

By the People

This discussion guide is designed as a springboard for today's conversation. Please remember our discussion is not intended as a debate over facts, but an informal dialogue about different perspectives of the issue.

“Higher Education for Democracy” in the 21st Century: How Can We Make It Affordable?

“The democratic ideal will provide the core sense of direction for our people if we keep it a warm and living thing.” (Higher Education for Democracy [Truman Commission], 1948)

“You can't educate people in a democracy on the cheap—how can you do it as well as possible and not spend your money on it? It is impossible.” (Public Agenda, 2007)

“The money I owe when I graduate weighs on me continuously. I go from work to class and back to work. I can't stop worrying about my college debts.” (Undergraduate Student, 2007)

The American educational system, including publicly funded colleges and universities, has always been linked to the success of our democracy. Today, soaring costs and uncertain returns on investments in higher education are challenging all Americans to rethink our state and national investment strategies. A “perfect storm” of demographic and economic forces is challenging policymakers and citizens alike to ask how we can achieve the public purposes we want our colleges and universities to serve at a cost anyone can afford. Current efforts to create a 10-year master plan for the future of higher education in Ohio provide an opportune time for Ohioans to reflect on such questions as the following:

- What kind of higher education does our 21st century democracy require?
- Are some public purposes more important than others or do we need to find ways of accomplishing all of them?
- How well are our colleges and universities doing in currently fulfilling the public purposes that make sense for us today?
- How might higher education faculty and administrators better contribute to these core purposes?
- How might policy makers best respond to these core purposes as they confront difficult economic choices?
- What role should citizens play in deciding about the future American higher education?

In this forum, the discussion will focus on three different approaches to delivering affordable higher education for our 21st century democracy. They are not intended to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but are meant to foster citizen discussion of what public purposes are most important and how we can afford to pursue them.

1. Maintain the State College and University Tradition to Renew the Civic Purpose of Higher Education

2. Organize State Systems of Higher Education Focused on Higher Standards for Workplace Effectiveness
3. Make Private Higher Education More Accessible to Promote Personal Choices for Life-Long Learning

Approach 1: MAINTAIN OUR STATE COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY TRADITION TO RENEW THE CIVIC PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

“If money was not such an issue, we could really be more well rounded individuals. Life is more than just a job, and now universities are being turned into big businesses. If you take away the heart and soul of our state colleges and universities, what’s left?” (Undergraduate Student, 2007)

“Our regional colleges and universities grew throughout the 20th century because they gave anyone who attended the chance to mature and create a better life for themselves and our region. Recent competition for public support for health care, prisons, and early education is like a cat chasing its tail. Starve the traditional academic missions of regional institutions of public funds, or dismantle the system as we know it, and we lose the long-term battle to solve these other problems.” (Retired Ohio Educator, 2007)

Supporters say state colleges and universities are becoming too focused on narrow career interests of students and workplace needs of society. With increasing awareness of cultural pluralism in society, and increasing need to understand cultures beyond our borders, colleges and universities should convey the history of the American experience and stimulate awareness of America’s place in the world. In response to growing economic disparities and low levels of political engagement, higher education also needs to renew its post WWII commitments to broad general education and comprehensive pre-professional training. Traditions to support these goals have built up around the “higher education experience” at our state colleges and universities. Higher education for economic prosperity and democratically oriented society has always depended on helping students develop their talents and discover their role as responsible citizens.

Examples of what can be done:

- Increase public funding to support the civic mission of each state college and university even if the state or nation requires more standardized assessment and accountability for academic learning.
- Promote greater institutional rewards for public service and partnership programs that address the root causes of our major social and environmental issues.
- Create a sliding scale for the cost of tuition to allow students to pay for their education in proportion to their means.

Opponents say the current system is broken and cannot be fixed. Institutional identities drawn from comprehensive academic and collegiate traditions no longer responds to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and technology driven global economy. The missions and traditions of state colleges and universities are too expensive to sustain without closer ties to state economic development goals and greater collaboration among different “centers of excellence.” Too many students aren’t ready for the demanding work college education requires. Expanding, comprehensive regional state institutions for higher education are a thing of the past.

Approach 2: ORGANIZE STATE SYSTEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOCUSED ON HIGHER STANDARDS FOR WORKPLACE EFFECTIVENESS

“People are just sick of paying taxes. Or, maybe people are sick of not getting what they want from the taxes they are paying. I need a job when I graduate so I can raise a family.” (Undergraduate Student, 2007)

“If you want good manufacturing jobs, one thing you could do is graduate more engineers. We had more sports exercise majors graduate than electrical engineering grads last year.” (American Corporate Leader, 2006)

Supporters say American higher education is in a state of national emergency as a result of international competition from highly qualified scientists and engineers being trained abroad. Our once great system of higher education is not preparing enough students for the 21st century global economy. Globalization demands a more focused set of priorities, and different knowledge and skills, suited for U.S. competitiveness in the global marketplace. Increased government spending for higher education and K-12 preparation will be necessary to expand college access and success, but a shift in academic focus, with cost-cutting and productivity improvements, is the surest path to reenergize U.S. competitiveness and revitalize state economies. These goals can best be achieved by creating a seamless public system of higher education focused on measurable outcomes required for innovations and entrepreneurship in 21st century workplace settings.

Examples of what can be done:

- Use the limited resources available for higher education to assure that citizens are prepared for a life of productive and satisfying work.
- Unify state systems of education to take advantage of each institution’s unique contribution to regional and state economic goals even if collaboration means cutting well established programs to reallocate resources to more economically viable areas.
- Create partnerships between faculty-student researchers and employers’ specific needs even if such partnerships restrict the time available for original research.

Opponents argue that focusing on 21st century workforce requirements threatens other aspects of the core public purposes of public higher education. Assessing and funding state colleges and universities on the basis of how well they meet state economic performance standards draws higher education too closely to the world of corporations and major donors and away from the diverse intellectual life and creative research environment of the modern college and university. This approach is likely to sacrifice the pursuit of long-term public good for short-term individual economic success.

Approach 3: MAKE PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION MORE ACCESSIBLE TO PROMOTE PERSONAL CHOICES FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING

“I want to learn more about things that interest me so I can develop a meaningful philosophy of life. I want smaller classes, where I don’t feel like a number. I can’t get this in a public university.”
(Undergraduate Student, 2007)

“All I need to know about the modern world, I can learn at my computer--- anytime of the day or night. I wasted a lot of time in high school learning things I wasn’t interested in, but I can’t afford to do that now that I have a job. I need higher education, but I want more control over where and when I get it. (College Dropout, 2007)

Supporters say making private education more accessible would pay rich dividends to states unable to keep up with the escalating costs of and decreasing appropriations for higher education. Independent colleges and universities already enroll over 40% of the nation’s four-year undergraduate students, many of them among the most highly talented high school graduates. Liberal arts and sciences colleges, church and faith-based institutions, historically black colleges and universities, and single-sex institutions are among the nation’s oldest and most well regarded institutions of higher education. Newer “for-profit” companies also offer students more choices for pursuing personal goals for life. Convenient internet-based degree programs for young career-focused undergraduates and older working adults are the fastest growing sector of American higher education. Expanding access to private higher education would relieve states of more of the burden of higher education costs while giving students and their families the choice of investing in the kind of education they want, when they want it.

Examples of what can be done:

- Increase direct state student opportunity grants and contributions to means tested state scholarship funds for students attending any private institution in her or his home state.
- Increase state and federal tax deductions for students attending both public and private institutions of higher education, even if it means the introduction of a system of national assessment of student academic performance.
- Expand guaranteed student loan programs for all college and university students.

Opponents say the traditional public purposes of higher education in a rapidly changing society cannot be sustained by private institutions focused on the separate interests of the diverse communities and individuals that support them. Shifting higher education to the private sector would diminish opportunities for students who could not afford the high tuitions and fees of most small colleges and universities, and drain needed resources from the public system. Many small nonprofit institutions would not be able to meet the rapidly growing demand for higher education to meet workplace needs without distorting the unique missions they were established to pursue. New company-based higher education institutions, which have shown they are effective in recruiting students, have been less effective in assuring their clients of publicly accredited outcomes.

This discussion guide was prepared for By the People, Dialogues in Democracy Project, 2007, by planners of the Kent State University and Bowling Green State University public dialogue series, “Renewing Public Trust in Higher Education,” in association with their Public Television partners, WVIZ/PBS *ideastream*, Cleveland, and WBGU-PBS, Bowling Green, and the Department of Teleproductions, Kent State University, and the Center for Regional Economic Development, Bowling Green State University.