

Campaign for the Future of Higher Education

Statement

May 17, 2011

The promise for higher education has never been greater. It is clear that it takes an educated citizenry for democracy to function. In advanced economies, higher education adds enough of an edge to critical thinking and deliberation that democratic societies can actually make complex policy decisions affecting the future of everyone.

At the same time, advanced societies are moving rapidly toward knowledge-based economies. In this world, higher education is the engine that drives the process and produces results. Research for innovation starts in the universities and colleges, technology transfer creates jobs in new businesses, and the workforce is educated and trained in every institution of higher education. In this way we escape living in a service-based economy with minimum wage jobs.

In three years of a worldwide recession, all of the advanced economies (except one) maintained the same or greater level of investment in public higher education. In other words, the advanced economies of the world are investing in higher education at the same time they are cutting budgets and services in all other agencies to deal with less revenue. *

However, threats to the future of higher education in the United States have never been greater. The U.S. is the only advanced economy that consistently cut higher education funds for the last decade and now is the only country to cut funds for higher education dramatically during a three year recession. In the states, higher education as a percentage of the budget decreased more than any other agency. Against the advice and the practice of every other comparable economy, the U.S. is gradually disinvesting in higher education.

This change has been in the making since the beginning of the Reagan Revolution and the “New Federalism,” which shifted most domestic funding obligations to the states so that the federal budget can be used primarily for defense-related priorities.** When states must struggle to meet mandated expenses such as Medicaid, schools, and prisons, legislators tend to view higher education as optional and dispensable. They tell higher education institutions to make up the difference with cost savings and efficiencies.

Within thirty years most permanent faculty positions are replaced with jobs held by contingent faculty paid much less per course and hired and fired at will. Tenure-track positions are now held by less than 30% of the faculty. Institutions are also forced to accept the other imperative of the Reagan Revolution, which is to privatize everything that anyone can make a profit on. The private sector is even called upon to cover expenses for curriculum and hiring – often in return for special treatment.

The culmination of this trend is for-profit colleges, which “deliver” higher education at a much greater cost to students, often based on false promises of employment after completion of degree. Students in public universities and colleges find that departments are so underfunded and understaffed that the loss of even one person can mean, for example, that there is no one qualified to teach a specialization students need to graduate. The turnover in departments is so great that students often have a hard time locating a faculty member who knows them and can write a recommendation upon graduation.

We do not have to accept the defunding of higher education. Coalitions are already in the formative stages in most states that will speak for the majority of citizens who need an authentic higher education to develop their plans for the future in a global economy. We see evidence of that today in the emergence of a national Campaign for the Future of Higher Education.

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*“Higher Education Budgets and the Global Recession,” Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California at Berkeley, February 2010.

**I develop this point in “Radical Transformations in Higher Education: Where Do We Go From Here?” Thought and Action, Fall 2010, 59-69.