Beyond the Numbers – Dreams & Values

by Freeman A. Hrabowski, III

The Value of Dreams

Pick up almost any newspaper across America, and one gets the sense of our being at a pivotal point. A recent Washington Post article commented, “This is a critical moment for the country. From the faltering economy to the burdensome deficit to our foreign policy struggles, America is suffering a widespread sense of crisis and anxiety about the future.” It is clear that we are in a defining period, nationally and globally. On the one hand, we see more Americans and others thriving, more scientific breakthroughs, and more indices of human progress than ever before; on the other hand, Americans and others throughout the world are living through a period of enormous uncertainty. Never has it been more apparent that our colleges and universities have a great responsibility and vital role to play in educating Americans to think critically, in shaping their values and developing their skills, and in helping growing numbers of Americans move out of poverty. We also are responsible for helping Americans put their immediate fears in perspective and to focus on those values that are most important to us as a society and as individuals. Our efforts will contribute substantially to determining the future of humankind.

Education’s Transformational Power

During critical periods of the 20th century, America experienced social, political and economic developments that led to public policies and legislation that reflected much about our values. In 1944, for example, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill, which by the mid-1950s had extended educational and training opportunities to nearly eight million World War II veterans. And the tumultuous 1960s produced sweeping civil rights legislation guaranteeing access for all Americans to public accommodations, voting booths and housing; this decade was also responsible for the Higher Education Act of 1965, which increased substantially the numbers of Americans from all backgrounds who earned college degrees. In fact, over the past six decades, the percentage of whites 25 years old and over with college degrees increased from six to 28 percent, and more than 50 percent of Asian-Americans 25 years old and over hold college degrees. (Data on Native Americans have not been reported by the Census Bureau because the samples have been too small.)

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This article is adapted from President Hrabowski’s President-to-Presidents Lecture at AASCU’s Annual Meeting in Charleston, S.C., on November 22, 2010. A tradition at the AASCU Annual Meeting for more than 30 years, the President-to-Presidents lecture is a signal honor bestowed by the AASCU board of directors on one of their colleagues.

References:

iii. Ibid.
v. Ibid., p.4.
One of our most important jobs as higher education leaders is to remind America of the role our institutions play in building this country, and to let more Americans know it is possible for them to attend and succeed in college.

Ensuring America’s Competitiveness & Transforming Institutional Cultures

Globalization and the resulting need to increase degree productivity—particularly in STEM fields and among the nation’s growing underrepresented minority populations—have been the focus of increased national attention. A recent National Academies report found that underrepresented minority students aspire to earn STEM degrees at roughly the same rate as students from other backgrounds; yet only about 20 percent complete undergraduate STEM programs within five years. What may be surprising, however, is that while white and Asian-American students have higher graduation rates, most of these students do not succeed in STEM—only 33 percent and 42 percent, respectively.

Over the past 23 years, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program for minority STEM students on my campus has become a model not only for preparing research scientists and engineers, but also for institutional innovation and change. The program’s success can be measured in various ways. One measure is the large number of underrepresented minority graduates who have gone on to complete STEM graduate degrees. UMBC has become the leading predominantly white institution in the nation in producing African-American bachelor’s degree recipients who go on to complete STEM Ph.D.s. Another measure is the influence of the program on our institutional culture. Not only has the program contributed to creating an overall climate of inclusion and support, but it also has encouraged creativity, innovation and experimentation across-the-board.

The program has served as a model, for example, for the development of other programs on campus—from special scholars programs for high-achieving undergraduates in the arts, humanities, public affairs and STEM teaching, to programs for women in science and engineering from the undergraduate level through the professoriate. All of the undergraduate scholars programs have benefited from the replication of key Meyerhoff Program components, including building community among students; close student-faculty interaction; student engagement in research, creative activities and internships; and engaging students in service in the larger community.

Our culture of innovation and creativity is benefiting students in other ways, especially involving curricular, pedagogical and administrative initiatives that rely heavily on the use of technology. Technology is helping us improve how we teach, learn and do business. Its potential for making students’ learning experiences richer—serving as a catalyst for more critical thinking and reflection—is enormous, as is its potential contribution to increased retention and graduation rates. Technology’s role, in short, is to support broader academic efforts to help students succeed—from course scheduling that is flexible and responsive to students’ needs, to redesigning courses, to providing professional development for faculty. STEM faculty, for example, redesigned first-year chemistry and opened the Chemistry Discovery Center to strengthen student performance. SCIENCE, which recently featured the Center, observed that, “Students who had once sat passively during a weekly two-hour recitation section while a graduate student solved problems on the whiteboard are now part of four-person teams responsible for finding the right answer.”


Each of these examples has involved strong collaboration across divisions of the campus focused on problem solving, data analysis and substantive dialogue. Our focus has been on what’s in the best interest of teaching and learning.

Beyond the Numbers

I frequently visit campuses that are working not only to increase their racial and ethnic diversity, but also to improve their institutional climate in relationship to recruiting and retaining students of color. I recently attended a reception before giving a keynote address at a major public research university, and I asked the following questions of campus leaders assembled: “When people of color are considering coming to the institution and are being recruited—whether they are faculty members, students or administrators—what language do you use to describe the climate of the institution, and to what extent is that language based on your having listened to the voices of people from diverse groups, and having understood what they have experienced?” I was met with silence, largely because most of us are not accustomed to talking about race or other “sticky issues” of the day, such as gender or sexual orientation. Too often, when we begin talking about these issues, we tend to become uncomfortable and defensive and begin pointing fingers at each other.

In my convocation address to new students each fall, I remind them how privileged they are to be pursuing a liberal education, and that part of their education involves learning and practicing open-mindedness and civility. Convocation is preceded by our New Book Experience, which involves seminar sessions with new freshmen, all of whom have read a book selected to challenge them. A year ago we read *Three Cups of Tea*, by Mortenson and Relin, on humanitarian efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the seminar I led, a young man asked why it was important for him to read this book. Immediately, a young woman who had immigrated to the U.S. responded, “So that we can have a conversation and understand one another—and so that you can understand what I have been through. When I, and others like me, come to America, we learn what Americans have gone through, but you don’t understand the experiences we’ve had.” There was a moment of connecting on both sides.

From experiences such as these—and based on lessons learned about the value of dreams, education’s transformational power, and higher education’s role in supporting American competitiveness—we know that the nation’s future is inextricably tied to education, including American higher education. Of course, it’s important to focus on retention and graduation rates, but it is only by going “beyond the numbers”—to know the qualitative character of our institutions—that we can be effective stewards for American higher education, and, consequently, America’s future.

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