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Lessons in University Leadership with Stephen Trachtenberg

Christine: You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues in higher education. I'm Christine Ravold, your host. It's not every day that we get to welcome one of the most successful university presidents in the country, but this week it's my pleasure to introduce George Washington University professor of public service and President Emeritus, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg. President Trachtenberg or Dr. Trachtenberg, is that okay?

Dr. Trachtenberg: Yeah, that's fine.

Christine: Welcome to Higher Ed Now.

Dr. Trachtenberg: Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

Christine: So, it's a challenging environment in today's higher education landscape with rising costs and lots of pressure on the administration. What is the role of the President in juggling all of these things?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Well, just as a budget is a philosophical document, not an accounting statement, the job of University Presidents is to provide leadership. Now, it doesn't hurt if they contribute to the management of the institution as well, but bureaucrats are more common than people of vision and courage. And what we want from our presidents is that they provide inspiration, that they talk to us about values. That they tell us what the purpose of higher education is. Why is this university something society ought to invest in?

There's a role for managers, and that's why there are vice-presidents and there are deans. And they, in their own way, have leadership roles as well. But, too many of the presidents, I think, come in and get so overwhelmed by the day-to-

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day minutia of running an institution that they lose their sparkle. And so, my sense is in hiring presidents and in retaining presidents you want people who are nimble, imaginative and love what they're doing, of course.

Christine: I understand you help now, after all your time at George Washington, that you help find presidents at different universities and fill vacancies. What is some advice you would give to a new college president who would start today?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: I have three pieces of advice: Listen, listen and listen. It's like real estate, it's location, location, location. Nothing is more important than listening and hearing your constituents. There are stakeholders out there. There are faculty, there are staff, there are alumni, there are trustees, there are benefactors and you want to be sure that you know what's of concern to them and try to address their agendas. You don't want to act precipitously, you want to be sure that these parties are, in fact, participants in your vision.

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For example, I remember some years ago when two gay faculty, a man and a woman, came to see me. Wanting the university to give the same benefits to their partners as we gave to spouses of faculty. This was before very many states or in the District allowed people of the same gender to marry. I thought, "There's a lot of merit to what they're arguing and what they're asking for." And I said, "Do you trust me enough to give me about eight months to get this done?"

Christine: Okay.

Dr. Trachtenberg: And they said, "Yes. Why do you need eight months?" I said, "I think it'll take me that long to line up the Board of Trustees." And I said, "Some will go with me immediately, but some I think I'm going to have to deal with one at a time, at a time, at a time." And so, I did. I finally had a majority of the Board

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and then once I had a majority I went to the others, who were holdouts, and said, "Look, we have a majority. You don't want to be on the wrong side of history, come with me on this." And everybody did, except one, and I went to see him and I said, "Look, I know you're against this. Can I persuade you to vote my way for me, as a matter of friendship? You don't want to be the only member of the Board who doesn't vote in favor of this." And so he acceded and we had a unanimous vote and so GW changed its policies on this matter, long before the states and the District of Columbia and so on.

Christine: Well done.

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Yeah, but the point is by taking the time and by going to see the Trustees one at a time and selling them on this issue and explaining why it was important, I was able to do something that I think would have been very hard. If I had merely gone to the Board and asked for a vote on it, I think they would have voted no.

Christine: Is that your advice? Working with every Board of Trustees to do it on an individual level?

Dr. Trachtenberg: People don't like surprises. And, yes, I think to the extent that you can bring people over to your side and make rational arguments for everything you want to do, know why you're doing it, I think that is a useful piece of advice. It's something I would have welcomed when I came onto the job.

Christine: Are there other aspects of the President's job that people don't think about or often gets neglected?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: In terms of the presidency, most people don't know presidents do. I remember coming out of the office one evening at about 8:00 and some faculty member was walking by and he said, "Oh, a long day today, Mr. President." And I said, "Yeah, yeah. I guess so." In fact, I was not going home, I was going to yet another event. It's important that people have a little sympathy for the incumbent, because they are working probably 10-hour days and they're doing it probably six days a week, maybe seven, depending.

They've got to show up at football games. They've got to show up at concerts. I once went to a student play and I stayed through the second act and after the second act there was a little break and I snuck out and went to a student concert. And in that way, I was able to attend both student events the same evening. The next day I got this outraged call from the student who had directed the play, that he had spotted me sneaking out after the second act and he was so upset.

And so, I called him and said, "Look, I wasn't sneaking out because I didn't like the play. I was sneaking out because I wanted to go to this concert, which one of your colleague students was doing. I was trying to touch both bases on the same evening." He was inconsolable. People just don't get it. They outnumber you by the thousands and, yet they expect you to show up. The other thing that is strange is I never quite understood, and I don't completely understand it now, why people cared so much whether you showed up. But boy, if you went to a wrestling match or you went to a crew race people really noticed and cared.

So, you have to deal with that. You have to say, "All right. That's life, and I'm going to make it my business to show up as often as I can." One day my secretary comes in, and I can hear a ruckus outside. She says, "There are a bunch of students that want to see you." I say, "Okay." I go out and I said, "How can I help you?" And they said they wanted to come see and talk about the way

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the university was treating gay students. And I said, "Okay, but you understand you don't have an appointment. I'm in my office, I'm talking to some people who did have an appointment. I can't abandon them simply because you've shown up."

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It was a Friday. I said, "What are you doing tomorrow morning?" And they said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Supposing I book a room at the Cosmos Club and we all rendezvous there tomorrow morning at 10:00 and we have breakfast together and you can have all the time you want?" They said, "Yes." So, I said, "Okay, good." Now it's the next morning and I'm coming down the stairs and I'm putting on my jacket and I see my 10-year-old. I say to him, "Ben, what are you doing now?" He said, "Nothing." I said, "Come, join me for breakfast. You'll watch and see what I have to do to make a living."

So, he comes with me and we go into the club, we go upstairs, and we go into the room and there are all these students who have assembled. I introduce them to Ben and Ben goes around and politely shakes hands with everybody and then he sits down and digs into his pancakes. Everybody is eating and talking and one thing or another. The meeting eventually breaks up and everybody is dribbled away, and Ben and I are about to go home. There's one kid left, and I said to him, "Well, how did you think the meeting went?" And he said, "You had us the minute you brought your son in."

I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You walked in with this young child. We understood that you were reaching out to us." I said, "You know it's funny, it was totally accidental. I was walking out of the house, he was standing there, I brought him along." So, sometimes you have to just be lucky in communications, but you have to be working at it all the time.

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Christine: Last year, during unrest on college campuses a lot of students stormed presidents' offices and came in with a list of demands. You just gave us one really good story about you handled a situation like that. What would you have done if you were president during these protests last year?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: The same as it would have been if I was still in office. I don't have any patience for that, but I think the time to build up goodwill is before you have a problem. There was a very famous, very distinguish president of Morehouse College, Benjamin Mays. Benjamin Mays is a legend in the African American community and a legend in the University President community. I was fortunate enough, when I was a young man, to meet President Mays. We were chatting about something and he said, "Sonny, if you ever want to know the black community in a city," He said, "Go to church."

Christine: Yes.

Dr. Trachtenberg: When I came to GW I had an assistant and I said to her, "I want you to call 50 churches and I want you to set me up to go to a church every Sunday, once a week, obviously on Sundays, for a year. I went to 50 plus or minus churches over the course of the year. I would call the pastor in advance, ask him for permission to come and then I'd go visit with them usually for a few minutes before the service. We would talk about why I was there and then I would go in.

I would sit through the service, participate as best I could and then, inevitably they would say, "Church, we have a guest with us today." Well they could see that, I was normally the only white person there. "We have a guest with us today, President Trachtenberg from George Washington University." And then he'd say, "President Trachtenberg, would you like to make some remarks?" And I would

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say, "Yes. Thank you very much." Then I would get up and I would thank them for allowing me to worship with them. And then I would say, "As you know, GW was founded in 1821, so we have been in Washington since 1821. I'm here to tell you that we are now going to be "of Washington." I said, "We're not going into competition with Howard, but we'd like some of your sons and daughters to enroll at GW and I'm going to stand at the back of the church and as you're leaving I'll hand out my cards. If you have people who are looking for jobs, if we have an opening at GW we'd be happy to hear from you. And if you have people who are looking for education, if we have room and good enough to get into GW, we'd be glad to have them." And I handed out my cards.

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This is over, it was about 30 years ago. To this day, people stop me in the street, stop me in restaurants and say, "Excuse me, aren't you Steve Trachtenberg? I remember when you came to speak at our church." If you want people to like you, you've got to ask. And you have to go, and you have to reach out to them. In the years that followed we racial incidents at GW, some of them very crisis-like. When I had to stand up and talk to students, black and white, the pastors from those churches came and stood with me.

And people said, "We know Trachtenberg and we know that he's doing the best he can." And so these people became friends. They were there in the bad times because I had gone and met with them in the good times.

Christine: That's an incredibly valuable lesson whether a college president or not. I have a question for you about what you see in higher education today and where it's going. Is the American model of higher education all that it could be or should be?

Dr. Trachtenberg: Well, no is the short answer for that question. We are a medieval institution. Our roots go back a long way and many of our traditions are

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valuable, but others are increasingly obsolete. The length it takes to get degrees. The way we close down in May, June, July and August so everybody can go home and take care of the harvest. Many of these things are historical anomalies and I believe that technology being one source of inspiration, but just the nature and cost of our function obliges us to take a look and see if we can't do things more efficiently. Why does it have to take four years to get a BA degree? Why does it have to take four years to get an MD degree? Why does it have to take three years to get a law degree?

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Truth is, it doesn't and there are medical schools now that are putting people through to the MD degree in three years. There are law schools which are trying to accelerate their programs. We need to take a look at that and, we need to take a look at the research that we do and is it all useful. There are a lot of root questions about whether an institution that goes back well over a thousand years ought to be running itself in precisely the same way that it did before the industrial revolution.

Christine: Which brings me to space utilization because it's something ACTA has taken a look at and we haven't received wonderful feedback on telling people to have class on Fridays, or to hold weekend workshops, or to work during the summer. I think you tried that at GW.

Dr. Trachtenberg: I did. You're talking about ACTA has not.

Christine: We haven't gotten wonderful response from other people on it, but we like the idea.

Dr. Trachtenberg: It's a good idea and you can't do it alone. It's an idea that needs to be put forward on a regular basis, until somebody does it. And then, if that somebody is a leader, so we're talking about either one of the great land



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grant universities or one of the leading academic institutions, like Stanford or Harvard, then others will follow. It is amazing how much colleges and universities are outer directed and how much they aspire to be like most famous institutions.

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I remember Adelphi University used to run ads that called themselves, “The Harvard of Long Island,” or something like that to try and attract students.

Christine: Were there other universities on Long Island?

Dr. Trachtenberg: There were. Oh, yeah, there were numerous.

Christine: At least it wasn't the only one.

Dr. Trachtenberg: No. But they were the Harvard of Long Island. A very good institution, by the way, Adelphi. But it's foolish for anybody to compare themselves to what is essentially a one-off. I mean there's Harvard and yes, there's Yale and yes, there's Columbia.

Christine: And Oxbridge.

Dr. Trachtenberg: Yes, but you know there are 10 or 15 institutions in the world and they are the top 10, 15 institutions in the world and there is no embarrassment. Indeed, one could make a case that if you were a high school senior trying to figure out where to go to college: Amherst, Williams or William and Mary are institutions that you ought to take very seriously. They're wonderful places. And then, when you've gotten your undergraduate degree you may want to go someplace else for your professional or graduate education, if you think you need additional learning.

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The point I'm trying to make is that those of us who come from great institutions, which are not Ivy League, have nothing to be embarrassed about. Our alumni ought to be able to say our names with pride and we ought to be able to point to the accomplishments of the faculty and the students with no blush.

Christine: When you mention the faculty, they're probably one of the most valuable resources you have on a campus. Are they all using their time effectively and to the best?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Well, all, you're talking about thousands and thousands of people and so, yes and no. Professors, it turns out, are no better or worse as human beings than physicians, or lawyers, or accountants, or school teachers, or life insurance salesmen. There are people who work their tails off and are committed and love the students and love their discipline and devote themselves with all they've got. And there are slackers, as you can imagine in any enterprise. People who do the least they can get away with.

And it turns out, in the academy, if you are a slacker you can get away with a lot, partly because we are very liberally oriented. Our personnel rules are protective of individuals. And so, what you have to rely on, I think, ultimately is not administrative sanctions, but peer review. What you have to hope is that if a faculty member is not doing what he or she should do as a teacher or as a scholar that the colleagues in the department will take that person aside and speak to them.

Christine: Can I ask you a little bit about any difficulties you find in the public and private dichotomy of free speech on campus? Obviously, on a public campus you have guaranteed protection and that's not always the case on a private university. What is the best way to thread the needle there?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Well, I think you can never underestimate the effect of shame. I think university presidents who do not protect free speech on their campuses ought to be ashamed. And so, I think students and alumni have a role to play in keeping their alma mater's feet to the fire and God knows they do it. I just quoted a Columbia University president of many years ago in a book that I'm writing for Johns Hopkins Press. And I said...

Christine: What's the name of the book?

Dr. Trachtenberg: I don't know yet, but it's about university presidencies. He said that every morning, after he took his jacket off, the first obligation was to get a cup of strong coffee and read the Columbia Daily Spectator because it informed him about what kind of trouble he was in. I thought, "That's exactly right." That's my experience at Boston University. That was my experience, where I was a Dean at University of Hartford, where I was a president in George Washington University.

The student newspaper, if it has a good editor and they come and they go, but sometimes you get a good editor and they will tell you what you're doing wrong and it's a very helpful thing to do. I made point of every time there was a critical article about me or an editorial, I made the point of sitting down, thinking about it and writing the author of the editorial or the article a letter, responding to the allegations, the representations, the comments, the criticisms that were made because it forced me to think through the pros and cons of what they had to say and then, frankly, by writing them down and sending them off to them I educated myself and I educated them, I like to think.

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Christine: The engagement and having your finger on the pulse of what's happening at your university is something that ACTA likes to encourage trustees to do. Did you have equally engaged trustees while you were president?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Not all of them. Some are, some aren't. Different universities have a different mix of trustees. When I was at the University of Hartford, almost all of my trustees were local. George Washington had a national mix. That's a good thing, but it has its shortcomings. And the shortcoming is if you've got a trustee living in San Francisco, he or she cannot be as engaged in the institution as somebody who's living down the street. And there were limits to you can expect of trustees who meet to deal with the university's issues three or four times a year, assuming they come to every meeting.

And so inevitably, a lot of the responsibility of the trustees falls, therefore, not to the full board but to the executive committee and generally those are people who are more proximate to the institution. But trustees have a very significant role to play. All of us are responsible to somebody else. All of us have to understand that we are ourselves, trustees of these institutions and that's true of the faculty and the deans and the president. We are being given a great privilege. People have invested their money, their time, their passion into creating universities that are hundreds of years old and they are a treasure.

You only get to preside over them for a little while and then you have to hand it on to your successor and his successor, her successor and so you have to have a great sense of responsibility.

Christine: And a lot of long term thinking, not just short term.

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Dr. Trachtenberg: There is that and the truth is, you put your finger on a very important thing. The president should be thinking 20-30 years ahead. Professors don't think that way and I'm not even sure they should, although they ought to be somewhat sympathetic to what the administration is saying. So, if I wanted to buy a building and at the faculty senate, while I'm there, they'll say to me, "We understand you're buying such and such a building. Why are you buying that building? What do we need it for?"

And I would say, "I don't know. What I do know is that we own everything else on the block. And so that building stands like a tooth in a jack-o-lantern's mouth, sticking up. I don't have any immediate use for that building, but I am as certain as God made little green apples, that there's going to come a day when we're going to need that space." And so, I bought this building and that building, and the time has come, and I see now my successor renovating that building or tearing that building down putting up a new building on the spot, which would have been impossible if I hadn't initiated the purchase of that building 20 years ago.

Here's the thing, you and I are mortal.

Christine: Last time I checked.

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Universities aren't. Right. God willing, GW founded 1821, it'll go on for thousands of years—hundreds certainly. It serves the society. And so when an opportunity comes to do something, or to buy something, or to move the institution forward, you have to take it because they don't come on a regular basis.

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Christine: Part of that looking into the future, is there something that you can see from your vantage point that people should be looking for right now?

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Dr. Trachtenberg: I think the whole issue of place-based universities needs to be massaged. Are we going to continue to have place-based universities? Or, will we reach a point where distance learning and computer technology is going to make it possible for people to be on their beds in their bedrooms in New Jersey and get their education through technology and electronically. Now, my guess is that yes and no is the answer, as with so many things, and that technology will have manifest changes.

May allow us to reduce the number of years for a degree, but there will always be a place, I think, for place-based universities. Partly because 17-year-olds are a pain in the neck and parents are delighted by the opportunity to send them off in a legitimate way to a university.

Christine: And they're itching for the chance anyway.

Dr. Trachtenberg: And they want to move. That's exactly right. So, it's something that the parents want, and the students want and, of course, the universities want. Secondly, there's a great deal to be learned, obviously, by socialization. You know you may be able to learn calculus on a computer. You may be able to do French lessons electronically but, what you're not going to be able to learn is how to live with another human being, how to give, how to take. How do you figure out who gets the top bunk and who gets the bottom bunk? How do you figure out who goes to sleep, at what time this person wants to turn the lights out and the other person doesn't?

Christine: And what music they're playing.

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Dr. Trachtenberg: You got it. It's just all those life decisions and learning how to get on and live with other people is a very important component. So, what goes on in the classroom, of course, is the primary purpose of a university. The classroom, library, the laboratories but, just getting along on campus, being on the student newspaper, playing basketball, there's just no end of activities that are added value in the lives of these students.

Christine: Speaking of students and parents and what they both like. We know that they want to see students get good grades and succeed in college, but there's been a switch in attitudes in understanding that students are customers and higher education is a commodity and it's something that people pay for and therefore, the customer is maybe always right. And I think this has led to what some are calling an epidemic in grade inflation. What is your take on this?

Dr. Trachtenberg: There is some truth in that representation. I would not deny it. I think grades are higher, well, it's an empirical matter. I mean you can actually take a look at the grades and I think you'll discover that the excellent work has been devalued by the fact that more A's are distributed than in the past. And I fear, if the truth be told, I'm guilty of it myself. And now I am blessed by getting honors students. They are very smart and the actually frequently earn the A's, but I think that's a real issue.

One way one could deal with that would be to return to numerical grades, rather than letter grades because letter grades give you three choices really. You're not going to give an F unless somebody is really a disaster and so you get A, B, C—I guess D. And some schools have pluses and minuses. I think if you went to numerical grades you could grade people with a greater subtilty. This has always been a problem. When I was a younger man I served on some scholarship

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granting committees. We would get applications from students and we would get applications from places like Sarah Lawrence. They didn't give grades at the time. I don't know what they do now, but they gave little essays. The professor would write a little paragraph or two about the student. It would say, "Stephen is a wonderful young man and he really writes beautifully and whatever they would say."

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What I discovered was, if you read enough of those, it turned out there was an ASA, a BSA, a CSA and a DSA. And you could tell, after a little while, whether that little essay meant they were giving this kid an A or a C or whatever. And so, it is very hard to come up with the words or the devices for distinguishing. Easy between A and F, maybe easy between A and D, but once you start getting into A and B and where exactly does the line cross, that gets to be very subtle and moreover, different professors are going to view things slightly differently so that all of us knew that Professor Smith was an easy grade.

And so, if you were pre-med and you were taking chemistry, maybe you took Smith because he gave away more A's. Now, there are, of course, the joys of numerically quantitative courses. Mathematics. Physics. Either you got the answers right or you didn't.

Christine: There's no alternative facts here.

Dr. Trachtenberg: That's exactly right. But once it comes to the...

Christine: The humanities.

Dr. Trachtenberg: Yeah. What happens is, I had a classmate, one of my roommates actually, at Columbia, who could write like an angel. And he'd go into



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exams and hadn't prepared for it at all. He could take a shred of fact and weave it into a beautiful little essay on a final exam, without really knowing very much.

Christine: So, maybe this isn't a new development.

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Dr. Trachtenberg: Well, you know there's very little that's new actually, as you think about it. Right? These are healthy issues and we ought to be discussing them. And we ought to be sympathetic to the fact that our children and our grandchildren are going to be discussing them as well.

Christine: Is there anything that I have missed that you would like to share with us today?

Dr. Trachtenberg: We could probably spend the whole semester and give people three credits for dealing with this.

Christine: We know someone who does stuff like that.

Dr. Trachtenberg: Higher education is imperative in our society. The universities are economic engines. They train our doctors, our lawyers, our teachers, our social workers. I mean to not understand that is to miss something very important. People who get to be governors and don't get that cannot serve their states well. The people who are in the congress as well. They too need to appreciate. Most of them, of course, are college graduates which is the problem, people who never got to go to college tend to have more respect for degrees than people who have earned them, because they understand the fallibility of the institution and the limitations of education.

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What we need, obviously, is character and faith and so many other components to make up a human being of valor. Just as there are no atheists in fox holes, none of us want to go to a hospital and not find good doctors. And none of us want to be trying to negotiate a deal of having some criminal problem without wanting to get good lawyers. And where are they to come from, if not our educational institutions? We want our children to be taught by the best teachers and, so we don't need to waste money and we should be conscious of resources. But, in the end, teachers are vital, and scholars are vital. Our public schools, our elementary and secondary schools, public and private, our community colleges are all a piece of what makes America the extraordinary country that it is.

Christine: We certainly think that is part of what we're doing over here. Steve, thank you so much for your time and of course, thank you to our listeners for tuning in. If you have any questions or comments about this episode, please make sure to send them to: [Info@goACTA.org](mailto:Info@goACTA.org). Until next time, I'm Christine Ravold and this is Higher Ed Now.

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