

## **OSHKOSH ROTARY CLUB**

August 18, 2008

### **Challenges Facing Higher Education -- Outcomes and Accountability**

Thank you to Michael Cooney and all of you. It is good to see many friends including former Oshkosh Chancellor John Kerrigan with whom I had the good fortune to serve on the Paine board.

I am most pleased to have an opportunity to be with you today and to explore some of the challenges facing higher ed. Labor Day is just around the corner -- so can school and college be far behind?

Let's start with a proposition.

American higher education is the envy of the world.

How many times have we heard that said, and how many times have we heartily agreed?

With over 4200 degree granting institutions, American higher education -- public, private, and for profit -- reaches 16 million students. In a country premised on an educated citizenry, our colleges and universities are uniquely responsible for preparing informed citizens, effective workers and life-long learners.

And there is no question, universities in America have long held a privileged place in American society. The Founders viewed public education as central to our ability to sustain a participatory form of government. They had great and important ambitions for education -- ambitions that included a belief that shared understanding, and shared knowledge would help unify and advance civilization.

Going back to 1862 and the Morrill Act which created land grant institutions, to the GI Bill, and the Higher Education Act, our institutions of higher learning have been the focus of --and beneficiary --of substantial public support with the understanding that they serve the public purpose.

Today, higher education is a 250 billion industry, and our colleges and universities receive billions in federal and state aid, tax exemptions and targeted appropriations in the form of research grants. At the same time, we recognize special academic protocols and privileges for college campuses-- academic freedom -- the foremost one, which allows students and professors to follow truth wherever it may lead.

This privileged status is a trust conveyed to colleges and universities --a trust that entails a right and responsibility.

Is American higher education living up to that responsibility?

Is American higher education still the finest in the world, or is it

- Resting on its laurels

- Suffering from unwarranted complacency
- And taking its postsecondary superiority for granted.

These were some of the urgent findings of a special national Commission on the Future of Higher Education that issued a report in September 2006 calling for “urgent reform” in higher education lest America be left in the dust by its competitors across the globe.

It’s been over two years since the report was issued and the debate still reverberates -- as Mike will surely testify -- an indication that the criticisms hit home and that the American public is growing concerned. And they should be.

Other nations are now educating more citizens to more advanced levels than we are.

Meanwhile, the cost of college is spiraling out of control. Over the last decade, tuition and fees at public institutions have increased by 51% . Meanwhile, our six year graduation rate -- yes, I said six year graduation rate -- is a mere 66% and the four-year statistics are not even kept by the DOE.

As more money pours into higher education, students and the general public remain largely in the dark as to what they are getting for the ever accelerating price. Outside the for-profit universe, there is relatively little solid evidence available to determine how much or how little students learn at competing institutions.

Colleges and universities are flying blind. Are current writing programs effective? Nobody knows. Do graduates have computational skills? Nobody knows -- and so on down the line. Fortunately, there is a nascent movement by institutions to provide this data -- and Chancellor Wells is helping to lead the way. But it comes little and late. It is as if General Motors never tested a single car before it put it on the highway . Meanwhile, employers - bolstered by a growing number of studies -- say they hire college graduates who cannot write, compute, or think critically.

While Congress has vested peer academic review teams known as accreditors with the role of guaranteeing educational quality before federal dollars are released, in fact accreditation is virtually universal-- and, I should add, virtually meaningless. In nearly 60 years, the so-called peer review accreditation process has rarely shut down a school for educational reasons, although it has been effective in keeping new entrants out of the marketplace by a labyrinth of regulations which focus on inputs rather than results.

ACTA was founded in 1995 in the belief that many of the greatest challenges to higher education quality are coming from within the academy. We believe it is imperative for friendly voices from the outside to raise concerns about what is happening, if American higher education wants to remain the envy of the world. ACTA believes that in too many places, campuses are suffering from low academic standards, weak curricula, and attacks on free speech and free thought and our goal is to help parents, taxpayers, and policymakers understand what is going on-- and what they can do about it.

Let me quickly outline what we believe to be the five greatest challenges to America's higher education system.

**Challenge One: Colleges are not preparing informed citizens.**

It used to be that all colleges and universities in America insisted on a curriculum that ensured students a broad, general education in addition to the specialization of the major. Courses covered the most important events, ideas or works known to mankind. Students were given a common educational foundation on which to build.

But no longer. As former Harvard dean Harry Lewis writes in his superb book, *Excellence without a Soul*, "Universities are having a hard time making the case that the education they offer is about anything in particular. Breadth and choice have become goals in themselves. ...And breadth and freedom in academia are like lower taxes in politics -- it is hard to be against them." In ACTA's study, *The Hollow Core*, we surveyed the Big 10, Big 12, Ivy League and other key schools and found the core curriculum had become nothing more than a hollow core. While colleges give the appearance of providing a core curriculum because they require students to take courses in several subject matters, in fact it is not uncommon for students to have hundreds, even thousands, of courses from which to choose. College requirements have so many loopholes that students can now graduate without exposure to key subjects such as math, science, composition, literature, economics, American history or government. Of the schools surveyed, mathematics is not required at 62%; 30 percent do not require writing. None requires economics. Nearly a quarter of the schools

require their students to take one or no courses before they graduate.

Let's take a look at UW. UW, as you know, consistently ranks among the top public universities in the nation. As one of our public Ivies, its reputation for excellence is second to none. And it certainly is possible to get an absolutely world class education at UW. But UW goes to great lengths to enable students not to acquire the knowledge and skills they need. All students at UW Madison must take courses in writing, quantitative reasoning, natural science, humanities and literature, social science and ethnic studies.

The requirements look good on paper. But in practice they are often meaningless. For example, you can fulfill your math requirement with an introductory course on ecology or high-school-level math. You can satisfy the literature requirement with a class on children's books. A course on television will work for the humanities requirement, while courses on everything from finance to child development to the history of fashion all work for social science. American history -- you can skip that altogether. All in all, there are hundreds of courses from which to choose. And while some offer excellent grounding in major disciplines, ideas, and works, a great many are like the courses I have cited -- trivial, trendy, narrow. Ask your children and grandchildren to show you what they have studied and I think you may see what I mean.

This type of cafeteria style approach to liberal education is not unique to UW.

Yet, it represents a major abdication of responsibility on the part of America's colleges and universities. And it is depriving an entire generation of young adults of the strong educational grounding they need.

Given these sad facts, it is perhaps not surprising that former Harvard president Derek Bok in his recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, found that "fewer than half of the recent graduates believe that college contributed a great deal to their competence in analytic and writing skills or in acquiring knowledge of their major fields of study." ACTA believes something has got to change.

Now let's go to challenge two. **Preaching is replacing teaching.**

As we all know, professors have the freedom to speak their mind -- just like the rest of us. But academic freedom does not mean anything goes. Academic freedom is a right and responsibility to teach according to accepted scholarly standards and to provide an open atmosphere in the classroom. I know that many of you have read articles in the paper about the political one-sidedness of the professoriate. But, quite frankly, that -- by itself -- should not concern us. What should concern us is -- what happens in the classroom? To quote George Bush -- Is our children learning? It was with that question in mind that ACTA commissioned a scientific survey of college students across the country in 2004. What we found is troubling indeed: Some 49% said they had professors who frequently injected political comments into their courses, even if they had nothing to do with the subject. Similar numbers said professors used the classroom to present personal political views and reported reading assignments that presented only one

side of controversial issues. Nearly a third felt they had to agree with a professor's political views to get a good grade.

Added to these problems is the lack of intellectual diversity. According to the Student Press Law Forum, thousands of copies of campus newspapers are removed or destroyed by those who dislike their views at campuses across the country each year-- with offenders receiving little or no punishment. Meanwhile, 20 percent of colleges have adopted speech codes or sensitivity requirements which clearly and substantially restrict freedom of speech, a freedom governed by the First Amendment and which our public institutions are bound to uphold. [According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group with which ACTA works, UW Oshkosh is one of those offenders. Oshkosh requires students, faculty, and staff to maintain "an environment free of insulting and demeaning comments and epithets based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, military status, socioeconomic status, family status, or political views." Oshkosh also prohibits emails that may "annoy." Now, I can see at first while this seems ok. Why would we want to have anybody insulting or demeaning others? Or even being annoying for that matter?

But if you think about it, could this policy could be invoked to punish a student who posted an anti-war poster? Or argue for abortion rights? Or even run a satirical cartoon about religion or race relations? You bet. Such things happen every day on our nation's campuses and Wisconsin is no exception. Indeed, far from promoting the free exchange of ideas -- the very essence of a university according to Thomas Jefferson -- well-meaning policies like these can create a climate of uncertainty -- one that would tend

to make students and faculty err on the side of not questioning, not exploring controversial ideas because their efforts might offend someone and result in punishment.

Students with strongly held religious beliefs, conservative students, even opinionated liberal students have found themselves brought up on charges under these policies, because they discussed issues in a way that others found offensive.

It's time to bring an end to these codes. ]

Challenge Three -- **Grades are increasingly meaningless.** In our study, Degraded Currency, ACTA found that at most institutions' grades have been rising steadily, giving students little genuine feedback and little reason to study. Meanwhile, employers receive no real information on which to make hiring decisions. This trend has got to change.,

Challenge Four. **Keep tuition down.** As I said before, tuition and fees have been rising at more than double the rate of inflation for over a decade -- all while quality has been on the decline (average annual tuition is around \$6100 nationally). In recent years, while consumer prices have risen less than 3 percent a year, net tuition at public colleges has risen by 8.8 percent. Though the causes are many, we have already looked at one --namely, the proliferation of narrow and trendy courses. And as Robert Dickeson, former president of the University of Northern Colorado has documented, "It is typical of colleges to add new programs -- academic, administrative, and student -- without corresponding cuts in existing programs." It is worth

noting that The College Board found that tuition is not the only item with a rising price. The cost of room and board has also continued to rise and dwarf tuition. At four-year public institutions, tuition room and board are on average \$13,589.

What that means is that lower income families today spend nearly 40% of their annual income for their children to attend public four year colleges; the outlay for children's education is the second largest family expense exceeded only by housing. Meanwhile, student debt continues to mount.

And finally, the ultimate challenge, Challenge Five:

**Earning the confidence of the public in the responsible use of funds.**

Currently higher education receives nearly \$100 billion in student loan money made possible by you -- the taxpayer -- not to mention billions in funding from the state and federal governments, as well as special subsidies and tax exempt status. This support underscores Americans' long-standing love of higher education and our realization of the importance of an educated citizenry in our democratic republic. If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was, and never will be - Jefferson said.

And yet, as we have explored today, there are real challenges in higher education which potentially undermine the greatness of our system -- and our ability to compete in the global economy.

So let's get back to our first question.

Is American higher education the finest in the world?

I would submit to you -- yes, still,  
but its preeminence is threatened and it must get better.

And it is up to all of us -- parents, alumni, concerned citizens, and taxpayers -- to ensure that our institutions are all they can be for the students of today and tomorrow.

Many people -- and particularly many in the university -- think of higher ed as off limits -- something best left to its own devices. But the fact of the matter is that our public universities are public property -- and they exist to serve the public good. Concerned citizens can and should be active participants in the ongoing work of holding trustees, administrators, and faculty accountable, and ultimately in ensuring that students get the best possible education and preparation for life during their college years.

Pay attention, get involved and speak up.

Raise your voice to fight speech codes.

Demand meaningful curricular reform. If you have a child or grandchild in college or going to college, look at catalogs, course descriptions, and ideally course syllabi. Go to the ACTA website to learn where schools excel, and what schools could be doing better. And if your family members are already

in college, help them understand that trendy courses that may strike their short term fancy will not well serve their long-term needs.

Inform campus chancellors and leaders of your concerns. And be especially alert to the power -- and the obligations -- of the Regents. They appoint the system leaders -- and they bear the responsibility for the entire university. It is their job to make sure that UW is fulfilling its public mission. Write to them and let them know what you think.

Form an alumni group. With ACTA's help, there are engaged alumni groups standing up for academic excellence and accountability at a growing number of institutions including Dartmouth, Chicago, Brooklyn, Bucknell, Georgia Tech, Hamilton and William and Mary. This is an excellent way to provide constructive input designed to keep your alma mater focused on what matters and to keep the value of your diploma high.

When you give, target your giving thoughtfully. ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal has been set up to help donors target their gifts rather than dropping their dollars in the black hole of the general operating fund. I commend to you our book, *The Intelligent Donor's Guide to College Giving*, available on Amazon, which outlines some of the dos and don'ts of college giving. Make certain that your donation goes to the purposes you intend and feel free to call ACTA if you would like advice.

Write to the Governor as well. The governor, after all, appoints the Regents, and you should insist that they be held to a high standard. And, of course, you should always feel free to write to your legislators....

With this kind of involvement, the answer to our question will be easy: Yes, American higher education will remain the envy of the world.

I thank you and would be happy to answer questions.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni was founded in 1995 by Anne Neal, Jerry Martin, Saul Bellow, Lynne Cheney, Joe Lieberman and others as a nonprofit and nonpartisan national higher education organization.

ACTA seeks to promote high academic standards, strong curricula and the free exchange of ideas by empowering alumni, trustees, policymakers and taxpayers around the country on behalf of academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability.

ACTA has members in all 50 states. Its quarterly publication, *Inside Academe*, goes to over 12,000 readers, its trustee materials to more than 6000 college and university trustees and it regularly produces studies on key issues in higher education. You can find more about it and become a member at its website, [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org) where you will also find a link to Career Education Review by Workforce Communications.

ACTA's work has been featured in the NY Times, the Washington Post, Fox News, and The Chronicle of Higher Education. You may have seen mention of ACTA and Anne most recently in an article appearing in Parade Magazine on football and drinking -- two topics she advises that she will not be addressing today.

ACTA will be hosting its annual meeting this year in New York City, October 17 and you are all invited. Among the speakers will be Hank Brown, former president of the University of Colorado; KC Johnson, author of *Until Proven Innocent*, the eye-opening account of the Duke Lacrosse case and Robert McDowell, vice president of Microsoft and trustee of the

Virginia Military Institute.