When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act into law in 1965, he dreamed of providing broader access for all Americans to pursue a college education in hopes of boosting the economy and improving quality of life. The legislation was put into place to improve higher education’s resources and provide financial assistance to students in need. Since then, millions of people have been able to reach their potential and make a difference in society.

AASCU institutions are meeting the academic needs of the majority of America’s students. Meet a few of our leaders who are outspoken in their advocacy for their institutions:

Nancy Zimpher: Closing Educational Gaps from Cradle to Career

Nancy Zimpher’s career as an educator began in a one-room schoolhouse in the Ozarks in the late 1960s. That experience sparked Zimpher’s passion to improve the nation’s educational system by bridging the gaps between K-12 and higher education.

Appointed as the first woman chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY) in 2009, Zimpher has been outspoken in promoting cradle-to-career partnerships, community-based initiatives that apply evidence-based strategies to move kids through the education pipeline—from early childhood and elementary school to high school, college and beyond. The Albany Promise, for example, brings together business, education and community leaders from the Albany region to develop strategies to improve educational outcomes, such as better preparation for kindergarten, higher proficiency in core academic subjects, and improving high school graduation rates.

“Our country is challenged in that we do not have the necessary connectivity between early childhood, elementary and secondary education, post secondary education, and the workforce,” says Zimpher, adding that SUNY partners with about 50 high schools throughout New York to enroll students in college-level courses. “We’re divided into some seriously isolated silos, and I think it’s up to higher education to lead the charge in knocking them down. We prepare the teachers who teach the students who come to college, ready or not. So it is our responsibility to care whether these students, starting in early childhood and kindergarten through high school, are successful.”
Better preparation for students requires effective training for teachers, and SUNY graduates approximately 5,000 teachers each year. As a nationally known expert in teacher preparation—particularly in urban settings—Zimpher is a champion for more rigorous, clinically based training to prepare future teachers for the challenges they will face in the real-world classroom.

Zimpher also was instrumental in the establishment of SUNY’s recently organized TeachNY Advisory Council, a statewide endeavor “to develop bold new teacher and leader preparation policy.” The Council, which hopes to become a national model program, will support teacher candidates from the time they make the decision to go into the profession, through their education and training on SUNY campuses, and throughout each stage of their careers.

SUNY, in partnership with Math for America, also leads the New York State Master Teacher Program, launched by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to strengthen K-12 STEM education in New York. The program recognizes outstanding teachers in the STEM fields, offering them professional development and peer-mentoring opportunities. Each master teacher receives a $15,000 stipend each year during four years of participating in the program.

Zimpher, in her role at the helm of the nation’s largest comprehensive system of higher education, also serves as chair of the Board of Governors of the New York Academy of Sciences and of the National Association of System Heads (NASH). The former president of the University of Cincinnati and chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Zimpher also is a supporter of Higher Education for Higher Standards, a coalition of higher education leaders who promote college- and career-ready standards.

“Higher standards are absolutely necessary for the United State to be competitive on a global stage,” Zimpher says.

Bill Ruud: Tackling Student Debt

For University of Northern Iowa President Bill Ruud, the old adage is truth: “If you find a job that you love, you never have to work a day in your life.” The U.S. Army veteran-turned-educator thrives on facilitating the type of environment that allows faculty, staff and students to develop their talents and excel academically and personally.

“I love this profession because it’s all about the students,” Ruud says. “It’s all about the next generation and about causing their success.”

As state funding for higher education shrinks, one of the ways Ruud tries to help students succeed is through his commitment to making college affordable. He praises the effectiveness of UNI’s financial literacy initiatives, including the course, “Live Like a Student,” and personalized loan counseling. The program encourages students to pursue on- or off-campus employment opportunities while in school—up to about 20 hours per week to earn the equivalent of about $4,000 in student loans. According to Ruud, UNI students borrow 21 percent less than the average U.S. student.

“[When students do] get a student loan, we make sure they understand the ramifications of it, and encourage them when they get out of school—at least for the first year—to live like a student because they’re good at it,” says Ruud. “As a result of this program, we’ve driven down student debt at the University of Northern Iowa by almost 13.5 percent over the last five years.”

Ruud also has been outspoken in pushing Iowa state legislators to provide greater funding support to state institutions in an effort to keep tuition costs from rising further.

“I think we will continue to drive forward to continue to push our message so the state legislators and governors will understand that state appropriations is not a cost, but an investment in the future of America and the future of what we do,” says Ruud, who previously was president of Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. “Higher education is that differentiator. It’s that level playing field that allows people to become competitive in the world of work and the world of the economy, and the world of government.”

A former institutional advancement administrator, Ruud also is skilled at fundraising and forming partnerships. As a member of the Iowa Business Council—a group of the state’s top business leaders—Ruud keeps the lines of communication open to stay abreast of industry needs while striving to inform business leaders of the skills and knowledge UNI’s graduates offer, as well as workforce development opportunities on campus.

Ruud serves on Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad’s STEM Advisory Council and Executive Committee—a group of education,
community and business leaders working together to strengthen STEM education in the pre-K-12 pipeline with an eye toward developing a strong, capable workforce for the future. Ruud also emphasizes the importance of arts and humanities courses, using the acronym STEAM.

A representative on the NCAA’s Presidential Forum, Ruud also serves on AASCU’s Professional Development Committee and is a member of the American Council on Education’s Commission on Effective Leadership.

Ever the optimist, Ruud welcomes the opportunity to find creative solutions to the many challenges facing American education in the 21st century.

“I compare improving higher education to moving halfway to the wall: You’re never going to get there, but you’re always going to be a little bit better each and every day.”

Mildred García: A Heart for First-Generation College Students

Mildred García’s parents—who came to the U.S. from Puerto Rico—always told their children, speaking in Spanish, “The only inheritance a poor family could leave you is a good education.”

Growing up in the Brooklyn projects, García was just 12 years old when her father died. She was inspired to by her mother, who struggled to raise seven children alone, to study hard and aim for a college degree.

“I knew that education is the way out of poverty,” García says. “I’m a first-generation college student, but now my nieces and nephews have either completed college and are working as professionals, or are in college pursuing their degrees. Education has transformed my life and the lives of others in my family.”

As president of California State University, Fullerton—the state’s fourth largest university—García is committed to improving access to education for underrepresented, first-generation and low-income students. She proudly shares that CSUF leads California in the number of degrees awarded to Hispanic students; it ranks 10th nationally in awarding degrees to Hispanics and 4th in the U.S. in graduating students of color. More than 50 percent of last year’s graduating class were first-generation college students, García says.

“We are very diverse, and I find that’s so important for students to help them become prepared to live in a global world,” says García, who previously served as president of CSU Dominguez Hills and was the first Latina chief executive in the largest system of public higher education in the country. “We can become that educational laboratory where people from all different cultures study and live and learn together.”

García was appointed to President Barack Obama’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, where she offers a voice to the challenges and opportunities facing Latino students. She also was appointed to the Air University’s Board of Visitors by the U.S. Secretary of Defense and to the Committee on Measures of Student Success by the U.S. Secretary of Education. She has served on the board for the American Council on Education and is a founding board member of the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships.

García’s passion for bolstering academic success and improving graduation rates is an influencing factor behind CSUF’s strategic plan. The six-year graduation rate has grown to 61 percent over the past three years—the university’s highest rate. Additionally, García notes that the achievement gap has been lowered from 12 percent for underrepresented students to 9 percent.

“These are the things that I get a lot of joy out of,” she says. “Just knowing that our students are really progressing.”

García also is proud of CSUF’s faculty and staff, who are becoming more and more involved in “high-impact practices,” such as engaged learning. They are involving more students—especially those in underrepresented populations—in undergraduate research, study abroad opportunities and internships. These practices are moving CSUF closer to the goal of becoming a national model public comprehensive university.

But for García, whose parents emphasized the value of education to their children, the biggest reward of her job is commencement. In May, CSUF graduated its largest class—over 9,000 students, all coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

“Graduation is so important to these families, and the graduates don’t just bring mom and dad. They also invite their brothers and sisters, their aunts and uncles, their godparents and grandparents—everyone coming to celebrate. There is nothing like graduation for me.”

Mildred Garcia, president, California State University, Fullerton.
Brian Noland: Promoting Economic Development in Appalachia

Since becoming the ninth president of East Tennessee State University, Brian Noland has used his high profile position to focus on regional stewardship and promote the institution’s role in transforming the lives of people throughout Appalachia.

In accepting the position, Noland was drawn to the opportunity to become part of ETSU’s legacy of serving the rural areas of Tennessee, as well as portions of Virginia, North Carolina and Kentucky. Since ETSU’s founding in 1911 as one of Tennessee’s three normal schools, he notes, the university has trained teachers who have gone on to work in rural areas, helping to improve the quality of life for the people of the region. It’s a mission that remains strong more than a century later.

“The majority of AASCU institutions, by mission, are committed to regional stewardship, so one of the elements of major public universities is that they are the economic engines of their communities,” says Noland, who previously served as chancellor of the West Virginia Higher Education System. “They’re the cultural engines of their communities, and the institution is more than a place of learning. It’s a place that serves as the heartbeat of a region.”

One of the challenges facing higher education, he says, is the “lost sense of the public-first purposes of the university as a whole,” as higher education becomes focused on the private benefits that it offers the individual.

“As we’ve begun to look at institutions as commodities rather than centerpieces, you then see the general public stepping away from their support of universities,” Noland says, citing the significant decrease in funding for public institutions. “So it’s just a notion of the public versus private nature of higher education. I think that’s one of the greatest challenges facing AASCU institutions—our commitment to the public purpose even though the public may be stepping away from its commitment to our institutions.”

In any major speech that Noland gives, he emphasizes ETSU’s public service role and the university’s impact on surrounding communities. Many of the area’s educators, health care providers and business leaders were educated at ETSU, he says.

“Without ETSU, the economy of our region would look very, very different,” Noland says. “Higher education is a vehicle through which we open doors of opportunity to the next generation of Americans, and at our institution, with commitment to regional stewardship and service to many first generation low-income students, we’re changing the future not only for those students, but also for their children and their children’s children.”

At ETSU, Noland has launched major initiatives to raise funds for new facilities, including a performing arts center, a new football stadium and a simulation laboratory in the ETSU Academic Health Sciences Center. He has pushed for greater state investment in higher education and advocated for enhanced scholarship offerings for students in need.

“It is incumbent upon institutional leaders to advocate for their faculty, for their staff, and for their students,” Noland says. “We want to provide our faculty with settings in which they have the ability to maximize their talents. We want the greatest opportunity for our students to realize their dreams, and our role as presidents is to set the table for those dreams to be realized.”

The Future of Higher Education

All four presidents interviewed agreed that the biggest challenge facing higher education is to continue making it affordable while offering high quality academic programs. AASCU institutions, they say, are ideal for serving and improving communities by providing opportunities for anyone, regardless of background, to attain an education and achieve a greater quality of life.

“I hope that we will stick with the storyline that education is really the critical element in individual and national success, that education informs healthcare, it informs the quality of life of our citizenry,” Zimpher says. “It makes people better citizens, they vote more often, they’re more apt to raise educated and healthy children. At SUNY, our mantra has become that educating more people and educating them better is the best bet society can make. That’s the function of higher education. That’s what we’re here to do.”

Karen Doss Bowman is an independent writer and editor based in Bridgewater, Va.