Act (CCRA) of 2007 (and it seems like the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997 was only yesterday...), to a firm stand by Ted Kennedy on loan agencies and the "inducement" scandal, this has been a busy week in my old stomping grounds in the District of Columbia.

This week I'd like to make comments on both of those issues, including the price controls embedded in the CCRA. Let's start with the Bill itself.

Without a doubt, the current bill in the House does some good things, and after a total hiatus from higher education by the current administration and Congress since 2001, many higher education stakeholders are simply pleased that the term "higher education" is mentioned on Capitol Hill. More money for Pell, some creative new programs... all sounds good. But let's take a more critical look at this with unbiased varnish.

The Pell Grant. Who can argue with a large increase in the Pell Grant? We've all been fighting for it for years, and it hasn't moved since, 2003-04, and that was a whopping \$50 increase (bagels AND cream cheese this week!). So, we're glad to see the Pell Grant go up to \$5,200 by 2010-12. But on one hand it isn't near what it will need to be in five years. That's not even enough now in most calculations, and inflation is likely to go higher rather than lower consi-

dering the US dollar in a global economy. Secondly, one must consider the reaction institutions of higher education will have regarding tuition setting. Economists will tell you that there is some truth to the tuition spiral noted by Art Hauptman over a decade ago. The trick is to find the balance and no one knows where that is. So it is good that the CCRA attempts to put some cost control into consideration.

Cost Control. The CCRA includes suggestive language that states if institutions raise their "sticker price," that is, tuition and fee rate, more than double the increase of inflation during a three-year period, they would be required to report to the U.S. Department of Education. Sounds good to me with the exception that they are using the HEPI (Higher Education Price Index) as the yardstick, and that is a problem. The HEPI is an index to measure the increase of college "costs" each year (e.g., physical plant, salaries, etc.); it is not meant to be confused with college "prices," but college costs. These typically go up higher than standard CPI measures because of the fast rising costs of salaries, benefits (including health care), and updating campus buildings, for instance. But for consumers, the HEPI is completely meaningless. Students and families pay real wages that are earned on the current economy, not higher education's economy. So the increase should be tied to CPI, not the HEPI.

Student Loan Interest Rates. Cutting the interest on subsidized student loans sounds great, but it doesn't do much good considering the cost of the program. There needs to be legislation in place to guarantee a reasonable interest rate to students (with the subsidized program, which is need-based, loan interest only begins to accrue six months after they have left or finished college; it is interest free during college), but providing them with an interest rate well below prime may not be a good idea. They already have had free interest during their college years. I've seen all the calculations about how much the interest rate makes a difference, but within the realm of public policy, there is a better use for taxpayer money than keeping this rate artificially low.

Income-Contingent Loans. The US has had an ICL for years, but only in name. It is a horrible system that doesn't work very well. The CCRA plans to adjust the system which caps payments at a "manageable" rate and also eliminates the entire debt after 20 years of payment. This is good policy. If

people are making a commitment to their repayment, at a pre-determined rate set by the Feds, then it should be removed at some time. These aren't people trying to get out of paying their student loans; it is people who are paying as much as is reasonable over a long period of time. These aren't doctors, but more like graduates who end up in social work or other professions that are important to society but do not have the same returns as other professions and careers. Good move.

Loan Limits. Loan limits have been a continual problem for the past, well, decade. Federal loan limits haven't gone up since the late 1980s. Hard to believe, but true, because everyone (including student groups, which is really obnoxious) believed that raising the limits would be like overfeeding your goldfish...students would over commit and over spend. Well, newsflash...they are anyway, but mostly because college costs are way out of wack and students and families are sometimes forced to use credit cards and signature loans with higher interest rates to get by. So the House Bill raises the amount of money that working students can earn and also lifts the loan limits. It's about time.

Loan Forgiveness Programs. I've never been a big fan of these policies. In the studies that I've read (which are few, I must admit, because they just don't exist), many students who take advantage of these either buy their way out of them when they have completed their studies or do their time then leave. We see this mostly in the medical and nursing fields (loans to get these individuals to rural areas, for instance). For teaching, which is a targeted area under the House Bill, 50 percent of new teachers are gone within the first 5 years. That will be enough time for recipients to take advantage of the forgiveness program and then they'll be on to other things. Just don't think it's a good use of funding. Better yet, let's find a way to increase teacher salaries about 30 percent. That's the incentive... and then they'll be able to pay off their student loans. Leave forgiveness programs to the states. Not a federal issue that will make a dent in anything constructive.

Minority-Serving Institutions. And finally, the Bill tacked on a new program (\$500 million over five years) for institutions that "serve large numbers of Hispanic, American Indian and other minority students." I'm always for more

money for institutions, and as my colleagues know, I'm a huge advocate for HSIs, HBCUs, and Tribal Colleges. But I'm not sold that this is a prudent measure. Most of these students are being served in PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions). I'm an advocate of affirmative action. But when does it stop? (yes, I'll read your emails)

To end, I would like to comment briefly on a report released by Senator Kennedy yesterday regarding the student loan scandal. Yes, the one about "inducements" by loan agencies to institutions of higher education. According to InsideHigherEd.com, "the 'Report on Marketing Practices in the Federal Family Education Loan Program' goes so far as to suggest that colleges are regularly accepting inducements provided in violation of federal law." The report goes on to suggest areas of inducement, some which are definitely beyond the line. But some inducements, as they are called, are borderline at best. If an agency wants to give publications for distribution to a college, and offers to print the college logo and personalize the brochure, is that an inducement? Apparently, if an agency wants to provide some professional development, at no charge to the institution, is that an inducement? Yes. We must establish where the line is, here. The humor in this is that Congress is taking such a hard look at this that it is freezing loan agencies from doing anything for their clients (yes, their clients). But they aren't taking any look at the medical field. Do you know how many doctors go on all expense paid trips to the tropics or Las Vegas? And you thought Tom Delay going to Scotland was bad... Nothing compared to what the doctors get. I have friends who are constantly getting free items and "business trips" (trust me, there isn't business going on at these events). So, until Congress starts looking at the medical and pharmaceutical industry, where much of the rise of medical costs can certainly be connected with "inducements," then I think we need to be very mindful of how far Congress pushes the loan agencies.

Enough already. Have a great weekend.

*June 22, 2007*

## NEED TO KNOW

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



It was fabulous to be among good friends in Portland Oregon this week for the [24th Annual Student Financial Aid Research Conference](#) hosted by the good folks at the [Pell Institute](#) (although it was very weird and a bit sad not to start Day 1 with one of Don Heller's multinomial logit-fests).

As always, the order of the day was to share all of our latest research about what kinds of policies can help lower-income students. And, as always, we seemed to continue to scratch our heads about what the data is really telling us about financial barriers and education.

Take Canada, for instance. We've known for a long time that province-level affordability indicators – whether measured by sticker price, net tuition or out-of-pocket tuition (that is, tuition minus both loans and grants) – has very little relationship with accessibility, as measured by the number of people who attend PSE. Now, this week, we've found that province-level affordability indicators also have little relationship with the ability of low-income students to attend either. It turns out that Newfoundland – darling of the lower-tuition crowd with its 20% tuition roll-back and subsequent freeze – actually has the most stratified student population in the country. In other words, all those millions in tuition cuts went straight into the pockets of the wealthiest half of society.

Or take the U.S. As Lee Hansen has noted, it isn't obvious that four decades of grant spending has changed very much in terms of access for low-income students in America; neither, apparently, has the expenditure of literally tens of billions in tax credits since Bill Clinton's 1997 budget. SPRC studies such as those conducted by Leslie and Brinkman and Don Heller make it clear that increasing grants (or rather, decreasing net price) have a certain effect on increasing enrolments, but these studies were done in such a way that it cannot be proven that an increase in loans would achieve the same result.

In other words, the evidentiary basis for assuming that grants are the answer is nowhere near as solid as we would like. Indeed, the evidentiary basis for any intervention is very weak, which is why we need more experimental work such as that being done by MDRC looking at the effects of paying dollars for grades low-income college students in Louisiana and that being done by the Millennium Scholarship Foundation looking at the effects of financial guarantees and career guidance on low-income high school students in New Brunswick. We've gone about as far as we can in exploring the effects of programs through various databases using various multinomial regression techniques. What's needed now is goof, hard, experimental evidence.

Arguably, the need for this kind of knowledge isn't that important in Canada and much of Europe and Asia, where PSE participation rates are increasing remorselessly almost regardless of the policy context. Lower tuition? Attendance goes up. Higher tuition? Attendance goes up too.

But the US is different. The US, almost alone among industrialized nations, has seen the stalling of growth in its post-secondary enrolments; indeed, in some respects it is going backwards. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy this is not just bad news, it is disastrous news. This fundamental advantage of the American economy in the world economy is being squandered.

Americans that care about access to college need to understand that - as David Longanecker said in his interesting presentation on the re-design of the Oregon student loans system – the old arguments about access aren't playing with legislators any more. We need new experiments and new data to help demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt "what works." It is certainly true,

as Tom Mortenson pointed out in a spirited intervention, that experimental methods raise some important ethical questions that must be addressed with the utmost seriousness. But without experimentation, we're going to be stuck in our current ineffective policy paradigm. And in America in particular, the trap of the current paradigm has the potential to do serious damage to the country's long-term economic prospects.

*August 24, 2007*

## **DOES MONEY MATTER?**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



Earlier this morning, InsideHigherEd.com reported on a new study released by "NBER" (the National Bureau of Economic Research) on the importance of money in college access and success. The study looked at the relative importance of finances in the persistence of students in higher education, especially for low-income students. So you don't have to wait, the study concluded that finances weren't nearly as critical as some other, non-financial "constraints," such as academic prowess, homesickness, don't like the school, etc.

I, too, believe that while finances are a huge barrier for some students, they aren't always as huge as issue as we would like to believe. "Finance" is an easy "out" for students and families because then it isn't about them. It becomes more an issue of where, not if (and that is a serious problem to consider for students).

Now, this stated, I do worry about studies like these because they aren't the best representation of the college arena. This NBER report was conducted at Berea College in Kentucky. Berea is somewhat infamous because of its "no tuition" policy. True, all students are required to complete a "work study" program of 10-15 hours a week, but still, this is an impressive statement of policy by the college. Berea is also a small liberal arts college that is selective in its admissions.

In their findings, only 18 percent of students expected to encounter fiscal "constraints" during their college experience, and, in student surveys, most students who left Berea without a degree (that is, dropped out) did not leave because of finances. With this, the authors concluded that other, non-financial factors were the true cause of departure.

But I again go back to the generalization of this study. Being at Berea, which has a fee policy that I believe no other institution in North America parallels, the landscape is foreign to anything else. No fees, and also subsidized housing, means that finances should play a much smaller role at this institution than at others. And they did.

So what does this mean for the larger question of how much finance matters in postsecondary success? Unfortunately this always depends greatly on the context of the situation, including family income to the cost of the institution. Most of us researchers believe that a major problem of college costs (or prices) is not being able to afford college, but being afraid of not being able to afford college. Because of this belief, we feel that many students self-select themselves out of college early on in their secondary schooling. If you think you can't afford it, why try?

But we still know little about this phenomenon, even though people like me think that we do. The evidence is all over the place in terms of the role of finances. Clearly, finances matter, and to some, matter greatly. Low-income students must certainly have the greatest burden to carry, but federal financial aid, over time, has done relatively well keeping up with college tuition increases. Not well enough, but better than expected. The new increase in Pell Grants is welcomed and hopefully will make this situation better. Those students in the middle income stratum perhaps face a more difficult hurdle. The best they have is subsidized loans, if they can get them, and tax breaks from the federal government.

The paper concludes that "further research" needs to be conducted. This is true. I hope for a follow-up at an institution that matters. But we certainly do understand in this day and age more than at any other time that other factors weigh considerably on the students ability to persist to degree.

Although I agree with some of their conclusions, I do hope that policymakers will refuse to use this study as an excuse to drop the ball on financial aid.

*August 31, 2007*

## **INTEREST-ING POLICY OPTIONS**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



The interest rate on student loans is one of those things that gets on the public agenda once every few years and then disappears again from sight. In North America, where interest rates generally have been rising for the last couple of years after being in record-low territory for the previous four years, we're now in one of those waxing phases.

For reasons that nobody can really explain, interest rates on student loans are subsidized in pretty much all countries that offer them (Japan and the US being partial exceptions).

Some countries, like Germany, charge no interest at all – which is excellent for students as they actually make money on this deal after inflation.

Other countries – notably the UK and Australia - follow the principle that no real interest should be charged on student loans but that the amount owed should be increased upwards by inflation each year. The Netherlands takes the intriguing position that students should neither be subsidized nor charged market rates – and as a result, charges them exactly the same low interest rate that at which the government itself borrows money.

In North America, for reasons that are not entirely clear, we take a different approach. Both the Canada Student Loans Program and US Stafford Loans take the view that while students are in school, they need the kid-glove German-style treatment and should pay no interest, real or nominal, on their

loans. As soon as they leave school, however, they should be treated as the market demands they should: as a result, they pay the same punishing interest rates offered to anyone with no assets and no income history.

How this Jekyll-and-Hyde approach to student loans came about is a bit of a mystery. If you ask anyone in either government why the system works this way, one usually gets an embarrassed shrug. It's the ultimate bureaucratic answer: "because it's always been this way."

There are, of course, winners and losers in the current system. Basically, anyone who borrows for a long time in school but pays their loans back quickly afterwards is a winner because they get large subsidies while in school and don't end up paying the big interest dollars. These tend to be people in highly remunerative professions like medicine and law. The losers, conversely, are those who borrow for a short for a short time but take a long time to repay – think Early Childhood Education graduates.

Now this, by just about anybody's reckoning, is a dumb way to run a railroad. Why would anyone design a system that deliberately gives the biggest benefits to those who need it least? And yet, that's what we've done in Canada and the US. By my extremely rough calculations, about 5 billion a year in the US and 350 million a year in Canada, doing precisely that with our in-school interest subsidies.

There are really only four ways out of this situation: two of them sensible, one of them less so and one completely insane.

The insane solution is the one New Zealand took recently – simply eliminate all interest on all loans for the entire life of the loan. This route is admittedly easy to understand and administer, and certainly the largest benefits would go to those with large debts re-paying over a long period of time, which is presumably a good thing. However, the costs would be enormous - easily a billion a year in Canada and probably close to twenty times that in the US – and the benefits, to put it mildly, are kind of hard to pin down.

Like the New Zealand solution, the two sensible solutions both entail eliminating the differentiation of treatment between loans in the in-school and repayment periods, albeit on more financially secure terms.

The first of these options is simply to stop providing any kind of generalized subsidy on student loan interest. After all, there's no reason to think that these subsidies have any effect on access, so why not just take all those billions and stick them into grants? We could still keep certain back-end interest subsidies in Deferment or Interest Relief programs to help those in repayment who have real need – we could even beef them up (a good idea especially in the US, where the threshold for assistance is pitifully low). This policy has a certain utilitarian charm and is in fact the position advocated by many experts in the field such as Bruce Johnstone – but politically, it would be a difficult sell.

The second option would be to adopt the Dutch model of charging students the governments' cost of borrowing for the life of the loan. In Canada, this would end up costing governments virtually nothing because what governments currently rake in from interest payments is roughly equal to what they spend on Class A interest subsidies. Our calculations show that over 70% of borrowers – basically, anyone who takes more than three years to pay off a loan – would actually end up better off as a result of such a change. Given the similarities of the Canadian and US systems, one might expect that the benefits would be roughly similar south of the border, too.

Now, you might think the Dutch policy option should be a political slam-dunk. A no-cost option that simplifies administration and communication while making life better for 70% of clients? Knock-out!

Bud sadly, this isn't the way things work. Politicians and interest groups will unfortunately tend to focus on the 30% who might be "losers" under this policy. The fact that these "losers" are actually doing very well (hey, they managed to pay off their loans in less than three years) is irrelevant – losers are losers and must be avoided at all cost. So this brings us to the fourth policy option, which seems to be in vogue in the US: leave the in-school interest subsidy alone and provide additional generalized subsidies to everyone in repayment so as to bring down their interest rates.

This strategy – adopted by the Democrats early in the present session of Congress - isn't the worst in the world; it's certainly a step-up over the New Zealand solution and it will reduce some of the inequalities in the present system. But it's expensive, gives many of its benefits to borrowers who don't actually need any help in paying down their debts, and diverts funds which might be more profitably employed in student grants that are actually proven to affect access to PSE.

In short, our current North American method of subsidizing student loans is a distinctly second-best solution. What we need are some policy-makers brave enough to grasp this nettle and come up with a first-rate policy that is fair to borrowers and taxpayers alike. The options are clear: all it takes is some will.

*October 5, 2007*

## **STOP THE INSANITY! PLEASE!**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



Remember Susan Powter? That punk-looking fitness/nutritional guru back in the 1990s? Yes, she's the one who lost 130 lbs and then ran around America shouting "Stop the Insanity!" Well, that's what came to mind this week after reading several articles on student loans, Marion Jones, US torture, et al.

I read an AP article yesterday titled High-Priced Student Loans Spell Trouble. The article does a nice job outlining the problematic conditions that some students are facing in the private loan arena. The article quotes Kristin Cole, who has \$150k in public and private loans: "I could never buy a house. I can't travel; I can't do anything. I feel like prisoner."

I don't like it when people are burdened with too much loan debt and have to squeak through life. But this isn't a commentary that begs for tears. Cole received her law degree from Michigan State University and currently serves as a legal aid worker. I have one question: who counseled her into taking on \$150k in student loans from a public university?

Paul-Henry Zottola, a periodontist in Connecticut, has \$300k in student loans, according to the article (although it isn't clear whether some of those are for his wife, a school administrator). Still, who counseled Paul-Henry to take on that level of debt to get his degree? There is now one periodontist in the country that I never want to go to.

I also remember a bright, pretty African-American girl I met when touring Tuskegee University in Alabama a few years back on a site visit. She was graduating that year and going into teaching: with \$80k in student loans. Who counseled her? Who sat down with her and perhaps suggested that she shouldn't take on that level of debt for a \$26,000/year starting job? There are other avenues that can be taken to get to the same end point.

It makes me a little mad, in this article in particular, when students are painted as victims when they should have done a little "education" on their own. I understand how this may sound a bit right wing, a bit unfeeling. But come on. When do we "stop the insanity?" We live in a culture where nothing is our fault, and we're always on the lookout for a bailout. It's akin to the mortgage crisis in the US, where homes are foreclosing at record rates and people are urging Congress to provide a safety net for those who lost their homes. I have little sympathy. They signed the mortgage and they should have read the fine print. Balloon loans can be surprising if you aren't careful. We can't protect stupidity.

So who's responsible? The government? Or the student or homeowner? At what point in one's life do we hand over the key and say, "our work is done, here. Enjoy the ride." This is a different point than focusing public policy on welfare and the poor. Those are systemic issues and typically issues beyond individual control. But a \$300k student loan, let alone \$150k or \$80k; these are individual situations that could have been averted with proper counseling or perspective.

A friend of mine graduated from medical school 10 years or so ago with \$125k in student loans. His starting job was \$125k/year. I didn't feel bad for him, and neither did he. He knew it was part of the price and he could handle it.

The article tries to play private loans as bad things. The only bad thing is that public student loans still, even under the reauthorization, do not provide enough support for students, forcing them to private forms of lending with higher interest rates. The private market is the private market, and I don't think we can or should do much to regulate it. What we need to do is to "fix" the public loan market. We still have arbitrarily low loan ceilings, and have

now authorized lower student loan rates, although I will argue that lower loan rates should not have been the legislative priority.

I certainly worry about people coming out of public four-year institutions with \$50-\$80k loans. With the average cost of attendance approaching \$17k/year at most public institutions, the potential for our future social workers to have considerable loan burden is high. These are the people I worry about: the regular folk with regular jobs; not the high private schools with professional jobs.

Part of the problem is what we have come to expect. We have built such an expensive system in the US. First, as I've argued before, we simply have too many institutions: 1,500 four-year privates; 500 four-year publics; over 2,200 two-year institutions, and 1,700 less-than two-year proprietary institutions. That's almost 6,000 right there, with plenty more of various types. Over 11,000 institutions come up in IPEDS.

Second, as in our medical system, higher education offers the best and the finest, which comes at a huge price. Many institutions have awesome dorm facilities on most campuses (but certainly not all), with unbelievable academic and social centers on campus. I'm not saying I want these to go away, but we all have to understand that someone has to pay for it. Remember the cardinal rule of higher education? Live like a student now or live like a student later. I think many students are choosing the later, and those are the people that the AP writes about. Not students who have scraped to get to college and are working full-time and attending full-time and scraping by to finish college. Those are the heroes in this story.

I've argued that we have a serious problem with the escalating prices in higher education. And as economists will tell you, that won't disappear. Higher education as a commodity will always outpace inflation. Even though this may be true, it doesn't negate the immense difficulty this is causing us now and will cause in the future. The prices will only get higher, even after adjusting for inflation (which will also likely increase with the continuing decline of the US dollar). Somehow, someone is going to have to pay the costs of these increases, and government will certainly pay part of it, but more and more of it will continue to fall on the consumer.

Barmak Nassirian of AACRAO says that student loans are "literally a new form of indenture...something that every American parent should be scared of." But unless we find ways to cut costs at institutions, something that isn't even remotely being offered as an issue, parents will be more and more scared.

So to Paul-Henry and Kristin and the girl from Tuskegee: I wish you the best. But you've made these decisions, perhaps not with the best advice, but you own them as well as the debt.

And Marion Jones? She's a local hero here (she went to Norfolk State University a few miles from our headquarters) who just announced steroid use yesterday. She knew it before she won 5 medals in Sydney in 2000. Where is your responsibility, Marion? All those years of saying "I didn't do it!" and everyone knew you did. All those endorsement deals brokered on lies. Marion, you looked too much like Ben Johnson, the man who broke Canadian's hearts back in 1988, to be telling the truth.

Don't worry; I won't touch the torture thing... although I really, really want to.

PS. By the way, Susan Powter has long hair now.

*October 12, 2007*

## **HILLARY TAKING CHARGE IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



She's already starting to look presidential. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner and the candidate that many observers now feel has a lock on the presidency (not necessarily a good indicator this far out from the election), is putting real issues on the table while the other Democrat and Republican candidates are still getting their collective "acts" together.

Last month Clinton unveiled her health care plan, a carefully-negotiated piece that stands a much better chance of acceptance than her aborted (no pun) attempt back in 1993. Yesterday, as reported in InsideHigherEd.org, Candidate Clinton unveiled her plan for postsecondary education. Many of the provisions aren't politically viable, but she put enough on the table to suggest that (a) she knows what she is talking about; (b) she has carefully canvassed people in preparation of this plan. Let's take a look, piece-by-piece:

**Upgrading the Hope Tax Credit.** In 1997, President Clinton signed the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997. Candidate Clinton plans to double the credit to \$3,500 and also make a portion of the credit "refundable." This was a key provision that was lacking in the original legislation, because it wouldn't have passed if that stipulation was put into the language. It probably won't pass this time, either. When it becomes refundable, people with little or no tax

liability actually get money from the government. This smells too much like "entitlement" for Republicans and perhaps even Democrat centrists to pass. Still, the way Clinton has packaged the new credit is interesting at a minimum.

**Pegging the Pell Grant to college prices.** In theory, this is a good idea, but again, does not have political viability. Republicans are not likely to support making the Pell Grant an entitlement that will grow exponentially. Also, there are enough naysayers that will suggest that Pell will cause further tuition spiral. Would I like to see it? Yes. Will it happen? No.

**Grants to community colleges to encourage college transfer.** Not sure the details, but in theory a very positive idea. The future success of our postsecondary system hangs on two-year institutions. They need to be better vehicles for upward mobility in the US. Any focus on that will be welcomed.

**The Graduation Fund.** Clinton has proposed an incentive fund for four-year colleges who undertake "performance-based efforts to improve their graduation rates, especially among low-income and minority students." If they can define how the "performance-based efforts" will be measured, this sounds like a winner. The problem now is that everything is based on cohort graduation rates, an imprecise and imprudent measure, at best, of institutional effectiveness and "equity."

**Simplifying the Financial Aid Process.** Clinton has suggested that a box be put on the 1040 tax form that would automate the financial aid process. This sounds promising, but I'm not convinced that the tax form has enough information for financial aid calculations and whether this simplifies the process for all tax payers. As stated on Clinton's website, "The 1040EZ has one-third of the FAFSA's questions and one fifth of its pages." Well, we may need the other two-thirds of questions for appropriate asset calculations.

**Expand College Information.** Clinton proposes publishing, through ED, information not only on graduation rates (which is already available), but data on employment following college at institutions and earnings in the field. This will be further burden on institutions, but a really neat idea.

**Multi-Year Tuition Rates.** This proposal would require institutions to "set multi-year tuition and fee levels for each cohort of students at the beginning of each student's freshman year, so students and families will have a sense of how much their costs will be in the coming years." We're not sure what this means, exactly. Does it mean that institutions must flat-line tuition rates during the college years for a student, such that if tuition is \$6,000 during the freshman year, it is \$6,000 during their senior year, or does it simply mean that the institution agrees on future tuition levels at the outset (e.g., freshman = \$6,000; sophomore = \$6,300, etc.) so that the student knows how much it will cost, in absolute terms. The later would make more sense, as flat-lining is actually a decrease over time, with inflation adjusted. Institutions will either have a problem with that or will game it such that they end up raising tuition at the outset to adjust for losing fees over time.

There are other proposals in her plan, too. As stated, some of these are "starters" and some are not. But Clinton must be given credit: she's put her ideas on the table for all to see, and each of these ideas is viable to some degree and worthy of discussion. It will now be interesting to see how the other candidates--from both parties--react to her proposal.

To be clear, I don't write this as an endorsement of Hillary Clinton. We're a non-partisan organization that works diligently to enforce that policy. And for sure, Clinton is a lightning rod in this political race. People love her or hate her, it seems. Most Republicans loath her existence and many Democrats worry that she will pull out the right wing vote and be "unelectable." But that sense is beginning to fade. Just as the adage that the person who brings the agenda to the meeting leads the meeting, Clinton is setting the agenda by beating the other candidates with concrete proposals rather than mushy political-speak.

Stay tuned. We only have another 13 months before the election...

*November 23, 2007*

## **THE BIGGEST DECISION OF THE YEAR**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



You've heard us at EPI say it over and over again for the past two years: Canada's student aid programs are sitting on a ticking time-bomb. We have suggested that there were a number of potential crises lurking in the system, but one of them lurked much larger than the others: the planned expiry of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation's mandate on January 4, 2010.

In public at least, the Government of Canada has been thunderingly silent about what will happen after the Foundation gives out its last need-based grants just fourteen months from now (though the Foundation is set to live until early 2010, its schedule of payments means its last batch of need-and-income based grants will be announced in early 2009). This, not surprisingly, scares the bejesus out of some student groups, who rightly fear the consequences if a third of the country's grants simply disappear and are not replaced.

But behind the scenes, things are moving, and there are some nasty interne-cine fights going on among the main players. While it is still too early to tell how things will play out, here's a handicapper's guide to what's going on behind the scenes.

There are two basic antagonists in this story: the Foundation itself, and the department of Human Resources and Social Development, which runs the

Canada Student Loans Program. Both are effectively competing for the favour of the Department of Finance, the Privy Council Office (PCO), and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), in whose hands collectively the fate of the Foundation rests.

The argument does not appear to be fundamentally about whether or not to replace the \$350 million/year in grants. Word on the street in Ottawa is that – one way or another – the money will be found. The argument is about who gets to spend this money and under what conditions.

The Foundation, not unnaturally, believes that it has done enough good work over the past eight years to warrant having its mandate renewed and its staff and board directors have been assiduously putting that case to Ottawa decision-makers for the past several months.

Opposing them, in a passive-aggressive kind of way, is HRSD, for whom the existence of the Foundation is a standing rebuke. When the Foundation was announced back in the fall of 1997, it was widely seen as a bit of a slap in the face for the department. After all, didn't they already run a student aid program? Why would the PMO set up a whole other organization to do this unless they fundamentally distrusted HRSD?

There were in fact good reasons to set up an independent Foundation which had to do with the Financial Administration Act and the fact that the Government of the day wanted to spread its \$2.5 billion investment over 10 years, which would have been impossible through HRSD. But even if no slight was intended, HRSD felt it as such and have seen the Foundation as a rival to be killed off at the earliest opportunity. Foundation staff, for instance, still recall with fascinated horror a social event in Ottawa several years ago in which a slightly inebriated CSL employee greeted a Foundation employee with the immortal greeting: "you guys are done and your money is ours!" Even if that's not HRSD's official position, you can bet it's a sentiment widely shared in the department.

So here we have two organizations each fighting their corner to be the ones eligible to distribute all this new money. But how is it playing out among those who matter?

The Department of Finance has always been partial to the Foundation because it is seen as less bureaucratic the HRSD and its research program is greatly appreciated. On the other hand, rumour has it that some of the Foundation's lobbying may have rubbed the department the wrong way.

PCO has never liked the Foundation. Indeed, when Prime Minister Chretien first announced it, he deliberately did an end run around PCO so that they couldn't use the armory of fed-prov arguments against it. With the Prime Minister's recent announcement that he wants to give all provinces (but most especially Quebec) the right to opt-out of any new social program, PCO will have new ammunition to argue the case against the Foundation.

PMO is a more difficult conundrum – nobody knows what those guys are thinking. But we do know that education is not one of the Prime Minister's five priorities, and that people around the Prime Minister have a laser-like focus on the median, middle-class voter. They might not be so keen to support a Foundation that has its own laser-like focus on low-income students. It may well be that any new budget allocation – whether it goes to HRSD or the Foundation – might come with instructions to keep it focused on the middle class.

Key to any solution, of course, is the views of the provinces. Without exception, provinces hated the Foundation at its inception. All have since learned to live with it and a number of provincial student aid departments probably now prefer dealing with the Foundation to dealing with HRSD. For long-standing constitutional reasons, it's unlikely any province will officially go on record as saying "the Foundation must stay." But outside of Quebec, there won't be anyone actively trying to kill the thing, either.

The final factor at play is timing. The working assumption of all parties is that there will be an announcement one way or the other in the next federal budget. That's all well and good, but there's at least an even chance that the next budget will trigger a confidence vote and then a general election, for reasons that have nothing to do with student aid. If a \$350 million hole in the country's student aid system results from a budget failure, it seems likely that student aid will be a major issue in the next election. With public finances in their current healthy state, the likeliest outcome is that the main parties be-

come engaged in a bidding war on student aid. Which, provided the result is not more wasteful tax-credits or other across-the-board measure, has to be a good thing.

This one still has a long way to go before it plays itself out. The next four months promise to be very interesting indeed.

## **INTERNATIONAL POLICY & PRACTICE**

*January 19, 2007*

## **LEARNING AS A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



We've all heard the rhetoric: learning is a strategic investment for national governments. It's a good mantra for lobbyists, who know all too well how much easier it is to sell the concept of more "investment" (forward-thinking, good) than it is to sell the concept of "spending" (wasteful, bad).

But once we've sold everyone on the idea of education as investment, should we really be surprised that governments actually want to treat education as an investment? That they might want to measure not just global returns but how each unit of their investment is doing? Or maybe rebalance their portfolio every once in awhile?

Our governments in North America are only starting to think this way about education, often in the face of intense hostility from institutions and academics who insist (with some justification) that even if such measurement were desirable, we don't have the conceptual tools to measure returns directly. But abroad, this kind of thinking is gaining steam and we should watch the results closely.

Take Korea, for example. This is a country where citizens and governments together spend the equivalent of 1.9% of GDP on English training and testing (no, that's not a misprint – it really is 1.9% of GDP). The average university student graduates having taken about 15,000 hours of English instruction

since elementary school. Koreans are making these major investments in time and money for a very good reason: they realize that they will individually and collectively more likely to thrive if they can tap into the global social and technical webs whose working language – for the most part – is English. And in terms of both time and money, Korean investments far outstrip those of their rivals: in Japan, investments are only about a third of what they are in Korea.

And yet, results are not what they might be. Many observers think that Korean students don't speak English very well (a recent survey of Hong Kong executives placed Koreans last in perceived English fluency). That's why Jeon Hyo-Chan at the country's Samsung Institute recently produced a report called *The Economics of English* which not only pointed out the many economic benefits of language acquisition but also suggested a number of changes that could be made to improve the acquisition of English in Korea.

I highlight this report not because it is especially insightful about the pedagogy of second language education (it isn't), but rather because it is the most clear-cut recent example of someone wishing to applying basic economic analysis not to education generally, but to a specific field of study. It's important to examine because there is a lot more where it came from: more and more, people will put higher education curricula under the microscope not just to see its economic value, but also to see if there are more efficient ways to array educational inputs to get the same result.

But the report is also newsworthy because of the specific subject matter it covers: language. From a labour-market point of view, language skills, be they in one's native language or one learned later in life, trump almost any skill learned in an academic setting, because language skills are the ones through which almost all others are mediated. In most of the world, acquiring a second language is a sure ticket to higher wages. If any educational investment can legitimately be described as strategic, this is it.

Yet English speakers have been slow to learn new languages because our own has achieved near-hegemonic status globally. This means that we have far less incentive to learn other peoples' language. But this hegemony depends on our own historically-anomalous position at the top of the global economic

heap. As our share of global population and economic production declines and those of China and other countries increases, it will become increasingly important for us to learn other people's languages, or else miss out on the economic opportunities those markets present.

So here's the challenge: we need to ramp up our young people's language capacities generally and in Asian languages specifically. In part this is about increasing language instruction capacity in post-secondary institutions (on which subject check out a recent article in [Inside Higher Education](#)), but it is also a broader task that involves changing societal attitudes about language and making major changes to our secondary school curricula as well. This is a clear economic imperative that all our governments should have an interest in pursuing.

But while we're doing it, let's pay attention to results and costs. There are lots of things to admire about Korea and its system of education; but language education, apparently, isn't one of them.

*July 6, 2007*

## DARING TO BE DIFFERENT

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



I was in Europe last week for a variety of reasons; most notably a brilliant IMHE/IAU conference on the diversity of institutional missions hosted by Ellen Hazelkorn and her colleagues at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The issue at hand was the problem of ensuring that institutions do not become homogenized by external pressures such as government funding formulae, one-size-fits-all rankings and blind obeisance to academic norms. A timely and engaging topic in all parts of the world, I was struck in retrospect by how little attention was paid to the Bologna process as a driver of this phenomenon within Europe itself.

A moment of explanation for North American readers: the Bologna process, which began in 1999, was about creating a "European Higher Education Area" where all degrees would be seen as roughly comparable. The goal here, simply, was increased mobility - not just of students (though this was an important side benefit) but more importantly, mobility of labour.

Pre-Bologna, European higher education was bewilderingly diverse. Depending on what country one was in, a first degree could be designed to be anywhere from 3-6 years in length. Now imagine getting a degree in a country with a 3-year system and moving to a country with a 6-year system and trying to compete for jobs against local graduates. You haven't a prayer. Local employers would, with some justification, say: "what is this "three-year"

degree, anyway? Must be of inferior quality – down to the bottom of the pile you go!"

(A parenthetical point for Canadians: this point is so simple that people miss it all the time. If you have two credentials with the same name but have different content and are of different intensity, employers will still be able to differentiate between the two and discriminate accordingly. So, to all those bright people who are wondering why "associate degrees" in Ontario and Alberta aren't taking off – that's why).

So, the governments of the EU decided that if all degrees were to be treated as equal in the labour market, they would have to come to some kind of common standards in the delivery of education. In practice what that meant was that all countries who participated in the project (at last count there were 48) had to have the same structure to their degree programs – 4 years for a first degree, 2 for a second and 3 for a third. In other words, Bologna was primarily about reducing diversity in education in order to make credentials more transparent to employers.

(Last parenthetical point, I promise: every once in awhile, someone dreaming up new projects in Ottawa reads something about Bologna and says to him/herself: "A European intergovernmental process to harmonize standards across jurisdictions! Where can I sign up to make sure that Canada gets some of that sweet meat?" What they fail to understand is that Bologna is entirely irrelevant as a policy structure in Canada because we already recognize each other's degrees across provinces. True, there are some issues about recognition of partial credentials (i.e. credit transferability) but no country in the world has perfect credit mobility and despite the existence of the European Credit Transfer System, the EU is further from this goal than Canada.)

Back to Bologna. The mere creation of a common structure turned out to create a new set of problems, and not just for British universities who saw a threat to their one-year Master's programs which act as a cash-cow by milking money from foreign students. Many institutions, quite naturally, resist harmonization from above. Not surprisingly, ancient and prestigious institutions like Humboldt, Oxford, or Louvain don't appreciate being put in the same category as universities in Tirana or Dniepropetrovsk. So now there is a

move afoot to “classify” institutions on a pan-European scale, just as Carnegie does in the United States.

Prima facie, this doesn’t really make any sense. Yes, for research funding purposes the EU probably needs to know on a continental level which institutions have top-level research capacity. And at a national level, it makes obvious sense to have gradations and classifications for both benchmarking and funding purposes. But is it really so important that a further education college in Durham know which among the many technical colleges in Kiev are its “peers”?

Probably not, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t takers for this kind of classification effort. And the reason is simple: differentiation matters for its own sake. Each institution wants to carve out a niche, and classifications help in this respect by reducing competition (for example, the University of Barcelona is better off if it is not one of 2000 higher education institution in Europe but rather one of 100 “Research I” institutions).

As much as it benefits some people to have a harmonized international system, it equally benefits others to have clear stratifications within that system. The reason is simple: education is a positional good; and positional goods abhor harmonization. For every attempt that governments make to harmonize higher education, there will be an equal and opposite reaction to make sure that institutions can differentiate themselves. It’s an inescapable fact that policy-makers would do well not to ignore.

*September 7, 2007*

## **WHEN EUROPE COMES ALIVE**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



Last week I had the fortune of presenting at the European Association for Institutional Research Conference (EAIR) in beautiful Innsbruck, Austria. For those who don't often get the opportunity to travel to Europe, let alone international conferences, much of the current dialogue revolves around something called the "Bologna Process" (or Accord). For the uninitiated, the Bologna Process is an agreement of over 40 European countries regarding higher education. It is titled "Bologna" after its original signing place at the University of Bologna in Italy in 1999. The premise, or perhaps promise, of Bologna is to standardize higher (or tertiary) education across Europe, such that degrees are somewhat transferrable. In the new EU economy, many feel that this is important for the continued development of a true economic unit, such as the EU (to be true, there are dissenters to this belief).

The Bologna process probably wouldn't have garnered any traction if the Euro hadn't been so successful. When the Euro came into being in 2002, many thought it would fail and would immediately fall in value to the US Dollar. But Europeans grasped onto the Euro immediately, and within days, the value of the Euro superseded that of the US Dollar. The Euro, now used by 13 of the 27 member states of the European Union, is worth \$1.38 US dollars and \$1.44 Canadian dollars. It has done remarkably well and made an exclamation mark on the statement that Europe is open for business.

But, contrary to belief, the Bologna Process is not part of the EU. However, it is benefiting greatly from the success of the Euro and the perceived benefits of the EU in totality. The overall sense and foundation of the Bologna process is that, for the EU and other Bologna member countries to expand and compete in a global economy, the system of higher education needs to come into a parallel format. Currently, higher education systems are significantly different from country to country. European universities have typically not used the terms "undergraduate," "masters," or "doctorate" terms in the same manner as in the US and Canada. Part of the Bologna Process is to bring a certain level of "Americanization" to the process, although this is an oversimplification of terms, to be sure. The Bologna Process plans to create what can be called a 3+2+3 process (or "cycles"), where the undergraduate portion is 3 years, a masters portion 2 years, and the doctoral process an additional 3 years, for a total of 8 years of study to the "terminal" degree. This framework was outlined in the Bergen Declaration of 2005 and is now being implemented in several member countries.

This is an exciting time for European higher education. In education, we often talk of "reform," but understand all-to-well that reform is difficult and often beyond our grasp. In Europe, reform is occurring due in part to Bologna, but also to the need to open their systems of higher education to the masses. European higher education has traditionally been focused on the elite, but over the past few decades has opened significantly to other students. This has caused a serious need for higher education reform, especially in a fiscal sense. Systems that have been virtually free to students are now, for the first time, requiring "private" funds, or tuition payments, for study. It can be argued that this push for "widening participation," as it is often called, also paved the way for the Bologna Process. Guy Neave of the University of Twente in Enschede, Netherlands, posed it this way:

"No one who is a student of higher education policy will bother to disagree – let alone deny – that we live in rousing times. Nor that the universities in Europe face what is very certainly the most complex and geographically speaking most ambitious series of reforms in their long history of nigh on nine centuries" (extracted from an upcoming EPI Policy Perspective by José-Ginés Mora of Valencia University of Technology).

Rousing is perhaps a great descriptor of the current process. But it is not without its challenges. Greek students provided a backlash at the proposal in 2006, causing street riots and other signs of solidarity against the Bologna Process. Others argue that alignment of the higher education systems in Europe is overdoing it, because in actuality there is very little movement, people-wise, among EU countries. And mobility is one of the founding principles of the Bologna Process.

And while the Bologna Process aims to “Americanize” the system, to a degree, it defaults on a three-year undergraduate degree, which, of course, isn’t remotely American or Canadian in anyway. So while the European system is “aligned,” there are calls asking: “Align to what?”

If I have my facts correct, the aim of Bologna is to implement these frameworks (the three “cycles” as noted above) by 2010 (According to the London Communiqué of May 18, 2007). No one in Innsbruck really believed that this was possible. In fact, 2020 was brought up as a possible realistic date for member countries to bring their systems into comparability.

I don’t pretend to know everything about Bologna or the EU. I have attended several international meetings in the past few years, and for obvious reasons, Bologna dominates the discussion. I write this week because we are in a glorious position to witness true education reform from a distance. Those of us in the US and Canada understand how difficult it is to get at any reform in a system where states and provinces rule, and the federal government dances around the margins trying to be relevant. But Europe is showing us all that reform can happen, even if it is painful sometimes.

Stay tuned for my update in 2020.

*September 21, 2007*

## **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



"In order to be competitive in the globalizing knowledge economy, the OECD countries need to invest in their innovation systems at the national and regional levels...As key sources of knowledge and innovation, higher education institutions (HEIs) can be central to this process." (OECD, 2007, p. 11).

**VALENCIA, SPAIN** -- And so it began. A three-day conference here in Valencia, hosted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and several other partner organizations. Interesting in many respects, for us from North America, because the world is looking at capturing what the US has always had an ability to mine: the research and development of American universities and private development. Last week, Alex Usher talked at length about this issue (*Time Running Out on an American Success Story*), and happenstance would have it that I am attending an international conference on his precise thesis: the emergence of the research institution beyond the United States.

As Alex noted, the American research university is the envy of every country. "Everybody--and I mean everybody--wants one of these," he stated. From my experience, I can confirm his exclamation. Everyone indeed does.

The conference was the capstone, to some degree, of a 14-institution case study conducted over the past three years by OECD. OECD teams, made up of research, higher education, and economic experts, conducted week-long case studies of institutions in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Korea, Mexico, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. And the United States—by any measure the leader in the linkage of higher education and regional development —was conspicuously absent from the list. Apparently OECD, with help from NCHEMS in Boulder, couldn't muster up an institution or regional system to take part. Unfortunately for us, this is both embarrassing and typical: the US continues to show it doesn't care about much beyond its borders, unless it involves oil.

Regardless, there was much to learn from the plethora of information and expertise at this conference, attended by over 250 people from around the world. Canadians were well represented by Robert Best of the AUCC and several participants in the study from Atlantic Canada. The US was represented by such luminaries as Dewayne Matthews of Lumina Foundation for Education and Aims McGuinness of NCHEMS. But no US case study.

The title of the conference was "Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged: Higher Education and Regions," and it was offered by one of the opening speakers, I believe John Goddard of the University of Newcastle, that "Globalisation" should be changed to "localization," because that ultimately is the reality: things must happen at the local and regional level if geo-political areas have a shot at competing on the global stage. And Christoffer Taxell of Finland was quick to note that education was the most efficient way to make these changes.

But the question is "how" to make this change. In the US, we have seen dozens and dozens of models where institutions are directly involved of the industrial and technical development of the area. Count the number of research parks being built on campuses these days, and you'll quickly see the trend. Even at our local university, Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, the university has just constructed a research park with brand new, state-of-the-art buildings for corporate entities to fill in order to further the connection between the university and the private sector.

The US has learned, through an incredible amount of fiscal support over the last 50-60 years, that the nexus of research and universities spurs economic development. The National Science Foundation (NSF) produces a spin-off report each year, as does the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), because research developed at our top research institutions "spins off" into industry and the marketplace. The number of patents developed by researchers at US institutions is mind-boggling. The University of California system alone generated 390 patents in 2005. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the infamous Cambridge, Mass, earned 136 patents. The top 10 research institutions in the US, as measured by patent development, recorded 1,274 patents in 2005. That's a lot of research with regional impact (click here for source).

US patent development was keenly noted at this conference in several presentations, and the patent is clearly used as an indicator of spinoff and regional development, although it can be argued whether patents always convert to regional development. But the US has largely done this through an incredible capacity to fund research at institutions of higher education. My former employer, SRI International, the original "dotcom," was once better known as "Stanford Research Institute." Today it is an international organization of 2,000 people with development of \$411 million in FY2006. That, as well, is a lot of regional development in a place called silicon valley, perhaps the most well-known "region" in technology.

The nations involved in this study want to know the secret to America's technological and regional development, even though we well know that the development in the US is anything but consistent and equitable across the country. But how do countries ramp up this development? Although it wasn't overtly stated during the three days, the answer, to a large degree, is "dinero." But in the success stories unveiled here in Valencia, the role of the university as a convenor seemed equally important; the bridge between government and industry. Institutions that work to play this role seem to become important conduits in the development process. In all our talk of higher education, affordability, and equity, the issue of the institution as a major player in regional development is often backburnered in many communities, and, I would argue, especially in the United States and Canada. Now that there exists a

major international cooperative looking at this issue, and the promise of an annual roundtable discussion to keep the discussion going, let's follow this tack and see what it bears in the next several years.

During the interim, let's hope that US will take part in the second round of the OECD study to begin sometime in the next year.

More information about this conference, with links to official downloads of papers and publications associated with the project, can be downloaded at the OECD website.

*October 26, 2007*

## **UNDERSTANDING WHAT THEY KNOW**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



Though it didn't get a lot of attention on this side of the pond, a very intriguing report appeared in the UK this month which may presage things to come here as well. It's the Burgess Report, put out by Universities UK, and it recommends some sweeping changes in the way student achievement is reported on academic transcripts.

The specifics of the report aren't that important – the British system of summing up three years of work into a single summative analysis (i.e. "first," "upper second," "lower second," etc.) is indeed somewhat bizarre and archaic and is in desperate need of an update. But more broadly, the Burgess report bravely takes an overall look at the whole notion of student assessment.

Think about it for a moment. What does an undergraduate degree actually certify to an employer or even a graduate school? What does any degree really say about the acquired body of knowledge or habits of thinking that its holder possesses? If so, what?

The problem, at the end of the day, is one of curriculum. As institutions have offered increasing amounts of cafeteria-style choices in course selection, it becomes harder and harder to describe to people what a university degree means. Does it mean anything other than that the holder managed to pay fees for four years and attended a number of classes?

At more prestigious institutions where the notion of curriculum is taken seriously (e.g., Harvard), there are still regular debates about what should be in the core curriculum and therefore – in effect – what every Harvard graduate should know. This is completely absent in Canada. Not a single institution in the last ten years has – to my knowledge – ever engaged in a debate about a campus-wide curriculum common content to all students and hence allow institutions to say “here’s what a Memorial graduate knows/can do.”

Other countries have tried to define university outcomes in terms of skills and competencies that people should have at the end of a first degree. The West Report in Australia had a pretty good set of such recommendations. In England, the much-maligned Quality Assurance Agency did a very good job at the start of the decade in creating national “subject benchmark statements,” in which academics from a single discipline across the country came together to agree upon expectations of minimum standards of what should be expected of graduates in each area. Again, North America has nothing like it.

But if we insist upon outcomes assessment for institutions, we’re going to need these sorts of external benchmarks to see whether or not students are in fact learning what they are supposed to over the time they are in universities’ hands. And, subsequently, we’re going to need to find more interesting and innovative ways of reporting on that via transcripts.

The Burgess report does not go as far as all this – indeed, it is in some ways a very cautious document which talks a lot about the process required to get a new national framework for transcripts working (it’s only a “framework” because the plan – quite rightly – is to set down some common elements of reporting while encouraging institutions to experiment with their own forms of reporting on student achievement). But it’s a question we all need to ponder. As undergraduate degrees become more common, the demand for forms of assessment which can permit solid differentiation between Bachelor’s candidates will grow. High schools – with relatively tight curricula and province or statewide curricula and testing - can get away with just publishing course names and grades. Universities—with little standardization and an increasingly smorgasbord approach to credit accumulation – don’t have that luxury.

As it stands, most institutional transcripts certify very little about students competencies and history other than time served. It's time people on this side of the ocean began giving some more serious thought as to how to accurately describe, quantify, and summarize the education undergraduates are receiving. Given what they're paying, we owe them that.

*November 2, 2007*

## RANKINGS

*Alex Usher, Vice President, Educational Policy Institute*



I had the pleasure of spending this week in Shanghai, China at the 3rd meeting of the International Rankings Expert Group. The meeting was hosted by the remarkable Professor Nian Cai Liu, who – without exaggeration – has more or less single-handedly revolutionized the way universities see themselves on the global stage through his Shanghai Jiao Tong World-Class Universities rankings. With delegates from more than twenty countries, the assembly provided a fascinating forum for tracking the explosive growth of rankings across the globe and the ways in which universities are striving for global excellence. Jamil Salmi of the World Bank set the tone for the event with an expert summary of the changes in rankings around the world. According to his survey, the number of countries using some kind of university rankings nearly doubled between 2006 and 2007 – and it is rankings by government agencies, not media outlets, which are behind this charge. It seems now that any time a collection of indicators appears, people have an irresistible urge to aggregate and weight these indicators and turn them into rankings!

Despite the spread of rankings around the world, they remain deeply controversial. They have been blamed for a host of ills including the increasing “marketization” of universities, the increasing homogenization of institutional missions and an array of irrational public policy and institutional policy decisions. The Shanghai Jiao Tong Rankings of World-Class universities in particular, which are largely research rankings, have been vilified for being

insufficiently sensitive to various national and disciplinary traditions and overly positive about the American research university model.

Certainly, there is some truth to many of these charges. But I'm going to let everyone in on a nasty little secret. Although universities and academics publicly deplore rankings, the real problem is not that these rankings misrepresent the truth about which universities are best, but that they reveal too much about what the academic community really values.

Most rankings are fundamentally measuring - either directly or indirectly - institutional funding (Maclean's is notably heavy on these kinds of measures) and research output (e.g. Shanghai Jiao Tong and other Asian rankings systems). Many also measure something called "prestige" or "reputation" (the Times Higher Education Supplement world rankings is particularly heavy on this measure, but it is US News and World Report that gets a lot of the press on this one). Some people say this highly unfair because it is "too subjective". But as recent research by Ross Williams of the Melbourne Institute and Gero Federkeil of the German Centre for Higher Education has shown, "reputation among academics", properly measured, is actually an excellent proxy for research output because of the high degree of correlation between reputation and bibliometric measures of scientific output. So in fact, when rankings measure prestige, they are actually indirectly measuring research output.

When one thinks about it, this makes a lot of sense. "Reputation" is the coin of academia. But reputation - truly national or global reputations - can only be earned through scholarly communications, which are universally available, and non-rival in nature (i.e. an unlimited number of people can consume them). There are no academics who are globally-known for their prowess in teaching, because teaching is always limited (there's only so many seats in a class-room), and local. And what goes for individual professors also goes for institutions, which after all are simply a bundle of individual professors.

Moreover, network effects exist in academia. Bluntly, elite academics as a bunch are inherently snobby and prefer to work with other elite academics. Thus, elite academics are not distributed randomly throughout academia but instead are highly concentrated. And - surprise, surprise - money and talent are inextricably linked. In many countries, research granting systems

are specifically designed to make this link and of course the presence of “superstar researchers” makes fundraising much easier. So aggregations of good people attract lots of money (there are of course other issues at play here - notably age of institution - but this is relationship basically holds true).

Given this, it’s easy to see how rankings that measure money and research actually do a pretty good job of capturing the prejudices and norms of academia. Maybe not in the middle ranges of universities where there isn’t a great deal to distinguish between universities, but certainly at the very top they would have to be extraordinarily badly designed not to capture these norms. That’s why in American and world rankings Harvard is always at or near the top and why at Maclean’s it’s always either the University of Toronto or McGill which occupies the top spot. Obviously it is possible to devise criteria which don’t put these institutions first; the Globe and Mail puts the University of Western Ontario first because it uses student satisfaction as a prime indicator. While this is a commendable showing, absolutely nobody - on the basis of this ranking alone - is going to mistake Western for a World-class university because deep down no one actually believes student satisfaction is an appropriate indicator for academic greatness.

Therefore, a lot of the complaints one typically hears about university rankings are – in my view – fundamentally misplaced. Whether directly or indirectly, rankings are pretty good at capturing the norms of the academic profession. If you have a problem with rankings, you actually probably have a problem with these norms.

Don’t think it’s right that rankings privilege research-intensive institutions over teaching institutions? Well, maybe so, but academia values research over teaching. Perplexed that rankings do not give sufficient credit to the extra work that poorer universities do to achieve the kinds of things their wealthier colleagues take for granted? Too bad, because academia cares more about raw outputs than about value-added. Outraged that English universities are privileged over other languages in research rankings because the top journals are all in English? Well, academia abhors barriers to knowledge dissemination and nothing impedes understanding like the lack of a common language.

There is an intelligent case to be made, of course, for the development of indicators and rankings that do not privilege research, money and the English language. Among other things, such indicators would probably be better for some of the main consumers of indicator data, such as students (who need data on undergraduate teaching to make good decisions on choice of institution) and governments (who would be quite interested in the value-added data). That in turn would help people understand which institutions have particular strengths and which are doing an excellent job at fulfilling their mandates.

But no one should fool themselves into thinking that success by either of these yard-sticks makes for a world-class university. Money and research still trump everything where “world-class-ness” is concerned.

Still don’t think it’s fair that only big rich institutions get to the top? That’s your right, of course.

Just don’t blame the rankers for saying the opposite. All they’re doing is holding a mirror to the norms of the academic profession.

The Educational Policy Institute will be hosting the 4th meeting of the International Rankings Expert Group in Toronto in either October 2008 or May 2009 (TBD).

*November 9, 2007*

## **THE THES RANKINGS AND THE DAWN OF GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION DATA STANDARDS**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



You might have missed this in North America because both the Chronicle and Inside Higher Ed managed to ignore it completely, but elsewhere in the world today, everyone is talking about the release of The Times Higher Education Supplement annual top 200 World Universities list this morning.

There will no doubt be some eyebrows raised about the Anglophilia at the top of the list: not that all top 10 are English-speaking universities (arguably true), but rather that 4 of them are actually located in England (much more controversial). There will also certainly be some tut-tutting about how some tweaking of methodology has led to some big changes in the rankings: the downgrading in importance of foreign students as a measure of quality has hit the LSE and some Australian institutions hard, leading to some really dumb headlines Down Under from journalists who can't be bothered to understand methodology.

Most people in the rankings business think that the main problem with the Times is the opaque way it constructs its sample for its reputational rankings - a not-unimportant question given that reputation makes up 50% of the sample. Moreover, this year's switch from using raw reputation scores to using

normalized Z-scores has really shaken things up at the top-end of the rankings by reducing the advantage held by really top universities - UBC for instance, is now functionally equivalent to Harvard in the Peer Review score, which, no disrespect to UBC, is ludicrous.

I'll be honest and say that at the moment the THES Rankings are an inferior product to the Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings. Any publication that genuinely thinks McGill is the 12th best university in the world - ahead of UPenn, Stanford, Berkeley, the University of Tokyo, and the Ecole Normale Supérieure - has a screw loose (yes, I can say that - I'm an alumni). This doesn't really pass the fall-down-laughing-test, which is the simplest way of validating any set of rankings.

It would probably help, too, if the Times would do a little fact-checking on the answers institutions provide. Much of McGill's advantage over U of T (who came 45th this year), for instance, stems from the fact that their student/staff ratio is - allegedly - 4 times better than U of T's. This, to put it mildly, is fantasy. (Let's be clear - I'm not saying anyone's cheating. I'm just saying that in good faith, the two institutions may not be reporting quite the same numerators and denominators on this item.)

But enough quibbling around the edges here. The THES Rankings may be a flawed product at the moment, but I would argue that over the coming five years, it may revolutionize the entire way that we measure performance in higher education. And that's because, behind the scenes, the Times has actually done a lot of the work necessary to improve itself significantly.

Here's the central problem faced by the Times: apart from bibliometrics and scientometrics, there aren't really any indicators which institutions in different countries collect and report in a common way. You name it: student numbers, staff counts, budgets, research income, completion rates - not everybody counts them, and when they do they don't count them the same way.

Faced with this, what does one do? Well, in the short-term there is really only one option: invent your own metrics. And the easiest way to do this is through surveys on reputation, just as the THES has done. One can quibble with some of their methodology, of course, but constructing a half-decent

sample in a single country is hard enough, let alone doing so globally. So let's give them a bit of a break and say they've done an OK job. Not great, but OK (although, for the record, they've gone and made things worse with this Z-score thing).

Now, if this were all the THES were doing, I think we'd have reason to dismiss them as being somewhat trivial. But it's not. It turns out for the last three years, the THES' data partner, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), has actually been collecting far more data from institutions than it has been publishing, asking institutions questions about library holdings, budgets and so forth. In other words, they are starting to get consistent data on all those kinds of indicators that one takes for granted in North America and which in many places forms the core of what we think of as rankings criteria.

QS hasn't started publishing any of this data yet - partly because not everyone is filling in the data and partly because they aren't convinced that they have drawn the definitions tightly enough to ensure that data across institutions is truly consistent. But their strategy is brilliant - quietly, behind the scenes, they are through trial and error starting to create genuinely global institutional indicators. Once those are up and running, the reputational stuff can take a back seat and we can start to have much more interesting comparisons between institutions.

And that's just step one. Now imagine QS were to go a little further. Say it were to ask institutions to send their students a little survey - nothing fancy, just a few satisfaction questions, maybe a few experiential questions. Not all institutions would participate at first, of course, but some would and the results could be published alongside the rankings.

Then things would start to get interesting. One of the problems of using survey data in rankings is that one has to get everyone involved because every indicator has to apply to every institution. That's one of the reasons its impractical (even if it were desirable) to use NSSE data in rankings. The Harvards of this world don't want to do NSSE because - let's be honest - they don't want themselves compared to the East Podunk State colleges of this world.

But they might want to compare themselves to the Oxfords and Cambridges of this world. One could imagine, then, a scenario where gradually, more and more universities agree to participate in the surveys, until finally nearly all of them - even the Harvards - are in and the results can go from being published alongside the rankings to actually being within them.

Sound farfetched? I don't think so. In Europe, the idea of using student surveys within rankings systems (albeit not ones that use the THES' league table format) is now widely accepted thanks to the CHE, and institutions in Germany, Switzerland and Holland are all involved in this effort. In Canada, of course, the Globe and Mail/EPI/Strategic Counsel University Report Card already uses this methodology. As this approach gains ground from the bottom up, QS is in a position to spread this approach from the top down. The result would be that we could probably meet in the middle about a decade from now.

*November 16, 2007*

## **FOREIGN AFFAIRS ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



Without getting too political, I'm not very happy about the war in Iraq. In total, 3,866 confirmed US deaths and 4,170 total "allied" deaths as of this morning. On top of this, over 28,000 US wounded. Not very pretty numbers. A few more targeted IEDs and we could hit 4,000 before the ball drops in Times Square.

I mention this as a precursor to a more important-but-related discussion. Traveling the world to education-related conferences, there tends to be a fair amount of dialogue about the US-led invasion of Iraq. Over the past four years of my international travel, I have yet to talk with one non-US person who is supportive of the effort. In fact, the discussion is usually of some level of futility and argument of why we are over there. I am left, often, to argue the Administration's position on this, although I don't agree in any manner. After 9/11, we had the world in our hands; I can remember 9/12 and the number of emails and phone calls from our German and other friends overseas. Everyone was affected. But the tides have reversed, regardless of what the new French President has to say about his love for America. Much of the world loves America; they just don't always like us very much.

Eight years before 9/11, a gentleman named Greg Mortenson attempted to summit K2, the second highest mountain in the world. This is relevant, be-

cause that signaled the beginning of a one-man effort to change the world, one school at a time.

Mortenson didn't summit that day back in 1993. In fact, he had to be rescued off the mountain by a porter named Mouzafer Ali. While resting back in the small Pakistani village of Korphe, Mortenson noticed that the town did not have a school. In fact, he watched 82 students – and only 4 girls – kneeling on the frozen ground outside, using sticks in the sand for their blackboard work. And they did this largely without a teacher. At the time, a teacher in Pakistan cost about \$1 a day. The Pakistani government didn't provide one, so Korphe had to share a teacher with two other communities. On the days that the teacher was not there, the children still showed up for their classes, 800 feet above the little town of Korphe.

It was at this moment that Mortenson, an American raised by missionary parents in Africa who built the first teaching hospital in Tanzania, decided that he needed to build a school for the people of Korphe, those who helped save him from the treacherous K2.

The story of Mortenson's efforts to build that school is well documented in the bestselling book, *Three Cups of Tea*. I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Mortenson last week at Old Dominion University. While I was present to receive an honorary award from the university, I must admit, I felt "little" in comparison to what this man has done for the world. Since 1993, Mortenson has built 64 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, mainly for girls, because the educated boys leave the village while the girls come back. He has done so as a lone wolf, so to speak, and by learning the local customs and working within the constructs of their society, not by imposing ours on theirs.

The term "Three Cups of Tea" comes from the following Pakistani saying, as quoted in the book: "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die." Mortenson has achieved the third level in dozens of communities in the Middle East, and has achieved something we have not been able to do through our foreign affairs efforts: he has earned the

respect and reverence of the local people, who understand that Americans can be good, even though our bombs sometimes drop and kill their families.

We need to learn something from Greg Mortenson's efforts, which will likely, and hopefully, earn him a Nobel Peace Prize. The message to us is that the humanitarian aid is perhaps the best mode of foreign affairs in our arsenal.

For perspective, consider this: while the US provides about double the amount of foreign aid than any other country, it provided only 0.17 percent of GNI (Gross National Income) in 2006 to foreign or development aid, far under the 0.7 percent level set by the United Nations or the 1.03 percent achieved by Sweden, the 0.89 percent by Norway, or even the lowly 0.30 percent by Canada. We need to do more, and Mr. Mortenson is showing us how much difference a small amount can make: \$1/day for a teacher; \$12,000 to build a school. The newest high school in Arlington County, outside of Washington, DC, cost \$77 million to build in 2005/06. Twelve grand seems like a bargain. Even if a school cost \$25,000 to build in Korphe, we could build a hundred of them for \$2.5 million, or 3,100 for the coast of the new Arlington high school.

Perhaps our best foreign efforts lay in the humanitarian efforts provided through USAID and other, non-governmental organizations. Building schools, helping communities "learn to fish" on their own, illustrates our best intentions.

Next week marks the US Thanksgiving (November 22) and also Canada's non-official national holiday (the Grey Cup game on November 25). While enjoying your family or whatever you are doing, I strongly encourage you to take the time to read *Three Cups of Tea*. It may change your perspective of the world, especially with consideration of the volatility of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and rekindle the belief that each one of us can make a difference if we choose to act rather than think.

*December 14, 2007*

## **INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON NOT KIND TO THE US**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



Last week was not a good week for the United States, depending upon what one's measure is. But if it happens to be mathematics and science—it wasn't good. (EDITOR'S NOTE: If you are Canadian, it wasn't a bad week at all!).

This is because PISA came out last week. For those not in the know, PISA is the Program for International Student Assessment, the international comparative study on how students in secondary education compare in science, mathematics, and reading. PISA is conducted by the OECD, with support from Departments or Ministries of Education around the world. In 2006, over 400,000 15-year old students from 57 countries participated in PISA. According to OECD, these countries collectively account 90 percent of the world economy. PISA is conducted on a triennial basis, and the 2006 report just released is the third such study since 2000.

According to the OECD, the US has the advantage of being the "first-mover advantage" (a great term), which means that the US is ahead because it has had a global advantage since WWII. However, this advantage continues to dissipate over time. In the mid-1960s, the US led OECD countries in high school completions. In 2006, it placed 21st out of 27 countries. In college-level completions, the US has dipped from 2nd to 14th between 1995 and 2005.

Of course, none of this is to say that the US is doing poorly. Rather, the rest of the world is doing better. Much better. In science, the US ranked 29th out of 57 countries in the PISA study. Finland was first; Canada third. In mathematics, the US ranked 25th of 30 OECD countries or 35th in the entire study. Chinese Taipei (Taiwan) topped the list, with Finland second and Canada 7th.

Interesting to note are the data when disaggregated. Education Week, in their article on the issue (and in this edition of Week in Review), said this:

*Not only did many industrialized countries outperform the United States in science on a recent international exam, but American students' academic achievement was also more likely to be affected by their wealth or poverty and family background than was their peers' in higher-scoring nations.*

Of course, I'm stunned. Wealth and poverty have an impact on achievement in the United States? I guess the real issue is that poverty didn't have as much as an effect in most other countries. At least that's my read. But from a US point of view (and I can't see this being any different in my native country to the north), this is stating the obvious. As a qualifier, has anyone stepped into a school in a poverty-stricken area lately, or seen the differences between schools in affluent suburbs vs. intercity (many, at least) areas? Night and day, my friends. Even in public schools, which are supposed to be somewhat equitable, by most state standards, the differences are stark. Affluent public districts or counties not only have higher property taxes to collect from, but also typically fundraise to ensure that their schools have the tools necessarily to properly serve students (there is something truly wrong about a local school asking for paper and pencils from parents at the start of a year, which I've seen happen in my own area in Virginia). PTAs and PTOs in affluent areas pay for six-figure playgrounds or computer labs, while other districts are forced to settle for what the state may transfer to them in equalization payments.

This is perhaps a side issue to the PISA data, but it is ultimately the crux of the entire education issue, from at least a US perspective. In sheer numbers, with maybe the exclusion of China and India, the US produces more of the best than anywhere else. A country of over 300 million can do that. The edu-

cation system in the US isn't bad. In fact, it can be argued that K-12 education in the US is really quite good, producing scientists and mathematicians, let alone artists, that are tops in the world. Where the US doesn't shine is in ensuring that other, perhaps less fortunate students get the same opportunities and care as the affluent or at least those who are brought up in proactive families or within the district boundaries of "good" versus "bad."

Although I must surely admit that the mean science and mathematics PISA scores certainly show the US at a considerable disadvantage compared to the Fins and Canadians, among others, it isn't enough to worry me that we aren't doing a good job and that the US is in trouble in the global competitive race. But the US could certainly do better if it could lift those from the bottom rungs of the ladder up to mid-level. A rising tide lifts all boats? So true, but that only occurs when policymakers focus on raising the tide. Atmospheric conditions can only do so much; it takes targeted, prudent public policy to ensure that some of our disadvantaged students have access to the same level of education as others.

I have seen students excel in old, dilapidated schools. But I think it's easier to learn in a nicer school. My son's middle school, a pretty decent school by all accounts (NOTE: the annual PDK/Gallup survey on education consistently finds that almost everyone thinks their local schools are fine but education as a whole is a mess; too funny), has over nine portable units which blight the school area. Luckily, inside those portables are good teachers, which can be harder to find than decent portables. But we're lucky because our school district is one of the best in the country and attract good teachers. Other school districts have huge troubles attracting teachers who excel, with many teachers on probationary licenses until they complete certification.

This is an ongoing problem in the US and one that we haven't taken seriously. Much of this comes down to money, and policymakers don't like to hear that it's about money because "you can't keep throwing money at the issue!" I think we have hardly thrown money at the issue. Education is an expensive public good, but it is, ultimately, the foundation of a nation.

What we learn from studies like PISA is not only that the US is falling in comparison to other countries—that isn't really the important part. Rather, we learn that (a) on a larger scale, we do a decent job of educating the masses, and (b) we have significant space for improvement. Contrary to popular belief, this isn't rocket science. We 'get' the solutions in many cases. The rocket science is in the politics. Getting different factions (and that's what they are) to agree on what students can learn (not even going to talk about Kansas), what level of facilities should be provided, and how best to improve teacher education and teacher salaries to attract and retain the best teachers is the hard part.

I don't expect the US to travel up the PISA scales anytime soon, if ever. But if we can improve some of the conditions I've noted herein, the kids will be alright tonight.

## **INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY**

*April 6, 2007*

## **COMPETING FOR QUALITY**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



Educational quality is hard to measure. Lord knows, it's been tried. Governments all over the world have been wrestling with this problem for years.

The history of measuring quality at the post-secondary level is not a pretty one. Left to themselves, institutions stuck with a system of periodic program review, which was neither transparent, nor to any real degree empirical. It smacked of a cozy arrangement amongst academics to make sure that nothing ever changed.

In the 1980s and 1990s, governments declared themselves unsatisfied with this and started measuring performance (and tying funding) to a set of simple, easy-to-understand, numeric indicators, most of which were simple outcomes measures such as graduation rates and employment rates. Indeed, at one point, over 30 US states adopted some kind of performance-based funding.

This, needless to say, was as much of a disaster as the previous arrangement had been. Graduation rates can be manipulated by raising entry requirements or lowering academic standards. Institutional employment rates are largely a function of geography and the range of courses offered. Performance-based funding, in other words, did not incentivize any kind of behaviour that normal, rational people might think was actually beneficial.

There have also been other experiments in quality. In Europe and Australia, there has been a tendency to equate quality not with numerical outputs but with process - that is to say, that quality is defined as a process which leads to improvement. This is a step forward over performance indicators in a couple of ways. First, by focusing over process rather than input, it tends to democratize quality discussions within institutions, putting less authority in the hands of the number-crunchers and back into the classrooms and common rooms. Second, by emphasizing that quality needs to be a continual concern, something that \*always\* needs to be dealt with.

But this idea has its limits, too. The most important one being that process on its own doesn't necessarily lead to change; and more over, it's not always clear what kinds of behaviour or outcomes governments should be trying to incentivize.

Yet this kind of problem shouldn't be that hard to solve. What do we really want from institutions in terms of quality, anyway? More than anything, we want them to constantly think about quality, we want them to make greater efforts to measure what it is they do and how successful they are at doing it, and we want them to make continual adjustments to improve their offerings.

Ok, then: then let's incentivize thinking about, measuring and improving quality.

Imagine a system where pots of money were available on a competitive basis to develop new methods of measuring quality. Imagine if every year, a competition were held to award a few million dollars to the institution(s) that came up with the best plan to improve teaching quality. Imagine if every year there was a \$5 million prize for the institution that had improved the most in the commercialization of research, or internationalizing its curriculum. Even if an institution didn't win in a given year, it would still have spent a lot of time thinking about how to improve its offerings and some of that thinking would no doubt seep through to programs even in the absence of new money.

As for institutions that won: well, I think we'd likely see some dramatic improvements. If we made quality measurement a mandatory part of the com-

petition, then we would even have solid empirical evidence about the effectiveness of the changes.

Seriously, how great would that be?

I'm willing to bet these prizes would generate a lot of new and creative thinking about these issues – and it would leverage a lot more systemic change than any performance funding envelope could. As quality becomes increasingly important, it's this kind of systemic change we need to be looking for.

*May 4, 2007*

## **HOW DO YOU DEFINE STUDENT SUCCESS?**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



It sounds like a Rolaids commercial, I know. But I'm always interested in how people view the issue of student success, since that's become the vernacular over the past few years. And I'm the guilty party as much as anyone.

We've been flinging "student success" around quite liberally, just as we've done for "college access" for the better part of 50 years. But as many of us have argued, including my colleague Vince Tinto, "what is college access if not for college success?" We all understand that access is dependent on another important question: "access to what?" because we all know that all access is not equal.

The same can be said for student success. In a definitional sense, we think of success mostly as securing of a college diploma, certificate, or degree. This is because these are more easily measurable and because institutions are tied to graduation rates as a measure of success. And this is the crux. We understand that not all student success can be measured by realization (or "realisation" for my Canuck friends) of a college degree. There are certainly those that "succeed" through transfer to another institution or finding a different pathway to their own personal success.

But we can't measure these because we do not have the data infrastructure to measure in a complex manner. With the exception of a few states in the US, I

can't tell if Johnny, who enrolled at ABC University in fall of 2002 but transferred in 2004 to DEF Community College, reached any "educational" success. The systems don't allow for this type of "unit-record" data mining. And I apologize because I've written about this before and I may sound like a broken record. But I believe that it is difficult to define student success if we can't measure what happens, at least educationally, with a student along the complex pathways in postsecondary education, let alone secondary education.

I'm keeping this week's commentary short because, well, we're kind of busy. We've got our Retention 2007 conference coming up in San Antonio, whose focus will be—guess what: Student Success!!! And we're also busy preparing our National Capitol Summit on Latino Students and Educational Opportunity June 13-14—also on student success. We hope you can attend one or both of these important events.

But I'd like to hear from you. How do you define student success? Please email me at [wswail@educationalpolicy.org](mailto:wswail@educationalpolicy.org) and we'll post some of the comments next week at the end of Alex' column.

*July 27, 2007*

## **RANKINGS, RANKINGS, AND MORE RANKINGS...**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



At the danger of stealing a little thunder from my partner, Alex Usher, I am focused on college rankings this week. I say this because Alex is not only our resident expert, but quickly becoming one of the “globe’s” more knowledgeable experts in this area.

In this week's news, Kevin Carey and Thomas Toch (see “College Rankings: Higher Education's Battle Royal”) discuss the upcoming US News and World Report Rankings Guide, which will hit the newsstands in a few weeks. Unfortunately, Carey and Toch take a purely populist view of the rankings and related issues. And this has set me off.

It's certainly true that institutions are walking away from rankings reports. In Canada, MacLean's magazine, which produces Canadian rankings, has seen an unprecedented downturn in institutional participation in the last year. Last year, 19 major Canadian institutions (almost half of four-year institutions across the country) denounced the rankings and are not participating. But in the US, with the exception of a very few institutions, higher education presidents and CEOs are relatively mercenary about the rankings: they hate 'em when they don't rank; love 'em when they do. If you attended a half-way decent institution, you probably know I'm right. I've read alumni letters from William & Mary (my wife's alma mater) and other reputable institutions that

in the first paragraph downgrade the importance of the rankings, followed by a quick acknowledgement of their "25" ranking on the liberal arts category. Then, of course, they ask for money.

I don't blame the universities. It's part of the game. But only because we have let it become so. And I'm not so inclined to buy the authors' comment that "presidents have a right to be angry." They get what they want and they use it to fundraise if they can.

Carey and Toch say that the tides are turning in this ranking business. Maybe they are. But their argument is weak, at best:

"New research and advances in technology in the last several years have led to a host of new ways to measure the performance of colleges and universities—and the new metrics are yielding some surprising results."

As a researcher, I find it insulting when writers throw around terms like "surprising results," without telling us what the surprising results are. It's so gimmicky. In talking about the CLA (College Learning Assessment), which was produced by a consortium led by the very talented Rand Corp (and I mean that), the authors state that the "results have been eye-opening." But Carey and Toch don't bother to open our eyes with any of these results. It's kind of like believing that things in Iraq are going "really, really well" and that we've made "significant progress" because our President says so (EDITOR's NOTE: 8 out of 18 isn't very "significant"). The power of the pulpit and of the press.

In reality, the outcomes of the CLA have been mixed at best. How does one truly measure the diversity of college learning at the most diverse education system in the world? The CLA is an interesting experiment, but to think it is the Holy Grail of campus quality is near sighted at best. I'm sure Rand wouldn't disagree. But it's a start, for sure.

Carey and Toch then suggest that the National Survey of Student Engagement, better known as the NSSE, is an important tool to document how "good" schools are. The NSSE is a decent tool for institutions to gauge what students think of their institution. Built off the backs of decades of IR surveys,

they've develop a trademarked tool (yes, as we've found, you apparently can trademark "how many hours do you study a week?") to hopefully help institutions plan for better student services. The author's state that institutions aren't willing to provide their NSSE information for public use. This statement isn't altogether true from our experience, but still, institutions are never overly keen on providing insights into their sausage factory. As well, NSSE doesn't publish that information. So I'll give them that point. But they do comment that high-scoring NSSE schools rate low in the US News and World Report rankings. I'm not sure if this is true, but if it is, it brings into question two things: either the US News Ranking system is flawed (which surely it is to some degree), or the NSSE is flawed, which I am unable to comment on. Important to remember is that the NSSE wasn't designed to be used in rankings, which makes it very interesting that the NSSE people are now working with USA Today to provide college-based NSSE information for the public. We'll see how well that goes.

Carey and Toch are absolutely correct in suggesting that there needs to be more information made public on how well our schools are doing. We've built a system called University Navigator in Canada to do just that. We hope to have it brought down to the US soon if we can get the funding and legal clearances, both of which we are working on at the present. Regardless of what we are doing, hopefully the NSSE and the CLA and the other discussions are opening the door so that students, parents, and policymakers can see behind the Wizard's (or Wizards') curtain. But we have a long way to go in terms of assessing institutional "effectiveness" and "learning." In the meantime, here's to you and your alma mater's 2007 ranking!

*December 7, 2007*

## **MAKING PSE ACCOUNTABILITY WORK**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



If there is one aspect of the current US debate on accountability in higher education that drives me to distraction it is the way that some members of the university community insist that common performance measurement schemes are a bad idea because it will lead to a reduction in the diversity of institutional missions. This is a really weak argument, for two main reasons.

The first is that the "diversity of missions" argument is really only a half-truth. It is true that different types of institutions have different missions and need to have their performance judged accordingly. But let's be serious: in the North American system of higher education, there are not that many different types of missions. Most institutional missions are fundamentally riffs on about a half dozen main themes. So even if you accept this argument, it's really only an argument for a half-dozen standard measurement schemes instead of one. It's emphatically not an argument for abandoning common measurement altogether.

The second is that just because all institutions would be required to collect data on a common basis doesn't mean that the success conditions for each institution need to be the same. Clearly "success" in a category such as "attracting research funding" is going to be different for Liberal Arts institutions than it is for Research I institutions. But that's not a reason for Liberal Arts institutions to collect statistics on their research activity - it's just a reason to set the bar at different levels for different institution. Conversely, NSSE scores are

almost always going to be better at smaller universities than at bigger ones. That's not a reason not to report NSSE scores - it's a reason to make sure that they are read in context.

I'm not close enough to the US debate to really understand what's driving these arguments. It's possible that these arguments are really just the community's way of saying: "we don't think governments are smart enough to make different yardsticks to institutions based on institutional missions." It's also possible that the people making these arguments are just staggeringly disingenuous and are just trying to avoid having their performance measured. I suspect it's a bit of both.

But just to provide a little bit of "northern wisdom" on this: In Canada, the province of British Columbia has an approach to institutional performance measurement (recently copied by Ontario) which puts most of the continent to shame and deserves to be more widely recognized as a best practice.

In BC, institutions are required to report on about two dozen common indicators, the results of which are plainly available for everyone to see. However, when it comes time for each institution to deal with the government on accountability arrangements, the benchmarks for each university on each of these two dozen indicators are tailored to each institution's mission. In other words, the system provides both transparency and comparability without turning accountability into a one-size-fits-all exercise. This system, which I call "common measurement and tailored accountability" (CMTA) provides the best of both worlds.

This is not to say that the BC system is perfect. Some of the individual indicators are frankly inane (student loan defaults - groan), and more work should be done to make the indicators reflect value-added measurements rather than simple outputs. But the basic idea is far superior to any other system of performance measurement in use in North America, most of which are in fact one-size-fits-all (I'll make an exception here for Maryland, whose approach to indicators and accountability in many resembles the BC approach).

The no-common-measurement crowd in the US is just plain wrong: tailored accountability does not require tailored measurement. British Columbia has

done us all a favour in showing us that a better way is possible. Instead of putting their faith in a "we-shouldn't-be-measured-because-we're-all-unique" argument which is almost certain to be met by withering contempt from government, America's colleges need to actively champion a CMTA approach. It is by far the most productive way forward in the new era of accountability.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

*February 2, 2007*

## **PROGRESS OF A SORT**

*Alex Usher, Vice President*



How important is postsecondary education in North American society these days? Go watch some movies.

The changing portrayal of higher education in popular culture hit me recently when I was watching the 1979 movie *Breaking Away* with my son. Set in Bloomington, Indiana, it tells the tale of four local working-class kids (known contemptuously as "cutters" by the snobbish university students in reference to the quarries at which the students work) who defeat the frat-boy snobs that dominate the local social scene by entering and winning the Little Indy 500 bicycle race.

Apart from the chance to watch Dennis Quaid and Daniel Stern in very early roles, there wouldn't be a whole lot to recommend this movie were it not for the fascinating way it portrays the college decision-making process (and really, what better place to examine college-decision making than in Bloomington, home of Don Hossler, Jack Schmidt, and Scott Gillie?). Despite the fact that the local quarries are going out of business, there is still a lot of reluctance among these kids' blue-collar parents to sanction the idea of going to college. I'm sure our readers from Ohio can relate as well.

"College?" says the main character's father. "He's not going to college. I didn't need college - he doesn't need college."

Though he later relents on this point, the father's initial opposition isn't based on ignorance or finances. The family can afford the education and the father knows perfectly well that blue-collar jobs are disappearing. But it's a cultural thing: to him, hard, back-breaking work is morally superior to white-collar work. College simply isn't a desirable good.

Contrast this with some more recent cinematic offerings. 2004's *The Perfect Score* (Scarlett Johanssen's last movie before mega-stardom) is a long, if shallow, meditation on the filtering function performed by the SAT and its effects on longer-term life-chances. Last summer's *Accepted* was essentially a spoof on the American accreditation system. While there is a lot of angst about where one goes to school (e.g. *Orange County*), not going to college doesn't really enter into anyone's head. College in the movies is as normal and inevitable as high school was 25 years ago, in a way it clearly wasn't when *Breaking Away* was made in 1979.

Even college party movies look different these days. National Lampoon's 1982 *Animal House*, set at an Ivy League university which looked suspiciously like Dartmouth (minus the Amerindian socialist-realist murals in the library), ended with a riot on the streets of "not-Hanover." National Lampoon's 2003 *Van Wilder* – written, designed and marketed as an *Animal House* remake – ended with party-animal Ryan Reynolds cramming for weeks straight and graduating with excellent grades.

So when did this change happen? Well, it's fashionable to bash the Reagan era as the one when the dream of equal access died, but it seems clear that the cultural shift that made college attendance the unthinking norm happened during the 1980s. In the early 1980s, TV could only portray students as being members of an intellectual elite (*The Paperchase*). By the 1990s, college campuses were commonplace on TV (*A Different World*, *Felicity*) and the kids they portrayed were – Tori Spelling apart – pretty run-of-the-mill, too. Indeed, by 1990 *Beverly Hills 90210* felt comfortable using up entire episodes to explore college advising, financial aid, and school choice. Luke Perry, indeed, was considered socially deviant for even harbouring thoughts of not going to college.

It is almost impossible to imagine hearing dialogue like *Breaking Away's* in a contemporary movie. While access to post-secondary education isn't universal, the desire for post-secondary education is and that's a big change for the better since from 1979.

If participation trends are any guide, though, we can expect a new movie genre any day now: impassioned debates between family members about getting a Master's degree. "Grad school?" the crusty father will say. "She's not going to grad school. I didn't need grad school - she doesn't need grad school."

And of course, by the end of the film, she'll be settling into her new course of studies in some suitably ivy-covered surroundings.

*June 8, 2007*

## **OUTCOMES FROM RETENTION 2007**

*Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President*



Two weeks ago hundreds of us converged on San Antonio for Retention 2007, our second annual international conference on student retention. This year's event doubled the attendance from 2006, and we're anticipating a much larger crowd next May in San Diego. Beyond the collective sigh of relief from our staff that we can put "R7," as we called it in office, to bed for a while and recharge our batteries, this was an exceptional event.

Retention 2007 started with an address from Raymund Paredes, the Commissioner of Higher Education for the State of Texas, who suggested it was both horrific and unconscionable that we allow students into higher education without ensuring that they have a chance to succeed. I've said this for years, but Dr. Paredes was perhaps more direct in his delivery. And he's absolutely right: public policy needs to ensure that the public systems of secondary and postsecondary education better serve our students, because for many, they simple don't cut it once they gain access to the postsecondary level. We can save "lives" in PSE, but there is, ultimately, only so much triage that can be performed by staff and faculty.

This takes us back to the ongoing discussion about high school graduation rates as of late. Although the numbers are arguable and in some cases suspect, the national graduation rate of 9th graders to high school graduation is about 70 percent, give or take about 5 percent. This is, of course, the average. And as Dr. Paredes will tell you, it isn't near that high in many areas of the

country. For instance, according to data collected and distributed by NCHEMS, South Carolina has a 52 percent graduation rate; that is, half of their students don't even complete high school. We're not even talking about college, yet.

This is a serious issue that we simply aren't addressing in public policy at the local, state, or federal level. Yes, the Bush Administration enacted the No Child Left Behind Act in late 2001, but there is a strong bipartisan consensus that NCLB hasn't worked. So what else is being done to change how we structure our education systems and improve education in America (and certainly South Carolina!)? Almost nothing. I'm sure I'll get a few emails about new initiatives and some stuff going on somewhere. But these are aberrations in a system that is faulty to an extreme. We are doing as little as possible to improve education in America, which is interesting because the US puts boat loads of money into educational research and practice compared to other countries. Perhaps our "problems" are just more extreme than other G8 countries, but I don't think so.

Most of the focus at Retention 2007, of course, was on postsecondary retention. Our presidential panel of Diana Natalicio (UT-El Paso), Roseann Runte (Old Dominion University), and Cha Guzman (Palo Alto College) was certainly a highlight of the conference. Each of these outstanding leaders shared their thoughts on the challenges of improving student success at their campuses. Dr. Guzman noted that simply talking to students was important. Showing them that they matter and engaging them on campus has made a huge difference. All noted that involving faculty was a critical element, and that faculty must understand that they are the critical lynchpin for student engagement and success. Making that happen is more difficult.

Cliff Adelman told the crowd during his luncheon speech that there is no simple retention plan or strategy for students because they're all over the place--coming in, going out--so it's difficult to point to one strategy to make success. Cliff later received our Lifetime Achievement Award for his efforts in higher education.

We were pleased to award Youngstown State University in Ohio our Annual Student Retention Program Award for their outstanding commitment to stu-

dent success. Jonelle Beatrice and Pat Shively of YSU were on hand to accept the award and gave one of the best presentations of the conference. Congratulations to them.

Sarita Brown gave an impassioned address about the work of her organization, Excelencia! in Education, and the importance of getting Latino students to and through college. And finally, John Brooks Slaughter, the president of NACME, delivered the closing address on the impact of affirmative action and importance of getting students of color into college, especially into engineering and other hard sciences. As Dr. Slaughter described, doing this is our pathway to global competitiveness, and not doing so will be our downfall.

It was a fabulous event, and we're pleased that so many attendees enjoyed the experience. We hope to see everyone next year in San Diego. Please visit our events site to view PowerPoint from this year's session.

*August 10, 2007*

## A POTPOURRI OF NEWS

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



The more I write this weekly column, the more I feel like I'm shifting towards VH1's "The Best Week Ever," wanting to make fun of every lawmaker in the US and Canada (not that there aren't many more lawmakers around the world we couldn't make fun of). But I'll try and behave myself and not digress. This will be difficult.

This week, there are a number of stories that are worthy of comment, so I've put a potpourri together so I can talk about almost anything I want to. So, here we go:

**Competitiveness Bill.** The House and Senate passed the "21st Century Competitiveness Act, 2007" this week to spur US global competitiveness. In fact, the Senate passed the Bill unanimously, which is significant. This has been a big issue on Capitol Hill for a number of years, and they have thrown in the kitchen sink with this one. Included are several new education programs, including "Math Now," a "Reading First" like program which gives states money to use "proven" practices in math and science education. The cynic in me asks: shouldn't they be doing that now??? But let's throw some federal money at it and see how it takes off... (he says, slyly).

Other pieces include more programming or funding for Advanced Placement, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, foreign language, P-16 data systems, the National Science Foundation, NASA, and more. If all appropriations are

filled, which is always questionable (civics 101: authorization ≠ appropriation and authorization without appropriation is largely useless), the price tag is \$43 billion over three years. That is a significant amount of money, and, if appropriated, I hope it gets used well. See our article for more details.

**Teachers Happy?** A new report by NCES says that public school teachers are much more “happy” than perceived (Ms. Smith, please pass the vicodin). Perhaps more interesting is that teacher turnover is not near as bad as most of us have been led to believe, or have led others to believe. In the public policy circles, it is largely held that 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. However, this new report, written by our wonderful research staff at MPR Associates in California, finds that only 18 percent of teachers left within the first four years. Unless there was a big jump in the fifth year, we’ve all been wrong, because 50 percent of starting teachers were still teaching 10 years later. And only 13 percent of those who left did so because of salaries. So this party debunks that issue, too.

**The HEPI.** Each year the “HEPI” comes out with its price index for higher education. I’m not a big HEPI supporter, but for what it’s worth, the HEPI does measure the “costs” of higher education—meaning the infrastructure, staffing, benefits, and other physical plant and activities that have a line item associated with it in the budget. Just like with the medical field, the costs in higher education are not the same as the CPI (Consumers Price Index). All this is true. However, the problem is that the HEPI keeps going up at rates much higher than CPI, and we use the CPI to gauge the affordability of items to families. At a time when incomes are going up at a snail’s pace (unless you are a utility executive), these figures matter greatly, because regular wage earners have to figure out how to pay for something—in this case, tuition—which continues to escalate far beyond that of CPI. For the record, HEPI went up 3.4 this year, and 5 percent the year before. CPI went up 2.6 percent over the last year, so the “cost” of higher education continues to grow at higher rates than standard inflation. Most economists will tell you this will always be the case because higher education as a commodity is more expensive than standard “market basket” indicators (e.g., bread, milk, cars, etc.). I understand that, but it doesn’t bode well for college affordability for those of us trying to plan 5-10 years down the road.

**Early Childhood Matters.** A study conducted by the University of Minnesota found that adults who were involved in a youth intervention program were more likely to acquire more education and less likely to commit crimes than other study participants. The study director said that “these findings are especially relevant to schools and policymakers in decisions about modifying existing programs or expanding access to early education.” Sounds good to me. The intervention was a Head Start-like program in Chicago, aimed at 3-9 year olds. Education Week cited the University of Chicago’s James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, who is promoting preschool programs as a wise economic-development strategy.

Why does this matter? Because on Capitol Hill the Reading First Program is getting lambasted by the Democrats. Their dismay is due to the incompetence of the US Department of Education in running the program and also reports that certain private vendors are being given preference in the program. Those are real and serious issues, but let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater. We just finished evaluating Reading First programs for the State of North Carolina, and we found many supplementary programs that were both interesting and well designed for students. From research we understand that reading is the foundation of everything else that can happen educationally and career-wise to a young person. So reading matters. Let’s learn from this study.

Is NCLB Working? In this week’s edition of Education Week, writer Scott Cech documents a study of mathematics and reading test scores in 12 states (p. 9). The study in question was directed by Bruce Fuller of UC-Berkeley and the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) at Stanford.

Fuller’s report finds that while academic progress appears to be increasing in mathematics, the growth rates are below those posted before and during the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Additionally, the study finds that in reading, there has been no closing of the gap by race/ethnic groups since 2003, although scores were closing before NCLB, and only Latino students have continued to make progress in mathematics.

A second study reported in this week's Ed Week (p. 7) reports that, in Chicago, NCLB is not benefiting poor and affluent students, but is having some impact on those from the middle class.

It's be interested to see these reports increase over time, but it's likely that we won't see much return from NCLB: bottom line: large federal programs never show much impact in the classroom. They just never do, which suggests that the federal government has limited impact on teaching and learning, a state (and provincial) responsibility.

That's enough for today. I could go on forever.

*September 28, 2007*

## **LET'S CELEBRATE: EPI TURNS FIVE!**

*Watson Scott Swail, President*



I am pleased to write today that the Educational Policy Institute has turned five!

The Educational Policy Institute was launched in September 2002 to provide high-level research on issues related to educational opportunity in the US, Canada, and beyond, and we believe we have provided that service to the public during our brief history. As stated in our mission, EPI is interested in helping leaders and policymakers make "prudent programmatic and policy decisions... resulting in an increase in the number of students prepared for, enrolled in, and completing postsecondary education." We look forward to continuing this effort.

This week, I would like to take the opportunity to provide a brief précis of our evolution since 2002.

### **Organization**

I started EPI in 2002 to fulfill a perceived need to provide high-level studies focused not only on education, but on helping to expand educational opportunity. This was not designed to be solely a US organization, although we are incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia and are designated a 501(c)3 (not-for-profit) program by the IRS. In 2003, Mr. Alex Usher, former Research Director of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation in Montreal, joined us and founded the Toronto office. Alex also serves as a Vice President

in EPI International. In 2005, we opened an office in Melbourne, Australia under the direction of Dr. Ian Dobson, formerly of Monash University. We are looking forward to opening future offices in the European Union and in Asia.

In 2006, EPI became a MATO-certified research organization under the U.S. Department of Education, authorizing it as a pre-qualified company for federal work projects. Also in that year, EPI created EPI Consulting, a for-profit, small-business arm of the organization to conduct consulting services for organizations and governments. EPI partners with Polaris Research Associates and provides the FastTrack student tracking software to institutions. In Canada, EPI has quickly become an important research and policy organization and is often sought out for projects and input into issues of national prominence.

Being a non-profit corporation in the United States, we are humbled and thankful for such an impressive and interested Board of Directors, which include:

- Dr. Paul Ramsey, senior vice president of the Global Division of Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Ms. Betsy Brand (Treasurer), Director, American Youth Policy Forum
- Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, President and Vice Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Dr. David Breneman, University Professor and Dean of the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
- Dr. Daniel A. Domenech, senior vice president and head of Urban Advisory Resource, McGraw-Hill Education, New York, NY

I serve as the chair of the board. I would like to thank the Board and also our founding directors, Dr. John Lee (JBL Associates, Bethesda, MD) and Mr. David Roth, education consultant, La Quinta, California for their contributions.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank our Board of Advisors which include:

- Dr. Carrie Besnette, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, Metropolitan State College, Denver, CO
- Dr. Paul Bucci, Director, Higher Education Management Services, Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC
- Dr. Alberto Cabrera, Professor & EPI Senior Scholar, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
- Dr. Daryl Chubin, Director, AAAS Center for Advancing Science & Engineering Capacity, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC
- Dr. Peter Dietsche, William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario
- Dr. Howard T. Everson, Executive Director, NAEP Statistical Services Institute, American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC
- Dr. Drew Gitomer, Distinguished Presidential Appointee, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ
- Mr. Larry Gladieux, Consultant, McLean, VA
- Dr. Carlos Rodriguez, Principal Research Scientist, American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC
- Ms. Leslie Sanchez, President & CEO, Impacto, Inc, Washington, DC

EPI also has three senior scholars: Dr. Peter Dietsche (UToronto), Dr. Alberto Cabrera (UMaryland), and Dr. Robert Wilkinson (Pittsburg State University).

### **Expertise**

Initially, EPI's research focused mainly on postsecondary access and success issues, including student retention/persistence and financial aid studies. This area still serves as the core of EPI business, but the organization has stretched into a number of other areas in recent years including:

**K-12 research.** In the past year, we have greatly expanded our K-12 work on No Child Left Behind issues. We recently completed a state evaluation of the federal Reading First program for the Commonwealth of North Carolina and have just commenced a similar study for the state of Iowa. Reading

**Quality Measurement and Rankings.** EPI has also become one of North America's foremost centers of excellence on issues of quality measurement in post-secondary education, and even runs its own interactive and non-hierarchical college rankings system, in conjunction with Canada's National Newspaper, The Globe and Mail.

**Skills, Trades and the New Labour Force.** EPI has been involved in projects looking at the evolving labour force needs of various industries (e.g. Mining, electricity) and the skills sets and training requirements each one requires in order to stay prosperous.

### **Projects and Contracts**

EPI's core work involved policy studies and program evaluations at both the PK-12 and postsecondary levels. Highlights of EPI's work over the past five years include:

Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid (MESA), a \$4 million longitudinal evaluation, in conjunction with the Queen's University School of Policy Studies, for the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

The Institutional Student Retention Assessment (ISRA), a web-based tool for colleges and universities to help assess their current status with respect to student success (funded by Lumina Foundation for Education)

The Effective Practices in Student Success (EPSS), an online database of “best” practices for postsecondary institutions to serve and retain students (funded by Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation).

The No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Act, a policy analysis conducted for the National Council on Disability.

The Evaluation of Reading First Supplementary Programs for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

The Role of Counseling in Increasing Academic Opportunity in Missouri, a research study and paper for the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA)

IS MORE BETTER? The Impact of Postsecondary Education on the Economic and Social Well-Being of American Society. A literature review and discussion conducted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Trends in Student Aid and College Pricing FLORIDA, 1997-98 to 2001-02, an in-depth analysis of student aid available for students at institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth of Florida (funded by the Florida Council on Education Policy, Research, and Improvement (CEPRI)).

## **Activities**

In 2005, we began hosting professional development events around North America. These have evolved into the Retention 101 series that are held several times each year in the US and Canada to provide support to postsecondary education professionals. In 2006, EPI hosted the first International Student Retention Conference, Retention 2006, in Las Vegas. The second annual conference held this past May in San Antonio, Texas, saw a 200 percent participation increase, and we expect over 500 participants from over a dozen countries at next May’s Retention 2008 in San Diego, California.

We are also moving quickly into the field of holding conferences in areas of significant public policy importance. In April 2006, we held a conference on

Quality Measurement in Universities in conjunction with McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Next month, in conjunction with the University of Maryland, we will be hosting a National Capitol Summit on Latino Students and Educational Opportunity in Washington DC in order to bring focus and recognition of the important issues related to the expansion of educational opportunity for the nation's fastest growing constituency.

In 2006, we began publishing Week in Review a free weekly roundup of educational news which we distribute electronically to an international audience. In 2007, we began broadcasting EPILive, an occasional web-based discussion program featuring top educators and experts from around the world. Some of our recent speakers have included Rick Fry of the Pew Hispanic Institute, Michael Kirst of Stanford University, Ward Connerly of the American Civil Rights Institute, and Betsy Brand of the American Youth Policy Forum.

## **Publications**

As part of its non-profit mandate, EPI also frequently publishes free reports on a variety of topics. Some of our more popular titles include:

- Global Higher Education Rankings 2005 (2005, April)
- Reframing the Student Loan Costing Debate (2005, July)
- Sustaining Science: University Science in the Twenty-First Century (August 2007)
- Changes in Tuition Policy: Natural Policy Experiments in Five Countries (2004, August)
- I Love You, Brad, But You Reduce My Student Loan Eligibility (2004, May)
- Work-Based Learning & Higher Education (2004, May)
- Value Added: The Costs and Benefits of College Preparatory Programs (2004, November)

- Student Assistance the American Way (2003, February)
- The Global Higher Education Rankings, written by Alex Usher with former EPI associate, Amy Cervenan, has been downloaded over 70,000 times since 2005.

EPI also writes two occasional series: Student Success, a free-publication which provides useful information for postsecondary professionals; and Policy Perspectives, an occasional publication devoted to highlighting issues of interest and importance in education.

## **Conclusion**

In celebrating our five years in the research and policy business, we extend our sincere thanks to the staff who have come and gone and those who continue to work with us; the consultants who have helped us on our various projects; and, of course, our clients and funders (listed below) who have made five years possible. We look forward to their continued support in the future.

And thank you for reading, listening, commenting, and supporting us. We've enjoyed the first five years and look forward to the next phase of our evolution.

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, EPI President & CEO

Some of our clients over the past five years include:

American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF)  
ASPIRA of New Jersey  
Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation  
Canadian Policy Research Networks  
Colorado Commission on Higher Education  
Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement (FL)

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)  
Council on Post-Secondary Education (COPSE)  
Government of New Brunswick  
Government of Ontario  
Human Resources and Skills Development Canada  
Institute for Research on Public Policy  
Iowa Department of Education  
Lumina Foundation for Education  
Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority  
National Council on Disability  
National Court Reporters Association  
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction  
OECD  
Ohio College Access Network (OCAN)  
Pew Hispanic Center  
Social Development Canada  
Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation (TG)  
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
The Ford Foundation  
US Department of Education (Office of Adult and Vocational Education)  
Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE)