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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

TESTIMONY OF

PRESIDENT MARK A. EMMERT, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

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Good morning. I am Mark Emmert, President of the University of Washington, a university defined in part by the breadth and scope of its research mission and its strong commitment to excellence and innovation in all areas of discovery and learning.

Dr. Duderstadt, I want to thank all of you and Secretary Spellings for devoting so much attention and energy to the vital issues facing our colleges and universities as we look to the future. I know you have already spent substantial time considering the questions outlined in the mandate of the Commission. Today, I want to focus on what I believe is a critical choice facing our nation's decision-makers with respect to our higher education enterprise.

At decisive junctures in its history, our country has made a series of crucial decisions that have led to the creation of the best system of higher education in the world. Recently, however, our pre-eminence in higher education has been put at risk. The long-standing investment in public higher education at the state level has been under considerable strain, and we are seeing signs of such strain at the federal level as well. All of this comes at a time when the competition from other countries for the best minds and innovative ideas is on the rise.

Our nation needs to resolve to reinvest in higher education in new ways. We need to invest in our nation's people. They are the principal resource for the future in a knowledge-dependent economy. Higher education produces two things: smart people and innovative ideas, the key ingredients of the 21st-century

global economy. We need a national strategy to ensure a rich and abundant supply of both.¹

One of the points in your charge considers the question of the cost of running and attending our universities. This is a serious issue for individuals and institutions alike. But I want to put the same question another way: What is the cost of not undertaking a dramatic reinvestment in and reinforcement of higher education in this country? If strong steps are not taken, future generations will look back at this moment and wonder why our nation's leaders stood by and allowed the rest of the world to catch and surpass the best educational system in the history of the world. We cannot let this happen.

Historically, the strength of the American higher education system has evolved from a durable partnership among individuals, the states, and the federal government. Numerous times in the past, the federal government has decided to invest in the future of the country by investing in our nation's colleges and universities. Today, we regard these as turning points in the history of higher education. In each instance, these landmark decisions grew out of pressing national concerns but faced opposition and turmoil.

First, there was Thomas Jefferson's deep belief that democracy required a well-educated citizenry, a belief that led to our first public universities. Fifty years later, Abraham Lincoln created the National Academy of Sciences (1863) and signed the Morrill Act (1862), which provided the land grants that allowed so many universities to develop throughout the country. After World War II, Franklin Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill of Rights, guaranteeing millions of servicemen the right to an education that they might never have had and providing our first broadly educated workforce. Also at this time, the Vannevar Bush report laid the foundation for the modern research university and the immensely successful partnership between the federal government and the nation's research universities.

In 1957, Dwight Eisenhower answered the challenge of Sputnik with the National Defense Education Act, and finally, in 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act, which made college more affordable and accessible for millions of students. These two landmark pieces of legislation -- passed forty years ago -- were the last major initiatives affecting higher education in a fundamental way. They gave rise to the generation of scientists and engineers who populate our college and university faculties today, people like the University of Washington's Professor Donald Brownlee, who has led NASA's

¹See *Engineering Research and America's Future: Meeting the Challenges of a Global Economy*, The National Academy of Engineering, 2005; and *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*, The National Academy of Sciences, The National Academy of Engineering, and The Institute of Medicine, 2005.

Stardust project, which just returned to earth with its treasure of 4.5 billion-year-old comet dust.

Each major step forward faced challenges and detractors. Jefferson's call for a more universally educated citizenry ran counter to the accepted notion of education that was reserved for an elite class. The land grant act was bitterly debated in Congress for years, because of opposition to the concept of providing land for the purpose of expanding access. The G.I. Bill was viewed by opponents as a subversive tool that would dilute the excellence of universities. And there was great resistance to the Eisenhower and Johnson bills that opened the pathway to opportunity for all members of our society. By then, questions of race and equality led both sides to question whether these bills would enhance or inhibit the efforts at integration that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

But eventually, in each instance, there was a recognition of the necessity of taking dramatic steps forward, even in the face of unknown and potentially unintended consequences. Even if there were questions about the role the federal government should play, officials recognized that doing nothing was unacceptable.

Today, we face a conflicting set of tensions regarding access and funding. We need to provide more opportunity for students than ever before, because it is in the national interest. So many of the jobs of the future depend upon advanced learning, in ways that we do not yet even fully comprehend or can anticipate. But if we know anything, we know that brilliant minds and innovation are the capital of the future.

It is time to make a national decision to reinvest in higher education at both the federal and the state levels, and to do so in a coordinated partnership among the states, our universities, and the federal government. Each must commit to doing its share. Together, we can solve the challenges we face.

At the outset I asked, "What is the cost of not doing anything?" The answer is: "The cost of inaction is far too high." We need investment and policy that will allow us to compete around the world. Our global competitors recognize what has made us successful, and they are in the chase. If they catch us in this new global competition, it will take a monumental effort to recapture our position of leadership. Not only our grandchildren, but our own children, will be asking why we did not act when we had the chance.

A strong, innovative system of higher education is absolutely essential to the future economy and security of our country. I, and my fellow presidents, stand ready to engage in the discussion and the implementation of a set of solutions that will result from your deliberations.

Excellence in higher education is a promise our nation made to itself. We cannot be the generation that breaks that promise. Thank you.