A midst the early signs of a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, along with the inevitable excitement accompanying an impending change in presidential administration, it was fitting that the Ford Policy Forum, an integral part of the Forum for the Future of Higher Education's Annual Symposium, focus on a question whose answer will have a long-term impact on our economy and on our society: that is, How do we measure and foster college success? The Ford Policy Forum is chaired by Michael McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, presidents of the Spencer Foundation and Northwestern University, respectively. Its goal is to bring the insight of economists and other scholars to bear on critical issues affecting higher education. We hope that the lessons drawn from the Ford Forum's work will both inform the policy agenda in Washington and beyond, and have direct implications for how we might run our campuses more effectively.

Why College Success Matters

Since World War II, the United States has built a higher education system that has become the envy of the world, not only creating great universities that have become peaks of excellence but also pioneering the goal, now shared with many other nations, of making access to postsecondary education available to most high school graduates. There is much to make us proud. roughly two out of three high school graduates currently enroll at one of America's approximately 3,500 not-for-profit colleges and universities within a year of leaving high school. But there are significant differences by race and by income in the likelihood that high school graduates will enroll in college and, even more striking, there are stark differences in the likelihood of graduating high school in the first place. Moreover, to truly realize our ambitious goals, we must also consider what happens to students after they enroll in college. How many graduate? How much do they learn?

In a nutshell, three issues must be resolved for American higher education to succeed:

(1) Talented young men and women must be encouraged to develop their potential during their K-12 education in order to become college ready.

(2) Those who are college ready should in fact enroll at suitable colleges—not just at any college, but one that maximizes the chances they will thrive there.

(3) Once they are in college, students should have every opportunity to succeed there.

Should we fail in any of these three areas, the nation will pay the price. Not only will the ability for inter-generational mobility be severely hampered, leading to possibly dire social and political impacts, but the long-term economic prospects of our nation will be undermined. In a globalized world, with rival nations ramping up their educational systems in an effort to compete more effectively with the United States, economic history suggests that wasting human resources will do more to limit future growth and prosperity than even the grossest inefficacy in the allocation of physical and financial capital.

Given the extensive literature and discussion on preparing for college and subsequently enrolling (some of which has been addressed in previous sessions of the Ford Policy Forum), we focus here on the third issue, college success.

It isn't easy to even agree on...
how to define college success, much less figure out how to encourage it. The American higher education system is remarkably heterogeneous, both in terms of the students who enroll and the colleges and universities that educate them. Some students are of traditional college age (18 to 22 years old) who enroll full-time shortly after graduating high school and have specific post-collegiate plans. To them, a bachelor’s degree is a stepping stone to a particular career or to further training. Many other students are older and enroll part-time while working. For this group, college success means acquiring specific skills regardless of whether a college degree is ever earned. Not surprisingly, the institutions that educate these very different students have little in common with one another, ranging from large public and private research universities that have at least as much at stake with their professional schools, hospitals, and Ph.D. programs as they do with their undergraduates, to small liberal arts colleges focused almost entirely on undergraduate education. Likewise, for some schools, success means maintaining a very high graduation rate; for others it is preparing students to upgrade jobs or to transfer to other academic institutions. These topics are explored in detail in our edited volume that shares its title with the name of this session (College Success: What It Means and How to Make It Happen, Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, Editors, College Board 2008).

As always, the key to the success of the Ford Policy Forum is the quality of the presenters. We were privileged to call upon three individuals with impressive service at a range of institutional types. Edward Ayers, president of the University of Richmond, previously served as Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. His innovative work in teaching American history has been highlighted widely and in 2003 he was the Carnegie Foundation National Professor of the Year. Diana Walsh recently concluded a brilliant 14 year stint as president of Wellesley College, following her time as a professor at Harvard’s School of Public Health. Susan Engel is a professor of psychology at Williams College where she also runs its program in teaching. Her expertise in innovative teaching has been shared in many forums, including in her columns in The New York Times.

Together, they have extensive experience at small schools and large, privates and a public, at research universities and colleges. That background is critical in analyzing such an important, yet elusive, topic as college success.

**Scale and Success in American Higher Education**

To help define success, Edward Ayers focused his remarks on the most prestigious 150 private and public colleges and universities in the country. Differences in a number of key indicators—diversity, six-year graduation rates, student debt, etc.—are smaller than most would imagine, as institutions attempt to mirror each other in strange but understandable ways. Small liberal arts colleges, for example, work hard to foster an illusion of scale in terms of their extensive curricular and extra-curricular offerings, while large research universities do their best to create a sense of intimacy to mirror that important aspect of a small college experience. The aim is to claim some of what those institutions at the other end of the spectrum possess.

Ayers notes a telling indicator, from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which found that students generally are satisfied wherever they go to school, with more than 80 percent professing themselves happy with their choice. He also cites research by the American Association of Colleges and Universities identifying three types of high-impact educational experiences that make the biggest differences in what students learn: the ability to engage in research alongside faculty, the chance to study abroad, and the opportunity to have a culminating curricular experience. Outside the classroom, the chance to participate in student government and various student-run clubs, and to cheer on varsity teams, appears to add to student satisfaction. These observations imply that lessons for fostering student success, at least among the nation’s 150 most prestigious schools, transcend institutional types. Students with the talent to attend a top college or university seek a similar kind of engagement regardless of whether they are enrolled at a private college focused exclusively on undergraduate education for 2,000 students, or at a complex public institution with law, medical, and business schools and 20,000 students. Ayers concludes that sharing success stories over a wide range of colleges and universities makes more sense than many might suspect.

**Learning About Learning**

Diana Walsh draws on lessons she learned at the helm of a college that most would agree helps set the standard for excellence in undergraduate education. For her, college success involves learning in its broadest sense, as students develop critical thinking skills along with values and character. She argues that the most selective institutions are in perhaps the best position to investigate what leads to student learning and student success. Walsh suggests a new learning initiative where learning is measured and faculty, students, staff and trustees work together to improve the results. She envisions the academic...
leadership and faculty in some of the nation’s top institutions leading the process for the academy as a whole. They would start at home, and build from their own classrooms and disciplines. They would consult with their students and pool ideas and resources with like-minded colleagues and conduct collaborative and robust research to discover what works.

Walsh’s goal isn’t accountability in the sense of state or federal oversight, but rather to encourage institutions to reallocate resources to advance student learning. She imagines uniting the world of excellent teaching with advances in cognitive sciences and cyberlearning and seeing what that produces. At the heart of this exercise is a call for faculty members to focus on who their students are, how they learn, and what they need to succeed after college. Walsh points to encouraging examples of these kinds of initiatives at Wellesley and elsewhere, and believes that these efforts could succeed at a broader level. She calls for cooperation across institutions rather than the zero-sum-game of rankings and competition-driven amenities and frills.

**What is Good College Teaching?**

Engel helps shine a light into the “black box” of the classroom. What constitutes excellent teaching? How can we increase the chances of creating a transformative educational experience? Rather than simply ask the best way for faculty to impart knowledge, Engel argues that the conversation should be broadened to ask how faculty can change the way students see the world. She identifies three elements, all focused on how to encourage students to think and participate in class discussions, as essential to a transformative college experience: First, provide students opportunities to think like experts, to pose questions experts might ask, and then to apply the appropriate disciplinary tools that lead to answers. Second, provide students the chance to come up with new ideas as they grapple with genuine, rather than rhetorical, questions. That is, don’t preach about critical thinking; rather, ask questions and set tasks that require it. Third, the chance for students to be part of an intellectual group is also key to a successful educational experience. Just as coaches often develop a communal sense of involvement on their teams, those of us on the academic faculty should strive to do the same.

Engel emphasizes the importance of analyzing how what we do in our classes affects life after graduation. We can understand better what works and what doesn’t by following up with research that links students’ particular academic experiences with their eventual reading habits, decision making processes, and openness to new ideas. Similar to Walsh, accountability to Engel isn’t so much about what students can do during exam week or soon after graduation, but rather about how the intellectual habits of mind they acquire during college transform the rest of their lives.

**Conclusion**

All three presenters argue that there are common lessons that can be applied across American higher education, despite its extraordinary heterogeneity. For Ayers, the type of school one attends matters surprisingly little in applying the proven ingredients in fostering college success. Walsh feels we should all think a bit more about serving the public good as opposed to our narrow institutional interests as we embrace a learning initiative focused on student outcomes. Engel’s thoughts on successful teaching are as applicable at the most selective and heavily resourced college as at its less privileged counterpart.

Perhaps this isn’t all that surprising. Whether an individual is 20 years old and enrolled full time while pursuing a degree in philosophy, or 40 years old and trying to gain a specific skill while fully employed, he or she is, as Engel put it, seeking a transformative educational experience. Students in American higher education start from very different points and seek very different destinations. But the ultimate aim of any educational encounter is to transform in some way, be it to enhance earning potential or to instill a love of learning—or very likely somewhere in between. At the end of the day, where an institution is ranked matters little; rather, the relevant question is, *How do its students emerge from their educational experiences?* We hope that applying lessons of success will ultimately create more satisfied and more productive citizens who have enriched not only their wallets but their lives.

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