



The 2013 Robert H. Atwell Lecture

**"THE COMPLETION IMPERATIVE:
HARNESSING CHANGE TO MEET
OUR RESPONSIBILITIES"**

by William E. Kirwan, Chancellor,
University System of Maryland

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"We bear a responsibility
that *no* generation of
university leaders before
us has faced."

Thank you, Molly [Molly Corbett Broad, president of ACE], for that wonderful and touching introduction. It is all the more meaningful coming from you, a person I have long admired for the quality and impact of your leadership in higher education. I'm especially grateful that Patty, my dear wife of 53 years, was present to hear you. She has a wonderful way of keeping me grounded. On those occasions when I have received some form of recognition she always asks, "Why you?"

I also want to say what an honor it is to give a lecture named after Bob Atwell. Bob, we are all in your debt for the legacy of your decades of leadership in higher education.

I was pleased to see that the theme for ACE's 95th Annual Meeting is "Leading Change." This is ideally suited for my comments. As I will highlight, our nation's future well-being on several dimensions needs the higher education community to *lead change* as perhaps never before in our history. We must unite in common cause to address what I have come to see as perhaps the most critical challenge of our time: the College Completion Imperative.

There is, of course, no shortage of champions for the college completion agenda in America, who usually cite the need for higher levels of education and skills in our nation's workforce if we are to remain a leader in the global economy. From President Obama; to the Gates Foundation; to the Lumina Foundation; to the National Governors Association; to most of our leading higher education associations, including the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and ACE; to the National Academy of Sciences; to the National Science Foundation, which sees the need for more science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees as a crisis that threatens America's national security ... and to many others, there is a real sense of

national urgency on the issue of college completion.

Now, there are some in our nation who challenge these ambitious college completion goals. They argue that there is no urgency regarding college completion. They claim, wrongly I believe, that the need for more college graduates is overstated and that the jobs in the marketplace today, and in the years to come, requiring a college degree are grossly overestimated.

However, those who challenge the college completion goals are necessarily mute on the irrefutable data documenting the economic value of a degree for the degree recipient. The expected lifetime earnings of a person with a bachelor's degree are more than \$1 million more than for a person with only a high school diploma. Moreover, even at the depths of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate of those with a college degree, even recent college graduates, was less than half of that for those with a high school degree only.

This leads me to what I feel is the most urgent and compelling element of the College Completion Imperative: *social equity*.

I graduated from high school back in another century. Come to think of it, everyone here graduated from high school back in another century. It's just that my graduation was much further back than most, 1956 to be exact. After graduation, some of us went on to college; many others went straight into the workplace. A few years ago, Patty and I traveled

At left: William E Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, giving the Atwell Lecture. Photo by Tim Trumble for ACE.

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back for our 50th high school reunion and I observed an amazing thing. Most of those who had gone straight into the workforce were retired and living in Florida. And, here I am still working! Can you imagine that same phenomenon 50 years from now for today’s high school graduates who don’t earn a college degree?

We in higher education must face two sobering facts. First, the path to a secure economic future for individuals—today—passes through our gates. And second, too few, way too few, of our nation’s economically disadvantaged are traveling along that path. The data are chilling. A child born into a family in the highest quartile of income has a roughly 85 percent chance of earning a college degree. A child born into a family in the lowest quartile of income has less than an 8 percent chance of earning a degree. How does such a child escape from poverty in today’s world without a degree from one of our institutions?

A fundamental value of this great nation is the American Dream, the belief that a person’s status at birth is not supposed to determine his or her status throughout life. From our nation’s founding, we have prided ourselves as being the land of opportunity, the world’s shining example of an upwardly mobile society, the nation where each generation passes a better life on to the next. Now, admittedly, progress toward these ideals has varied over time based on race, gender, and ethnicity. But there is no denying that, until this moment in our history, movement toward our founding principles and values has been inexorable for all.

But we are staring at the possible disappearance of the American Dream. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) *2012 Education at a Glance* report notes that children of less-educated parents in the United States have a *tougher time* climbing the educational ladder than in almost any other developed country. The odds that a young person in the U.S. will enroll in higher education if his or her parents do not have a postsecondary education are just 29 percent—one of the lowest levels among OECD countries.

As Laura Tyson, chair of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Clinton, observed recently: “The United States is caught in a vicious cycle largely of its own making. Rising income inequality is breeding more inequality in educational opportunity, which results in greater inequality in educational attainment. That, in turn, undermines the intergenerational mobility upon which Americans have always prided themselves and perpetuates income inequality from generation to generation.”

It is sobering in the extreme to consider that an American child’s educational achievement is more dependent on the education level of his or her parents than for a child born in almost any other developed country. For generations, social mobility through education was America’s great strength and a precious gift for our citizens.

No matter what level of college completion we are ultimately able to reach as a result of the ambitious national goals, if the gains come mostly from the middle and higher income classes, or are overwhelmingly white, or primarily from the offspring of college-educated parents, we will not be able to claim success. Indeed, we will have contributed to creating, for the first time in our nation’s history, a permanent economic underclass.

Since an individual’s opportunity for economic success and well-being goes through our gates—and this is the point I want to emphasize most in my talk—we bear a responsibility that *no* generation of university leaders before us faced. In previous eras, as many of my high school classmates demonstrated, there were alternative routes to a satisfying and secure life. Not today. The question for those of us in higher education is how history will judge our collective efforts in meeting this awesome responsibility.

Now I fully recognize that many step off the path to higher education before they reach our doors and for reasons that are not fully our responsibility. But many, too many, do not. I will focus my remaining remarks on four areas that we do control and where our collective efforts could make a huge difference in sustaining the American Dream for members of our society where that dream is fast becoming a lie.

I certainly could provide a litany of strategies requiring investments that would immediately help: Dramatically increase the number and value of Pell Grants; provide greater federal support to our colleges and universities; urge the states to reinvest in higher education; and on and on.

The fact of the matter is, however, and I’m sure you agree, there

is no indication that significant new investments of public funds will be available in the near or intermediate term to do these things. We are, after all, in day three of sequestration. The discussions currently holding sway at the federal and state levels are how to *reduce* spending, not increase it. States, which are already financially strapped, will see more and more fiscal obligations passed down the line to them, with no corresponding increase in revenue. And colleges and universities, struggling in the aftermath of the Great Recession, do not have the wherewithal to make massive investments in new initiatives.

But this fiscal reality cannot be an excuse for paralysis on our part. The stakes are too high. So the four items I want to discuss are things that do not require significant new funds. But they do require a new mindset and a willingness to *lead change* in order for higher education—as the gatekeeper for social equity and the nation’s economic competitiveness—to meet its responsibilities to our nation.

Match Students with the Best College for Their Abilities

The first issue I want to address is a relatively new one for me: college matching or—more to the point—college mismatching. William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson advanced the significance of the matching issue in an important book, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*. One of their counterintuitive findings was that African-American males with high school GPAs below 3.0 who enrolled in the *most* selective flagship universities were more likely to graduate (46 percent) than those who enrolled in less selective flagships (40 percent) or in the least selective flagships (38 percent). The message for black males—and other minority and low-income groups—is to “go to the best place that will admit you.”

The authors were quite explicit in their conclusions, voicing the belief that “the primary forces leading to high under-match rates were a combination of inertia, lack of information, lack of forward planning for college, and lack of encouragement.” Their recommended course of action was to find “more effective ways of informing high-achieving students and their parents of the educational opportunities that are open to them and of the benefits they can derive from taking advantage of these opportunities.”

Eleanor Dillon and Jeffrey Smith at the University of Michigan, Melissa Roderick and her colleagues at the University of Chicago, and others have delved deeply into the issue of college matching. Their focus is on academically capable low-income and minority students. These are students who will graduate from high school and are well-prepared for college, but who need advice and support to choose college wisely.

Absent the appropriate support, these students too often choose to attend nonselective four-year colleges—for which they are academically overqualified—where graduation rates are very low. Even worse, an alarming number of highly capable students do not pursue postsecondary studies at all.

MDRC, a not-for-profit think tank, launched the College Match Program in Chicago. This school-based program delivers crucial information and assistance to students and parents to help them make thoughtful decisions about college enrollment. In their pilot, they have shown a 50 percent increase in placing high-ability, low-income students in institutions better suited to their career ambitions. Jay Sherwin of MDRC wrote a policy brief on this effort last year, and he makes an interesting point. By learning now how to match capable students to the right college, we may well be better prepared to help a much larger student population make wise college choices in the future.

I find his argument very compelling. This is not to imply that high-ability, low-income students can’t prosper at open admissions institutions. Obviously, many do. But, it does mean that selective institutions need to do a much better job of meeting their obligations in our common goal of serving more low-income students and serving them better.

The bottom line is that the higher education community—two-year, four-year, public, and private—must shoulder more responsibility and take ownership of the matching issue. We in higher education have the information and expertise that secondary students need but lack, especially students from low-income families. And, we have a recognizable presence in our communities. We must develop stronger partnerships with middle and high schools in economically disadvantaged districts. If we do, we can make a real difference in helping students properly align their abilities, aspirations, and expectations with the options best for them.

We are taking steps in this direction in Maryland, with Way2GoMaryland, an information campaign aimed at middle school students, with a particular focus on those from low-income families. Through this program, we provide students with material about college prep curricula, financial aid availability, and access to admission counselors.

The research is clear: There are plenty of capable low-income students who could graduate from our institutions, if we would just make the extra effort to find and support them.

“There has never been a more propitious moment for financial aid reform at the federal level.”

Reform Financial Aid Policies and Practices

A second issue we must address is our policies and practices related to financial aid.

The U.S. Department of Education has expressed a willingness to rethink the structure and uses of its aid programs, including the Pell Grant, and is seeking new ideas from the higher education community. We should seize this opportunity because, in truth, these programs are not working as well as they should. Too many students are using Pell Grants and other forms of federal financial aid to attend schools mismatched with their abilities and career goals. And too few persist to a college degree.

This is not an area of expertise for me, but thanks to a program funded by the Gates Foundation, a number of organizations have given significant thought to redesigning federal aid programs in order to make them more effective. APLU is one of these organizations, and it is calling for reforms such as per-student supplements for institutions that serve large numbers of Pell Grant recipients well and for a requirement that institutions serving Pell Grant students provide those students with a feasible path to a degree and regular audits of their progress.

The New America Foundation has proposed that Pell Grant eligibility end after the completion of 125 percent of credits required for a degree. MDRC is experimenting with a program where Pell Grants are given out in bi-monthly payments, rather than lump sums, so students can better manage their expenses. Others have called for greater incentives in Pell Grants to reward students making substantial progress toward a degree.

From my perspective, these are all sensible recommendations. In any case, some organization—perhaps ACE—needs to take the lead and develop a Pell Grant reform agenda that addresses many of the inconsistencies and inefficiencies in Pell Grants and other federal programs. There has never been a more propitious moment for financial aid reform at the federal level.

Moving to the topic of state-based financial aid, last year I had the pleasure of joining Sandy Baum and Matt Chingos at a Brookings

Institution event that coincided with the release of its report, *Beyond Need and Merit: Strengthening State Grant Programs*. The basic thrust of that report was that states should consolidate and simplify state aid programs, target state financial aid to needy students who have the best chance of succeeding in college, and reward students making progress toward a degree. I absolutely agree with these recommendations.

As first envisioned, financial aid programs were almost exclusively for students who would otherwise not be able to afford college. With the introduction of the HOPE Scholarship Program in Georgia and its counterparts in other states in the 1990s, there was a turning point. Since the early 1990s, the proportion of state funds going to merit-based aid nationally has risen dramatically, by more than 50 percent, largely at the expense of—not in parallel with—need-based aid. We can and must work within our states to strengthen aid programs that serve our neediest students.

This brings me to institutionally-based student aid. Thus far this evening I have resisted the temptation to talk at length about specific things we have done in Maryland. But, as Oscar Wilde once observed, the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. So let me share a brief story.

When I became chancellor of the University System of Maryland in 2002, I was concerned about the growing national trend of diverting institutional aid to merit and away from need. I appointed a commission to study our system's use of institutional aid and found that we were also guilty of spending the vast proportion of our institutional aid on merit scholarships where there was no need. As a result of this study, our Board of Regents passed a policy stipulating that low-income students, defined as Pell-eligible, should incur debt at a rate that is at least 25 percent less than the average student debt. This has led our institutions to direct much more institutional aid funds to our neediest students. In fact, since the inception of this policy, need-based institutional aid has increased 150 percent at our institutions.

A broad-based commitment to favor substantially need-based aid over aid based on merit where there is no need is a policy goal that is both achievable and desirable within our institutions, and one that we should all pursue as the gatekeepers for the American Dream.

Build a Stronger Culture of College Completion

The third area we must address, if we are to meet our obligations to the larger society, is building a stronger culture of completion on our campuses.

Most of our institutions spend considerable resources on marketing. We mount public relations and advertising campaigns and develop attractive brochures, all aimed at attracting students to our institutions. In the era of ubiquitous communication, this is understandable. Interestingly, however, in too many cases we don't demonstrate the same commitment to understanding why many students leave our institutions without a degree.

Kati Haycock and the Education Trust have compiled compelling evidence of our failure in this regard. She and her colleagues systematically grouped colleges and universities with like characteristics—same mission, resources, program mix, proportions of underrepresented minorities and low-income students, and so on. And then they compared completion rates. The natural assumption would be that there is little difference in these rates, since the profiles of entering students, resources, etc. are so similar. The interesting finding was that the rates differed significantly.

For example, in the study, Penn State had graduation rates that were, on average, 20 percentage points higher for all students, as well as for underrepresented minorities, than many of its carefully selected peers that had almost identical institutional characteristics. The University of Northern Iowa had rates 15 percentage points higher than the average of its peers. Albany State had rates 11 percentage points above its peer average. There are other compelling examples of high-performing institutions, but I think the point is clear. Something is going on at these institutions that isn't at many others, and that something is producing significantly higher completion rates.

Kati Haycock and her colleagues wanted to know what that something was. Their findings were not surprising but they are instructive and, hopefully, we can all learn from them. They found that at the high-performing institutions:

- Presidents made a visible, vocal, and persistent commitment to retention and completion.
- These institutions systematically collected data on student performance and then acted on that data.
- These institutions created degree completion pathways for students and regularly audited students' progress.

One example profiled by the Education Trust is Florida State University and its Cross-Campus Success Team. This team, convened by the chief academic officer, unites professionals from core academic and student services. Regular meetings generate detailed action plans with specific tasks to yield continuous improvement in meeting the needs of students. The results are impressive. Compared to one peer institution—same mission, same profile, same size, similar SAT scores, roughly identical percentage of Pell Grants and underrepresented minority students—Florida State's overall graduation rate stood at 68.7 percent versus 56 percent at its peer. And, the underrepresented minority graduation rate was even more impressive: 69.9 percent for Florida State versus 44 percent for the peer.

I find these examples both compelling and encouraging. They show that leadership matters, and that commitment can make a huge difference in improving retention and completion rates for all students and especially for low-income and underrepresented minority students. As the gatekeepers for social equity, how can we not follow the lead and adopt the strategies of these high-performing institutions?

Use New Ways to Deliver Quality Education at a Lower Cost

Let me now turn to the final issue I want to discuss, and it is admittedly our greatest challenge in meeting our obligations to the larger society: the resources necessary to achieve our ambitious college completion goals.

Jane Wellman, then of the Delta Cost Project, and Dennis Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, did some work a few years ago to estimate what it would actually cost to reach the higher education attainment goal of 60 percent if we continued to operate exactly as we were without any significant structural changes. Their analysis determined that it would require an increase in real spending per student of somewhere around 4 percent per year, every year through 2020. By contrast, real spending increases per student over the past decade have been around 1 percent per year for public universities and community colleges.

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I'd like to see a show of hands from those who expect to see their annual per-student expenditures increase by 4 percent a year in constant dollars, every year over the rest of this decade. Anyone? No one? So, the conclusion is clear: If we don't change the way we operate, if we don't find some means of curing what Bill Bowen calls the “cost disease” in higher education, then we don't have a realistic hope of meeting the critical college completion goals many of us have signed on to achieve.

Our only hope is to find lower-cost means of delivering high-quality higher education. Lower cost and high quality must go together. Either without the other leads us to failure.

Even a decade ago, I would probably have said lower cost and high quality is a pipe dream. We have quality and cost built into our DNA. But, in my view, forces and ideas have emerged that offer real hope that we can actually deliver quality education at lower cost. These emergent forces are called “*disruptive* strategies and technologies.” I prefer *transformative* to *disruptive* but by any name they deserve our careful attention.

We have Carol A. Twigg and the National Center for Academic Transformation to thank for showing us the potential for active learning and “flipped” (hybrid) classrooms to improve learning outcomes and reduce costs in certain types of courses.

The potential for significant “disruption” is increasing now because of advances on two fronts. These are, on the one hand, the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and the power of modern IT and intelligent software, and on the other hand, the advances made in cognitive sciences. We are actually coming to understand how information gets imprinted on the brain, and we can build those triggers into intelligent tutors available to students through workstations.

Nobel Laureate Carl E. Wieman has conducted studies into how the

brain acquires “expert thinking.” He then developed teaching and learning approaches combining knowledge, process, and context to advance conceptual mastery. Changing the model from passive listening to active mental effort didn't just improve learning; attendance and engagement increased as well.

Candace Thille at Carnegie Mellon University, through its Open Learning Initiative (OLI), has undertaken a highly sophisticated approach to “disruption.” Drawing upon the expertise of its cognitive science faculty, OLI developed computer-enhanced learning modules and online tutorials, with intelligent tutors built into the software. The learning outcomes in these courses have improved and after the initial investment to develop the software, the cost of course delivery was lowered. To its great credit, Carnegie Mellon makes these courses available free to any institution interested in using them.

At the University System of Maryland, we have supported the redesign of close to 40 courses using these “disruptive strategies.” This past fall more than 12,000 students were enrolled in such courses. In addition, we have worked closely with other public and private institutions and community colleges in Maryland to facilitate the “disruption” of an additional 31 courses across the state. Preliminary results have been positive, but to gain a broader understanding of these transformations, we are initiating a major longitudinal study to assess the impact and value of our efforts.

We are also working in partnership with the non-profit ITHAKA, based in New York City, to conduct a Gates Foundation-funded study to determine the impact and effectiveness of using Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, from Coursera as the learning platform in “flipped” classrooms. We will be assessing the learning outcomes and delivery costs as compared to those of traditionally taught sections of these same courses.

In my mind, we have no choice. We must invest time and effort in finding new means of delivering high-quality education at lower costs. There is no alternative if we are serious about meeting our commitment to the nation's college completion goals and addressing our responsibilities for social equity. We must be open to new teaching and learning strategies and invest in their development. And while I am now convinced that lower-cost means of delivering high-quality education are possible, I want to offer one word of caution. We must not yield on the quality of the education our students receive. There will be external pressure to adopt strategies before we have evidence that they do not diminish learning outcomes. These pressures must be resisted. That's why in Maryland, we test these new approaches before we allow their broad application.

In order to be effective, these “disruptive strategies” must, of course, be driven *by* faculty, not imposed *upon* them. At the same time, faculty have an obligation to embrace the effort to find lower-cost means of delivering high-quality education. Just as administrators must not ignore the potential that “disruptive strategies” have, so, too, faculty must be open to pedagogical strategies that enable us to serve more students and serve them better.

In the Tanner Lectures at Stanford University last year, Bill Bowen, president emeritus of both Princeton University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, articulated this point well. He wholeheartedly endorsed the importance of academic freedom as it relates to the freedom of faculty to think and write and speak their minds as scholars and as teachers. But he observed that there is nothing about academic freedom that equates to control over methods of delivering classroom instruction. In fact, he concluded that the use of overly sweeping “academic freedom” arguments to block reasonable efforts to innovate in the classroom actually puts the core principles of academic freedom at risk.

As we move to embrace the potential that can be unlocked through “disruptive” teaching and learning strategies, we are not casting aside our values and integrity. Rather we are *counting on them* to make this success possible. These values must support our efforts, govern our actions, guide our progress, and empower us to address all of the four issues I have mentioned today as we strive to meet the overarching challenge of the College Completion Imperative.

As I bring my comments to a close, I want to make one final observation. Throughout history, America has faced formidable challenges that threatened our social fabric. Fortunately, we have had leaders at these critical moments who rose to the occasion, who *led change*, and found the means to protect our nation’s core values.

More than 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln gave his first inaugural address. This came just two months after the succession of the Southern states. In this address, Lincoln appealed to the “better angels of our nature.” But, in the months that followed, he became convinced that, while he would hold firm to his convictions, he would have to adapt to circumstances, to be flexible, and to be willing to take risks. He saw his nation in crisis, and—with the Emancipation Proclamation—was able to take an essential step in securing the nation’s future well-being. He was president during the bloodiest years of our nation’s history, but he *led change* and America emerged from those dark years still united and poised to eventually take her place as the greatest, strongest, most prosperous nation in history.

Some 100 years later, in his first State of the Union address, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, seeing a nation again divided—this time by

poverty and racial injustice—launched the Great Society. Johnson also held fast to his and our nation’s core principles, but it was his formidable skills as a consensus builder that enabled him, along with Martin Luther King Jr., and other civil rights advocates, to *lead change* that brought profound results. The foundational elements of that effort—the Civil Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Higher Education Act—remain some of our nation’s crowning achievements.

Fifty years on—today—I see us at another divide: an educational divide, once again threatening our social fabric. If educational attainment becomes an option available almost exclusively to those who are better off, we are headed not just for a nation divided, but also a nation in decline. This is not to suggest that our situation is as horrendous as the Civil War or as encompassing as the War on Poverty. But, we cannot deny the severe consequences and long-term implications if we fail to *lead change*, address the College Completion Imperative, and sustain the American Dream of upward mobility.

We need to hold firm to our convictions of access, inclusion, and quality. But, individually and collectively, those of us in leadership positions within higher education need to show the kind of courage and adaptability that Lincoln and Johnson did.

In addressing a matter of gravity similar to the one I have described this evening, Robert Kennedy once observed that we must act “not because it is economically advantageous—although it is; not because the laws of God and man command it—although they do command it; not because people in other lands wish it so. We must do it for the single and fundamental reason that it is the right thing to do.” As leaders responsible for advancing social equity and the economic competitiveness of our nation, we know the right things to do. The question is, do we have the will and resolve to *lead change*?

Since 1997, the American Council on Education (ACE) Annual Meeting has commenced with the Robert H. Atwell Lecture, named by the ACE Board of Directors to honor Atwell, who served as president (1984-1996).

William E. (Brit) Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland (USM) since August 2002, is a nationally recognized authority on critical issues shaping the higher education landscape. He served as president of Ohio State University for four years (1998-2002) and president of the University of Maryland, College Park for 10 years (1988-1998). Prior to his presidency, he was a member of the University of Maryland, College Park faculty for 24 years. USM, a public system of higher education, comprises 12 institutions, two regional higher education centers, and a system office. It enrolls more than 155,000 students worldwide.



From left: At the Atwell Lecture, Robert H. Atwell, former president of ACE, greets Kirwan and Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University and then-chair of ACE's Board of Directors. Photo by Tim Trumble for ACE.



University System of Maryland

Office of the Chancellor
3300 Metzerott Road | Adelphi, MD 20783
301.445.1901
www.usmd.edu
