The success of higher education in the United States has long rested on an implicit social contract that lies at the heart of our American value system. Throughout our history, Americans have remained dedicated to self-improvement and social and economic mobility, with equality of opportunity as the universally accepted framework for achieving these values. Daniel Yankelovich, founder of the Public Agenda, the research firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White and The New York Times/Yankelovich poll, notes that the high cost of attendance hurts higher education’s ability to deliver on its core commitment to make social and economic mobility a realistic goal for average Americans. He argues that higher education is unwittingly violating the social contract, laying the groundwork for a tidal wave of public resentment. Yankelovich describes four diverse trends—political, economic, demographic and cultural—affecting higher education. He suggests strategies and principles to guide leaders as they respond to these trends and communicate in the current environment. Excerpts of his remarks are reprinted here.

**Trends**

The four somewhat diverse trends I will touch on—a political trend, an economic trend, a demographic trend, and a cultural trend—are relatively easy to spot, and you are probably familiar with most of them. It is much more difficult to tease out their implications. My aim is to represent the outsider point of view—the outsider in this case being the American public.

**Political Trend**

The first of the trends is political. We’re entering into a grim political climate, shaped by a severe economic recession. The pressures on the public, on the consumer, are mounting, and people are hurting. Gallup reports the lowest levels of confidence in the economy since they developed the confidence measure some 20 years ago. The public is anxious and worried both about the economy and foreign affairs. More than two-thirds of the public feels the country is on the wrong track. There’s been a growing concern on the part of Americans who feel that the world is becoming a much more dangerous place—about 80% now. The public is also aware that the United States is not held in high esteem abroad. This is not just a matter of Americans wanting to be liked; the public regards it as a genuine national security threat. (The Confidence in Foreign Policy Index, developed by the Public Agenda in cooperation with the Council on Foreign Relations, reveals the statistical patterns and numbers behind this trend. It’s available on the Public Agenda website at www.publicagenda.org.)

So, in addition to a low level of confidence in the conduct of the war in Iraq and our relations with the Middle East, what we have is a combination of strains that are creating ever more mistrust in our institutions. U.S. bankers and automakers were living in a fools’ paradise up to a few years ago. We know how quickly mistrust built up for them.

**How Higher Education is Breaking the Social Contract and What To Do About It**

The high cost of attendance hurts higher education’s ability to deliver on its core commitment to make social and economic mobility a realistic goal for average Americans. The perception that higher education is a necessary ticket to the middle class means that if our society doesn’t offer that opportunity, then its unwritten social contract with the public is being violated.

When public mistrust grows and combines with anxiety, the combination can easily lead to a kind of resentment the French call resentment, a technical term in political science. The buildup of public resentment is very bad for institutions. And there are sound reasons to believe that higher education could become a target in the future.

My sense is that you have a three- to five-year timeframe. That gives you some lead time to do what needs to be done in order that public resentment not build up too much momentum. We know that the nation’s bankers and automakers were living in a fools’ paradise up to a few years ago. We know how quickly mistrust built up for them.
call resentment, a technical term in political science. This kind of political resentment is probably second only to fear and the first being the fear of instability. That’s what creates revolutions and riots.

The buildup of public resentment is very bad for institutions. And there are sound reasons to believe that higher education could become a target in the future.

**Economic Trend**

The economic trend is, simply, that the costs of higher education are rising for students and parents. Again, you may be familiar with the overall trend, but a few numbers will help:

- The belief that college has become a necessity has risen steadily since 2000, while the conviction that there are many ways to succeed without going to college has dropped way down.
- Today, 87% of the public believes that college now is as important as a high school diploma was in the past, and a similar number, 88%, feel that no qualified, motivated student should be denied access because of cost.
- We’ve seen a significant rise over the last couple of years, up to 62% now, of people who feel that qualified students don’t have the access to higher education that they should have.

In brief, a majority of the public believe that college is necessary, but increasingly feel that access is being denied because of cost. I’ve been interpreting public opinion polls for more than half a century, and these numbers wave a red flag for me. They’re approaching a tipping point where you will soon begin to see strong negative repercussions and backlash.

I suspect that maybe we haven’t fully taken into account the new factor that is creating desperation in the public mind, namely, the growing lack of low-skill, high-paying, middle-class jobs. In effect, the perception that higher education is a necessary ticket to the middle class means that if our society doesn’t offer that opportunity, then its unwritten social contract with the public is being violated. The public is willing to accept the special privileges and the elitist culture of higher education, but only as long as higher education delivers on its core commitment to provide equality of opportunity through education. The heart and soul of the American core value system is that education is the royal ticket to middle-class status.

My sense is that you have a three- to five-year timeframe. That gives you some lead time to do what needs to be done in order that public resentment not build up too much momentum. We know that the nation’s bankers and automakers were living in a fools’ paradise up to a few years ago. We know how quickly mistrust built up for them. It may not happen in the same way for higher education, but this is such a fundamental societal problem that my hope is that by laying it out clearly it will be in the forefront of your minds and you’ll be more alert to the signs that it’s coming, so that you can take appropriate action.

**Demographic Trend**

The third trend, the emergence of a new constituency for higher education in the form of the retiring baby boom generation, is much more positive and cheerful. The boomer generation has been so large and so powerful and so self-centered that it has transformed everything it touches. And it’s going to do the same for higher education.

The meaning of retirement in the United States has been transformed over the past few decades. It used to be that you reached age 65, received Social Security, hung around for a year or two, and then conveniently died. Now there is an extra 15 to 20 years of life, and boomers are determined to make the best of it. They do not want to retire in the traditional sense, and they can’t afford to. So they’re going to look to higher education for two fundamental benefits.

The first is retooling for part-time work or for different work, because that’s part of the substitute for retirement. In that retooling, they will use the extension divisions of colleges and universities or go back to school in some other way.

The second is based on the old American tradition of self-improvement through higher education, which is a cultural and spiritual benefit rather than an economic one. Colleges and universities are beginning to respond to these initial expressions of interest by offering more extension courses and also by rethinking the humanities and social sciences as a means to offer the self-improvement that boomers seek so avidly.

The motivations for higher education to woo this new constituency are substantial. For alumni, one of the established facts of fundraising that has been demonstrated unequivocally is that if you have an existing relationship with alumni, they will give. This is an opportunity to deepen such relationships, and to initiate them where they don’t exist. This new constituency is also a source of political support. They represent not only a source of income, but also an opportunity to render community service.

This is particularly important for research universities, which present themselves as giving equal attention to research, teaching and community service. But it’s mostly lip service on the community service front. In this political climate, universities could easily be accused of bad faith or hypocrisy in promoting how much they claim to do for the community when most of the time, it doesn’t come close in importance to their research and teaching missions.
Cultural Trend

The cultural trend may not be as familiar or obvious as the others. It involves the variety of ways of knowing. You are all aware of the resurgence of religion and other forms of spirituality in our culture. One of the many sources of this resurgence is the conviction that we’ve lost our way ethically and spiritually. There is a sense that higher education responds to a different drummer. It exists within a different paradigm—the paradigm of scientific knowledge. In universities, the dominant epistemology is that of the scientific mindset leading to specialization, objectification, and quantification.

It is true that in the arts and humanities other ways of knowing dominate. The concept of emotional intelligence has been advanced by philosophers like Martha Nussbaum as well as by psychologists like Daniel Goleman and Howard Gardner. My book on dialogue [The Magic of Dialogue, 1999] describes dialogue itself as a distinct way of knowing, a way of gaining a kind of representative thinking that you can’t achieve through a scientific way of knowing. But by and large, nonscientific ways of truth-seeking and knowing have been on the defensive in higher education, particularly in research universities, for a long time—in contrast to their high standing in the popular culture.

We see this in the “intelligent design” controversy. I take that kind of controversy seriously, because it expresses a profound cultural uneasiness with the limitations of science-based knowledge. We have a public hungry for nonscientific ways to ground moral, political, religious, and cultural beliefs. The quest to understand the limits of the science-technology paradigm pressures higher education to do more with nonscientific ways of knowing. This has implications for a revival of interest in the humanities, and perhaps could inject them with a new vitality.

Strategies

Let me turn now to a few strategies, or ways you might respond to these trends.

The first strategy focuses on how to repair the social contract. There’s lots of experimentation going on to make college more affordable. The most ambitious is Harvard’s new financial aid initiative. But after Harvard and Yale and Princeton, it’s hard to think of institutions that have the kinds of resources to do what they’ve been doing.

At Northeastern University, students can alternate semesters of study with work in their field, and so are able to graduate without taking on a heavy burden of student loans. So there’s some experimentation in individual universities, but it will be very difficult to repair the social contract for the majority of students for a simple, fundamental reason: higher education thinks of financial aid for low-income families, but the resentment is strongest in middle-income families. They’re the ones saying, “They’re going to give the minorities and the lower-income families the help, but we’re going to be left out in the cold.” So if you consider that in hard economic times, you have to, in effect, subsidize both low-income and middle-income students, that encompasses most of the country.

I’d like to suggest very tentatively a way of approaching this challenge. It’s difficult for individual institutions to do, but maybe collectively it could happen. The question I’ve asked myself is, if the social contract touches on only a small part of the benefits that higher education offers, is there any way that you can isolate those benefits and somehow deliver them in a quasi-separate way? That could relieve some of the pressure and, whatever other problems remain, at least you would not be violating the social contract, which is the key to avoiding destructive public resentment.

Let me go back to the root cause of the problem. It’s that to realize the core value of equality of opportunity, access to higher education has become a necessity in an economy where, increasingly, low-skilled, high-paid, middle-class jobs have ceased to exist. You probably don’t think of higher education as a monopoly, but the perception from the public’s point of view is that it is a monopoly. And, when you consider the accreditation process, it does appear to be so.

Higher education offers Americans a wide range of benefits like student amenities and forms of acculturation and ways of knowing that are not part of the social contract. The two aspects that are essential to the social contract are, first, formal credentials (that is what employers look at), and second, also important to employers, is whether a job candidate can speak and write with proficiency, can think logically, and has disciplined work habits. In effect, these are the remedial and byproduct-aspects of higher education that four-year colleges try to deal with in the freshman year.

So the question I have asked myself is whether there is some way that students can acquire these minimum capabilities at a lower, more affordable cost, and not be saddled with a lot of debt? One clue to the answer to this question comes from public attitudes: more than two-thirds of the public feel that their higher education needs could be satisfied through two-year colleges and/or distance learning. The fact is that nearly 75% of today’s college students are not in the traditional 18-to-22 year-old age range, and for the non-conventional students, two-year colleges and distance learning hold lots of potential.

I’m suggesting a strategy that would lean more heavily on distance learning and also upgrade the two-year community college system. If necessary, find ways to subsidize it, control its costs, make it maximally cost-effective—no frills, but do the job that the social contract calls for. I suggest that four-
year colleges adopt community colleges and have a symbiotic relationship with them. I don’t think this should be left to the market and for-profit institutions. It would be smarter to look at community colleges as more than just stepping-stones to a good four-year college. Seeing them in a different light would help generate new solutions to the social contract problem.

Secondly, I’d also suggest strategizing about how to revitalize aspects of higher education that depend on nonscientific ways of knowing in the humanities and social sciences, which I think are particularly important for new boomer retirees. From an epistemological point of view, one can acknowledge that science is undoubtedly the best way to gain certain categories of knowledge, and yet at the same time acknowledge that science has little to contribute to the truths and knowledge that are vital to the deepest human aspirations of hope, cooperation and creativity. That’s because scientific knowledge leads to specialization, and while there’s no better way of accumulating certain form of knowledge, the result is that universities are producing fewer broad synoptic thinkers who cut across the specialized disciplines, and who can think in terms of policy and strategy as well as technical knowledge.

The third strategy to respond to the trends affecting higher education is to focus on how to communicate under conditions of mistrust. Higher education’s leaders are very good at communicating under conditions of trust. They say, “We are good people, we’re doing the right things, and there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be given the benefit of the doubt.” That works fine when trust exists. But when trust is absent, it doesn’t work at all—and mistrust of institutions in general is growing as is mistrust of higher education itself.

I propose seven basic principles for communicating under conditions of mistrust:

1. The claim of value-free neutrality doesn’t work under conditions of mistrust. Ethically neutral, value-free stands on issues like race, gender, class and the boundaries of political expression are seen as deceitful. Under conditions of mistrust, it’s important for institutions to work out their positions on these emotion-laden issues in advance, and not think that they can get away with being neutral and value-free.

2. Non-transparency backfires. Recognize that silence, denial, and closed doors are interpreted as evidence of bad faith, and anything non-transparent is suspect. A mistrustful public will attribute the worst possible motives to such maneuvers. When it is possible to make deliberations open and transparent, colleges should do so.

3. Do not count on being given the benefit of the doubt. Remember that no one gets the benefit of the doubt. Being good people and having good motives are not acceptable rationalizations, and noble goals with deeply flawed execution evoke accusations of hypocrisy.

4. Accept the responsibilities that go with noblesse oblige. More is expected from privileged institutions and faculty in research universities. Most institutions understand the responsibilities that go with privilege and do a great deal to meet them. But in the present climate, colleges should be explicit about their commitment to do so.

5. Avoid spin. Honesty and integrity respond to a genuine hunger on the part of the public, so that it’s possible to get significant competitive advantage simply by responding to that need with transparency and high standards. Be clear and candid, and avoid spin, denial and the like.

6. Keep expectations low and realistic. To build trust, it’s important first to acknowledge problems that people already know exist. Make few promises and commitments, and live up to each faithfully. Performance should exceed expectations, rather than the other way around.

7. Adopt a stewardship ethic. Make a conscious effort toward developing a stewardship ethic. Stewardship involves making a commitment to leave the institution better off than you found it. It also extends the perimeter you care about to a wider community, including parents, the public and the society at large, as well as faculty and students.

Conclusion

We live in a time of uncertainty and change, and we face some tough years ahead. Higher education has been basking for so long in public adulation that it’s hard to take the trends I have described to heart and act on them. But the threat today to higher education’s social contract—which is at the very core of the American value system—is real. Now is the time for higher education’s leaders to be more nimble than ever before and to take action before a crisis of confidence overwhelms them.

Daniel Yankelovich founded the research firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White and in the 1970s initiated The New York Times/Yankelovich poll, the predecessor to The New York Times/CBS poll. He is founder and current chairman of Viewpoint Learning, Inc., a firm that advances dialogue-based learning as a core skill in newer forms of leadership; DYG, Inc., a market research firm tracking social trends; and Public Agenda, a public education not-for-profit founded with Cyrus Vance in 1975. Yankelovich can be reached at Daniel@Yankelovich.ws.