How Can We Expand Affordable, Cost-Effective, High-Quality Post-Secondary Opportunities in the Midwestern Region?

A Choicework Discussion Starter by Public Agenda for the Midwestern Higher Education Compact’s “Difficult Dialogues, Rewarding Solutions” Fourth Annual Policy Summit
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INTRODUCTION

Many experts agree that the number of college educated and trained Americans must expand significantly in the coming years in order for the country to remain competitive in the global economy. Moreover, it is now patently clear that a direct correlation exists between learning and earning: it is increasingly difficult for an individual to earn a livable wage without some form of postsecondary degree or credential. The following are just a few of the facts that speak to these twin imperatives of economic competitiveness and individual opportunity:

- By 2014 the number of jobs requiring some form of postsecondary credential will grow 60 percent faster than the job market as a whole.

- The United States ranks near the bottom of industrialized nations in the percentage of entering postsecondary students who complete a degree program, and ours is the only industrialized country where young people are less likely than their parents to earn a high school diploma.

- Significant disparities in educational attainment persist across racial and ethnic groups, even as the nation’s population becomes more diverse.

The upshot is that in order for our citizens and region to prosper we must find ways to ramp up college access and completion without sacrificing educational quality. Moreover, with public financing strained to the breaking point we must do so in ways that are affordable to taxpayers, students and families alike.

This, of course, is no small order. Both operating costs and tuition have soared at colleges and universities, while far too many students are not completing degrees. It is therefore time for fresh thinking and tough decisions.
To help us think through the issues, this “Choicework Discussion Starter” presents three possible approaches. As we review them, consider their pros and cons, and think about how effective each might be to help reach the goal of expanding affordable, cost-effective, high-quality higher education opportunities in the Midwestern region. Also, if there are important ideas, policies or strategies that are missing, please make a note of them as well.

As a simple device to get our conversation rolling, we'll ask you to choose the one approach that you think has the most pros and the fewest cons and to explain your choice. After this initial exercise, you are encouraged to develop your position as you wish, revising the ideas we present, bringing together elements of various approaches or bringing completely new ideas into the conversation.

**IMPORTANT NOTE**

Because the problem we are discussing is complex and multi-faceted, we do not presume that any single approach can serve as a free-standing solution. Rather, this framework seeks to disentangle key elements of the challenge in a way that creates space for focused and productive dialogue. It is intended as a point of departure for our collaborative dialogue, not as a fixed set of boxes into which all possible ideas must be fit. It is best to view this three-approach framework merely as a device to get a solution-oriented conversation rolling.
Approach 1: Make Institutions More Cost-Effective

The culture of higher education institutions is not, by nature, a culture of efficiency. It has never had to be—until now. Today, tighter budgets for our public colleges and universities and their rising operating costs are a fact of life. Meanwhile, rising tuition is becoming an obstacle to many students in their quest for a better education and a better life. Unfortunately, in a human- and capital-intensive operation like higher education, cost-saving measures that do not undermine quality can be difficult to find. But find them we must if we are to reach our goal of expanding affordable, cost-effective, high-quality higher education opportunities.

Therefore, we should pursue strategies such as the following:

Rethink the Business Side of Higher Education
- Adopt business models and best practices that bring down costs by streamlining and standardizing administrative functions and processes within institutions.
- Adopt business metrics to identify promising practices and drive ongoing improvements to make the administrative and operational functions of institutions more cost effective.

Rethink Curriculum and Graduation Requirements
- Create a core curriculum of carefully-aligned required courses with fewer electives, giving students less leeway to take courses that may not apply toward their eventual major or degree program.
- Review completion rates in all majors and credential programs and provide incentives for institutions to eliminate particularly expensive and low-enrollment majors and those that do not lead to strong career opportunities in today's economy.

Rethink Curriculum Delivery
- Increase the use of technology in large, lower-division courses, including expanded distance-learning opportunities.
- Shift full-time faculty towards course content and assessment and development, and have part-time, graduate students or adjunct faculty do the majority of the classroom teaching, as is being done in Great Britain.

Tough Questions for this Approach
- Shouldn’t students be allowed and even encouraged to explore different subjects in college to get a well-rounded education rather than rushed through in the name of “efficiency”?
- Don’t many of these ideas endanger educational quality while failing to get at the real problem, which is that too many students are simply not prepared to succeed in college?
Approach 2: Prepare and Incentivize Students to Make Efficient Progress

Higher education is overwhelmed with too many students who are not prepared to succeed. As a result, the costs of remedial/developmental education are a growing drain on institutions, while vast numbers of students fail to complete degrees or earn certificates. However, if students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college, and if there is a well-designed system of supports and incentives in place, most will move through the process efficiently and effectively. This, in turn, will hold down costs for students and institutions alike, while increasing the number of individuals who earn the degrees and credentials required for success in today's economy.

Therefore, we should pursue strategies such as the following:

**Improve the School-to-College Transition**
- Increase K-12 rigor, better align high school and college curricula, and improve assessments that gauge college readiness.
- Offer more accelerated learning opportunities such as dual-enrollment and Advanced Placement, and invest more in summer and weekend programs to help lagging middle- and high school students get prepared to complete their college education efficiently.

**Improve Supports and Incentives that Help Students Work Towards Degree Completion**
- Improve counseling services at middle and high schools, community colleges and four-year colleges to advise students on 21st century career opportunities, requirements for degree completion, and efficient transitions to other institutions.
- Tie student aid to progress toward degrees so students are encouraged to stay focused and earn meaningful credentials in a timely fashion.

**Improve the Preparation of Non-Traditional Students**
- Coordinate systems to integrate literacy, ESL and job training programs that can be offered at community colleges in more cost effective ways.
- Provide incentives to employers that make it easier for their employees to pursue and complete postsecondary degrees and certificates.

**Tough Questions for this Approach**
- *Isn’t it this just the old blame game, in which educators point the finger at under-prepared students rather than taking responsibility themselves for improving results?*
- *Aren’t there larger forces at work driving up the cost of higher education that we have to address, besides the preparation and behavior of individual students?*
**Approach 3: Revamp Higher Ed Systems at the State and Regional Levels**

Higher education is organized and governed in statewide and regional systems, and it is at this level where we can find the "levers" that have the greatest systemic impact on college costs and affordability. Unfortunately, the incentives that college systems create often make it more difficult, not less, for institutions to collaborate effectively in ways that hold down costs. No matter what gains are made on other fronts, it is unlikely that soaring tuition and operating costs will be brought under control without states and regions coordinating their higher education systems in ways that increase efficiency.

Therefore, we should pursue strategies such as the following:

**Create Incentives that Encourage Colleges and Universities to Contain Costs**
- Encourage institutions to “broker in” existing programs from other institutions that can be offered locally in a cost-effective way, and create incentives for institutions to share facilities and expand year-round operations.
- Tie state aid to 4-year institutions more to completion rates and less to enrollment so that institutions become more focused on helping students finish their degrees.

**Avoid “Mission Creep” in Order to Create a More Efficient System**
- Limit the number of research institutions in each state, and have regional universities focus on teaching.
- Put a cap on the number of students admitted to research institutions and direct more students toward lower-cost options like community colleges.

**Create New Educational Models to Meet State and Regional Goals**
- Instead of requiring students to earn credits based on the number of courses they take, create systems that allow students to progress by successfully completing required assessments that measure proficiency or competency.
- Work more closely with the business community and economic development agencies to provide alternative certification programs to meet specific workforce development and regional economic goals.

**Tough Questions for this Approach**
- *Even if this approach leads to some costs savings, how is it going to help students who aren’t prepared to succeed in college earn meaningful degrees and credentials?*
- *Do we really want to give this much power over higher education to decision-makers far away from the day-to-day reality of the college classroom?*
The Choices in Brief

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach 1: Focus on Institutions</th>
<th>Approach 2: Focus on Students</th>
<th>Approach 3: Focus on Systems</th>
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<td>• <strong>Improve the school-to-college transition</strong> by increase K-12 rigor, bettering aligning high school and college curricula, improving assessments that gauge college readiness, and by offering more accelerated learning opportunities (such as AP and dual enrollment).</td>
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<td>• <strong>Improve supports and incentives to encourage students to complete degrees</strong> by improving counseling services at all levels of schooling, and by tying student aid to progress toward degrees.</td>
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- Don’t many of these ideas endanger educational quality while failing to get at the real problem, which is that too many students are simply not prepared to succeed in college?
- Do we really want to give this much power over higher education to bureaucrats far away from the day-to-day reality of the college classroom?”
- Aren’t there larger forces at work driving up the cost of higher education that we have to address, besides the preparation and behavior of individual students?
- Isn’t it this just the old blame game, in which educators point the finger at under-prepared students rather than taking responsibility themselves for improving results?