A CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENTS

James Montoya, Vice President, Higher Education Relationship Development, The College Board, Moderator

Joseph Aoun, President, Northeastern University

David Harrison, President, Columbus State Community College

Beverly Daniel Tatum, President, Spelman College

Mark G. Yudof, President, University of California

James Montoya, vice president, higher education relationship development, the College Board, served as moderator for this panel and asked questions of one president at a time. He opened by reflecting on President Aoun’s comments in the keynote address, about the social compact between higher education and the wider community.

What are the issues you face, President Yudof, in regard to the social compact in the new normal environment that are different from those facing Clark Kerr at the time the California Master Plan was created?

Mark Yudof, president of the University of California, responded that higher education is becoming more privatized “because people don’t want to pay taxes.” He sees a lessening of the sense of the public good nationwide, in areas ranging from toll roads to mercenary soldiers. Adjusted for inflation, the state of California is spending 60 percent less on higher education than it was 20 years ago. “Students are paying more than taxpayers; this is not my idea of a good thing.” Yudof indicated that the California university system is now 15 percent more efficient than it once was: sometimes that is “not desirably so,” as in larger classes, and sometimes it is desirable, in that IT resources are being shared. Yudof sees the recent demand for accountability as important and good. He would like to see more long-range planning. “Our job is to preserve the quality of the educational experience. The cost of what we are giving up does not make the news like tuition increases do.” Yudof acknowledged that it “is harder to have a big vision or project now” than in Kerr’s time; there is a disinvestment in higher education as a priority, given our aging population and the current economy.
As we look at this broader place we are in as a county, how can we make the case for the social compact and the social good?

Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College, said that Georgia’s Hope Scholarship is funded through sales of lottery tickets, which are generally purchased by poorer people. “Yet the Hope Scholarship benefits students from middle and upper income families. In the U.S., only 30 percent of the populace has a college education. So it’s no surprise that the other 70 percent of the population doesn’t want to pay for someone else’s children to attend.” She asked Yudof for his thoughts on that situation.

Yudof said that most public goods only benefit a minority. He added that 40 percent of the students in the California system qualify as low-income. “Berkeley has more low-income students than all the Ivies combined. It bothers me that, just as the Latino college-going-age population is surging, we are pulling back.”

Tatum added, “The disinvestment of the public in terms of education—both higher education and K-12—is directly related to the increase of non-whites going into the education system.”

What was clear from the keynote is that we have an opportunity: we are here to shape the new normal. But how do we do this?

President Joseph E. Aoun, Northeastern University, responded, “We have a unique system here, with competition and a variety of different approaches. It is a meritocratic, mobile system. So we need to nurture that diversity. We are innovative and we should keep innovating.”

He indicated that U.S. higher education can see technology less as a disrupter and more as a means to an end, as MIT is doing with its open courseware, which will benefit a large group of students worldwide. Another area where higher education could be more innovative is in curriculum development. “We as professors develop our curriculum. But our students are accessing knowledge 24/7. We as professors do not need to be the center of the experience, but a supporter of the experience. We should work on building partnerships, teaming up with other institutions and thinking about what our students need to know.”

“Our system, despite crises, is innovating. If you are satisfied, you don’t innovate—and that’s why some nontraditional institutions are changing first.”

Montoya referred to President David Harrison’s inaugural address, where he described the need to partner with the local K-12 system to be sure students and families know how to go to college, and asked how he sees technology as part of working in the ‘new normal.’

David Harrison, president of Columbus State Community College, said, given that half of U.S. college students are enrolled in community colleges, “perpetual reinvention is the status we are always in, not so much the ‘new normal.’ A large majority of our community college students come to us unprepared for college. Instead of saying this is not our problem, we really have to address it. Most of our students are place-bound by family and other responsibilities. We are
now seeing that our traditional-age students have the same issues as our older adult students. So we are promoting partnerships with families, and developing a common language. While we have had some success with online learning, we see the real promise of technology in its ability to capture the different needs of students and to create a specific response that addresses each student’s needs.” He said technology is integrated into the overall college experience, but they have to realize that not all community college students have access to technology.

**Going back to students, it seems that we are holding on to our own ideas of a meritocracy. What does that mean? How are students helping to shape the ‘new normal’?**

**President Tatum** referred to the diversity and variety of higher education institutions in the U.S. and said that even though small residential liberal arts institutions educate a minority of students in the country, they are important for leadership development. She continued, “We live in a time of change in the narrative. Lots of students turned out to vote for Obama, but the millennial generation does not see this as different or life-changing in the way that our generation does; they have a world view that has seen the success of minorities. But their lived reality is the same old story: public K-12 education is still as segregated as it was 40 years ago. Students in private schools are more likely to have experienced diversity in high school than public school students. This student generation has the theoretical idea of diversity and opportunity but no real experience of it.” Tatum continued, "Small liberal arts colleges as well as some special programs at large institutions help students learn to be leaders in a diverse environment. We need to take advantage of that opportunity to develop leaders in this generation."

**What are you seeing in terms of California students these days?**

**Yudof** referred to the “problem of scarcity of higher education opportunity.” The four-year California institutions are working increasingly closely with community colleges to increase transfer opportunities, because so many students are now starting there, to save costs. They are also working with some e-models so that students can take online courses to increase their opportunities for higher education. “Unfortunately, there is a sense of ‘why should we pay taxes to educate people of color?’”

Yudof went on to describe ways in which California students are really hurting, including family unemployment and housing issues. Yet, despite this, he sees that California students are concerned about serving their communities, and they themselves are less race-conscious than prior generations, viewing Obama’s election as less earth-shattering than some older adults might.

**What about the student demographic as it relates to the faculty?**

**Tatum** stated, “The typical professoriate has not changed that much, demographically. So some of their interactions need to be addressed, given their racial and gender expectations: especially, perhaps, in terms of STEM.”
Aoun added, “I think about how we can get the faculty to help us. The younger faculty members do embrace diversity and technology. We look to them as driving the new relationship. I am betting on them to make changes, rather than trying to change the older faculty.”

Tatum added that the reality is that the small, private, liberal arts colleges still “rely on traditional white men and women. We need to be encouraging of diversity to succeed.”

Harrison said that Columbus State faculty bring to the administration’s attention issues such as lack of parity and the attainment gaps for students from poverty-stricken suburban Columbus. “Our professors make us aware that we need to look at non-academic issues.”

**Let’s focus on the theme of new models to better meet the needs of students. Community colleges have been forward thinking. But how are they continuing to be forward thinking vis-a-vis the for-profit colleges?**

Harrison said that there are currently 90,000 jobs open in Ohio, yet unemployment stands at 9 percent. And they are also facing state budget cuts. “So we have to talk about all these issues. Community colleges have always been at the forefront of working with employers. The transfer mission has always been there, but that part is moving front and center as selectivity and costs have increased at the four-year institutions. In many areas, the community colleges have become the land-grant institutions, the entry point into higher education. Then we also have to work with the population of students we serve, to help insure their graduation rates improve. We need to take a more individualized approach. This is a mission addition, and hard to do in a less-money environment.”

Even though state funding has decreased, “whenever we do something new that costs money, we can’t pass that along to students. Our tuition has not increased in six years. We need to develop orientation programs and first year programs for students planning on a four-year degree as well as for those with different goals. The partnership model will be vital moving forward.” Ohio community colleges are embedding themselves in high schools to be sure students are on a path to success. And they are partnering with colleges and universities, beyond articulation agreements, using guaranteed pathways such as the Preferred Pathway to Ohio State University.

**Also, let’s think about these models in a global context.**

Aoun responded that the for-profit higher education entities operate totally differently in other countries than they do here. “We look down on them, as they have abused financial aid and not fulfilled their promises. But overseas they have a different model since they cannot rely on federal financial aid. They have set up law, accounting, and business schools. No tuition is charged. DeVry trains 50 percent of the world’s accountants who have to deal with U.S. accounting. They are doing this to position themselves to take on higher education here, especially the community colleges. So they are not going to fail. They will come back here and say they don’t need U.S. money to educate U.S. citizens. Do not underestimate them.”
Harrison added that he has mixed emotions about for-profit institutions. “They have been competitors, but they have also been good partners. They have created markets for us, to replicate at a lower cost.” His quarrel with them is the financial aid issue. Many of his students come to the community college with so much debt that they cannot help them. “Their lobbyists are better than ours.”