OBAMA-BIDEN TRANSITION PROJECT

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NASULGC National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

November 20, 2008

Mr. Seth Harris
Obama-Biden Education, Labor, and Transportation Transition Working Group
Director, Labor and Employment Law
New York Law School
57 Worth Street
New York, NY 10013

Dear Mr. Harris:

Congratulations on being chosen to serve on the Obama-Biden transition team. I can see that this is the daunting task that you and your colleagues face. It is in that spirit that I write on behalf of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) and the 218 presidents and chancellors of the nation's largest public universities and university systems it represents.

As you consider the myriad of policies and programs for the Department, we respectfully offer the following document for review by you and your colleagues as well as the new Secretary of Education. We believe that the attached document, reviewed by our presidents and chancellors of our member institutions at a meeting a few days ago, can be of assistance to you and the new Secretary as the higher education agenda is developed and can also be of help in the new Secretary's interactions with the broader higher education community from the outset.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Peter McPherson
President

PM/sh

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Introduction

NASULGC offers the following comments and recommendations to the next Secretary of Education as that individual attempts to address many of the challenges facing the U.S. higher education system. NASULGC stands ready to work with the new Secretary.

- **ASSUME LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE AND ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION**

We believe that the new Secretary can be a very effective change agent for higher education. However, to be effective the Secretary must work with the reality of a decentralized and locally controlled higher education system as well as a culture of consultation and engagement that lies at the heart of academia. It is clear that higher education has changed over the past decade as a result of voluntary efforts, but the academic community will strongly and generally effectively resist federally directed change. Still, higher education can be inspired by vision and will collaborate for decentralized change.

To that end, as one way to interact with the community, we recommend that the Secretary create a formal Advisory Group or Committee which can serve as a forum for dialogue on the various challenges facing higher education. To be effective, the Secretary will need to be personally engaged with the committee The Department of Education (ED) may wish to create a similar mechanism for the K-12 system and, when warranted, the two organizations should meet jointly to discuss issues impacting both. Such an advisory body could assist the Secretary in addressing concerns and questions related to improving access and persistent rates.

There are precedents in the federal government for such bodies. The Advisory Committee to the Director at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides an opportunity for the biomedical community and the public to engage with the agency. In addition, the National Science Board (NSB) at the National Science Foundation (NSF) provides oversight and guidance on the agency agenda. While we would not propose to prescribe the membership or organizational form of the body, such an entity with a qualified, experienced and representative membership deserves serious consideration.

In addition, *we suggest that the Secretary create a mechanism to engage with the broader community in a less formal manner.* It is important that this be both an opportunity to communicate the Secretary's views but to get the input of the community and work through issues. Of course, such a conversational approach should be used in the formal advisory committee setting as well. Such a setting should establish a positive and genuine working relationship between the Department and the higher education community and get results for the Secretary and the community.

One example of why such an approach is needed involves the Department's recent attempts to federalize "accountability" in the form of proposed changes to the accreditation process. These proposals were met with stiff resistance from the higher

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education community. A major cause of the opposition was the manner in which the previous Administration sought to overhaul the culture and core of the academic enterprise without consultation. The community's concern was that the Department's approach would be inflexible and would threaten the quality of higher education. The Department did not seem to recognize the significant, independent efforts made by the higher education community to address many of its concerns. Upon learning of the Department's proposal, the community balked and reacted confrontationally rather than collaboratively.

A number of voluntary efforts that effectively further two primary goals of the past Administration's attempts to overhaul accreditation, i.e., creating transparency and measuring learning outcomes, have been underway within various sectors of higher education. The Voluntary System of Accountability™ —a joint venture between NASULGC and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), which both increases transparency and furthers the measurement of learning outcomes—has gained the support and commitment of more than 300 public four-year institutions around the country over the past year. This support represents a majority of the public four-year institutions in the United States and more institutions are signing up regularly. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) has undertaken its University and College Accountability Network (UCAN) initiative, an effort that focuses on transparency. Both efforts were launched to provide a further vehicle for U.S. colleges and universities to demonstrate they are transparent and accountable in myriad ways. Both systems offer a template for institutions to provide valuable information to the public, including prospective students and their parents. They are constantly being modified to provide more useful consumer information.

Fundamental changes to higher education are best achieved in collaboration with the institutions that provide the education, not as a result of a governmental directive. The higher education community must be a true partner to effectively generate significant changes, regardless of their nature and scope. Such collaboration will be of critical importance to successfully address some of these national challenges especially during intensifying national and state financial difficulties.

We believe that the steps outlined above could set the appropriate tone in meeting many of the challenges described below.

- **SERVE AS AN INTERAGENCY LEADER ON VITAL ISSUES**

Another means by which the Secretary can bring about change is to serve as a very visible interagency, inter-Cabinet leader on a number of critical issues that affect higher education but are not entirely within the purview of the Department.

International Education: The new Secretary of Education should visibly work with the new Secretary of State to urge the easing of diplomatic barriers between the United States

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and other nations to foster and increase the international exchange of students, faculty, and ideas. Not only must the United States continue to attract the best international students, the U.S. must encourage many more American students to study abroad. In particular, we ask the Secretary to strongly support the Paul Simon Study Abroad legislation, which has the goal of send one million American students abroad each year in ten years. The Secretaries of Education and State together should help raise the public visibility and profile of the need for international education. International education, in the context of globalization, is a critical component of higher education and must be a two-way street.

Graduate Education and Research: The Secretary also must serve as the interagency advocate for graduate education and research. While the Department's graduate education portfolio is relatively small, the Secretary must serve as the visible advocate for the importance of graduate education. Our country's future competitiveness depends upon world-leading doctoral education. Such education can be delivered by our institutions most effectively if our faculty members are engaged in cutting-edge research and doctoral education is fully integrated into their research efforts. This is especially true in agriculture, the natural and social sciences, mathematics, medicine and engineering. Your collaboration with the agencies that sponsor such research can enable our faculty to produce the innovative research findings our country requires, while ensuring graduate education remains strong.

Science and Mathematics Teacher Education: There are a number of reasons for the concerns over U.S. global competitiveness, including the diminished educational attainment of our students when compared internationally and the declining interest and preparation in science and mathematics. NASULGC members are facing this challenge through an initiative aimed at training science and mathematics teachers at our universities. Our member universities generally have large undergraduate populations and research-intensive science and mathematics departments giving them a strategic advantage to provide the rigorous disciplinary training teachers need. We will need the collaboration, including direct support, of the Department and other federal agencies in our efforts to dramatically expand the number of well-educated science and mathematics teachers.

While various federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) have important roles in educating future science and mathematics teachers, it is the Education Department that is closest to the overall challenges of preparing, developing and retaining well-qualified teachers. We believe the Secretary of Education should be a visible leader on this issue and create more powerful collaborations with other agencies that incorporate their interests and expertise, and which will allow them to strengthen their own programs.

- **PROMOTE AND SUPPORT QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY**

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NASULGC believes a number of obstacles can be dealt with through innovative incentives to improve efficiency. Increasing graduation rates while maintaining educational quality reduces costs while furthering national goals.

Increase graduation rates and educational attainment levels: The lower-than-desired levels of higher education attainment and college graduation rates are well-documented by different sources. Disparities among white, black and Hispanic students are of particular concern. We join with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEOs) in calling for increasing the higher education attainment rate to at least 55 percent for all 25- to 34-year-olds. Yet, a single-minded focus on increased graduation rates is likely lead to greater admissions selectivity. The future of our nation is dependent on improving both graduation rates and educational attainment levels, as we cannot afford to let them become mutually exclusive activities.

To increase educational attainment rates we must increase high school graduation rates and improve the college readiness of high school graduates. We encourage Departmental support for efforts like the American Diploma Project, aimed at improving the alignment between high school curricula and college (and work) entry requirements.

An increasingly large proportion of students are choosing two-year colleges. While this route to a higher education reduces expenses, too often it does not lead to earning the associates degree or transferring to a four-year university to earn a bachelors degree. We urge the Department to support and encourage practices and research that improve retention and the transition to four-year institutions.

Support voluntary efforts to measure and improve the quality of higher education: Some worry that increasing the number of Americans earning bachelors and advanced degrees might be accomplished at the cost of diminishing the quality of education. While we believe that the dramatic increases in enrollment in recent decades have not adversely affected quality, our ability to measure higher education quality is not sufficient.

NASULGC and our sister public university association, AASCU, have taken the lead in developing a trial to measure higher education's value-added in the selected areas of critical thinking, problem solving and written communication. As noted above, more than 300 of our member universities participating in the VSA are engaged in a trial project to measure value-added. We hold a major grant from the Department's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) program, to subject value-added measurement instruments to a study with the aim of thoroughly understanding their effectiveness. Under that same grant we are also developing other measures for the quality of higher educational outcomes.

The point is this: no matter how much our nation needs more graduates, we cannot compromise educational quality. It is important for the Department to support flexible, voluntary efforts that enable individual institutions to develop and use measures of the quality of the education that genuinely measure learning outcomes. Imposing inflexible

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measurements and reporting mechanisms could inadvertently force a narrowing of the diversity of our universities' educational approaches. *We urge the Secretary to encourage additional voluntary efforts to measure the quality of higher education and to provide research funding to refine methods of measuring quality.*

Keeping the cost to the student affordable: We support the sentiments echoed by a host of organizations and entities that the federal government must fund the need-based aid programs, especially the Pell Grant, to their fullest. We ask for your support for increasing the Pell Grant awards and other programs that support low-income students annually so that students from modest backgrounds will have the same opportunity to earn degrees that the more economically fortunate have.

In addition, we believe that simplifying the federal student aid application process will assist academically qualified students to attend college. *We urge the Secretary to take steps to simplify the aid process in consultation with other federal agencies, states, and institutions and do so without impacting the availability of aid to disadvantaged populations.*

While affordability is a universal concern, there has been little agreement on how to address the issue. Public higher education has operated with essentially flat per student, inflation adjusted budgets for the last two decades. Public higher education tuition has risen substantially during these two decades but those tuition increases have offset reductions in real per student support from our states. *Our per student educational costs are, in fact, flat.* Nevertheless, our tuition rates are likely to continue to go up unless the states fund our institutions better.

While the per student costs of delivering higher education have been flat in the public sector, reduction in our cost of delivering education would make possible smaller tuition increases in the future. Large cost reductions might even warrant tuition decreases. The Department could play a role in helping us reduce cost but, as discussed above, changes in higher education are unlikely to come about as a result of federal mandates; rather, the federal government should look for the right combination of incentives to encourage voluntary changes.

We offer the following possible incentives:

- In addition to the formal Advisory Committee recommended above, we also suggest that the Secretary establish a senior staff-level working group between the department and the community that would address and resolve a number of concerns that stem from Departmental mandates. We believe that such a development could lead to reductions in unnecessary expenses at institutions and allow them to focus their efforts and resources more narrowly.

- While new funds are going to be scarce in the new Administration, the Secretary has the opportunity to shape and designate priorities in the FIPSE program. The Secretary should encourage innovative efforts through pilot and seed funds made

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available through FIPSE. The methods of delivering instruction on our campuses are changing rapidly but we are hopeful research breakthroughs in cognitive science or in the application of games to learning or in some other area can dramatically increase learning and perhaps decrease cost. Putting Department financial support behind efforts that promise such gains is important. Continuing research into ensuring the effectiveness of distance education with its burgeoning enrollments is a clear way to focus on both cost reduction and quality improvement.

The scope of these efforts is up to the Secretary to decide. However, correctly structured, we believe they will significantly address a number of our shared concerns.

Conclusion

The challenges facing the new Secretary and the higher education system are daunting. The number of students enrolled in public higher education has increased from 11 million to 13 million in the last decade, which includes increases in proportions of white, black and Hispanic populations. For the U.S. to effectively compete in the world and to rightfully serve the country's citizens, public higher education must continue to expand and further increase participation rates of our society. We ask that the new Secretary recognize the progress we have made and advocate for and assist our efforts to move forward.

NASULGC offers these suggestions set for here for consideration by the new Secretary and looks forward to working with the new Administration.