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Quality: The Indispensable Word in the Push for “Access to Higher Education”

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The Obama administration established a vision for America's future that includes having the [world's largest share of college graduates by 2020](#). This goal requires a nationwide set of initiatives aimed at increasing from 40% to roughly 60% the percentage of adults in our country with completed college degrees and certificates.

The [Lumina Foundation](#) punched up the visibility of this ambitious target and is putting the full strength of its financial and human resources behind what it calls "an audacious goal" for higher education attainment. It's so much a part of our culture that the phrase "Access to Higher Education" yields nearly 1.2 million results in a Google search.

We all know that for our democratic processes and national political dialogue to be less polarizing, for our country to succeed in our ever-flattening global economy, for our jobs to remain within our borders, for our underserved populations to change the trajectory of their families, our country must invest in a broad menu of strategies that will, when executed simultaneously, push open the floodgates and raise the education levels for US citizens in all demographic categories.

Sometimes lost in the effort to promote access and degree completion, however, is a focus on quality. In a [2003 Chronicle Review article](#), William F. Massy wrote that "When policy makers are asked to identify the biggest issues in higher education, they often cite college costs and high tuitions or access for underserved students. But, although those issues are important, resolving them will make little difference if colleges and universities don't deliver high-quality education."

I agree with William Massy. In fact, **I believe that access to quality higher education is the key civil rights issue of the 21st Century**. And so do many others who continue to articulate concerns about the quality of higher education in America and about how much students learn once they gain access.

Much criticism has been leveled at institutions that provide access but do not promote completion, or those that promote completion but cannot demonstrate adequate delivery of [AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes](#).

As we lament this shadow on the landscape of higher education, we should not overlook the bright spot created by our nation's independent colleges and universities that already produce outstanding results for students. Those of us at [Council of Independent Colleges](#) (CIC) institutions know that overall our brand of education offers an affordable alternative that includes personal attention to students, focuses on high-impact practices resulting in essential learning outcomes, produces relatively high graduation rates even for "at risk" students, and inspires community involvement that continues after graduation.

Similarly, the [Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges](#) (COPLAC) successfully strives to advance “high quality public liberal arts education in a student centered environment.” And other consortia such as the [New American Colleges and Universities](#) emphasize quality, in NACU’s case “to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning” by integrating liberal arts, professional studies, and civic responsibility. If space allowed, I could go on to list the dozens of consortia and individual institutions, private and public, that truly place quality, rather than efficiency, at the top of their priority list.

This means that as a whole, we are poised and ready to be part of the solution. Please join me in a public dialogue that teases out the values that drive our work and the “how” behind our positive outcomes. In this way, we refocus the national conversation on “quality” and call ourselves and others to engage in access initiatives and ongoing quality improvement in American higher education.

Recognizing quality in a rigorous way requires that we interrogate curricula and institutions with the right questions. I believe that there are three essential questions for all institutions to ask and answer:

- **Does the content of the curriculum address 21st Century benchmarks for essential student learning outcomes?**
- **Are the students inspired to take advantage of those quality offerings as they matriculate?**
- **Does learning actually accrue, as a result of that student engagement?**

What do you think? How are these questions useful? Do the questions apply to a broad range of institutional types? What am I missing? What are your thoughts?