New Models for a "Flat" World

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen—I appreciate the welcome you’ve given me, because that indicates that you are, in fact, all ladies and gentlemen. I’m pleased to have the honor of speaking to you, in part because at one time, I would have been one of you. At Delaware State University, early in my career, I was both the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Chief Negotiator for our Board, and in that awkward role, I was called upon to be the negotiator between the University and the Union. It was excellent training for an academic, since in all my later roles I was continually called upon to negotiate peace between faculty and administration, the soccer team and the softball team, the fraternities and the independents, Town and Gown—you get the idea.

But I’m not going to talk about negotiating this afternoon. I’ve been invited to focus, and I’m quoting—“beyond collective bargaining to the dilemmas and issues—both domestic and/or international—-that the academy is likely to face during the next decade and beyond.” That leads me the title of my address—“New Models for a ‘Flat’ World.”

The theories about our time, the next decade, and “the future” are many. Most of them have some relevance to what we collectively need to do to insure our own future and that of the nation. I’m sure all of you are aware of Thomas Friedman’s book The World is Flat, but in case you haven’t had the opportunity to read it, Friedman’s thesis is that the quantum leaps in technology in the recent past have led us into an age in which we and our institutions and students are in a competition with others all around the world. He uses interesting illustrations to show us what he means, such as the “out-sourcing” of jobs that means the phone call you got last week asking you to contribute to something or buy something probably originated in India’s Bangalore or Bangladesh, or some other place on some other continent. Our communications technology enables “real time” conversations anywhere, and since we are a capitalist country and capitalists are always looking for the next dollar, why are we surprised? Isn’t it obvious that workers in third world countries will make those solicitation calls for pennies compared to what our workers would require?
Madeleine Green, the Vice President for International Initiatives at ACE, suggests that because the globalization of higher education is changing things so rapidly, all of us must be alert to and aware of such activities as the development of a global outcomes test for higher education, particularly because we seem to be falling behind many others in existing test results.

Green also argues that we need an “Internationalization Strategy” and a new concept of our domestic International Education. We should work on using the “Flat World” stimulus to tie our increasingly diverse American students at every level to initiatives we are taking for global competition—and make our international programs not “extras” but a part of the core activities of our institutions.

Our new models for the future need to be based on an understanding of what is happening internationally in the present. Some time ago someone referred to this age as “The Information Age,” and now, of course, it is not only information, but also individuals and jobs moving from place to place around the world, following opportunities. The “dilemmas and issues . . . both domestic and international” are staring us in the face no matter where we live and study and work.

We must continually adapt; as Green says, “The alternative is educating students for a world that no longer exists.” The latest reports on our international standing in student achievement indicate that we have lost our lead, and are now in 6th, 7th, or 8th place (depending on which pundit and which area you consult). For example, the World Economic Forum dropped the US from 1st to 7th place “in the ranking of nations’ preparedness to benefit from advances in information technology.”

Then there are new technology challenges that are simply ours in day-to-day activities! For example, the IT Director at the Commission, Charles Benil, requested a meeting with the Segmental Advisory Board which includes representatives from every “segment” of postsecondary education in Maryland. He needed to alert them to the OMB standards of 1991, only now beginning to be implemented with the issuance of U.S. Department of Education guidelines. IPEDS rate ethnicity reporting in a “mixed mode,” a technical term I don’t understand, but which, according to Benil, is “burdensome, complex, confusing, and more costly for the State and the institutions to manage.” Although at a glance these changes might seem minor, they may eventually require institutions to re-survey students and employees, collecting the race/ethnicity data of institutions so as to report aggregate data to the U.S. DoE. What a headache this would be—just imagine the search for missing data or entry errors in existing data…

We need to take deep breaths and recognize that it is not only for our students and teachers, our business world, our government planners: the changes in our world will affect us all—faculty, staff, administrators, negotiators and union reps—and we need to accept the challenges.
Our students do not fare well on the international tests, especially in maths and sciences. A 2004 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, through its International Indicators of Education Systems, indicated that the proportion of “first university degrees” awarded in the U.S. in science, mathematics and engineering-related fields was smaller than that of any of the rest of the “G-8” countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Russia). Further threatening our position, we know that China and India are making enormous and rapid gains in these areas and others.

So, with a bow to Thomas Friedman, the first new model for the future must be the “Flat World” model which keeps us always aware that our competition in every area is coming from everywhere!

Building on that same title, Norman R. Augustine published Is America Falling Off the Flat Earth? Augustine was the Chair of the “Rising Above the Gathering Storm” Committee, which gave early warnings of our challenges. Augustine’s answer to his essay’s title would be, I believe, that we are indeed teetering on the edge and need the kind of national focus we had after Sputnik, or before that with the GI Bill—a national awareness that we are behind and fading fast, coupled immediately with a national resolve to “fix” it before it’s totally “broke!”

Augustine points out the inadequacies of our public schools and our universities, and our generally misplaced value system: In most school districts, physical-education teachers are paid on the same wage scale as physics teachers, and excellent physics teachers are paid the same wages as mediocre physics teachers, on the grounds that this is “fair. . . .But when we encounter a pursuit that really matters . . . we put a priority on paying our high school football coaches very well for the extra duties they perform.” In free market terms, this is silly, since there is an abundance of candidates for PE jobs, but we have a national shortage of qualified math and science teachers. This same prioritization pattern explains the latest figures showing five states spending more on prisons than on education.

Therefore, a part of the new model must be to re-establish a value system that prizes education and educators and holds them and their students accountable.

Where we may still have an edge, though a shrinking edge, is our combination of freedom and the creativity it fosters and nurtures. Our “best and brightest,” or the “talented tenth,” as W.E.B. DuBois might say, still take top marks. However, if we want to continue to hold an important place in the world and to preserve our quality of living, we simply must focus on what this global reality check calls upon us to do.

A recent publication (January 2007) of the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education was entitled “American Competitiveness Challenge: How can we compete in a Hi Tech Workplace when 93 million adults have skills below the high school level?” There is national concern over workforce
shortages—but those 93 million adults make it plain that we have plenty of workers; they just don’t yet have the skills they need in today’s world.

The next new model we need to think about—and this will be up to you and your faculties—is who our students are and are not in a different age. The big numbers in the next few years will probably not be the 18-22 year-olds. The people who can fill the workforce will probably be the 25-54 year-olds! These are a part of that 93 million with skills below the high school level. In my own state of Maryland nearly 10% of that group didn’t graduate from high school, and another 25 ½% have only a high school credential. We need readily available and strong Adult Basic Education programs and strong CTE programs.

Studies indicate that 65% of the 2020 workforce is already beyond high school. These are a part of that 93 million with skills below the high school level to which I’ve already referred. Uneducated workers make low wages, tend to live in low-income areas and send their children to poor schools. We know there is a high correlation between poverty and low academic achievement whether it is in Appalachia or the city. Common sense will tell you that if you are just getting by, there will be little money for newspapers, books and magazines, or to take your kids on trips to the zoo or out of the country—the enriching activities and resources of the middle- and upper-classes. There is a good chance that the children of the unskilled will be the next generation of “adults with skills below the high school level;” they are already entering kindergarten.

One of our greatest challenges is to educate all our children. I would venture to guess that if you identified the cities and counties whose schools had the highest percentages of Pell Grant recipients, you would also find them to have high percentages of minority students. I am sure that you are aware that in many places in our public schools today, there is either no majority, or minorities in the plural are the “majority.” Here is a challenge that should excite all of us in education—our schools should be laboratories teaching not only math and history and English, but also how to respect those who are different and work well with them.

Let us use our freedom and creativity to invent a new kind of school if we must, a new curriculum to interest and excite a generation of youngsters with iPods and reality shows as their frame of reference. Most of the freshmen who are coming to us were born in 1989 or ’90, and probably have little knowledge of the Vietnam War, a world without cell phones, high definition, and Text Messaging. The world is moving so fast that they will need to keep moving to keep up; there will be ongoing changes in their lives, too. Richard Florida, in The Flight of the Creative Class, has this to say: “Our greatest challenge involves both the growing class divide and the huge reservoir of untapped creative capital that is being squandered. Addressing this divide is not only socially and morally just, it is an economic imperative for any society interested in long-term innovation and prosperity.”
If we are to be successful in the flat earth of today, we must have a new model to address the shortcomings of our education system: we need new teachers, new pedagogy, new attitudes from the citizens.

The new model for the future must believe that all our students are important, and must figure out how to educate them in the “T’s for Tomorrow”—Teamwork and Technology! Presently, according to data taken from The Education Trust, “A low-income and high-ability student is no more likely to go to college than a high-income “C” student.” We must level the playing field and reward achievement.

Our colleges and universities must try to bring under-educated adults back into the education pipeline, too. Our legislatures are recognizing their need for financial aid even though they tend to be part-time students. The problem is—the process is slow! So, another thing we need to build is a speedier, more efficient model. Some things can have a quick impact. For example, if high schools adopted the 4-years-of-English-and-Mathematics curriculum, we might be able to free all or almost all of those faculty members who have been teaching remedial sections of English and Math at the college level. Who knows what new teaching strategies those freed faculty people could create? Some of them might decide to take Alternative Certification paths to go back into the high schools and provide a better foundation in science or math for the next group of students. Amazing things could happen—but first would be the four years of English and Math.

Actually, that’s not right—first would have to be the introduction of math in kindergarten and 1st grade, and the middle school early start on Algebra . . . but you get the point. We need better, stronger, more enthusiastic, innovative, and creative teachers of math and science and every other subject, and we need them from the first days of school. To get them, we need to make those teaching jobs more attractive through better pay, more efficient administrators, and greater freedom, respect and appreciation for the whole education team.

A reflection of our failings in the early grades is shown in research that has established that our high schools are not as demanding as those of our global competitors. Across the nation, we are working to strengthen high school requirements, including holding students to that curriculum with four years of English and four years of mathematics. We know that most students who take 4 years of math, including Algebra II and an additional course in the senior year, will not need remediation at the college level and will be career-ready if they choose to go directly into the world of work. We know that these courses give students college or career readiness; students who do not mean to go to college need the same preparation.

The old model in which a high school diploma could get you a job that would enable you to take care of yourself and eventually your family just doesn’t work anymore. When I go to industry and business meetings, they tell me that the “kids right out of high school” do not have the proficiency they need.
Some business people are brutally frank—“They can’t read, write, or compute, and they don’t learn on the job quickly enough!” At a recent meeting of the Governor’s Workforce Investment Board in Maryland, we heard an expert on the “Middle-Skills” jobs tell us that for every “High-Skills” job in the future, there will be two “Middle Skills” jobs requiring an associate’s degree, an apprenticeship, or an occupational certification. But these jobs will pay a living wage enabling self-sufficiency and family provision.

One final book I recommend if you’re interested in the trends in the future: In addition to the “flat world,” author Richard Florida offers us The Flight of the Creative Class. Florida’s theory is that our prominence in the world was, in large part, because our universities and our political freedoms made us a magnet for the best and brightest from around the world, immigrants from every continent. He gives examples from the Russian Sergey Brin, one of the co-founders of Google, to venture capitalist and philanthropist George Soros to prove his point.

Now, according to Florida, our universities are challenged by others around the globe and our politics and policies tend to hinder rather than help the bright immigrants who, in the past, have helped us to lead the world. The author deplores existing conditions which feature a weak education system, a protectionist policy limiting the number of scholars entering the country, and the growing chasm between the “creative class” and the rest of us in income, education, and life circumstances.

Florida also points to the drying up of the research and development dollars from the government that once fueled the discoveries and innovations which enabled us to lead the world in virtually all important areas. He believes in what he calls “clusters,” by which he means that creative people and free societies tend to act as magnets to other creative people, making what he calls “spikes” on the “flat earth” and stimulating bursts of inventions and discoveries. Now, he fears that some of our “spikes” are being flattened out as other international magnets are drawing our creative people away.

Can I put together all the features of the new models I’ve introduced? Let me try.

I was asked to talk about dilemmas and issues that will have an impact nationally and internationally into the future. If I provide an artificial order, the ones I’ve mentioned should seem sensible.

1. We must “fix” our public education beginning with kindergarten or even pre-school. If children are “turned off” to math and science or school in general in the early grades, they usually do not recover.
2. Perhaps even more vital, we must recognize and respect who our students are. Public school enrollments will be increasingly “minority” until the minorities are in the majority! Our teachers need to examine themselves and their curriculum to insure their success with this new pupil population in an increasingly demanding milieu.

3. We need to re-engage the 93 million 22-54 year-olds, providing opportunities for the education and training they need to be productively employed, and we need to pay them at a level that will narrow the existing chasm between them and the highly skilled in society. We need to pay their teachers, too!

4. We must challenge our students, all our students, in the same way as students almost everywhere in the world are being challenged. If we do not, our children will not be competitive in the “flat world” with its rapidly developing ranks of highly skilled engineers and scientists and its attractive low costs!

5. Rigorous preparation should be the “default” curriculum at every level, because even students who, for whatever reason, do not go on to a 4-year degree, will need the “Middle-Skills” to manage many (most?) future viable jobs.

6. Augustine says, “those who cannot keep up seem destined to become road-kill on the information highway.” We must re-create the conditions that encourage experimentation, discovery, innovation, risk-taking. We must emphasize our welcome to the brightest from other countries who wish to come to our universities, and make it easy for them to stay here if they wish to. We need to return to making healthy public investments in every area from science to the arts to political freedoms; in doing so we will once again free creativity.

To put all my sources together—Friedman’s *The World Is Flat*, Augustine’s *Is America Falling off the Flat Earth?* and Florida’s *The Flight of the Creative Class*—we can succeed in the “flat world” by building and freeing our “creative class” to create “spikes,” through exercising our freedom, challenging ourselves in every area from education to human rights. In this way, we can prevent America from “falling off the flat earth.” To rise above, we must move to “higher ground.”