

# Divided We Fail

## Are Leaders and Citizens Talking Past Each Other on Higher Education?

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### **An Interim Report on the 2013 National Issues Forums Prepared for the Board of the National Issues Forums Institute**

*When typical Americans talk about the mission of higher education, their conversations are startlingly different from those of policymakers. How do college students, parents, professors, employers, and others describe their hopes for—and concerns about—higher education? How does their vision compare with that of leaders now proposing and adopting reforms?*

During the past year, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) has cooperated with the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP) and The Democracy Commitment (TDC) to convene more than 100 forums across the country as part of a project entitled *Shaping Our Future*. These forums, sponsored by convening organizations throughout the National Issues Forums network, have brought college students, high school students, parents, faculty, employers, retirees, and others together to deliberate about the mission of higher education and the role it should play in the nation's social, political, and economic progress.

Although *Shaping Our Future* forums will continue into the fall, the project has already yielded important results. The forums so far reveal a potentially troublesome gap between the way those outside the policymaking arena think and talk about higher education and the already well-developed debate now underway among

elected officials and other national, state, and local leaders. Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from these deliberations is the urgent need to broaden discussions to ensure that the ideas and concerns of both leaders and those outside policymaking circles get an adequate hearing in the debate on the future of higher education.

The ideas, insights, and concerns of citizens who participated in the forums will be captured in a final report tentatively entitled *Divided We Fail: Are Leaders and Citizens Talking Past Each Other on Higher Education?* Our work so far poses two questions. One is how to bring more citizens from all walks of life into these deliberations on the future of higher education. The second is how to address the gaps between leaders and citizens so these disconnects do not end up undermining public confidence in higher education or derailing support for the changes needed to improve the system.

## HERE ARE SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CONTRASTS THE REPORT WILL HIGHLIGHT

### LEADERS AND EXPERTS

Both inside and outside higher education, *innovation* is the watchword. Facing a more competitive international economy and relentlessly rising college costs, leaders say now is the moment for higher education to reinvent itself. Some are asking tough questions about the place of traditional, four-year degrees in today's world.

Business and government leaders have called for higher education to graduate more scientists, engineers, and technology innovators to bolster US competitiveness.

Leaders voice deep concern about how governments and students can afford higher education's rising costs.

Most leaders say that it is imperative to increase the number of Americans attending and completing college in order to strengthen the economy.

Leaders are advancing a number of specific ideas and reforms—competency-based education, for example—that they believe will make higher education more affordable and more in step with the needs of the job market. Many are focusing on community colleges as an increasingly crucial part of the system overall.

### PARTICIPANTS IN THE NIF FORUMS

Forum participants spoke repeatedly about the benefits of a rich, varied college education. Most saw enormous value in the classic four-year residential experience where, in their view, students have time and space to explore new ideas and diverse fields. For many participants, being able to take advantage of this experience is the key to becoming an educated person.

Most participants saw this as a laudable goal, but not a pressing one and not one that would improve the economy for most Americans. Many stressed that STEM professionals will be more creative if they too are more broadly educated.

Most participants seemed to be at a very early stage of their thinking on this issue. Many were alarmed by student debt, but there was little focused discussion about the difficult choices and trade-offs involved in containing costs in the system overall.

Many participants wondered whether the country has gone too far in encouraging students to attend college—especially traditional, four-year programs. Some worried that college students too often aren't sufficiently prepared or motivated to take advantage of what higher education offers.

Most forum participants had not focused on or deliberated on many of these ideas prior to the sessions. For most, "college" meant traditional four-year programs, and many did not initially talk about the role or importance of community colleges. This was generally true even of faculty or college administrators attending the forums.

## THE SHAPING OUR FUTURE FORUMS

Given the topic of higher education, it is not surprising that many *Shaping Our Future* forums were held on college campuses, that many of the convening groups were higher education institutions, and that many of the participants had some connection to, or special interest in, higher education. A list of forums held to date appears at the end of this report.

Organizers of most forums took steps to invite local community residents in addition to students, faculty, administrators, university employees, recent grads, and others. Some forums, such as those organized by book clubs and senior centers, mainly drew citizens without any formal connection to higher education, although most tended to be college graduates.

For these forums, NIFI published a short issue guide called *Shaping Our Future: How Can Higher Education*

*Help Us Create the Society We Want?* The guide describes three alternative missions for higher education: 1) emphasizing science and technology education to help the economy; 2) offering students a rich, broad education and emphasizing principles like responsibility, integrity, and working together; and 3) expanding opportunity by helping more students attend college and graduate. It also lays out the rationale behind each option and suggests policy actions that might accompany each of them, emphasizing both the advantages and drawbacks of these proposals. In most forums, participants saw a video introducing the topic and recapping the alternatives. In some sessions, participants also completed short questionnaires capturing their thinking following the deliberations.

## WHO COMES TO THE FORUMS?

The NIF forums attract individuals of all ages from around the country and gives them the chance to weigh different missions for higher education and exchange views on alternative ideas for addressing the challenges it faces. As might be expected, most of those who opt to come to the forums have an expressed interest in higher education—either as students, faculty, parents, or simply adults who believe their own college experiences played a central role in shaping their lives and expanding their opportunities. Consequently, the reflections captured here should not be read as a formal or systematic survey of public opinion.

However, the NIF forums do provide another kind of insight. The students, alums, professors, business people, community organizers, retirees, and others who come to the forums are especially attentive to higher education issues. Moreover, they typically spend 90 minutes or more in the forums talking with colleagues, classmates, and neighbors about higher education's challenges and weighing alternative visions for its future. As such, their thinking may well foreshadow concerns, questions, and ideals that will emerge among a broader swath of the public as leaders move forward with reform.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Below, we suggest a set of questions that, based on what we have seen in the forums to date, warrant much broader and more inclusive discussions—discussions that invite participation from leaders and the broader public alike. The challenge highlighted here is that the country is now having two very different, largely separate, conversations about the future of higher education. What is promising is that so many Americans outside the policymaking arena want to think and talk more about the mission of higher education and its role in shaping our collective future.

The final report on the forums will showcase the enormous divide between the policymaker debate on higher education and the ideas and concerns among the more typical citizens who participated in the forums. Both groups bring important values and issues to the table but, at present, there is substantial crosstalk and miscommunication between them.

Indeed, the principal take-away from the forums is the need for broader, more inclusive deliberations—conversations that bridge the customary divisions in our society. These include divisions between policymakers and citizens, educators and employers, faculty and students, people on campuses and in communities, those who are lucky enough to have college degrees and those who haven't. The NIF forums have propelled the conversation, but they also suggest additional questions that warrant more inclusive deliberation:

**1. What does it mean to be well educated?** The forums suggest that some leaders may have underestimated the value many Americans place on college as a time and place where students receive a rich and broad education—something beyond specific job training. So what does it mean to be well-educated in today's world? Are the liberal arts—or perhaps an updated version of them—a thing of the past, or is it the very thing we need?

**2. How do we make higher education affordable—for governments and for students?** The cost challenges facing higher education are real, and the choices they present are not easy. But absent a better understanding of the options and a wider participation in choosing the

best ones, many Americans may be inclined to push back against needed change. How can we move this conversation out of state houses, legislatures, and expert seminars to include many more Americans? Can we control costs without jeopardizing the aspects of higher education citizens value most?

**3. What does it mean to be prepared for the world of work when it changes year by year?** Many in the forums voiced an almost idealistic view of what education should be, but that didn't mean they weren't worried about students getting jobs. In fact, they were troubled by the idea that the kind of education that benefits a student over a lifetime may not be the kind of education that will help a new graduate get a job right out of college. Is higher education about educating people for the long-term, or do we assume that we'll all be "going back to school" throughout our lives. What do employers really want, and is it higher education's job to deliver it?

**4. Should all young people be encouraged to go to college?** Forum participants seemed to struggle with what they saw as a tension between giving all young people the chance to improve their education and the risk that higher education will lower its standards in an effort to help more people graduate. Are these goals of accepting many more young people into institutions of higher learning and maintaining high academic standards in tension? Should we encourage all students to pursue degrees? And what should we offer to students who aren't interested in further academic study?

**5. What do we mean by "equal opportunity" in higher education?** Both the forums and public surveys show that the country is divided over whether our current higher education system really offers an equal chance for all. Many Americans believe that even low-income students can still graduate from college by going part-time and choosing less expensive public options. But is that really equal opportunity? Should we do more to avoid developing a two-tiered system where affluent youngsters can choose full-time, residential, liberal arts colleges, but lower-income students rarely have that option?

## WILL HIGHER EDUCATION BE REINVENTED FROM THE TOP DOWN?

The higher education system in the United States now faces an array of daunting challenges—some financial, some pertaining to purpose. The results of the *Shaping Our Future* forums show that many citizens do not yet recognize the depth of these challenges. Yet, these same citizens have ideals, values, and concerns that should be weighed as part of the policymaking

equation. The question going forward is whether higher education will be reshaped from the top down, adopting changes and solutions that skip over public concerns, or whether leaders will find ways to co-frame solutions side by side with the citizens they say they want to serve.

## FORUMS ARE “AWESOME”

For many NIF participants, the opportunity to talk about the future of higher education and its role in society was a new one. Even though a majority had some connection to a college or university, about 4 in 10 of those completing questionnaires said they heard ideas in the forums that were new to them. Some commented that the forums helped them see, as one Iowa woman put it, that “this is something that I need to be concerned about. This is a public issue.”

A Kansas student went further: “This is my first time at something like this—in politics or whatever. I stay far, far [away] from that, but I really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed putting [in] my opinion, being able to think about this stuff. It was awesome.”

This is an interim report on the 2011-2012 National Issues Forums deliberations prepared by Jean Johnson of Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

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The Charles F. Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, DC, and New York City), is a nonprofit operating foundation chartered in 1927. The foundation is not a grantmaker but rather engages in joint research with others. Kettering’s primary research question is: what does it take to make democracy work as it should? For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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## A SAMPLING OF REFLECTIONS FROM THE FORUMS

“Granted, I’m biased towards the liberal arts, but if you have a higher education background, period, you’ve had opportunity to be exposed to different cultures, different lifestyles, different religions, different belief systems, and you have a heart that is not—a heart and a mind that are both opened, and I think that’s what education does for you.”

*Manhattan, Kansas*

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“Thinking about college solely [as career preparation] just makes you a resource to be optimized by society, rather than to be a real person and a free thinker.”

*Albuquerque, New Mexico*

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“Whatever [students are] studying right now is probably not going to be true in five years, two years, maybe. You don’t know, maybe next year. You can’t learn this box and then use that forever, because that’s not the way the world is now.”

*Des Moines, Iowa*

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“We’ve lost the idea or the feeling that education is sacred. . . . When people are worried about going to school to get the job, to get a job, to make money, to get a job, to make money . . . I think at that point, we’re putting price tags on education. As soon as we do that, then education, in and of itself, is no longer sacred.”

*Denver, Colorado*

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“Innovation is the strength of the United States in science and technology. That means a broadly educated and experienced person. . . . They need to be very good at their technology or science, but [they need more than that] or we’re going to be another China.”

*Manhattan, Kansas*

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“How many people in this country can afford to pay \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year—one year? I can’t even wrap my brain around that. I think there is something really, really, very, very wrong about that.”

*Laurel, Maryland*

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“We’re so driven toward [the idea that] everybody is going to graduate and go to college, and we’re leaving a lot of kids behind who are not academically inclined and don’t have the skills—[who] need more hands-on classes—and we have nothing for them. They are dying in our high schools.”

*Denver, Colorado*

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“Not everybody is well-suited even for a four-year degree. How do we value those other options, those other avenues, and how do we remove the kinds of obstacles to access that aren’t just financial?”

*Greensboro, North Carolina*



## SHAPING OUR FUTURE FORUM LOCATIONS, 2012-2013 (THROUGH JULY)

### Alaska

Mar 27, 2013	Fairbanks-Wood Center (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)
Apr 03, 2013	Fairbanks-Noel Wien Public Library (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)
Apr 10, 2013	Fairbanks-Noel Wien Public Library (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)

### Alabama

Nov 15, 2012	Auburn-Auburn University
Jan 14, 2013	Birmingham-Heritage Hall (University of Alabama)
Jan 28, 2013	Birmingham-University of Alabama
Mar 07, 2013	Fairfield-Fairfield-Miles College
Mar 11, 2013	Fairfield-Fairfield-Miles College

### Colorado

Nov 12, 2012	Fort Collins - Council Tree Library (Colorado State University)
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### Florida

Sep 13, 2012	Panama City-Gulf Coast State College
Nov 15, 2012	Panama City-Community Life Center
Apr 04, 2013	Fort Myers-Florida Gulf Coast University

### Georgia

Sep 24, 2012	Albany-Albany State University
Oct 12, 2012	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Oct 18, 2012	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Oct 23, 2012	Milledgeville-Center for Engaged Learning (Georgia College)
Oct 25, 2012	Milledgeville-Digital Bridges (Georgia College)
Nov 07, 2012	Milledgeville-First Presbyterian Church (Georgia College)
Nov 09, 2012	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Dec 13, 2012	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Jan 28, 2013	Milledgeville-Digital Bridges (Georgia College)
Jan 29, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Feb 27, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Mar 01, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Mar 06, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Mar 07, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Mar 14, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Apr 15, 2013	Milledgeville-Georgia College
Apr 17, 2013	Atlanta-Perimeter College
Apr 17, 2013	Atlanta-Mississippi State University
Apr 20, 2013	Porterville-Porterville College (Mississippi State University)
May 09, 2013	Milledgeville-First Presbyterian Church (Georgia College)

### Iowa

Jul 09, 2012	Des Moines-Iowa State Education Association
Nov 10, 2012	Des Moines-Franklin Avenue Library
Feb 09, 2013	Des Moines-Des Moines Public Library
Mar 01, 2013	Cedar Falls-Lang Hall (University of Northern Iowa)

### Illinois

Mar 29, 2013	Normal-Heartland Community College, Humanities Department
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### Kansas

Mar 04, 2013	Manhattan-Kansas State University
May 13, 2013	Overland Park-Central Resource Library (Consensus)

### Massachusetts

Jul 20, 2012	Boston-Frontiers of Democracy Conference
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### Maryland

Feb 09, 2013	College Park-UMD School of Public Health (University of Maryland)
Feb 19, 2013	Laurel-Victoria Falls (University of Maryland)
Mar 05, 2013	Bowie-Prince George's County Memorial Library (University of Maryland)

### Michigan

Nov 23, 2012	Mt. Pleasant-Central Michigan University
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### Minnesota

Oct 09, 2012	Minneapolis-Coffman Union, University of Minnesota Twin Cities
Oct 17, 2012	Rochester-Rochester Public Library (University of Minnesota Rochester, Winona State University Rochester, Rochester Issues Forum)
Oct 22, 2012	St. Paul-University of St. Thomas
Oct 23, 2012	St. Paul-Buenger Education Center, Concordia University-St. Paul, Community Action, Leadership, and Learning Center
Oct 30, 2012	Mankato-Centennial Student Union, Minnesota State University, Mankato, Center for Excellence and Innovation and Office of Community Engagement
Nov 07, 2012	Brooklyn Park-Center for Business and Technology, North Hennepin Community College
Nov 12, 2012	Morris-University of Minnesota Morris
Nov 13, 2012	Moorhead-Knutson Campus Center, Concordia College
Nov 14, 2012	Bemidji-Hobson Memorial Union, Bemidji State University
Nov 15, 2012	Duluth-Kirby Student Center, University of Minnesota Duluth, Office of Civic Engagement
Nov 27, 2012	St. Cloud-Atwood Center, St. Cloud State University, Department of Campus Involvement

### Missouri

Nov 27, 2012	Kansas City-Rockhurst University Community Center
May 09, 2013	Kansas City-Husch Blackwell (Consensus)

### Mississippi

Apr 10, 2013	Philadelphia-West Side Community Center (Mississippi State University)
Apr 10, 2013	Jackson-Mississippi State University
Apr 11, 2013	Jackson-Mississippi State University
Apr 11, 2013	Perkinston-Mississippi State University
Apr 13, 2013	Jackson-Mississippi State University

## SHAPING OUR FUTURE FORUM LOCATIONS, 2012-2013 (THROUGH JULY)

Apr 15, 2013	Biloxi—Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (Mississippi State University)
Apr 16, 2013	West Point—Mississippi State University
Apr 17, 2013	Quitman—Mississippi State University
Apr 17, 2013	Waynesboro—Mississippi State University
Apr 18, 2013	Hattiesburg—Mississippi State University
Apr 18, 2013	Pontotoc—Mississippi State University
Apr 20, 2013	Jackson—Mississippi State University
Apr 21, 2013	Jackson—Mississippi State University
Apr 22, 2013	Ashland—Mississippi State University
Apr 23, 2013	Kosciusko—Mississippi State University

### North Carolina

Feb 12, 2013	Elon—Elon University (Campus Compact)
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### New Mexico

Oct 15, 2012	Albuquerque—University of New Mexico, School of Continuing Education
Mar 18, 2013	Las Vegas—United World College

### New York

Sep 06, 2012	Syosset—Syosset Library (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Sep 27, 2012	Northport—Northport High School (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Oct 01, 2012	Hempstead—Hofstra University (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Oct 03, 2012	Northport—Northport Public Library (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Fall 2012	Binghamton—Broome Community College
Fall 2012	Binghamton—Broome Community College
Nov 10, 2012	Binghamton—Broome Community College
Nov 27, 2012	Hempstead—Hofstra University (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Dec 07, 2012	Vestal—Good Shepherd Village
Dec 10, 2012	Vestal—Good Shepherd Village
Dec 13, 2012	Malverne—Malverne High School (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Dec 14, 2012	Malverne—Malverne High School, (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Feb 22, 2013	Hempstead—Hofstra University, Center for Civic Engagement
Mar 08, 2013	Troy—Hudson Valley Community College
Mar 09, 2013	Troy—Hudson Valley Community College
Mar 19, 2013	Vestal—India Cultural Center (Binghamton Lyceum Program)

Apr 26, 2013	Binghamton—Broome Community College
May 02, 2013	Binghamton—Broome Community College

### Ohio

Sep 18, 2012	Ashland—Ashland University, Center for Civic Life
Sep 29, 2012	Yellow Springs—Antioch University
Jan 15, 2013	Dayton—Kettering Foundation
Feb 01, 2013	Cincinnati—Open Stacks Book Club
Apr 08, 2013	Dayton—Sinclair Community College (Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education)
Apr 17, 2013	Dayton—University of Dayton

### South Carolina

Sep 25, 2012	Sumter—University of South Carolina
Feb 05, 2013	Clemson—Clemson University
Jun 17, 2013	Rembert—Wateree River Correction Institution, Youthful Offender Program
Jun 22, 2013	Columbia—St. John Baptist Church (Clemson's Institute for Economic & Community Development Laboratory for Deliberative Democracy)
Jul 18, 2013	Columbia—Greater Columbia Community Relations Committee (Clemson's Institute for Economic & Community Development Laboratory for Deliberative Democracy and the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission)

### Texas

Jun 08, 2012	San Antonio—American Democracy Project (American Association of State Colleges and Universities)
Oct 03, 2012	Austin—Hilton DoubleTree Hotel (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board: Reinventing Instruction and Learning Conference)
Oct 12, 2012	Kingwood—Lonestar Community College
Nov 05, 2012	San Antonio—CAO Annual Conference (Council of Independent Colleges)
Nov 06, 2012	Houston—University of Houston, Downtown
Nov 13, 2012	Houston—University of Houston, Downtown
Feb 25, 2013	Bellaire—Bellaire High School
Mar 30, 2013	Austin—St. Edward's University

### Virginia

Oct 22, 2012	Blacksburg—Virginia Tech
Oct 29, 2012	Charlottesville—University of Virginia
Apr 29, 2013	Charlottesville—University of Virginia
Apr 30, 2013	Charlottesville—University of Virginia

*Shaping Our Future* forums will continue through fall 2013. Information about hosting and moderating forums, along with citizen and moderator forum materials, are available, free of charge, at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).