

E. Gordon Gee – Presidential Address
College Board Forum
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“More than a Sum of Our Parts”

Thank you, President Caperton. Although my tenure as president at West Virginia University did not coincide with his as governor of that state, I of course knew him at the time, and then admired his leadership from afar. In all of his undertakings, but perhaps especially here at the helm of the College Board, he has been an ardent and uncommonly effective advocate for education.

Let me get back to that figure he cited – the 670,000 students who have endured my presidencies in each and every region of the country. That is truly humbling. And it also makes me feel as old as Methuselah!

Ladies and gentlemen, as I begin I want to say that my intent is to speak and then to have a dialog with you. I want to hear your thoughts and experiences and to answer any questions you might have.

I am grateful for the honor of being with you today. That is particularly true because of the unique combination of educators who are gathered here this afternoon. This annual forum, and the College Board itself, incorporates all of the right people to make the far-reaching and enduring changes that are called for at this moment in our nation’s history.

To be sure, we gather during a time of upheaval and uncertainty. Some facts, by way of a starting point.

- National unemployment has reached 9.8 percent, a 26-year high and a full 50 percent increase from one year ago.
- During the past two years, 8 million Americans have lost their jobs.
- Housing foreclosures have increased by 5 percent from this summer to fall.
- The official poverty rate has risen to more than 13 percent of the population.
- More than 15 percent of Americans do not have health insurance.

In this time of turmoil, education at all levels has been thrust into the unflattering glare of the national spotlight. We are doing too little. Doing the wrong thing. Doing the right thing the wrong way. Every permutation imaginable.

As we all know, our students and their families are struggling as never before. In higher education, federal student loan disbursements grew 25 percent during the past academic year. Additional double-digit increases are anticipated for the current year.

The important message to draw from the moment and the criticism is this: Three hundred million Americans are looking to those of us in this room for solutions.

We are being asked to provide answers because of the uniquely powerful role that education has played in America – to fulfill our country’s founding ideal of a meritocracy based on ability and action, to sustain our democracy through an informed citizenry, and to right the wrongs of bigotry and oppression.

Noble purposes that transcend politics and doctrinaire thinking.

Truly, these are challenging times for all levels of education. All but a few of this nation’s 50 states are facing substantial budget gaps, and education is once again enduring reductions to help fill them.

The “trickle down” to higher education has been more akin to a rushing current. I need not review here the breadth and depth of layoffs, furloughs, construction cancellations, and other moves to compensate for balance-sheet shortfalls. To my great good fortune, Ohio’s elected leaders have demonstrated unparalleled support for higher education, for which I am deeply grateful.

But across the country, public primary and secondary schools are facing budget pressures of an even greater magnitude. Belts have long-since been tightened. And it is the rarest of school levies that passes. I will say here, by the way, that publicly affirming our support for these levies is very much the duty of all leaders in higher education. I was proud to support Columbus City Schools’ successful levy last fall, and am supporting two others that will be voted on next month.

We all know the painful truth: primary and secondary schools’ budget reductions are now down to the core. Transportation. After-school enrichment programs. Athletics. The arts. Foreign language instruction. And so many other programs which help to assure that our young people are fully prepared for advanced study and for productive and satisfying lives.

Without a doubt, the facts of the day are daunting. We must keep them very firmly in our minds, but not allow them to paralyze us. We cannot allow today's crisis of finance to beget a crisis of confidence in our work.

I believe that this time of uncertainty is precisely what American education has needed to loosen us from our moorings. To challenge traditional assumptions. Drive creativity. Foster far greater innovation. Establish much more robust partnerships. Inundate our communities with the reach and power of our work. And renew our own personal commitment to the large public ideals that underpin all of our efforts.

Today, the scale of the need is great, but the scale of our opportunity is far, far greater.

We must approach the challenges aggressively – with a passionate intensity not only to address them, but also to go well beyond meeting immediate needs and leverage this time of upheaval to long-term advantage.

Conventional thinking will prove insufficient to the task. This is a time for bold strokes. This is a time for first-order change.

We cannot let this opportunity pass. We must use this moment to create a new American educational ecosystem. An educational ecosystem with schools at every point along the spectrum that are sustainable because they operate in a fully interdependent fashion.

We will thrive only by first acknowledging our symbiotic relationship and then using it to maximum advantage. Taking the long view, we can see the complexity of American education: The well-being of one of us directly affects the health of the others.

Yet, for far too long, we have acted in isolation from one another, hoarding our marbles and imagining the broad framework of education as a zero-sum game. As resources grow tighter, there is grave danger in tolerating a culture of heads-I-win, tails-you-lose.

At this moment – both terribly difficult and rife with possibility – our schools have the distinct and pivotal role in revitalizing America for the long-term.

But colleges and universities cannot do it alone, and neither can primary and secondary schools. This new kind of sustainable system of education requires our unrelenting pursuit of deeper partnerships – with one another, with business and industry, with government, and with our communities.

We must work together to foster stronger early-learning skills for preschoolers, encourage high school students to take more rigorous coursework, cast a

wider net in our universities' admissions effort, help families work through the labyrinthine financial aid application process, and expand programs that nurture college students so that they graduate in far greater numbers.

Succeeding will require us to free ourselves from parochial interests and territorial claims, to reject hardened attitudes, to recalibrate our institutions' internal strategies, and to fully prepare our students for leadership in a global context.

Ladies and gentlemen, this will not be easy. These are no small tasks. And much is required of each of us. But our collective resources and creativity are without bounds.

It is absolutely imperative that we press ahead to develop new ways to reach, support, educate, and graduate more students.

The first step is to start early.

We all know that a college education is the single most important factor in upward mobility. Understanding that, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that young people have two things: the financial means and the early guidance to earn a college degree.

The former first.

For low- and middle-income families, a college degree is an investment made with borrowed money. More than half of all financial aid now comes in the form of loans, and today the reliance on loans is growing as other support dwindles.

That is why, as the financial markets tumbled last fall, we created the University's Students First program. Through the program, we have increased funds available for loans, decreased interest rates, and guaranteed that financial aid will rise proportionately if tuition increases.

Like many institutions across the country, we have launched a related fund-raising initiative for scholarships as well as emergency aid. Through the effort, students will have the resources they need to remain at the University. Since January first, \$29.3 million has been raised. Our target is \$100 million.

Of course, before they enter our colleges and universities, many prospective students must overcome a complex range and combination of social, cultural, and geographical barriers. These young people, and some not-quite-so-young, are often first-generation college students, international students, and non-traditional students of all sorts. They need well-targeted, hands-on help easing their entry into our institutions.

In developing a comprehensive, healthy educational ecosystem, all of us must recommit to those students. We must ensure that the gifts and talents of young people do not go undeveloped. It is our responsibility to assure that they do not fall through the cracks.

Through Ohio State's Economic Access Initiative, faculty, staff, students, and alumni nurture in children the belief that they can achieve in college and beyond. They act as role models, tutors, counselors, and friends.

Students and faculty are participating in extraordinary numbers. Last year, more than 400 faculty members identified themselves as first-generation college students and signed on to be speakers and ad hoc mentors to current first-generation students.

These faculty represent the full range of academic disciplines, and their stories illustrate in deeply personal ways the central role of education in changing lives. The business faculty member, whose parents were Italian immigrants, unable to read or write in any language. The engineering professor, whose childhood was lacking in certain material ways but flush with supportive parents who instilled a love of learning and the discipline needed to succeed. Four hundred faculty members, each with a moving story of success to share.

What truly impresses me is that our students are assuming real leadership in these areas. As usual, they are way ahead of us. I will mention just a couple of examples.

Earlier this year, one of our business students approached the Economic Access Office staff with a proposition: to begin an Ohio State chapter of College Mentors for Kids, a national mentoring organization.

Right now, at this very moment, 40 Ohio State students are meeting for the first time with their new young friends in the first through fourth grades. They have partnered with an elementary school in one of Central Ohio's most financially distressed school districts.

The program is different from other access initiatives in at least two key respects. First, it targets children as young as 5 or 6 years old. Second, it will bring these children to our campus each week, learning about college and receiving help with reading skills and financial literacy.

Having these children on our campus is a potent way to break down barriers and expand possibilities. They are able to experience a university's vibrancy, its arts and culture, its laboratories and libraries. And these children are able

to grow comfortable in the knowledge that one day they can thrive in such an environment.

The other example is one I want to mention because it was created entirely by undergraduates in our residence halls. During this year's spring break, several students spent a week in rural Adams and Brown counties, two hours south of Columbus. The students led a variety of activities with elementary- and middle-school children and their parents to raise college aspirations and increase readiness. In these two counties – where only 5 percent of adults hold bachelor's degrees – their passion, encouragement, and practical advice will have a profound and lasting impact. The program is expanding this year.

Access programs are a fundamental part of the founding purpose of this nation's land-grant institutions. But those broad principles are shared equally among us. Many of your institutions – K-12 school systems, two-year colleges, research universities, public and private alike – are finding new ways to extend opportunity and to recommit to communities.

When I led Brown University and Vanderbilt, I spoke often about private institutions with a public purpose, and we worked hard to expand our partnerships in our communities. To be sure, each of our institutions contributes to ensuring that young people are able to stretch their talents, refine their skills and understanding of the world, and make real their dreams. And without question, our students gain enormously from their engagements with our communities.

Even in these times of turmoil – or perhaps particularly during these difficult times – we must not lose sight of the critical role of our schools and universities in creating, preserving, and teaching the humanities and the arts. As we all know, public and private financial support for the arts decreases dramatically during periods of economic distress. Today, it is vital that we advocate strongly on behalf of arts and culture. They give our lives texture, complexity, joy, and understanding. They are, in fact, what make us human. And we must keep expanding our community work in the arts.

My own institution recently initiated a project with England's Royal Shakespeare Company to promote literacy, drama education, and leadership in the public schools. Called "Stand up for Shakespeare," the three-year program began this summer, when 20 Central Ohio teachers traveled to Stratford-upon-Avon for a one-week intensive workshop. They teach everything from third grade to twelfth, and subjects ranging from drama and English to math and music. The techniques those teachers learned in England are now reaching more than 1,500 young people.

Next month, we will welcome some of the company's actors and educators to campus. And the project will keep growing.

My point is that regardless of economic circumstances, we must never forget that our schools – all types and all levels – are where the mind and the imagination flourish. We are repositories of human achievement, sanctuaries for the human spirit, and incubators of human aspiration.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot allow this transformative moment in our nation's history to shatter the system of education that is the envy of the rest of the world. We cannot allow this to be the moment in which the great promise of higher education is limited to students whose families are blessed with financial resources and the strong secondary preparation those resources make possible.

American colleges and universities both reflect and sustain our democratic institutions. Preserving the thoroughly American higher education system – which values opportunity, diligence, ability, and hard work – will foster the creativity and innovation that will lead our nation to long-term economic prosperity.

To be clear: Those of you here today are the people who can assure that a caste-based education system never takes hold in this country.

And yet, some disturbing trends already exist. A study sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts, released last year, illustrates the calcifying disparity between family income levels and educational attainment. The central finding is that children born to wealthier parents are nearly five times more likely to become college graduates than those born in more modest circumstances.

These conclusions are echoed in the recently published book “Crossing the Finish Line,” by former Princeton University President Bill Bowen, Matt Chingos, and Michael McPherson. We were honored to have Dr. Bowen and Mr. Chingos on our campus last week, discussing their work with a standing-room only crowd – faculty, staff, students, school superintendents, and leaders from state government and from our Board of Regents.

Their research is rigorous and comprehensive, and their conclusions resonate with profound impact. The key message is this: America's public universities – which educate three-quarters of all college students – must focus intently on their founding purposes. To ensure unobstructed access to our institutions. To nurture our students' ability to succeed on our campuses. And to see to it that students graduate.

That, finally, is the bottom line. It is plain. It is easy to understand. And it is simple to measure.

We have all of the data we need. Our tasks are crystal clear. Now, it is up to us.

Dr. Bowen and his co-authors strongly urge a holistic application-review process, where multiple factors are considered. Several colleges and universities are beginning to take this approach, as is my own.

This fall, we are also casting a wider net for applications among underrepresented students by going straight to them. Simply stated: If they do not apply, we will not get them on our campuses.

In the program we are piloting this fall, admissions office staff are working in 15 urban Ohio high schools. They sit side-by-side with students, helping them to apply online and to write their essays in advance, and waiving application fees in cases where financial need exists. Although that program has just begun, we have every reason to believe that it will result in greater numbers of motivated, well-prepared students applying for admission.

But we fully appreciate that our work must go well beyond just bringing students to the front door of our institutions.

I am very proud that my own University's Mabel Freeman, our assistant vice president for admissions and first-year experience, is a College Board Trustee. Since 2001, she has led an integrated office that admits students, orients them to campus and to college life, and sees them through their initial successful year. She and her staff lead summer programs to acclimate students, year-long leadership development programs, and a peer-mentoring initiative, among other activities. That strong commitment to undergraduate education is critical in large research institutions, such as ours.

And the success of Mabel and her team is measurable and significant. Ten years ago, shortly before the admissions and first-year experience program began, our freshman retention rate was 85 percent. Today, it is 93 percent. And, I will add, that rate is comparable among all of our students, regardless of race.

All good numbers and great work. But Dr. Bowen and his co-authors have reminded those of us leading public universities that we must have a greater commitment to students all along their path to graduation.

Less than 60 percent of students entering four-year public universities will graduate. That, my friends, is absolutely shameful.

We must do much, much more to understand why our students are leaving before earning their degrees and provide whatever assistance is needed to see that they complete their degrees.

One critically important segment of our student populations deserves special mention. And that is our nation's returning veterans. They are older, their life experiences are vastly different, and their needs as students are unique.

Nearly all who join our armed forces cite educational benefits as a key factor, yet less than one-tenth of them take full advantage of those benefits. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that they feel welcome, receive assistance with G.I. Bill regulations, and have access to support services that meet their special circumstances.

One of the nation's leaders in providing services to veterans is Cleveland State University. There, veterans receive help applying for benefits, participate in mentoring programs, and take veterans-only courses that help them to successfully transition from soldier to student.

As we focus on ensuring that our four-year colleges meet the growing range and complexity of student needs, we must also be mindful that more than half of this country's college students attend community colleges. This fall, double-digit enrollment increases are the norm nationwide. In Ohio, Columbus State Community College experienced a 17 percent increase in enrollment, and Cuyahoga Community College's Metro Campus in Cleveland is coping with an astounding 40 percent increase. Clearly, all of our community colleges are stretching at the seams.

And yet, because teaching is the primary focus at those institutions, far fewer opportunities exist for generating external financial resources. Tuition is low, state funding is declining, and vastly greater numbers of students are seeking admission. The confluence of circumstances is a perfect storm, with a potentially devastating impact on fundamental access to higher education.

Community colleges are the first point of entry, the open door to the American Dream, for millions of people. And now, the central question is this: At what point can community colleges no longer welcome all who wish to come and learn?

To help ease that burden, we must reach out to expand articulation agreements and other partnerships with community colleges. And to do so quickly and strategically.

Our task – at this defining moment in history – is not only to protect and preserve our nation's proud legacy of affordable, high-quality education; it is to extend it.

Doing so, I believe, requires our institutions and those of us who lead them to be nimble, versatile, risk-tolerant, and innovative. We must recalibrate

internal strategies and create institutional reward systems that prize quality and effectiveness.

That is no small order, I know. My own institution has 63,200 students and nearly 40,000 faculty and staff members. My attempts to make these kinds of changes at such a behemoth might well be enough to qualify me for some special medication! Truly, the task is akin to changing an elephant into a ballerina. But we are working on it, and I believe we are making progress.

Dismantling labyrinthine procedures and processes will free us to accomplish much more for all of our constituencies.

While we are revamping our administrative procedures, we must also focus intently on our academic structures and systems.

A narrow discipline-based education simply cannot give our students the multiple skills and experiences they need as future leaders. The world is far too complex and nettlesome to accommodate that approach. We must also develop new, transinstitutional structures that foster collaboration.

And I will say here that we cannot ask our faculty to innovate and reach across disciplines while rewarding them through the old, traditional model. Very quickly, we must develop new ways to reward those who, along with us, seek to transform our institutions.

No longer can we simply count the number of publications and make recognition decisions based on numbers. We must spend the time to understand the true quality and force of each faculty member's work, and reward those whose impact on our students, in their disciplines, and in our communities is the strongest.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been leading universities for 30 years now, and I believe that this is both the most challenging and the most propitious moment in education in this country. Our calling – our plain purpose to enrich lives and improve communities – has never been clearer.

We all understand the same unsettling facts of the day – substantial economic duress at the personal and macro levels and the threat that poses to educational opportunity. Fraying communities and fragmented approaches to assisting those in real need.

Today's economic and social turning point demands that each of us think anew about how to extend our institutions' precious resources even further, educate additional students, and help more families.

I believe that we have a covenant with our children's children. A covenant to extend this country's founding principle of education in a democracy. We are part of the great line that started with Thomas Jefferson and was expanded to enormous effect by Abraham Lincoln. Our role, as theirs, transcends politics. It transcends today and tomorrow.

At this moment, we must not fall back on the instinctive, white-knuckles approach to riding out the storm. Another will come soon enough, and we must be better-positioned to handle rough waters. We must have the vision and the confidence to tack against the prevailing winds and to chart an entirely different course.

We must look up from our desks and our computer screens. Think hard about the needs in our neighborhoods and in cities and villages around the world. And have the vision to re-imagine what education can and should look like in the coming century. And then we must have the will and the fortitude to make that historic change happen.

Let me tell you something that we do not readily admit aloud: For far too long those of us in education have held out our hands palm-up. Those days are over. It is time now, instead, to extend our hands in partnership.

No more waiting for help from others. No more wishful thinking. No more porous promises. No more endless searching for a new compass.

We know what we need to do. You and I, together, must change our institutions. We must change ourselves.

We must thoroughly re-evaluate our ideas, revitalize our perspectives, renew our shared passion for teaching, learning, and discovery, and re-commit to the ideals of education in a democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will close by thanking you for joining me today and for thinking through these issues together.

I firmly believe that this is the moment of truth for American education. And this moment presents us with the greatest of opportunities – to wholly reinvigorate and reshape our schools, to create a fully rounded ecosystem of education that is truly K through life, one in which our interdependencies are our greatest strengths.

We cannot slacken our pace. We cannot look to others for solutions. We must maintain a singular focus on extending the transformative power of education to every person of willing heart.

That, finally, is our common obligation and our common purpose. Plain and simple, it is our moral duty.