

Higher Education and Society

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Abstract:

Institutions of higher education, and the system of which they are a part, face a host of unprecedented challenges from forces in society that affect and are influenced by these very institutions and their communities of learners and educators. Among these forces are sweeping demographic changes, shrinking state budgets, revolutionary advances in information and telecommunication technologies, globalization, competition from new educational providers, market pressures to shape educational and scholarly practices toward profit-driven ends, and increasing demands and pressures for fundamental changes in public policy and public accountability relative to higher education's role in addressing pressing issues of communities and the society at large. Anyone of these challenges would be significant on their own, but collectively they increase the complexity and difficulty for higher education to sustain or advance the fundamental work of serving the public good.

Through a forum on higher education, we can agree to:

Strengthening the relationship between higher education and society will require a broad-based effort that encompasses all of higher education, not just individual institutions, departments and associations.

Piecemeal solutions can only go so far; strategies for change must be informed by a shared vision and a set of common objectives.

A "movement" approach for change holds greater promise for transforming academic culture than the prevailing "organizational" approach.

Mobilizing change will require strategic alliances, networks, and partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders within and beyond higher education.

The Common Agenda is specifically designed to support a "movement" approach to change by encouraging the emergence of strategic alliances among individuals and organizations who care about higher education's role in advancing the ideals of a diverse democracy through higher education's practices, relationships and service to society.

Keywords: Higher, Education, Society, Impact

A Common Agenda

The *Common Agenda* is intended to be a "living" document and an open process that guides collective action and learning among committed partners within and outside of higher education. As a living document, the *Common Agenda* is a collection of focused activity aimed at advancing higher education's civic, social, and cultural roles in society. This collaboratively created, implemented, and focused *Common Agenda* respects the diversity of activity and programmatic foci of individuals, institutions, and networks, as well as recognizes the common interests of the whole. As an open process, the *Common Agenda* is a structure for connecting work and relationships around common interests focusing on higher education's role in serving society. Various modes of alienating and amplifying the common work within and beyond higher education will be provided within the *Common Agenda* process.

This approach is understandably ambitious and unique in its purpose and application. Ultimately, the *Common Agenda* challenges the system of higher education, and those who view higher education as vital to addressing society's pressing issues, to act deliberately, collectively, and clearly on an evolving and significant set of commitments to society. Currently, four broad issue areas are shaping the focus of the *Common Agenda*: 1) Building public understanding and support for higher education's civic mission and actions; 2) Cultivating networks and partnerships; 3) Infusing and reinforcing the value of civic responsibility into the culture of higher education institutions; and 4) Embedding civic engagement and social responsibility in the structure of the higher education system

VISION

We have a vision of higher education that nurtures individual prosperity, institutional responsiveness and inclusivity, and societal health by promoting and practicing learning, scholarship, and engagement that respects public needs.

Our universities are proactive and responsive to pressing social, ethical, and economic problems facing our communities and greater society. Our students and graduates are people of integrity who embrace diversity and are socially responsible and civically engaged throughout their lives.

MISSION

The purpose of the *Common Agenda* is to provide a framework for organizing, guiding and communicating the values and practices of higher education relative to its civic, social and economic commitments to a diverse democracy.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We believe social justice, ethics, educational equity, and societal change for positive effects are fundamental to the work of higher education.

We consider the relationship between communities and higher education institutions to be based on the values of equality, respect and reciprocity, and the work in higher education to be interdependent with the other institutions and individuals in society.

We will seek and rely on extensive partnerships with all types of institutions and devoted individuals inside and outside of higher education.

We realize the interconnection of politics, power and privilege. The Common Agenda is not for higher education to self-serve, but to *“walk the talk”* relative to espoused public goals.

We understand the Common Agenda as a dynamic living document, and expect the activities it encompasses to change over time.

THE COMMON AGENDA FRAMEWORK

It is clear that while goals and action items are organized and aligned within certain issues areas, there is considerable overlap and complementarity among the issues, goals and action items. Also, following each action item are names of individuals who committed to serve as “point persons” for that particular item. A list of “point persons,” with their organizational affiliation(s) is included with the common agenda.

ISSUES, GOALS, AND ACTION ITEMS

ISSUE 1: BUILDING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION’S CIVIC MISSION AND ACTIONS

Public understanding more and more equates higher education benefits with acquiring a “good job” and receiving “higher salaries.” To understand and support the full benefits of higher education the public and higher education leaders need to engage in critical and honest discussions about the role of higher education in society.

Goal: Develop a common language that resonates both inside and outside the academy.

Action Items:

Develop a common language and themes about higher education's role and responsibility to the public

good, through discussions with a broader public.

Collect scholarship on public good, examine themes and identify remaining questions.

Develop a national awareness of the importance of higher education for the public good through the development of marketing efforts.

Goal: Promote effective and broader discourse.

Action Items:

Raise public awareness about the institutional diversity within and between higher education institutions.

Identify strategies for engaging alumni associations for articulating public good and building bridges between higher education and the various public sector companies.

Develop guidelines of discourse to improve the quality of dialogue on every level of society.

Organize a series of civil dialogues with various public sectors about higher education and the public good.

ISSUE 2: CULTIVATING NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Approaching complex issues such as higher education's role in society requires a broad mix of partners to create strategies and actions that encompass multiple valued perspectives and experiences.

Broad partnerships to strengthen the relationship between higher education and society involves working strategically with those within and outside of higher education to achieve mutual goals on behalf of the public good.

Goal: Create broad and dispersed communication systems and processes.

Action Items:

Create an information and resource network across higher education associations

Create information processes that announce relevant conferences, recruit presenters and encourage presentations in appropriate national conferences

Develop opportunities for information sharing and learning within and between various types of postsecondary institutions (e.g. research-centered communities).

Goal: Generate and support strategic alliances and diverse collaborations.

Action Items:

Establish and support on-going partnerships and collaborations between higher education associations, postsecondary institutions and the external community (e.g. civic organizations, legislators, community members)

Explore with the public how to employ the role of arts in advancing higher education for the public good

Promote collaboration between higher education and to address access, retention, and graduation concerns

ISSUE 3: INFUSING AND REINFORCING THE VALUE OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY INTO THE CULTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

There is a separation and imbalance among traditional research, teaching and service in higher education. Higher Education should attend to the implicit and explicit consequences of its work, and reexamine “what counts” to integrate research, teaching and service for the public good to the core working of the institution.

Goal: Emphasize civic skills and leadership development in the curriculum and co-curriculum.

Action Items:

Develop and implement a curriculum in colleges and universities that promote civic engagement of students

Create co-curricular student and community programs for leadership and civic engagement development

Develop learning opportunities, inside and outside of the classroom, that promote liberty, democratic responsibility, social justice and knowledge of the economic system

Develop student leadership and service opportunities that focus on ethical behavior

Teach undergraduate students organizing and networking skills, and encourage student leadership and activism

Diversity education

Goal: Foster a deeper commitment to the public good within the professorate.

Action Items:

Work with faculty on communication skills and languages to describe their engagement with the public, and educate faculty for the common good

Identify models for promotion and tenure standards
Identify models for faculty development

Goal: Identify, recognize, and support engaged scholarship.

Action Items:

Identify and disseminate models and exemplars of scholarship on the public good
Encourage the participation in community research
Help institutions call attention to exemplary outreach
Establish a capacity building effort for institutions

Goal: Bring graduate education into alignment with the civic mission.

Action Items:

Work with disciplinary associations to hold dialogues on ways graduate student training can incorporate public engagement, involvement and service
Promote “civic engagement” within academic and professional disciplines according to the disciplines’ definition of “civic engagement”
Incorporate the concept of higher education for the public good into current graduate education reform efforts

ISSUE 4: EMBEDDING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Promoting the public benefits of higher education requires system efforts beyond institutions to intentionally embed values of civic engagement and social responsibility in governance practices, policy decisions, and educational processes.

Goal: Align governing structures and administrative strategies.

Action Items:

Develop ways to improve student and the community involvement in the governance and decision making process of higher education institutions.
Identify and promote ways for institutions to improve involvement with the public and the practice of democracy within their own institution.
Establish public good/civic engagement units that orchestrate this work throughout institutions.

Goal: Publicly recognize and support valuable engagement work.

Action Items:

Offer public awards that reward institutions with demonstrable track record in serving the public good in order to encourage institutionalization of performance around the public good and civic engagement.

Develop a comprehensive inventory of funding sources, association activities, initiatives, and exemplary practices that advance the public good.

Identify, recognize, and support early career scholars who choose to do research on higher education's public good role in society.

Goal: Ensure that assessment and accreditation processes include civic engagement and social responsibility criteria.

Action Items:

Identify service to the public good as a key component in provincial and national educational plans (e.g. Master Plans, federal budgets, professional associations etc.).

Bring higher education associations and legislators together to broaden current definition of student outcomes and achievement, and develop a plan for assessment.

Develop strategies and processes to refocus system-wide planning, accreditation and evaluation agendas to consider criteria assessing the social, public benefits of higher education.

Goal: Cultivate stronger ties between the university and government.

Action Items:

Develop a 3-year implementation plan that joins college and university rector / Pro-Rector and Director with provincial legislators to engage in an assessment of the needs of the public by province.

Host a series of dialogues between trustees and provincial legislators to discuss the role of universities and public policy in advancing public good at a local, provincial, and national level.

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