Flickering in the Dark: Tiki Torches or Lamps of Learning
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Let's start with imagination.

Imagine flames flickering in the dark.

Imagine seeing shadows cast by those flames and trying to figure out what the shadows mean.

Time was when even the lowliest first year student would pop up at this point and call out, "Plato's Cave!" with some satisfaction. But I'm not here to bemoan the death of Freshman Philosophy. Take a closer look at the flickers. The fires are raging right here on the campus grounds. And those bearing the tiki torches are not poor, uneducated, deprived minds but some of the brightest and most well-educated in the land, faces distorted with intemperate rage and inchoate hatred. And they're coming for us.

They're coming for us because they say we are too rich, too elitist, that we do not provide a sufficient return on investment.

They're coming for us because they say we don't provide enough access to low income students, or that we care too little about getting our students to graduate.

They're coming for us because they say we are too liberal, that we promote mindless adherence to principles of social justice and toleration for a broad range of human conditions; or that we do not give enough credence to views unlike our own and more like theirs; or that we allow speech that is offensive, except when we ban speech that is offensive, depending on who is offended.

They're coming for us because the academy is a place of ultimate freedom, freedom of thought and belief, the freedom to challenge conventional wisdom, indeed, the obligation to challenge once-immutable authority in the quest for truth.

They're coming for us because our freedom makes higher education a great counterweight to government in this free society, and our independence is, ultimately, a grave threat to the authoritarian instinct of the mob with the torches and those who incite them.

Wild fires have been raging across the landscape of higher education this year and we rush from one crisis to another, trying to decide which fire will burn itself out in time, and which will burn the whole house down if we don't contain the flames soon.

Do we even know how to fight the fires that endanger our daily work and our very purpose? We need to take a page from the work of good environmental stewards --- we need to start some fires of our own in order to contain the wildfires all around us that threaten to consume the best of higher education in the United States. Managed well, fire can be transformative.

The theme of this conference is "transformation." But transformation for whom and for what purpose? Deep change can only begin with a clear acceptance of the need for change --- do we really understand the need for transformation, what needs to change, and how?

To change well, we need to understand our purpose. In the Year 2000 the late Princeton President William Bowen gave a speech at Oxford in which he aptly summarized the "most essential" purposes of the university: *"…educating students broadly so that they may lead productive lives in a civilized society; serving as engines of opportunity and social mobility; creating new knowledge of every kind…; encouraging and protecting the thoughtful critic and the dissenting voice; and defending cultural, moral and intellectual values that no one can 'price' very well."*[1]

The fires around us suggest that we're failing at these purposes. Why? Among many burning issues in the academy, three are ripe for transformation: Wealth, Access, and Purpose.

- **Wealth: how can the wealth of higher education be used to promote transformative institutional and social change?**

The torch bearers of tax reform in Congress have set their kindling around some of the largest university endowments; whether they light the pyre remains to be seen in the final bill, but let's not kid ourselves: the proposal to impose an excise tax on the earnings of large endowments is only the beginning of a major political movement to impose constraints on the wealth of universities, and a harbinger of potentially far wider and more harmful financial constraints in the future.

As president of a relatively small university with an endowment of only $16 million, or about $8000 per capita for Trinity students, why should I care about a federal excise tax on Harvard's endowment earnings? The slope is steep and very slippery, big endowments today, all endowments tomorrow, and who knows what else may be next.

Why is this happening at this particular time? Certainly, true or not, higher education generally is perceived as too wealthy, too expensive, not returning enough on the investment of tax dollars in student financial aid and the tax exemption, federal and state grant dollars, deductions on charitable gifts. Congress sees a potential windfall, an opportunity to generate billions more in tax revenues; states do something similar by reducing subsidies for state institutions; local municipalities are not shy about demanding payments in lieu of taxes.

We can make a lot of arguments about the money part of this --- that building wealth is an honorable American capitalist tradition; that the relative wealth of institutions is essential to support quality and excellence in the academy's many pursuits; that donors have built the endowments through charitable gifts that support students and faculty; that a university's

[1] William G. Bowen, "At a Slight Angle to the Universe: the University in a Digitized, Commercialized Age," the Romanes Lecture, Oxford University, October 17, 2000 in Kevin M. Guthrie, ed., *Ever the Leader: Selected Writings 1995-2016 William G. Bowen*, (Princeton University Press: 2018), p. 6.

investment income should not be diverted to support non-educational governmental interests or even possibly fund a war or a wall. And so forth. All good arguments.

But money is probably not the real driver of the Congressional action or the political issues surrounding the relative wealth of universities. Rather, this is a struggle about control and institutional autonomy, about institutional values and political promises. We may find it odd that a Republican Congress and administration appear to be seeking a somewhat Marxist redistribution of the wealth of successful capitalist enterprises, particularly odd in a tax package that seems to lean over backward in favor of reinforcing wealth. But these are political times that seem to be redefining traditional ideologies and definitions. And we have to be aware of the prevailing voter sentiments: a Pew survey last summer (also reported by Gallup) showed that a majority of Republicans believe that college is having a negative impact on the country, largely because of perceived liberal leanings.

While the public political explanation may be that colleges have done a poor job of redistributing their wealth, and that increasingly high prices demonstrate a lack of concern for the public good, in fact, I would argue that concern for the public good and academic affordability is a scrim that masks a more disturbing governmental agenda, namely, the federal desire to control higher education, an instinct that is not new, transcending party lines, as we saw with the excessive regulation of the prior administration.

While so smart about so many things, higher education can be extremely stupid about politics, and completely obtuse about public perceptions. What do I mean? Didn't we presidents all sign onto a lot of letters, isn't Ted Mitchell over at ACE in full lobbying mode, aren't the Washington offices working in overdrive? Well yes, of course, but the successful outcry from graduate students aside, more conventional lobbying is not making much of a dent and those efforts simply deflect from our real obligations to address the changes we must make at this moment. We do need transformation, not more letters.

While it may be too late to affect the current tax proposals, the long-term dangers are so great to the essential independence of higher education broadly that we must hear the call in this moment to consider significant voluntary transformation of the economics and financial practices of higher education for the future. What might this kind of transformation look like? I have a few radical suggestions:

- Acting collaboratively, instead of always standing in a competitive mode, wealthy institutions could work across institutional lines to create an independent national foundation to support scholarships for low income students across all sectors and levels of postsecondary education; or providing challenge grants across institutions that support genuine transformation of curricula and programs and delivery systems, emphasizing streamlining and cooperation among coalitions of colleges and universities; or grants supporting innovative projects done by faculty and students in collaboration with municipalities, especially around improving K-12 education or social services in our cities or remote geographic areas under-served by collegiate opportunities;

- Absent such a radical proposal to transfer wealth among institutions voluntarily, at the very least every institution on the target endowment list, and those who are next, should act in this academic year to address tuition pricing and scholarship practices to

demonstrate a long-term and sincere commitment to redistribute wealth to relieve student cost burdens, including making a significant --- not marginal, but large --- commitment to enrolling and supporting more low income students;

- For all institutions, we could be using consortia more effectively to reduce or eliminate course duplication, especially in general education --- create cooperative curricular agreements among institutions about who will offer which foundation courses, who will offer specialized advanced courses, and other collaborative models including those that would facilitate transfer of credit and thus reduce costs to students.

All of which leads me to the next issue:

- **Access: how is the access and completion agenda central to the idea of transformation for our institutions, and for society as a matter of social justice and imperative for the preservation of our democracy?**

The economic issues I discussed in the first part certainly fuel the fires of those who claim that higher education is too expensive, and that cost effectively denies access to millions of low income Americans who cannot afford to go to college. So goes the charge, but like so many issues only partially illuminated by the fires of our critics, there's a spark of truth but a large amount of shadow obscuring the actual facts. Fire starters don't like it when the truth is far more complicated than the spark.

Certainly, it is true that quite a few very wealthy, elite institutions enroll a very small proportion of low income students and students of color. But it's absolutely not true that such students, therefore, cannot enroll in college. Millions of students enroll each year in community colleges and broad access public and private institutions where they are well-served.

But all of the current discussion seems focused on the dearth of such students in elite institutions. Some prominent gurus in the field have gone so far as to suggest that unless a student can go to a very elite college she is relegated to some hellhole. Consider this statement in an article by Richard Reeves in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* the other day, quoting Dr. Carnevale of Georgetown's Center for Education and the Workforce: *"The current postsecondary system is becoming more and more polarized….The choices offered are the lavish, full-service degrees offered by the pricey brand-name colleges that come with a graduation, graduate school, and good-jobs warranty, or the bargain-basement alternatives offered on the cheap with no guarantees of completion or long-term value in the labor market."*[2]

Yikes. Aside from the fact that the system has ***always*** been stratified, there's a more recent fashion of publicly exalting the most elite institutions as the very best, and the trashing of everyone else as "bargain basement alternatives" with "no guarantees of completion or long-term value in the labor market." Balderdash! This is a tremendous disservice to the majority of students who attend broad-access institutions in this country with great success.

In an essay in *Inside Higher Ed* the other day, Brookdale Community College Vice President for Learning Matt Reed noted a speech that Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities, gave recently at the Middle States annual conference. In that talk,

[2] Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, quoted in Richard V. Reeves, "College and the End of Upward Mobility," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 2017.

McPherson spoke of the access problem and then spoke glowingly of a program funded by the Gates Foundation to get elite institutions to enroll more low-income students of color. We might ask why wealthy institutions need Gates to fund this, but I digress… Reed called this a "boutique" solution and I agree. He wrote:

"Those of us in the trenches on student success issues know that "boutique" is a dirty word. If you want to make a significant and lasting change, you have to get at structure. In this case, that would mean making it easier for community college students -- a much more demographically diverse group -- to carry their credits with them when they transfer. That would make a sustainable difference over the long term. It would ratify community colleges as on-ramps to the higher echelons of higher education… It wouldn't even require grant money to keep going. But it would involve political battles, both among institutions and within them."[3]

We don't need boutique solutions for a privileged few, we need widespread transformation in the way we recruit, enroll and subsidize the broadest possible range of students who need more and better educational opportunities across their working lives, not just low income students of color, not just those fresh out of high school but including the millions of adults (30+ million or more) who started college degrees but did not finish them. What is the transformative opportunity for improving access?

- Colleges and universities need to stop competing and start cooperating more across types of institutions and programs. I agree with Matt Reed about the role of community colleges, and this should not simply be a movement within the public sector, but also across public and private. Reed mentions the political issues associated with creating the necessary change --- aside from the politics of faculty ownership of courses, which is a problem in credit transfer policies, this is really a leadership problem. I saw this first-hand for years in our Consortium of Universities in Washington, an organization of both public and private universities, where, for a very long time, the most dominant and influential members would not hear tell of any proposal to extend membership to our very fine regional community colleges. But I'm delighted to say that with presidential changes and more visionary leadership, in the last year the Consortium eagerly extended welcome to Montgomery College, Northern Virginia Community College, and Prince Georges Community College. This kind of cross-sector collaboration strengthens higher education throughout our region and opens opportunities for easier transfer and articulation pathways among institutions and programs.

- Along with great cross-sector cooperation, we should consider new avenues for students to earn credentials more quickly and in sensible small steps, and this is vitally important not only for low income students coming straight out of high school, but for the majority of 'post-traditional' students whose migration through higher education is longer and along remarkably different pathways from the old four-year turntable. For example, one concept that probably needs more attention is the idea of the "reverse transfer" so that students who move from community colleges to baccalaureates prior to earning the associate's degree can still earn that degree on their way to the baccalaureate.

[3] Matt Reed, "What Gets Said, and What Goes Unsaid," *Inside Higher Education*, December 7, 2017.

- We need to stop allowing certain magazine rankings to influence our enrollment behaviors. High scores in certain rankings come at the cost of access: to pick just one awful metric of rankings, "selectivity" is a euphemism for rejecting large numbers of applicants, and it's a terrible metric to measure any kind of real academic quality.

- We need to fix pricing. Create a new pricing strategy that ends pricing per-year or per-semester and instead prices by degree and credential (we actually do this with per-credit pricing for part-time students), so that students who take longer than others to complete do not pay significantly more for the same product; cap the prices of degrees at reasonable levels; Create separate pricing for amenities and do not tack them onto bills (looking at you, athletics fees) but permit students to choose to pay for what they actually use!

- We need to untangle the bureaucratic nightmare of financial aid. An article just this week in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*[4] documents the grotesquely discouraging practices of financial aid verification, a barrier to enrollment for many of the very low income students we need to enroll in greater numbers. Why can't all the very smart people in higher education come up with some better solutions to the labyrinth financial aid processes? As well, we need to devote far more of our advocacy power to getting Title IV regulations to support innovation and transformation of delivery systems instead of raising barriers to non-traditional attendance patterns.

As a corollary to access, we must take the completion agenda more seriously as well, but we have to change the conversation and the vocabulary, itself. What do I mean?

For starters, let's stop talking about "two year" and "four year" institutions. Those terms are completely outmoded. Our educational products are degrees and related academic credentials and learning experiences, not seat time; many of us offer associate, bachelor's and master's degrees all at the same time, some add doctorates and certificates to the mix, and other forms of continuing education. Diversified product lines are good business models and serve the communities we inhabit more completely.

Moreover, the hangover of "two year" and "four year" designations continues to enshrine an unrealistic, antiquated notion of silos for credentials and traditional time to degree completion at the institution where a student started. This is the deeply flawed IPEDS "graduation rate" problem, something the federal government is trying to fix but not going far enough at all.

The graduation rate is simply an index of admissions risk --- the higher the graduation rate, the less risk the institution took at the time of admission. With no understanding of what shapes a graduation rate, however, politicians are using the rate in ways that are extraordinarily pernicious threats against the very institutions that are working hard to serve low income students very well. So, now we have the proposed new Higher Education Act that, among other things, would single-out Minority Serving Institutions and impose a graduation rate threshold on them --- mind you, no other institutions, only MSIs --- in a way that is both punitive and highly discriminatory, and that lacks any understanding of what causes students to stop out or to delay degree completion. Congress should be asking how to help improve completion and provide grants for

[4] Eric Hoover, "The Verification Trap," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 10, 2017.

that purpose, rather than threatening to harm the institutions that take the risk of serving a majority of low income students of color.

We know a good deal about access and completion at Trinity. More than half of our students are residents of the District of Columbia --- from the poorest wards in the city --- we have the largest proportion of DC residents of any university in the city or nation. Our women's college at the core of the university tripled in size over a ten year period as we welcomed more low income women of color from our city. Most of these students come from our local public or charter schools. Most are the first in their families to come to college, almost all work while in school, about 25% have children of their own. 95% of our students are black and Latina; more than 80% of the full-time undergraduates are on Pell Grants with a median family income of just about $25,000. This year we are enrolling more than 100 Dreamers, about 10% of our undergraduate women's college.

As other universities that serve similarly challenging populations have learned, our students do not necessarily have good academic habits when they start. Among these, the greatest challenge might be regular attendance, and this problem starts in high school. At Trinity, we have learned that first year attendance is one of the single most important markers for persistence and completion. And here's an example of how high school behavior affects college completion: Recently, a scandal erupted in our city in which we learned that at least one of our local high schools, more than half off last year's graduating class had been absent from school for more than six weeks in their senior year. No wonder they don't come to class in college!

We know some other things about barriers to success for low income students.

Students who lack professional role models in their families are unfamiliar with the educational pathways to professions and often have unrealistic ideas. About half of our young women come in with their hearts set on being nurses, a profession they have encountered but about which they know very little in terms of the rigorous preparation. Then they encounter Calculus and Chemistry, and despite a great deal of support, their dreams are dashed. We have created other pathways into health professions so that these students do not simply disappear when they realize that they may not be able to conquer the math and science needed for nursing.

Or, maybe they have the aptitude but can't afford the books and software bundles. *MyMathLab* is expensive. We have moved intensively into rented texts and open source materials, but some books and bundles still seem necessary. We have recently started fund raising for micro grants to help students with those specific academic purchases they must make to do well and stay on track to graduate.

Quite often, our students are also hungry, homeless, have a sick baby or a parent telling them to stop out and work more, or they run out of money to put gas in the car or buy metro cards. For those among you who serve large numbers of low income students, I'm not telling you anything new, but the real question is what is the transformative opportunity to really make a difference on the access and completion agenda? We have to meet the students where they are and provide all kinds of support to keep them on track to complete their degrees.

To get more students to graduate, we have to transform programs *and* services to address the real issues that students bring with them to school each day; just some of these might include:

- Revamping academic advising and student services to provide new and different support, from food pantry and transportation support to emergency housing to micro grants for books and other needs; reducing the cost of textbooks by using more open source materials; taking class attendance especially in the first semester and pro-actively seeking out students who are not in class; using analytics to support academic advising, and, at the same time, using assessment data to identify the first year "killer courses" and develop academic support strategies especially for the math courses that are the #1 academic roadblock for many students;

- Developing real academic partnerships and data sharing agreements with local school systems to build a stronger pathway from high school through college. At Trinity, we are completing a study of mid-term and final grades of freshmen according to the high school they attended and we will share this aggregate data with the local schools so we can discuss improvements. At the same time, working with the DC Public Schools we are developing a plan for early college high school for the nursing program and dual enrollment for others so that we can begin to address some of the preparatory challenges, more directly in junior and senior years of high school;

- Faculty also play a central role in fostering a culture of completion. Transforming pedagogy is a major component of improving opportunities for student success. At Trinity, for example, our faculty in the sciences have achieved a great deal of success in engaging undergraduate students in research initiatives and recently the Howard Hughes Medical Institute awarded Trinity a $1 million grant to enlarge the faculty work in pedagogy that promotes success for low income women of color in the sciences; ten years ago our science faculty said the students could not really do the work, but today we have students winning undergraduate research awards and doing summer internships in labs at places like Harvard, MIT and Stanford. Not to be outdone, the Arts & Humanities faculty secured two Mellon Foundation grants to support transformation of their curricula and pedagogy, also using undergraduate research as a driver of improved student performance.

In the Oxford speech I quoted earlier, Bill Bowen also said that

"…in a digitized and commercialized age it is even more important than it was before that access to the most prized educational opportunities be made available to individuals of ability and ambition from every background. How best to pursue equal opportunity in ways that strengthen, not weaken, colleges and universities is a huge subject…"[5]

Ultimately, improving access to higher education and new pathways to degree completion is essential to our society as a matter of social justice and economic opportunity, as well as the strengthening of our democracy --- a robust democracy depends heavily on enlightened citizens leaders acting with the knowledge, perspectives and values of advanced education. The latter purpose is more urgent than ever before.

[5] Bowen, ibid., p. 8

- **Purpose: How can we manifest with greater urgency our purpose in truth and intellectual freedom, justice and equality at a time of authoritarian threats and widespread moral chaos?**

We academics have to look at the chaos of our current political culture and admit that what we are seeing is a failure of education. The people carrying tiki torches across the grounds in Virginia were not all lacking in advanced education. The people trying to disrupt campuses with speech that ranges from merely provocative, which is fine, to speech that incites riots, which is not fine, are largely well educated. The people urging executive actions that ban travelers from Muslim nations, that strip young immigrants of some very modest basic legal protections, that craft plans to roll back voting rights and civil rights protections, that deny the reality of climate change and eliminate funding for climate science, that threaten freedom of the press, these are all educated people, some from the very best universities!

I am reminded of this passage written by the legendary Notre Dame President Father Ted Hesburgh as a preface to an essay he wrote in 1973 about "The Moral Purpose of Higher Education."

"All of the young White House men involved in Watergate were products of some of our best educational institutions. They were obviously competent people; after all, they manipulated a stunning victory for Mr. Nixon. Yet, by their own admission, many of them confessed that they had not learned to ask the right questions, such as "Is this the right thing to do? Is it honest, just or fair?" They made ends of means, substance of shadow, rights of wrongs. In a word, they were hucksters."[6]

Hesburgh often said that the most important thing higher education leaders must do is to convey values to our students by the way in which we live our own lives. *"There are great moral issues facing young and old alike today,"* he wrote at another time in 1976. *"In an educational setting, one would hope that values would be all important and that the young would perceive clearly where we elders stand on issues like human rights, world poverty and hunger, good government, preserving the fragile ecosphere…"*[7]

Are we really living our values so that our students can learn from our example?

When the white supremacists, neo Nazis and KKK enthusiasts marched across the grounds at the University of Virginia, every collegiate leader in America should have responded with outrage and a clear message that we cannot tolerate what is intolerable to our values, the deliberate and chronic promotion of racial and ethnic hatred, the American Original Sin.

But aside from some modest flurries of blogs and op-eds and speeches on the topic, the leadership of higher education seems largely silent on some of the most urgent concerns of this historic era --- the constant incitement of racial hatred and religious bigotry, the ongoing and chronic plague of sexual assault and degradation of women, the dismissal of climate science and undermining of environmental stewardship, the naked attacks on freedom of the press which is a close cousin to academic freedom, the debilitation of the State Department and fraying of

[6] Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., introduction to "The Moral Purpose of Higher Education" in *The Hesburgh Papers: Higher Values in Higher Education* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1979), p. 113.

[7] Hesburgh, ibid., "The University President," p. 14

international alliances, the threat of war including nuclear weapons, the retreat from promises our government made to those living on the margins that they could have healthcare for themselves and their children, that our impoverished seniors would be cared for with dignity, that such social supports and security for all people are what a good society stands for. Whatever happened to our advocacy for the good society?

Oh, yes, we sign letters, we attend roundtables, opine on panels --- we appear to be doing all the right things, but we are talking to ourselves. We not making much impact, truth be told.

And we seem to be somewhat terrified about freedom of speech. Even as we presidents fail to exercise our own freedom of speech more robustly, we have interpreted that greatest of all American rights to mean that we cannot do much of anything about expression that is deeply disordered, morally offensive, academically just plain wrong. How can we be good educators if we allow just about any balderdash to pass as equally valid, if we fail to challenge the lies of the powerful and the fake news of their acolytes, if we remain mute on the great issues of our time?

Yes, I know, especially in public universities it's complicated. And we good academics, honoring the idea of the marketplace of all ideas, certainly do not want to reject an expression simply because we disagree with it, or that someone finds it hurtful. But for goodness sakes, we presidents get the best parking spaces, if not the big houses, to use our brains to sort out the issues and use our spines to stand up to what is clearly, unambiguously, intellectually and morally wrong. That may not mean censorship, but it certainly must mean vigorous and loud responses and robust advocacy for what is right.

Presidents have told me that they can't possibly speak out for fear of alienating donors, boards, politicians whose favor they need. While we equivocate, the hourglass is running out. Our democracy, our very way of life is in grave danger. If we're not willing to risk our jobs, then we're not doing our jobs. We must know when it is worth it to take a stand for what's right regardless of the consequences. And we have to do it more quickly, before we find that our words have become simply irrelevant.

Hesburgh also wrote at the end of his essay on the moral values of the university:

"… all those engaged in education today must look to themselves first, to their moral commitments, to their lives, and to their own values, which, for better or worse, will be reflected in the lives and attitudes of those they seek to educate. There is nothing automatic about the liberal education tradition. It can die if not fostered. And if it does die, the values that sustain an individual and a nation are likely to die with it."[8]

We must not let our values or our nation die in silence. Let's fight fire with fire. Let us hold high the torches of our deepest values in truth and freedom. Let us light up the night with the fire of our conviction that education done well is our society's best hope to sustain democracy, equality, justice and peace.

[8] Hesburgh, ibid., p. 119.