

## Dear President Obama ...

January 30, 2012

By [Robert J. Sternberg](#)

Dear President Obama:

Thank you for the interest in, and passion for, higher education you showed in [your talk on January 27 at the University of Michigan](#). Many of us in higher education, and especially in state institutions of higher learning, are excited about the prospect of increased federal funds directed at our enterprise, especially in a time of relative drought for state funding. I would like to express 10 hopes for the new program that perhaps some others share, although of course I only can speak for myself.

- *Please don't rush it.* Some of us will be afraid of a replay of the scenario that emerged from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Although the law was well-intentioned, its metrics for progress and implementation were not well-thought through, and have resulted in (a) straitjacketing of public schools in terms of what curriculum they feel they can teach, (b) relegation of important school subjects -- such as history, civics, languages, music and art -- to the back of the back burner, (c) high-stakes tests that were not ready for prime time, (d) gaming the system, with some states actually lowering standards when they discovered that they otherwise could not meet the ever-more-stringent goals the law placed, and (e) demoralization and discouragement among educators regarding the role of the federal government in education. Many, including myself, feel it was an overreach on the part of the federal government, and we seek to prevent the same phenomenon in higher education. Whatever legislation may emerge from your new initiative needs to be much better planned than NCLB was.
- *Please respect differences in college missions and goals.* Although there are commonalities among institutions of higher learning, a wonderful feature of higher education in the United States is its diversity — students can go to a wide

### The President's Plan

President Obama unveiled his new agenda for higher education in a speech Friday at the University of Michigan.

[Details here.](#)

variety of institutions to learn different things in different ways. For example, students who engage in a pre-professional major come out of college with a somewhat different kind of knowledge base and set of skills from students who strongly emphasize the liberal arts. I worry that a one-size-fits-all measure of outcome quality will hamper colleges and the students in them from optimally achieving their own individual goals. I especially worry about metrics for progress that will undermine liberal education in this country — the very education that brought you, your wife, and most of the nation's leaders to where they are today. Many educators hope that the federal government does not intrude upon the diversity in educational experiences that makes our system of education great.

■ *Please understand the limitations of standardized tests.* Virtually all of us in higher education believe in accountability, but many of us know that there are no standardized tests out there — at least at this time — that comprehensively measure the outcomes that are important for college learning. Both the Association of American Colleges and University (AAC&U) and the Lumina Foundation have proposed exciting frameworks — Liberal Education for America's Promise (LEAP) and the Degree Qualification Profile (DQP), respectively -- for capturing many (but not all) aspects of college learning. Standardized tests, however, do not come close to measuring all or even most of them. For example, none of these tests measure the creative, practical, ethical, wisdom-based, and team-based skills that students will need to succeed in the world of work and the broader world of life. I very much hope that any legislation will reflect the limitations of standardized tests and not create a nightmare in which college professors are pressured to teach to some kind of narrowly conceived national test.

■ *Please understand the pressures on college tuition and fees.* We in higher education empathize with families who feel that tuitions and fees are climbing at a rate faster than they can afford. My family is one of them, worrying about how we eventually will have the funds to put our 1-year-old triplets through college. But please understand that, at least for state institutions, we have had to raise our tuitions and fees largely because of substantial, and in some states (but not my own State of Oklahoma), draconian cuts in state funding. Private colleges and universities are under pressures of their own. Please ensure that colleges and universities are not penalized for increases in price that reflect our continued commitment to providing quality education at an affordable price. Please keep

centrally in view the role our higher education system plays in supporting cutting-edge scholarly activity and research that are fundamental to our world standing. We know we can do better on price and we are trying to control costs and hence tuition, but federal price controls are not the answer to the problem.

- *Please take into account factors that lead to differential college completion rates.* I can understand why any governmental body at any level would be concerned with completion rates. So am I. But at least some of us in higher education wish to make sure that three factors are taken into account in evaluating completion rates. First, some colleges purposely accept students who, for a variety of reasons, are less likely to complete college than are other students who go elsewhere. In elite institutions that accept primarily students at the top of the academic heap who come from relatively affluent families, completion rates are likely to be higher than at open-admission institutions that accept all applicants, many from indigent families. The country needs many different kinds of institutions of higher learning, but their completion rates almost inevitably will be different and for good reasons. Second, I hope, along with my colleagues at the AAC&U, that considerations of completion do not overshadow considerations of quality. Over-focusing on completion can lead one to disregard the important issue of whether the education being completed is of the best quality our institutions of higher learning can provide. Third, please keep in mind that students fail to complete college for varied reasons, only some of which are under the control of the institution.

- *Please be temperate in focusing on a jobs-based agenda.* Certainly one measure of the success of an institution is whether students are employed upon graduation, whether they are employed in their field of study, and what level of income the jobs provide, especially in helping students repay their student loans. But please keep in mind that there are many factors that determine how well an institution will stack up in the jobs competition, some of which are not perfectly correlated with the quality of education they provide. One is the perceived prestige of the institution, independent of the actual quality of education it provides. Another is whether the institution emphasizes pre-professional training — students are more likely to be employed in the field of their major if they are pre-professionally oriented; many students intend careers in areas that welcome and reward broad knowledge and a strong liberal arts foundation, rather than job-specific skills (fields such as communications, public service, and

the nation's many service and innovation-minded industries). A third factor is the part of the country and even a given state in which students study and then seek jobs. The employment situation is better in some locations than in others. Please consider that there is no simple statistic that will indicate how well colleges are doing in achieving appropriate job placement and starting salary. And finally, as you know from your own post-college experience, some students do not seek the highest starting salaries. Teachers in this country, for example, are underpaid (relative to other countries and relative to what I, at least, believe they are worth) and yet they choose a profession knowing they will be underpaid because they want to educate our students. A college should not be penalized for producing more poorly-paid teachers than, say, better-paid engineers.

- *Please don't force us into political correctness.* Some of us may worry that the grant proposals the government seeks will lead institutions to try to satisfy some governmentally imposed agenda rather than their own. As I said above, institutions have different goals and missions, and it would be unfortunate if they were forced to compromise in their own missions in a search for federal funds. Such enforced conformity would impoverish, not enrich, higher education in our great nation.

- *Please ensure sufficiency of resources.* Some of us worry that either the money the federal government puts into higher education will not be sufficient to make a large difference or that some states, upon receiving grants, will commensurately decrease their own state funding. I suspect many of us hope that any new funds the federal government allocates to higher education will be incremental funds rather than replacement funds.

- *Please create a sustainable program.* If colleges are asked to make substantial commitments to achieve federal funding, I hope that whatever program is created will be sustainable — even after a new president and Congress eventually come into power — so that the effort of the colleges will be worth their while in the long as well as the short term. Sustainability will mean bipartisan support for whatever initiative is eventually passed.

- *Please ensure whatever program is enacted has self-correcting mechanisms.* It is rare that a large new educational initiative is perfect in its original implementation. Who among us can claim quickly to attain perfection in the implementation of any of our strategic plans? If and, more likely, when things

begin to go off course, please ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure that the program can be self-correcting so that it truly accomplishes its goals.

Thank you again for your interest in, and desire to enhance, higher education in our country. We in universities want to do what we can to improve and we welcome assistance.

Sincerely,

Robert J. Sternberg

#### BIO



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