

**Commentary:  
An Education on  
Higher Education for  
the Next President**

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COMMENTARY

An Education on Higher Education for the Next President

The Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama, has cited affordable college tuition as one of his key goals if elected. John McCain, the Republican candidate, has said that he wants to simplify the federal student-aid process and give parents better information about colleges. What else should be on the candidates' agendas when it comes to higher education?

**M. LEE PELTON, president of Willamette University:**

Access, affordability, and accountability — alliterative headliners — seem very much on the minds of the public and Congress, who increasingly view those three areas as the cornerstone of America's higher-education future. They are most notably represented in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in mid-August.

But many of us in higher education find it ironic that just as the state and federal governments' sustained underinvestment in higher education has insidiously eroded affordability and threatened access for prospective students and their families, Congress is turning up the heat on colleges to be more accountable by measuring performance and demonstrating outcomes.

Our nation is entering a new era in higher education — one as significant in its scope and impact as what we faced after World War II. Demographic trends suggest that increases in college applications will come largely from members of underrepresented groups, many of whom will be students of color from low-income families, whose high-school curricula will not have prepared them to persist and succeed in college.

David Brooks has written in *The New York Times* that “we live in a country stratified by education. . . . The gap between rich and poor is widening. Students in the poorest quarter of the population have an 8.6-percent chance of getting a college degree. Students in the top quarter have a 74.9-percent chance.” The truly engaged university must ensure, to borrow a phrase from the former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, that the “path to leadership” is visibly open to economically disadvantaged students whose backgrounds cut across racial and ethnic borders. So here is my advice to the presidential candidates:

- Sweep the ideologues out of the Department of Education who insist on one-size-fits-all accountability. The strength of the American higher-education system — that which has made it the envy of the world — has been its diversity of institutional types, each with a singular mission and history as well as the freedom to decide whom it admits, what it teaches, and how to teach. Cookie cutters may make good cookies, but they make bad colleges.

- Let us do our job and stop treating higher education as if it were some kind of regulated utility company. Higher education is more than a commodity; it is a social good.
- Provide incentives for elementary, secondary, and higher education to work together as a coherent and coordinated whole.
- Provide incentives for higher education to fix its pricing structure so that all qualified students can afford to attend college. The good news from my sector: According to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 80 percent of dependent full-time undergraduates at private institutions receive some form of financial aid. On average, those students pay less than two-thirds of the published tuition, and families that demonstrate the greatest financial need pay only about a quarter of the published tuition. The bad news: According to federal statistics reported by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, middle-income and high-income students at private institutions are now likelier to receive institutional aid — and more of it — than are students from the lowest income quartile.
- Reinvest significantly in higher education, beginning with the community colleges, so that those students will have a chance to participate meaningfully in the knowledge economy, or, better yet, matriculate seamlessly to four-year colleges.
- In your first 100 days in office, assemble a group of the country's business and education leaders to figure out ways that local and state businesses can contribute significantly to continuous improvement in education.
- Finally, fix the health-care system. A less costly and more efficient health-care system will permit a larger portion of federal and state budgets to find their way to all levels of education as well as to the social and family-support programs that increase educational access and success.

Let us not retreat from the social compact that we made with this nation more than a half a century ago with the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights. Let's get it right. Even though the challenges today may be more complex, we did it once and we can surely do it again.