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A New Foundation, Revisited

Richard J. Boris¹

In my valedictory article in this journal² in 2014, I offered my colleagues several critical observations and suggestions as possible guides for the National Center's future role in public higher education. Eight years later, I believe that several merit repeating (and expanding), more forcefully than before, at a time when our public institutions are increasingly fragile and clearly confused about what their charter and role ought to be three years into a world-wide pandemic where everything is not quite as it was before.

In retrospect, we can see that public higher education in 2014 was under attack but not imperiled, resource-challenged but not starved. Never having leveraged our place as a first-tier pillar of the American "knowledge" economy, we had no safeguards when demographic, economic, and political trends—and popular sentiment—critically shifted against it.

Simply put, public higher education no longer has a place at the national table. Nor does it have a recognizable national voice. Among (and within) states, public higher education has staked a parochial, almost feudal positioning of its—often locally competing—needs without much acknowledgment of its potentially critical place in our national dialogue about what kind of nation we want to be and what role public higher education might play in that aspiration.

Compared to the post-Sputnik era when a national consensus developed about the place of public universities in rectifying the putative gap between the United States and the Soviet Union in science, literacy, and culture, public universities today have lost the confidence of the public and, more importantly, they have also lost their self-confidence in their own role in national life. But even then, the seeds of our marginalization were sown because we were recipients—rather than advocates—of the largess that the political system bestowed, for its own reasons, during the height of the cold war.

The timid, insular politics of the leaderships of public universities is partially responsible for this state of affairs, but so is mission-creep, the relentless pursuit of higher rankings and private funding, the erosion of full-time faculty, and the marginalization of faculty governance. The public higher education unions are similarly fragmented since they are often step-children of

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² Boris, Richard (2014) "From Ivory to Babel to A New Foundation," *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*: Vol. 6, Article 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58188/1941-8043.1367> Available at: <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba/vol6/iss1/1>

K-12 unions or fragile offshoots of non-academic unions (the reasons for these new forms of representation deserve their own analysis).

Finding a new voice to re-situate public universities in our national dialogue will not be quick or easy. But there are strong models of patient, methodical messaging, and leadership that we might well emulate. We need an unrelenting, unvarying message to change the public perception of what we do, who we are, and why we are nationally important. Of course, we first have to learn what it is we have to say.

What to say will be particularly difficult to find at a time when long-held beliefs about the value of college and university as sure paths into the middle class, have ceased to resonate—with cause. Youth, and the not so young, are today attracted by advertisements that promise good work without “the paper,” meaning, of course, without a college degree. While national data are hard to come by and outcomes vary greatly by discipline and region, it is clear that job-seekers with bachelor’s degrees do not earn much more than those without diplomas, especially in the years right out of college, and they often have significant college debt to boot.

To keep faith with our students, their families, our state legislators, and the general public, we surely have to start by re-dedicating ourselves to strong undergraduate education, bolstering the value of associate’s- and bachelor’s-level degrees, and building career paths and essential citizenship skills of value to our students, their communities, and the workforce of tomorrow.

We have to articulate a new rationale for our public universities. Can this be done? Our universities remain repositories of great talent that we have marshaled in the past to help rebuild institutions, communities, cities and whole nations. But today our public universities are hollowed out—one of many trends accelerated by the pandemic—and in need of a new charter with a compelling mission, message and voice.

The long absence of national leadership, of a strong national voice, has brought us to the point where provided resources are inadequate to fund the work we do. An exploitative labor policy to manage resource scarcity is virtually universal at public institutions. High moral ground cannot be claimed in state houses or in the national government (or in the classroom) when labor policy is so flawed morally.

We must commit our institutions to a national perspective, one that is not confined by provincial concerns, guarded sovereignties, or paralyzing strangleholds of administration/faculty conflict. A common voice in the higher education landscape must be found.

Voices need development. They need venues and institutional support. The City University of New York, our nation's primary urban public institution, could serve as an inaugural setting for such a public policy discussion, and ultimately a public policy institute.

The National Center is ideally suited to undertake an expanded role with its long record of accomplishments that include the annual National Conference, regional conferences, the *Directory of Faculty Contracts and Bargaining Units in Higher Education*, as well as its well-regarded *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*. But most important is its long and credible record of collaborative work among scholars, administrators, and union leaders, which is unparalleled in American academic life.

For the National Center to take on this expanded role in higher education, its leadership must commit to reordering its priorities and raising significant funding—probably starting with foundations—to join the effort to re-imagine and revitalize higher education in this nation. Failing that, the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions will be fighting over the scraps of a decimated landscape. The National Center has proved agile in the past, and I believe that it can rededicate itself to accomplish larger goals at a time when we most need to pull together.

What started 50 years ago as a clearing house of ideas for the new collective bargaining in higher education eventually could become a major national institution with a grand mission where adequate resources and dialogue again mark the university as a special and revered place. The National Center could be the place where talent is mobilized, messages formulated, and public universities find a new start.