

Looking Ahead: Letters to the Next President from Higher Education's Leaders



For the September-October 2008 issue of Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, seven higher education leaders, including the US Secretary of Education, the President of the American Council on Education and the President of COL, Sir John Daniel, were invited to address an open letter to the next President of the United States.

Sir John's letter is included below. The others can be found on the magazine's website at:

www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/September-October%202008/full-looking-ahead.html.

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Given the importance of the upcoming Presidential election, not only to the nation as a whole but to higher education, Change solicited a set of letters to the President-elect from a group of higher-education leaders: Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings; Molly Broad, president of the American Council on Education; Sir John Daniel, president of the Commonwealth of Learning and former vice-chancellor (CEO) of the UK Open University; Johnnetta Cole, former president of Spelman College; Richael Young, an undergraduate from the College of San Mateo; Gerald Graff, president of the Modern Language Association; and Robert Connor, president of the Teagle Foundation. From their various perspectives, each offers a view of the critical issues facing higher education in the coming four years and suggests what role the next President, as well as we, might play in addressing them. The letters are followed by a longer statement from the heads of the coordinating and governing boards in the states (known collectively as the SHEEOs) that addresses the same questions.

-Margaret A. Miller, Executive Editor, Change magazine

To the next President of the United States:

I write as a friendly foreigner to urge that you act to strengthen and sustain higher education in the United

States. You might ask: Why, with the stack of pressing issues on your desk, should you worry about higher education, where there is only a limited role for the federal government?

In his book *The Post-American World*, the editor of *Newsweek International*, Fareed Zakaria, shows that although the U.S. is not declining, other countries are rising and challenging its preeminence in many fields. A long-term change in America's relative position was always predictable, but, because of the previous administration's inept economic management and callous diplomatic incompetence, the shift is happening more quickly than anyone expected. In this environment, America must nourish its strengths. Two of these, which complement each other well, are higher education and the armed forces. I offer you no advice on the military, except to suggest that you trade your predecessor's motto, "In arms we trust," for a more effective blend of hard and soft power.

The tremendous worldwide influence of U.S. higher education gives the country an abundant source of soft power. It is not only America's research universities that the world envies. Your real treasure is the diversity of a system that gives opportunities for tertiary education and training to a large proportion of the population from all socioeconomic groups. Other countries are keen to emulate U.S. higher education, using your model of the community college, your mix of public and private institutions, and your huge array of available programs.

How can you, then, as President, strengthen the system and enhance its international influence? I suggest action on three fronts.

Step 1, which will no doubt inspire your stance in international affairs generally, is to show that America supports multi-lateral approaches and can work effectively within them. At a time when Americans are touchy about the apparent decline in their international influence, this will take guts-but your courage will be well repaid, not only in goodwill, but in real influence. Although UNESCO might seem an odd place to start, it gives you a platform to show-in education, culture, communications, and science-that the era of "my way or the highway"-style diplomacy is over. As a recent article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* noted: "With this attitude the U.S. often finds itself as isolated as only North Korea and Myanmar are in other forums... . Sometimes it seems that America only rejoined UNESCO to blow up the whole organisation from the inside."

In a world where demand for higher education is booming, where the international movement of students will triple in a decade, and where e-learning is challenging the notion of borders, America has nothing to fear and everything to gain by leading the development of international rules of interaction. Where the previous administration fanned the embers of xenophobia and paranoia, you must lead the world's most multicultural nation to engage confidently with other countries-a much more natural stance.

Step 2 is to work from the good principle, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Just as other countries begin to accept that universities perform better autonomously, with a light touch from the state, America is moving in the opposite direction through attempts in Congress to suck the accreditation system more deeply into the federal ambit. This will do damage. The current regional and national systems of accreditation may not be perfect, but the federal government should push to correct their perceived weaknesses rather than launch a hostile takeover.

For example, robust action-including legislation-by your administration to suppress degree mills would be very welcome. These bogus operations, and the equally phony accreditation mills behind which they hide, undermine the credibility of U.S. accreditation and have a negative influence on higher education worldwide. Through the Bologna process, Europeans are trying to raise the quality and standards of higher education across 46 countries in Europe. They face an uphill struggle because of the hodgepodge of national legislation. The U.S., already well ahead on this front, should now lead the international community in freezing these fraudulent and dangerous scams out of their safe havens around the globe. A war on degree mills is winnable, presents no risk of collateral damage, and would earn America international plaudits.

Step 3 is to achieve a better balance between the recruitment of foreign talent for the U.S. economy and the strengthening of universities in developing countries. Under current trends, including the external dimension of the Bologna process, more students are becoming global nomads. This increase in mobility is a force for peace. However, poorer countries lament the loss of their brightest people through brain-drains to the U.S. and Europe. Thirty percent of Africa's tertiary-trained professionals live outside the continent, which loses about 20,000 professionals annually. Because the U.S. economy needs a steady influx of trained workers, it is in America's interest to strengthen universities in developing countries as well as to promote mobility. It could do this by encouraging U.S. universities to help local universities in poorer countries develop solid Ph.D. programs in situ, which would allow more people to train as researchers without going abroad. Substantially increasing the number of doctorates awarded in these countries would provide a pool of highly qualified people to contribute to their national development without decreasing the overall availability of talent to the U.S.

This would be an excellent and much-appreciated form of soft power. What better way for America to extend its long-term influence for good than by nurturing the universities across the world whose graduates will create the future? To adapt the well-known Chinese proverb: if you educate foreigners in the U.S., they will benefit for a lifetime; if you nurture foreign universities, the benefits will extend to future generations.

-Sir John Daniel
President and Chief Executive Officer
Commonwealth of Learning
Former Vice-Chancellor, UK Open University