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A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission On The Future Of Higher Education

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Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony before the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher education. My comments will primarily be directed towards the areas of accessibility and affordability. I would also like to propose a realistic but bold approach with historical precedence.

My testimony is based on my forty-year academic career, including fifteen years as the President of Washington State University. I was also a founding member of the National Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. This was a four-year study done under the direction of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). The Commission was primarily composed of 25 Presidents and Chancellors that had actually demonstrated measurable improvements in their institutions. If you have not seen the ten published reports of this commission, I would suggest that they are found on the NASULGC web site (www.nasulgc.org). I have also been involved in starting new organizations including two that are now described as "New Models" of institutions of higher education. These are the Western Governors University (WGU) (www.wgu.edu) and the Washington Education Foundation (www.waedfoundation.org).

Our nation is widely perceived as slipping when we are compared to other nations relative to educating our citizens and having an educated work force. This slipping is particularly noted in the fields of science, mathematics, engineering and technology. We are also finding it impossible to produce enough teachers specializing in math and science to adequately staff our K-12 system. We are simply not able to provide a sufficient number of high school graduates ready to pursue these areas in college. As a nation we wish to compete in today's knowledge based economy and we are neither producing a sufficient number of qualified high school graduates proficient in math or science nor a sufficient number of university educated scientists, mathematicians, engineers or technologists.

This well documented problem in math and science is occurring at a time when many of our states are finding it necessary to limit or reduce their funding for our public colleges and universities. This reduction in state support as a percentage of the institutional budgets has encouraged dramatic increases in

tuition and student fees, which is clearly limiting access to all but the affluent. This limited access is most apparent if one looks at the university attendance of individuals from lower income families. Federal Student Financial Aid data and numerous other studies demonstrate that a student's probability of attending and graduating from a four-year public university is directly proportional to family income. To further add to this problem most students leaving college with or without a degree have a large financial debt. The cost of tuition and fees when coupled with the anticipated student debt has created what is described as "sticker shock" considered to be a major factor in discouraging potential university students from lower to middle income families.

As individual states vary in their support of our public colleges and universities, the private or business sector has been attempting to assist. The most obvious sector that has not adequately come forward to assist is the Federal Government. Yes, they have provided some much appreciated student financial aid but it has simply not been adequate to meet the challenge of educating individuals from all of our social or financial classes. In many ways we have returned to the conditions we deplored in the mid 1800's when the children of the wealthy were educated and those from the lower and middle class were not.

We do though have a successful precedence of the Federal Government addressing this inequity and meeting the needs of educating all those who would benefit. In the mid 1880's, our country was in the midst of our civil war and was clearly not educating enough of its young to meet the needs of the then agriculture based, national economy.

In 1862, President Lincoln signed into Law the Morrill Act. Justin Smith Morrill had "... wanted to assure that education would be available to all social classes." " The genius of the Morrill Act was two fold, in accord with its two governing principles: the equality of opportunity and the utility of knowledge." To put this in today's terminology, he wanted to use all of the intellectual capabilities of the American gene pool to provide a sufficient number of educated individuals to make us competitive in the world.

The Morrill Act, commonly called the "Land-Grant Act", provided federal lands to each state to establish and support schools to educate individuals from all social and economic classes to meet the needs of that era's economy which was primarily agricultural. The state of Washington more than matched the federal contribution by providing additional lands for support of its several colleges, universities and public schools. These public lands still play a major but not sufficient role in supporting our state's educational system.

The parallel today is that once again we are limiting access to higher education to affluent families and we are not producing enough educated individuals to meet our needs in our knowledge-based economy. The Morrill Act provided land to help us become the most agriculturally advanced nation in the world. What similar contributions could the Federal Government provide today to help us compete in the knowledge based economy? Some suggested contributions have been: band width, intellectual property rights, sharing in government revenues from our Internet commerce and some of an even more basic nature such as mineral, oil or water rights. One of the advantages of this commission is that you have as members that are successful business leaders that are capable of identifying a source of suitable federal contribution.

Having watched or participated in commissions and studies such as this on the future of higher education, it has been my experience that we are facing challenges that require not merely a fine-tuning of our educational system but leadership and bold action. None of us want or need another commission report that ends up on the shelf.

On a more positive note, today we have an additional partner, the private sector which is already actively supporting existing institutions and experimenting with new models. Let me just mention two examples. There are a wide range of new models but I will just describe two.

The Western Governors University (WGU) (www.wgu.edu) came about with the leadership of the Western Governors Association in cooperation with corporate leaders and individual donors providing guidance and support. WGU is a fully accredited, on-line, competency based university with a National Teachers College and a realistic, non-profit business model.

In this state, we at the Washington Education Foundation (www.waedfoundation.org), thanks to private supporters including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are demonstrating that with mentoring and wisely placed financial support students from all social and financial classes can be successful in college.

My fondest hope would be that this commission would not only take bold action to bring the Federal Government on as a full partner but also assist in developing a new model university that will enable us to meet not only today's needs but the challenges of the future. There really is a moral demand for a new Morrill Act.