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Scott L. Thomas

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Errata: This address should have been published in the pages of this issue and volume in the year following the Annual Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Conference at which it was delivered. In 2022, the ASHE Ethics Committee conducted an investigation to understand why nine Presidential Addresses had yet to be printed in the *Review of Higher Education*. The ASHE Presidential Addresses missing were from C. Robert Pace (1977), Burton Clark (1980), Howard R. Bowen (1981), Joan S. Stark (1985), Sheila Slaughter (1996), Lisa Wolf-Wendel (2013), Scott Thomas (2016), Shaun R. Harper (2017), and Lori Patton Davis (2018). The investigation findings indicated a reliance on tradition rather than the establishment of a clear process. One recommendation in this report was that the contract with *RHE* Editors be amended to include an explicit process and expectation of publication of ASHE presidential addresses; this was completed in February 2023 by way of a contract signed by the ASHE Executive Director and *RHE* editor/s and to be required from 2023

Scott L. Thomas is President of Sterling College, in Craftsbury Common, Vermont. At the time of this address, he was the Dean of the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont. His research focuses on higher education policy related to college access and outcomes. Please send correspondence to sthomas@sterlingcollege.edu.

Dedication: This presidential address is dedicated to those on the ground who are making a difference in the lives of young people through making college opportunity a reality.

on. Another recommendation was to collect the missing presidential addresses for publication and make them available. ASHE took up the responsibility of publishing missing addresses by contacting the president, archives and/or estate; the addresses of Drs. Pace, Clark, Bowen, Stark, and Slaughter were sought but were no longer available, including this speech.

Drs. Wolf-Wendel, Thomas, Harper, and Patton Davis were asked by ASHE in April 2022 to submit their manuscripts to be published as an erratum. Past President Thomas' address was submitted on November 15, 2022 to the ASHE Office. April 5, 2024, the ASHE President and board asked the *RHE* editors to take up the missing addresses, including this address, and editors agreed. Immediately, the manuscript moved through the production process as outlined in the contract, "While the presidential address is not sent out for peer review, it will follow the regular copyediting process." After copy editing and proofs, this erratum presidential speech was posted on December 15, 2024 to coincide with the in-print publication of *RHE* 48.2.

For ASHE Presidential Addresses and available video recordings see the [ASHE Presidential Addresses](#) website. Text versions and the addresses can also be found in the online volumes of *The Review of Higher Education*.

Abstract: The Presidential Address critically reviews the growing inequalities in the U.S. higher education system, focusing on access and completion disparities among different socioeconomic and racial groups. Despite progress in increasing access to postsecondary education, significant gaps remain in its quality and the completion rates. K-12 and higher education is rather one interdependent system and access to postsecondary education shall start with equalizing schooling academic experience. Existing statewide programs that aligned school and postsecondary education are good examples on a local scale, but a systemic approach is needed to minimize inequalities across the country.

Keywords: educational inequality, access to education, educational reform, socioeconomic mobility

In 1947... Harry S. Truman warned in a report of his Commission on Higher Education, "If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them" (p. 36).

INTRODUCTION

Most of my substantive work in higher education has revolved around access and stratification of opportunities to participate in quality postsecondary experiences. This is an interest shared by many members of our Association [Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)]. We have long known that one's ability to prepare, ability to pay, and orientation to higher education options powerfully shape the opportunity to position oneself for participation.

For most of my career, those interested in the equity of opportunity have focused on academic preparation (Perna, 2005), counseling (McDonough, 2005), and financial aid policies (Delaney & Doyle, 2011) as levers to expand opportunities to students from populations historically underserved by higher education. Moreover, to be sure, we have made significant progress in increasing opportunity, moving continuation rates from high school to college from 60% in 1990 to 66% in 2013 (Snyder et al., 2016, Table 302.20). While we have certainly not solved the access piece, we are moving incrementally in the right direction.

We have also made some overall progress in closing racial gaps in participation. In 2014, the differences in the high school to college continuation rates of the broad racial grouping used by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics had closed substantially over the years past.

Numerically first-time freshmen peaked at roughly 3.2 M in 2008. We sat at 2.96 M in 2014, the last year for which we have numbers (Snyder et al., 2016, Table 305.10). It is noteworthy that much of that growth has occurred in the two-year college sector – where the preponderance of institutions has low- or nonselective admissions. Lois Weis (2016) spoke powerfully about the structure of these patterns in yesterday's keynote address (also see Weis, 2015).

Despite this progress, durable gaps in overall participation remain between income groups. In 1990, students from high-income families were 30% more likely to continue from high school to college than their peers from lower-income families (Snyder et al., 2016, Table 302.30). The participation gap was not measurably different in 2014, nor were the gaps separating middle-income students from these other groups over time.

This focus is only on access. The news is even less encouraging when we consider completions. In short, there are deep race and class disparities in completion. These gaps are durable.

As a sociologist, I have framed these gaps in access and completion in the language of power and stratification. That language weighs the role of education in intergenerational mobility, a balance between education as a great equalizer and education as a vehicle for socioeconomic reproduction. The equalizing power of postsecondary education is an essential theme in

the narrative of the American Dream and sits at the root of contemporary debates over affordability and access. Whatever your perspective, education confers distinct and measurable life-course advantages.

This theme of education as an equalizer provides a warrant for concerns connected to historical economic, social, and cultural inequalities in America. On the one hand, the equalizer narrative relieves pressure on inequality by suggesting that there are clear paths forward if one is willing to work hard and be industrious (think of the “ladders of ascent” rhetoric). On the other hand, the reproduction narrative heightens attention to differences in the opportunity of access to quality postsecondary options [think of Brint & Karabel’s (1989) “Diverted Dream” or Burton Clark’s (1963) “Cooling Out”]. It follows from the vast literatures in education, sociology, economics, and political science (to name four areas with longstanding interests in the role of education and society) that access to quality educational opportunities is a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition for intergenerational mobility.

Both narratives around education and power rely on an analysis of individual-level opportunity. What alters individual opportunity then rolls up to a collective impact on positions of power and privilege in society. Intergenerational mobility requires the ability to pass economic and cultural capital to future generations. Evidence abounds that intergenerational mobility in the US has slowed substantially (Corak, 2010). The erosion of mobility—a central theme in the narrative of the American Dream—is surely underlying the sentiments driving the political changes we are experiencing. This narrative is playing into the politics of the moment, with populists and autocrats moving into positions of power in the US and around the world.

Many have written about the moral and educational imperatives of inclusion and diversity in education. Our focus on these imperatives often invokes the connection between the university and civil society. I have been particularly moved by the years-long campaign of inclusion championed by education leaders such as Carol Geary Schneider of the AAC&U [American Association of Colleges and Universities], the innovative organizational tack of senior academic colleagues such as Smith (2009), and the elegant, powerfully evidenced arguments of Olivas (2012). These are but three of our colleagues who have devoted a significant part of their careers to championing equity and diversity as hallmarks of a vibrant and high-quality educational system. Opportunity sits at the heart of these clarion calls.

So many from this association have written so persuasively about these realities that there are days I am baffled at our lack of more significant progress over the past 20 years. Ultimately, I believe the moral and educational imperative has only carried us so far. While I will not give up on that line of work and argument, I now want to reframe the imperative to focus more on the demographic and economic realities of allowing the gaps in access and

success to endure. From a concrete finance perspective, the current model of the university will more quickly prove unsustainable if we do not do a much better job addressing gaps within our K-12 system in the opportunity to prepare academically.

Decades of evidence show that there are indeed significant private returns to a college education. These include higher lifetime incomes, lower unemployment rates, higher savings rates, better health, and greater longevity (Carnevale et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The wage premium for college education has increased substantially since the early 1970s (Autor, 2014; Baum et al., 2010; Zumeta, 2011) and the college wage premium in the United States is among the highest across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

Importantly, we also know notable wage premiums are associated with WHERE one attends college. Much of my early work examined these relationships, and subsequently, a much more sophisticated corpus of research has illuminated the distinct labor market advantages of attending more selective institutions. This reality (and longstanding intuition) has fueled intense competition and marketization in college admissions over the past 20 years (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). A Return-on-Investment (ROI) narrative now accompanies the relentless escalation of tuition costs. This ROI logic aims to encourage prospective students and their families to place a heavier weight on the personal economic value of their college decisions and has further intensified competition for seats at more selective institutions.

This competition for seats has spawned a robust college preparation industry providing pricey support for test preparation, private college counseling, application and essay development, and financial services to families contemplating the increasing costs of attending postsecondary education. These relationships connect with the intense demand for college admission that Lois Weis spoke of on Thursday.

Given this clear demand, it is noteworthy that 84% of chief admissions officers surveyed in Inside Higher Education's Survey of College & University Admissions Directors report being moderately or very concerned about meeting their institution's enrollment goals for 2016-17. Moreover, two-thirds of institutions surveyed report falling short of their enrollment goals in 2015-16. So what is going on?

To understand the anxiety of admissions directors (anxiety that extends to deans, provosts, presidents, and boards), I think one needs to locate the university as it is traditionally conceptualized as a creature of a specific point in time. Many of you know that I seem to have trouble keeping jobs. Across my 22 years as a faculty member, I have worked at several fine land-grant universities. These include the University of California (founded in 1868), the University of Hawai'i at Mnoa (1907), the University of Arizona (1885),

the University of Georgia (1785), and the University of Vermont (1791). Each of these fine institutions has, as a part of its narrative, a history pegged at its original charter date (think 1785 for the University of Georgia or 1791 for the University of Vermont).

We often talk about the university as an institution of medieval origins and regularly embrace the academic rites and rituals tied to those medieval times. I suggest to you right now, though, that if surveyed by Doug Lederman and Scott Jaschik at *Inside Higher Education*, enrollment managers at Padua, Cambridge, Oxford, or Monash would have reported very different forms of anxiety about meeting the enrollment targets in any given year (there is a *New Yorker* cartoon there for someone more artistically talented than I am). I point out that these institutions of medieval origins that so many of us are wringing our hands over are uniquely 20th-century products, reflecting an economic, political, and cultural blink of an eye. Ours is the period of Martin Trow's massification, throwing the doors of campus open to an array of people (primarily men) from backgrounds hardly represented on college campuses until after World War II. Through the university, America built her way to a new form of global dominance economically, militarily, and politically.

Across the post-WWII period, we strategically invested vast sums of public money in the physical infrastructure and staffing of the country's great colleges and universities. Moreover, these investments led to tremendous economic growth, the emergence of a solid middle class, and modeled the enabling power of higher education (for those who were allowed to participate on scale).

It also turns out that this level of investment was unsustainable, given a shift in political and economic ideologies that took place within three decades of the rise of the multiversity (Kerr, 1995). That period of growth was unprecedented and signaled widely that the path to the middle class is through a college or university education. A vast market emerged fueled by large subsidies to campuses, students, and their families across this period.

Public investments of this magnitude suggest a common understanding of higher education's public value (potential or real; see Bowen, 1997). What it turns out was masked, was public and private sector confusion with higher education, differing political cultures and values about the concept of "public" reflected by differing conceptual and theoretical treatments across disciplines, and a longstanding contested idea that a common interest can transcend individual preferences. Marginson (2007, 2011, 2016) has written thoughtfully about these issues.

Two takeaways from this are that 1) the foundation of the 20th century expansion was built on a set of highly contested ideas about public investments and private preferences (think Aristotle and Plato, seriously), and 2) that while Trow (1973) had the massification thing right, he neglected to take

into account the well-known tendency for the differentiation of elite goods when more people are provided access. This latter point is very important because it changes the emphasis from access to higher education to one of access to higher and higher quality forms of higher education.

Now there are a number of ways to regulate access to any elite good. Price is often one of the leading features of discrimination. If you cannot afford it, you are denied access. There may also be strict membership rules (test scores, recommendations, etc.). In higher education, we certainly see pricing tiers (subsidized and nonsubsidized) that correspond with perceived and perhaps demonstrated quality. We also see membership criteria put in place that serves as screens that purportedly ensure that aspiring students can demonstrate their probability of succeeding in the collegiate environment and, ideally, add demonstrable value to the community.

Many of us have focused on the financial and economic aspects of entry and completion. This debate and narrative are well-developed. That dimension is far from solved and becomes increasingly contested, given the abrupt shift in ideology at the federal level.

Today though, I want to draw our attention to the equally problematic front of academic preparation for meaningful participation in postsecondary education. I'm a sociologist by training and came to higher education from an academic program focused on organizations, policy, and leadership. My perspective on higher education has been shaped by orientations to the life-course that sometimes render the discrete study of the postsecondary sector harder than it should be.

Education is a social institution that is organizationally defined by people in different times and different societies. In the US, we first encounter postsecondary opportunity as young adults, typically after 12 or more years of compulsory primary and secondary preparation. Our field's legitimate focus has been on the consequences of the larger neoconservative project labeling public colleges as wasteful, too expensive, and that has to be fixed.

But something else is going on that rarely attracts our systematic attention and is even more destructive than the stark financial barriers that limit or prohibit college access. It is the long pathway of powerful sorting, differentiation, and stratification that occurs over the 18 years (at least) before most students can ever set foot on the college campus. I suggest to you that—if we were to resolve the financial stresses of today's university and get everyone to agree on a balance of public and private benefits that would remove pricing and financing barriers—that we would have done little to equalize access to the benefits of postsecondary education.

Francis Bacon purportedly said, "Knowledge is power" (see Bacon, 1597) and education is the fundamental precondition for political development, democracy, and social justice. While in our society, education happens in

schools, education is not just going to school. Things are presumed to happen in schools that shape knowledge and understandings that translate into the capacity to enable sensibilities for political development, the appreciation of democracy, and the embrace of values defining civil society.

But all schooling is not equal. In fact, primary and secondary schooling are remarkably unequal in terms of their capacity for developing the talents of the young people we are socializing to adult roles and responsibilities that will drive the conditions of families, politics, religion, and the economy of their adult lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren. This profound unevenness handicaps one's chances from early in life and shapes the capacity to realize the full potential of resources that may be encountered later in time (think college).

Combined with financial barriers, this unevenness in the ability to prepare drives the variance in the patterns of completion we observe in the current period. In short, the access project envisioned in the Truman Commission's work of 1947 has been hamstrung by the shifting economic and political ideologies that took hold in the 1980s that have had stark effects on all levels of public education. Resolving either but not both of these challenges will do little to yield meaningful improvement in equalizing access to quality postsecondary opportunities.

So, what do we do? Well, first, we continue the fight on the financial front. The terrain in that fight will surely change in the years ahead. Both sides in that fight have federal legislation that has been rising and falling across congressional sessions.

Second, renew efforts from the University to better articulate the university and the K-12 sector. The education system in the US is comprised of two major interdependent parts: K-12 and higher education. While bureaucratically, these are two systems, functionally, they are one large interdependent system. It is impossible to create major changes on one side of the system without significant changes on the other side (Venezia et al., 2003).

There has already been a great deal of work on this front that has resulted in statewide reforms aligning and articulating high school preparation and university admissions. (ASHE Programs of the last 7 years include: Rippner (2013), Knepler et al. (2011), and McDonough et al. (2009)). P-20 and K-16 councils are common. Illinois offers a good example of the mission and focus of these bodies:

Mission of the IL P-20 Council

The mission of the Illinois P-20 Council is to deliberate and make recommendations to the Governor, Illinois General Assembly, and state agencies for developing a seamless and sustainable statewide system of quality education and support, from birth through adulthood, to maximize students' educational attainment, opportunities for success in the workforce, and contributions to their local communities. (Illinois.gov, n.d., para. 2).

These efforts have provided opportunities for policymakers and practitioners to come together to bridge the divide between the two parts of the systems. But alignment and articulation do little to address the structural disparities in resourcing that yield the deep differences in the ability to prepare that we see in the national data. Alignment is not equalization and improvement. Focused efforts on improving governance, leadership, and financing of our K-12 schools are needed.

Much of this goes on, too. Consider the many ongoing urban renewal efforts designed to address gross inequities in urban schools. In 2004, Zimpher (then President of the University of Cincinnati) published an edited volume capturing K-12 renewal efforts of the presidents and chancellors of 14 Great City Universities (Zimpher & Howey, 2004). Zimpher is now the Chancellor of the SUNY system and has taken this same commitment to New York State.

Or consider the work of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Penn GSE in Philadelphia has students, alumni, faculty, and staff working in Philadelphia District and charter schools, parochial schools, and informal learning environments and community organizations across the city. While these examples by Zimpher and the work at Penn show demonstrable impacts, their focus and scale are limited to the areas in which they are located (almost exclusively urban areas). There are scores of other examples of great work that is similar in intent and design.

But these, even taken together, are not the systemic approach that is necessary to ensure that inequalities in the ability to prepare are minimized across the country. The future of the university depends on our getting this right. For without eliminating these gross inequalities, the demographic realities of the 21st century almost ensure that the potential of the public university will decline, along with the promise of socioeconomic mobility, our overall pool of talent, innovation in the workplace, and economic productivity. This talent defines the potential of the university and society more broadly.

That approach will require the leaders of our universities to commit to this as a project defining the future of the university and the public sphere. And to be sure, this is not a project that many university leaders recognize as a priority. There's another talk on the distracting effects of privatization that are consistently drawing our attention away from our academic priorities (Newfield, 2011, 2016).

So, to borrow admonitions of yesterday's Presidential Panel on making college affordable (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016): find ways to take your research and hold your institution accountable. Turn the fight to our own campuses and make the case about the direct connection between the opportunities within the K-12 system and the success of the university in the long term. Engage your colleagues outside of higher education in conversations about the connections between the university's challenges and the condition of the areas that are in their domain. Engage your colleagues in the disciplines about their perspectives on the value of diversity for the success of the work they

do in their areas. Be relentless in bringing these linkages to bear in discussions about central campus planning. Terrify your enrollment management professionals with concrete evidence of the long-term consequences of our not addressing this. Engage your deans, provost, president, and board in this concern and evidence what it will mean for your campus.

Only with solidarity as an institution and forceful, authoritative leadership will we realize the full potential of our immense talent and vision for a more equal and just society. This is a distinctly political act and one that we must channel all of our energies into over the period ahead.

I am proud to be your colleague and humbled by the opportunity to serve as your president this year. Thank you. Let's go make change...

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