



New Administration, Old Higher Education Challenges: An Agenda for Higher Education in the Trump Era

*Remarks to Middle States Annual Meeting
December 9, 2016*

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Here we are, good accreditation soldiers all, earnestly discussing important issues:

- Aligning accreditation and planning
- Implementation models for a new shared governance paradigm
- Development of a sustainable resource allocation process
- Understanding the outcomes taxonomy
- Assessing the Assessment Process

Meanwhile, somewhere in New York, the next leader of the free world is calling Taiwan, rupturing longstanding diplomatic relationships, dissing labor leaders, appointing cabinet secretaries to dismantle everything from healthcare access to climate protection, tweeting out threats to strip people of citizenship for acts of protest. His aides have gone on record as saying that we are now in a world where facts don't matter. George Orwell foretold our current crisis; we shoulda read the whole book instead of the Cliff notes.

I chose the title for this morning's talk long before the election, back in the sunny summer days when we all laughed and assured ourselves, oh, that would *never* happen here! Back when we thought our biggest problem was how to convince Ted Mitchell to hold off on issuing the new teacher education regulations (yeah, and that didn't work out so well...). Back when we thought the College Scorecard misrepresented the facts --- back when facts actually mattered.

Today I stand before you as one of the old dogs of accreditation --- it was a long time ago that I sat with then-Middle States leader Howard Simmons at a hearing before the then-predecessor to NACIQI board to defend the Middle States diversity criteria under fire during the administration of the first President Bush and Secretary Bennett in the early 1990's. And then along came the regulatory juggernaut of the Clinton Administration and I actually sang a song at one of these Middle States meetings called "Triad Wonderland" to the tune of Winter Wonderland... the song was about then-Assistant Secretary David Longanecker and the proposal for SPREs --- remember that? --- State Postsecondary Regulatory Entities. Quaint!

Now I realize that those were mere skirmishes, kinder, gentler days for higher education and accreditation. We are on the brink of an uncertain, potentially very dangerous new era for our nation and our industry. We academics are now challenged to exercise public intellectual leadership more boldly, to lay down the marker of higher education's great purpose as the counterweight to government in a free society. In the days to come, we may well have to make some difficult and dramatic choices about who and what to defend --- our students come first, and we are already seeing the movement emerge to protect our Dreamers. Other students are at risk, too, whether they are LGBTQ or Muslims or African Americans marching under the banner of Black Lives Matter. Some might now say that our students who express more conservative views are also at risk, and they are right because the toxic political discourse of the last few years has made it nearly impossible to have rational discussions amid the polarities of political expressions.

Our faculty are also at risk; the emergence of a new website, the "[professor watchlist](#)," is not a new idea at all, but seems more ominous for academic freedom in the present moment when the signs of the times warn us of a more authoritarian shift in political power. (News from DC this morning is about blocking permits for protests during the inauguration and in the weeks before and after, just another sign of the times...)

Since November 8, the education press has been full of speculation about what the new Department of Education might mean for higher education. I think we are only kidding ourselves if we say it's not really going to be different, or that we should simply wait and see what the higher education agenda of the new administration might be. I think we abrogate our responsibilities as stewards of higher learning, research and scholarship, if we see the new administration as merely an opportunity to liberate higher education from the excessive regulation of the past eight years; at what price?

Here's a different idea: why don't we set forth a bold agenda of our own rather than waiting to find out what surprises might lurk in those shiny gold Trump boxes piling up in the holiday closet. While we all have wish lists and deep needs, I propose that we should agree on five essential components for the higher education agenda during the Trump Administration era:

1. Make facts meaningful again
2. Restore higher education as a public good
3. Develop an effective solution to the access problem
4. Reclaim higher education's ownership of quality control and accountability
5. Reinforce academic freedom as a foundational value of a free society and not just a perk of academic elites

Let's consider each:

1. Make facts meaningful again

Trying to maintain a completely neutral academic posture on political discourse these days is nearly impossible, particularly when some very fundamental issues of knowledge and truth are at stake. Here's an example: last week on a radio talk show (The [Diane Rehm Show](#) on NPR) a conversation ensued about facts and lies. The host was talking to a Trump aide and the aide was extolling the virtues of social media as a way for a political leader to communicate directly with citizens without the mediating force of traditional journalism. The host, Diane Rehm, challenged the aide to explain accusations that Mr. Trump sometimes puts statements out on Twitter that are lies. The aide replied that whether something is a lie is a matter of opinion, that all statements are up for interpretation, and that while people say that facts are facts, "There is no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts," she said. And then she went on, "And so Mr. Trump's tweets amongst a certain crowd, a large --- a large part of the population are truth."ⁱ

Now, politics aside, whether you support or oppose Mr. Trump, as academic leaders and people supposedly committed to the objective pursuit of truth in teaching and research, we have to reject the idea that facts do not matter, that objective truth is passé, that all that matters is whatever the person in power says is truth. I think we've studied this in the Age of Dictators course. Ethics cannot be a fungible political concept in a free society. From Aristotle to Orwell we academics across the millennia have certainly plumbed the depths of the essential nature of truth and the corruption of knowledge as a means to concentrate political power. Hannah Arendt famously wrote that, "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other."ⁱⁱ At the start of the presidential campaign so long ago, we had a [candidate suggest](#)ⁱⁱⁱ that perhaps education needed to produce more welders and fewer philosophers, but now we encounter a national crisis of truth in which philosophers should certainly find full employment for a long time to come.

The election exposed many educational problems in this nation, and not just the big social and political rift between those who went to college and those who did not. We know now that the campaign period was infected with fake news, particularly on certain websites and blogs. We elite academics might smile smugly to ourselves and say, well, there go the uneducated again, believing what they hear on Rush Limbaugh, or see on Breitbart or Drudge. But an article in the [Hechinger Report](#)^{iv} last week cited a [Stanford study](#)^v that found that students at all grade levels, including college students, cannot tell the difference between fact, opinion and outright deception online.

The Hechinger Report article about the research cited this example in which the researchers asked students

"...to judge the veracity of claims made on social media. For example, when presented with a tweet made from a liberal advocacy group, half of the students judged the tweet without bothering to click the link to read the source of information presented to advance the advocacy group's claim. And among the students who did click, few were able to articulate why a poll that was cited was credible or not. They made general statements about the dangers of social media, instead of doing the work to investigate the source of information contained in the tweet."^{vi}

The Stanford researchers noted in the introduction to their study:

“For every challenge facing this nation, there are scores of websites pretending to be something they are not. Ordinary people once relied on publishers, editors, and subject matter experts to vet the information they consumed. But on the unregulated Internet, all bets are off. Michael Lynch, a philosopher who studies technological change, observed that the Internet is “both the world’s best fact-checker and the world’s best bias confirmer— often at the same time.” I Never have we had so much information at our fingertips. Whether this bounty will make us smarter and better informed or more ignorant and narrow-minded will depend on our awareness of this problem and our educational response to it. At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.”^{vii}

Dare we even get into the role of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, and whether Vladimir Putin and Russian operatives manipulated the news to affect the election? Or is that fake news, too?

“...we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.”^{viii}

Now, how many of us over the years have done a secret little eye-roll at the mention of the assessment of information literacy as an important part of our work in accreditation? The new Middle States standards, as was true with the standards they replace, clearly state that undergraduate general education must develop in our students the ability to make informed judgments through developing competence in critical reasoning that must rest squarely upon information literacy --- the ability to discover facts and to distinguish them from mere opinion, lies and fakery. Somehow, we must find a way to restore a national commitment to the idea that facts do matter, that the interpretation of facts must have deep roots in ethics, and regardless of political preferences, truth must prevail over a 3 am Twitter rant.

2. Restore higher education as a public good

The second part of our agenda: restore higher education as a public good. In a recent [Chronicle of Higher Education article](#) reporter Scott Carlson documented the decline in public funding for higher education among the states even as the proportion of black and Hispanic students seeking admission to college is reaching an all-time high. Additionally, there’s a national movement questioning whether college is even worth it. Carlson writes, “As the student population has diversified, the language that many people use to define the value of a college degree has shifted, from a public good to an individual one. Is that merely a coincidence?”^{ix}

Of course, the answer to that question depends on your perspective. The recent election has spawned an entire field of study on the anxieties and fears of the so-called white working class and the changing demographics of the nation. Much has been written since the election about identity politics and the fact that American history is littered with the tragic consequences of white identity politics, a fact that today’s critics of other hues of identity politics blithely ignore. But whether the specter of a more educated population of people of color --- who might move into more productive jobs and secure greater social status with college degrees, who, heaven

forfeited, might even become president of the United States --- whether that specter might motivate under-educated white voters to demand that their state legislators and Congress retreat from funding higher education is probably a conspiracy theory too far. However, it certainly does not slide across the line into conspiracy theory to note that disinvestment does disproportionately impact low income students, of whom black and Latino students are a significant proportion. Low income white students, too, suffer from disinvestment and this also contributes to the under-education of large swaths of the American electorate, making them more susceptible to the manipulation of truth and even reality. [1984](#) meet 2016.

Policymakers certainly pay a great deal of lip service to the need for broad postsecondary education since many if not most jobs today require more education than a high school diploma provides. But there's a deep chasm between postsecondary job training and real liberal arts education, and that is the nexus of the philosophical struggle over the meaning of college today. We can agree with John Gardner^x that we need both plumbers and philosophers to make a good society; but even plumbers today need to think deeply about the ethics of water and environmental conservation just as philosophers must know how to wield the occasional plunger.

The current fashion to reduce the ROI of collegiate education to the first job and starting salary betrays the entire idea of higher learning as a public good for the benefit of larger social purposes. Of course we want our students to complete college and to be employed in whatever occupations suit their talents and interests. And so it happens: longitudinal data on the economic value of college degrees consistently reinforces the greater earnings of baccalaureate and advanced degree holders by a million dollars or more.

But the emphasis on economic return on investment obscures the critical importance of higher learning to sustain our democratic society. We educators need to be far more aggressive about stating those critical nation-building values overtly and without apology. Teaching our students how to live and work together peacefully and respectfully amid many kinds of difference ---- racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, religious, nationality, ability --- is not some kind of genteel politesse or a stifling form of political correctness. In a society where the demographic balance is rapidly changing --- where we have just seen an election that might be termed a reactionary explosion to the very idea of diversity in our society --- we must be clear and firm about the values at stake in college curricula and environments that respect diversity since the students who learn those values today will be shaping the next several decades' worth of political and social policies, news articles and social media commentaries, lesson plans and community endeavors.

Teaching our students how to distinguish facts from fakes, how to analyze scientific data on issues like climate change, how to weigh the costs and benefits of public policy options for the social safety net, how to analyze investment choices for greater social responsibility, how to make business decisions that enrich rather than debilitate communities, how to ensure investments in art and culture as part of the intellectual and spiritual life of the community, how to shape advocacy for racial justice and a greater public commitment to equality of opportunity -- - these and other collegiate goals are not merely for the enjoyment of a handful of privileged elites but central considerations for those who participate in building broad communities, corporations, social and political structures for the future of our nation and global society.

We must do more to be public advocates for the public good of higher education, to insist that the best return on investment is in developing citizen leaders with the curiosity, imagination, resilience, ethical framework and advanced knowledge that will be necessary to solve this nation's deep problems and get the polity moving forward in a coherent direction that upholds fundamental principles of justice, equity and truth.

In raising our voices as more passionate advocates for the public good of higher education, we must also be firm and tireless in pursuing the support that our students need to enter and succeed in college. Across all types of institutions, we must become better advocates for a restoration of state investment in the opportunities that should be present for all people in public higher education, and we also need to be more forthright about stating the case for investment in those institutions of private higher education that actually serve significantly greater proportions of low income students, Pell grantees, black and Hispanic students than flagship public schools.

In the same way, we need to make sure that Pell Grants are not dissipated by a misguided approach to federal financial aid that might restore private interests in the loan program at the expense of improving federal grant support for the neediest students. We should be much stronger advocates for increasing Pell Grants by the consumer price index, restoring year-round Pell as one pathway to faster completion, and, in the same way, creating incentives in federal policy for innovative programs that shorten time to degrees. This is an area of opportunity for the new administration; the Obama Administration's policies for higher education too often exalted traditional and outmoded structures and policy ideas, from the rigidity of credit hour definitions to the constraints on distance learning and new locations to half-time/full-time definitions that do not match the ways in which the majority of students might need to attend college today.

3. Develop an effective solution to the access problem

Restoring the value of higher education as a public good is an empty promise if we don't do something about the access problem, ourselves. The promise of access is hollow if we fail to address our own institutional dispositions and circumstances that keep students out.

We face an ironic dilemma today that so many institutions seem to be struggling with enrollment even as millions of Americans remain outside of higher education. There's a mis-match in terms of programs and delivery systems, costs and subsidies, and campus environments that too many students find hostile and not welcoming.

There's an arms race that goes on among the wealthiest and most elite institutions to enroll similarly wealthy, elite students, with a few bones thrown on occasion to the idea of enrolling more Pell Grantees and more students of color --- preferably those who fit the romanticized version of "high performing low income students." I've spoken about this in other contexts so will not repeat myself here except to say that, too often, we admit students in the firm belief that the college experience will change them with no acknowledgement that, perhaps, the real change must be in ourselves, in our own institutions, attitudes and environments, faculty and curricula and staff and services that would make it possible for a broader range of students to find success.

In an [article](#) in the Washington Post this week, Anthony Carnevale of Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce writes about the "separate and unequal system of higher education"^{xi} that concentrates white students in elite institutions while students of color are a larger presence in what he terms "open access" institutions. He makes some valid points. But nowhere in the article does he mention the impact of deep and chronic poverty and its pernicious consequences for student enrollment, persistence and completion, particularly among historically marginalized populations of low income African American and Latino students, and how the consequence of poverty also compel change in colleges and universities that serve these students.

In our quest to address the access conundrum, we run up against the paradox of access that criticizes wealthy, elite institutions for not doing more to welcome low income students of color, while those of us who do enroll such students in large number are roundly criticized because the outcomes measurements do not look like more traditional results. Some commentators like Dr. Carnevale then say that the solution is to get more of our students into the "better" schools across town. That's no solution because it does not address the actual challenges these students face. But the frequent and often unfair criticism of those schools that do the "broad access" mission --- who actually do it well, but with results that look very different from what traditional yardsticks measure --- dampens the enthusiasm of more elite schools even to dare to try to enroll more students who come with a lot of challenges because doing so might have a negative impact on their performance metrics like retention and graduation rates, discount rates and net tuition, and *U.S. News* rankings.

In this regard, I fear that accreditation's more robust use of federally-mandated data measures can be a serious trap that will work against solving the access problem and create grave injustice for low income students, and particularly African American and Latina students and the institutions that do serve them well. Many of those federal data measures are rooted in only the most hopelessly outmoded ideas of what constitutes success in college, or they are based on seriously flawed data. Consider this example:

On the Department of Education's [College Scorecard](#) page, the Department has chosen to set up institutional comparisons that are really comparing apples, oranges, bananas and Twinkies. They set up lists of institutions heedless of mission, comparing them on things like Pell Grant proportion, net price, graduation rates and earnings 10 years after enrollment. They present these institutions in ways that suggest these are 'best' institutions mimicking a certain magazine. There is no evidence that the schools are 'best' or better than others in terms of academic programs, teaching and learning outcomes, support services and other more pertinent measures of effectiveness.

Let's take graduation rates, for example, the factoid we all love to hate. Created in the 1990's to measure full-time male athletes in Division I schools --- yes! --- the graduation rate is used as a surrogate quality measure even though the Department, itself, has acknowledged for years that the data is deeply flawed, starting with the fact that it does not account for transfers and does not actually measure all completions. It's really a loyalty index, or an index of low admissions risk. But, as one official told me at a meeting, yes, it's bad, but it's the only data we have so by gum we're gonna use it!

What did I say earlier about the fact-free environment? The prior administration had facts --- lordy, did they love their data sets! --- but the pernicious use of bad facts to draw harmful conclusions borders on the unethical. Another example is the fact that, without warning, the Department went right into the IRS database to pull earnings information on our students and then presented this data as longitudinal economic values of institutions which proved no such thing --- the data was ten years after enrollment in the financial aid system, not related to graduation, and not related to any likely career pathways, mission, curriculum, majors, or other relevant information. I did an [analysis of this data](#) the first year the College Scorecard came out and my data illustrated the plain fact that women's colleges and historically black institutions had lower earnings data than elite private and flagship state institutions^{xii} --- well, duh! --- but the data does not norm for racism and sexism in employment.

We need to use the opportunity of the change in administrations to set forth a more forthright agenda about access and success, and we need to be better advocates for the right measurements to determine what success really should look like.

4. Reclaim higher education's ownership of quality control and accountability

The preceding section sets up my fourth point: we leaders of higher education must reclaim our ownership of quality control and accountability for the effectiveness of higher education.

I've been involved with accreditation long enough to know that this has been a sustained battle between the federal impulse to control accountability measures and higher education's insistence that we can do it ourselves. The federal solution has not been better whatsoever, not by a long shot, and has had the unfortunate result of weakening respect for accreditation and making the process deeply unsatisfying. I will say in defense of regional accreditation that specialized accreditation is even worse, interfering with the smallest of details in course syllabi and hiring decisions and campus policies. Regional accreditation, and certainly with Middle States, has strived nobly and honorably to maintain the balance of respect for institutional mission and autonomy.

Nevertheless, somewhere along the line we have retreated from the vigorous assertion of the idea that accreditation is a private, voluntary process of academic peer review for the purpose of improving our work and our results for students. We also have not come up with the better system that we should be capable of imagining. In some cases, some practitioners have substituted some terrible ideas instead of improved methods to make the case for quality improvement and public accountability for results. The increased demands for standardization and mechanization of the processes of accreditation --- the substitution of a gigantic assessment spreadsheet with thousands of cells in place of prose testimony from faculty that demonstrates the actual learning that takes place in any given classroom --- is a loss for the serious intellectual work we should be doing in peer review and institutional improvement. Algorithms are interesting but no substitute for genuine faculty analysis of what and how students are learning.

Our loss of control over the components and methods of quality assurance jeopardizes fundamental values of the academy, most importantly, the foundational value of academic freedom, which leads to my final point:

5. Reinforce academic freedom

We must never relent in our insistence that academic freedom is the foundation of our work in higher education, and not just a perk for faculty and academic elites. That's how it sometimes comes across in the public eye. Academic freedom is the backbone of our enterprise, the spine that raises and supports the networks of teaching and learning and research and publication and convening and public engagement that makes higher education one of the great pillars of the free society. We are the counterweight to government, not an arm of the government. We must not allow the temporal frenzies of the moment --- whether jousting with Senate staffs about student loan policies or debating with regulators about assessment data or lobbying state assemblies for funding ---- to undermine the foundational necessity of defending academic freedom.

We are on the brink of an era that could be as dangerous as the McCarthy era of the early 1950's. The cavalier treatment of truth, the manipulation of facts, the overt threats against freedom of expression --- it's only been four weeks since the election and already we see this happening. We must not think that it can't happen here. It's already happening, and it will require higher education to find a level of courage and steely reserve we have not tapped into for a long time. We can joke about the [professor watchlist](#) as one more example of those crazy wingnuts, but one day we may awaken to find Leviathan at our door. What will we say to him then?

We'll never be able to stand up to Leviathan if we grow faint at the thought of disagreement or discomfort in our own campus communities. We need to do better. The University of Chicago, famous for its embrace of vigorous academic freedom, drew fire earlier this year when the dean of students welcomed the incoming class with a [letter](#) that made it clear that the university would have nothing of trigger warnings and safe spaces because, in Chicago's view, higher learning requires confrontation with the uncomfortable. The university held up the principle of the great President Hanna Holborn Gray who once said, "Education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think."^{xiii} In a longer essay on academic freedom accompanying the infamous letter, Chicago Academic Dean John Boyer wrote, "...academic freedom... requires us to defend autonomy of thought and expression in our community, manifest in the rights of our students and faculty to speak, write and teach freely. It is the foundation of the University's mission to discover, improve and disseminate knowledge."^{xiv}

As this semester has gone along, and especially since the election, I'm more and more taking the Chicago view. There will be no safe spaces for higher education in the years ahead, and rather than protecting our campus communities from what is unpleasant or uncomfortable or even outrageous, we need to have higher expectations that our students and faculty can and will stand up and respond effectively to the threats against justice and freedom. If we can't do this on campus, how can we do it in the community beyond the campus gates?

I would add to Boyer's statement that academic freedom is the best hope the larger community may have to assert and strengthen the freedoms of all citizens when faced with threats and intimidation from those in power. Academic freedom is not simply our own privilege in higher education; it is our profound stewardship responsibility to use it to protect and defend our national ideals of equity, justice and freedom for all. That's our agenda for the new administration.

ⁱ This is the actual exchange on the [Diane Rehm Show](#):

Hughes: “No other president has been able to directly talk to the people and have the tools to do that at his fingertips like Mr. Trump is, whether we’re talking Twitter or YouTube or Facebook live. Social media has opened up a new channel that goes directly from the politician to the people.”

Rehm: “I’m sure you’ve heard James Fallows talk about lies that Donald Trump has put out there in tweets, in things he’s said. What do you make of that?”

Hughes: “Well, I think it’s also an idea of an opinion. And that’s -- on one hand I hear half the media saying that these are lies, but on the other half there are many people that go, no, it’s true. And so one thing that has been interesting this entire campaign season to watch is that people that say facts are facts, they’re not really facts. Everybody has a way, it’s kind of like looking at ratings or looking at a glass of half-full water. Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true. There’s no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts. And so Mr. Trump’s tweet amongst a certain crowd, a large -- a large part of the population, are truth. When he says that millions of people illegally voted, he has some -- in his -- amongst him and his supporters, and people believe they have facts to back that up. Those that do not like Mr. Trump, they say that those are lies, and there’s no facts to back it up.”

ⁱⁱ Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/11/philosopher-vs-welders/415890/>

^{iv} <http://hechingerreport.org/shocking-number-young-people-cant-separate-fact-fiction-online/>

^v <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>

^{vi} Hechinger Report, *ibid*.

^{vii} Stanford Higher Education Group, [Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning](#) (November 22, 2016) pp. 4-5.

^{viii} *Ibid*

^{ix} Scott Carlson, [When College Was a Public Good](#), *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 27, 2016

^x John Gardner, *No Easy Victories*

^{xi} Anthony Carnevale, [“White Flight is Creating a Separate and Unequal System of Higher Education.”](#) *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2017

^{xii} Patricia McGuire, [“College Scorecard Sandbags Equity in Higher Education.”](#) *The Huffington Post*, September 13, 2015

^{xiii} In the [Report of the Committee on Free Expression](#), The University of Chicago, 2014.

^{xiv} John Boyer, [Academic Freedom and the Modern University](#), The University of Chicago, 2016.