



WASHINGTON IDEAS FORUM

OCTOBER 4-6, 2011 | WASHINGTON, D.C.

HIGHER EDUCATION: TODAY'S ECONOMY, TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE WORKING SUMMIT OVERVIEW

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THE CONVERSATION

Leaders in education policy gathered at the Newseum on Wednesday to discuss how institutions of higher learning can better prepare a workforce fit for the 21st century. During the discussion on the purpose of higher education and the extent to which American institutions live up to their aims, experts around the table agreed that the country's university system is to be admired.

"It's trite to say it's the envy of the world. Antecedents are very important in this kind of conversation," said John Sexton, President of New York University.

There are as many as five thousand higher-education institutions in the United States, and while the big picture is impressive to behold, this discussion explored several shortcomings. Among them are: problems with accessibility, affordability, matching students with the right program, and the quality of degrees—which might advance graduates despite "disemboweling the content," as Sexton noted.

Patrick Callan, Director of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, said "America's system of higher learning is not serving social needs. This 'best in the world' stuff is getting us into big trouble."

The conversation next covered subjects of class, race, socio-economic status—and the accompanying cultural molds to which education promises an alternative, yet so often fails to provide. Without proper statistics to track how graduates perform in the labor market, or a true measure to assess how much students are learning while they are in college, it's difficult both for students to prepare for the workforce, and also for administrators to guide programs effectively.

"There are strong informational deserts out there in terms of outcomes. And information asymmetry," said Grover Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution. "This means the market of prospective college students (and their parents) is not informed in the way of the market of people shopping for used cars."

With such limited access to information—and the fear of some colleges over losing their accreditation should they release unsavory statistics—the question arose: to what extent do institutions need some regulation or incentive to set up their students for post-graduate success? Some believed that a concerted



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effort to disseminate information within the free market would help; others called for greater standards of accountability.

As *U.S. News and World Report* Editor-in-Chief Brian Kelly explained, “The solution cannot come from educational institutions alone, and the gap between the educational and labor systems needs to be bridged. It seems like, from a market standpoint, there ought to be a shakeout. There are too many providers ... the market has not really imposed much discipline on higher education.”

5 BIG IDEAS

1. From the start, students should be matched with the right college program.
2. Appropriate incentives are important, but there’s danger in meddling with institutional standards.
3. More information is needed to educate the marketplace about higher learning.
4. Interested parties—institutions, partners in industry, etc.—should collaborate more effectively.
5. Getting policy right isn’t easy, but it’s of critical importance not only within the field of education, but also in terms of its broader economic impact.



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ATTENDEE LIST

Moderator: Clive Crook *Senior Editor* **The Atlantic**

Host: Bruce Gottlieb *General Counsel* **Atlantic Media Company**

J. Thomas Bowler, Jr. *Senior Vice President, Human Resources and Organization* **United Technologies Corporation**

Molly Corbett Broad *President* **American Council on Education**

Patrick Callan *Director* **National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education**

Joanne Conroy, M.D. *Chief Healthcare Officer* **Association of American Medical Colleges**

Dennis Jones *President* **National Center for Higher Education Management Systems**

Brian Kelly *Editor-in-Chief* **U.S. News & World Report**

George Leef *Director of Research* **John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy**

Chris Long *Principal* **Booz Allen Hamilton**

Mary Ellen McGuire, Ph. D. *Senior Advisor, Education* **New America Foundation**

Brian Moran *Interim Chief Executive Officer and President* **Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities**

Catherine Murphy *Executive Director of Communications and Public Relations* **Gallaudet University**

Shai Reshef *Founder and President* **University of the People**

Mark Schneider *Vice President* **American Institutes for Research**

Jeff Selingo *Vice President and Editorial Director* **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

Marlene Seltzer *President and Chief Executive Officer* **Jobs for the Future**

John E. Sexton, Ph.D. *President* **New York University**

Robert Templin, Ph.D. *President* **Northern Virginia Community College**

Jeff Ubois *Program Officer, Media, Culture, and Special Initiatives* **The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation**

Andy Van Kleunen *Executive Director* **National Skills Coalition**

Tim Welsh, Ph.D. *Senior Vice President - National Industry Strategy Group* **The University of Phoenix**

Grover Whitehurst, Ph.D. *Senior Fellow, Governance Studies, and Director, Brown Center on Education Policy* **Brookings Institution**

Ross Wiener, Ph.D. *Executive Director, Education and Society* **The Aspen Institute**

Josh Wyner *Executive Director, College Excellence Program* **The Aspen Institute**