Graduating the 21st Century Student: Advising As If Their Lives (and Our Future) Depended on It

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In this adaptation of my keynote address at the 2011 NACADA Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado, I outline the level of increase in college attainment that must occur between now and 2025 for the United States to remain internationally competitive and meet its changing economic and social challenges. After making the case for why achieving Goal 2025—providing high quality college degrees to 60% of the U.S. working age population—is necessary, I outline how those in higher education can achieve this ambitious goal with an emphasis on the role of advisors in advancing college completion goals for the 21st century student.

KEYWORDS: advising profession; advising, role on campus; higher education, future of; higher education, issues in; NACADA, keynote address; retention

The future of the U.S. economy and democracy rests in large part on the ability to dramatically increase the number of people in this country with a high quality college (2- and 4- year) degree. The Lumina Foundation is the largest foundation in the country singularly focused on achieving that goal. In fact, we call it the *Big Goal* or *Goal 2025*. Simply stated, we seek to be a catalyst to help the country increase its college attainment rate from around 40% of the work force with a college degree (the level for the past few decades) to 60% of the workforce with a high quality college degree by 2025 (I will have more to say about the issue of quality later). The best analysis of the economists with whom we work suggest that 60% is a necessary level to sustain an economy where 63% of the jobs will require some form of postsecondary attainment by 2018 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). So ultimately this is not Lumina's goal, it must be the nation's goal if Americans hope to provide a future for young people that in any way offers the quality of life enjoyed over the last half of the 20th century. We, in fact, are hoping organizations like NACADA, employer groups, states, and others will adopt Goal 2025 or something like it to help mobilize the country around this goal.

NACADA and its members are important partners in this work. To create a system that has any hope of achieving this goal, everyone in education must become much more focused on students and their success. Having spent 30 years in higher education before coming to Lumina, I know no group is more committed to student-centered policies and practices than are academic advisors, who live every day with students and know what is working and not working for them in postsecondary institutions. In presenting the challenge facing the country and higher education today, I hope you will see why your work to support student success is more important today than it has ever been.

What is Goal 2025?

First let me elaborate on what Goal 2025 entails. To reach the goal, the United States must produce 278,000 graduates per year, every year: a 6.3% annual increase. According to the latest figures, U.S. colleges and universities are producing about 112,000 graduates a year, which needs to increase nationally by 166,000 per year. This is an audacious goal to be sure, but an attainable one. Especially if broken down by state and county as we do in our annual report, *A Stronger Nation through Higher Education* (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). For example, in Colorado, where the 2011 NACADA Annual Conference was held, the necessary increase in associate's and baccalaureate degrees each year is 2,926, an annual increase of 4.6%. When data are further disaggregated, Denver County or Pueblo County can decide what they need to do. At that level one begins to see that by implementing strategies to increase opportunities for returning adults who have college credits but no degree (there are 636,534 such adults in Colorado—23.1% of the total workforce!), reducing gaps in college access and success for the growing Latino population, and other strategies appropriate to different regions, the goal is achievable (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010).

Other countries are making substantial progress in attainment. In fact, in South Korea, according to 2011 data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012), 63% of the workforce now has college degrees. South Korea moved ahead of Canada to become the most educated nation in the world, with a 5% increase in one year! Ontario Canada is already at a

60% college attainment rate and has a plan in place to move to 70% in the near future. The world is not waiting for America to wake up and catch up.

Achieving Goal 2025 will demand large increases in both the number of people participating in college (access) and equally significant improvements in the number of people who complete college (success) to reach the 60% attainment rate. Here I will emphasize the completion issue since that is the area in which NACADA members are most engaged. But I would challenge everyone to think about the partnerships they are creating to support access for underserved groups: Are you working with counselors at your feeder high schools to improve students' academic, financial, and social preparation for college? Are you creating pipelines where the handoff is smooth and the student is not dropped somewhere in between the high school exit door and the college entrance door? Is information being shared across that great divide? Are programs in place to make those connections? What partnerships do you have in place with agencies and employers to allow adult learners to return to your colleges with all the information and resources they need at the outset for a good start? Strong partnerships with K-12 systems, employers, community agencies, and adult basic education can help colleges increase access for students who most need that help.

Again, I know most of advisor efforts are focused on improved student completion. I want to be clear about what I mean by *improved* completion. America must achieve significant increases in the number of people who obtain quality degrees that prepare them for the next step in their lives, be it more education or work. I am not talking simply about improved graduation rates. Everyone reading this knows one easy way to increase graduation rates: Raise admissions requirements and only accept those students who will graduate with minimal effort on the part of the postsecondary institution. I recently saw plaudits issued to an institution for increasing its graduation rate. I reviewed how many degrees it was granting and discovered that the number had actually gone down slightly. Such strategies will not help Americans meet Goal 2025 or secure the economic and civic future of this country.

Why is Achieving Goal 2025 Critical to the Future?

As noted previously, the ability of the United States to continue to be an important part of the global economy and its ability to recover fully from this deep recession is, in very important ways, dependent on dramatic increases in college attainment. To explain why this is true, let me begin by briefly framing the international context and then looking more deeply at the state of the American economy. A loss of international competitiveness will have dire consequences for this country, but frankly, in terms of motivating change I have found that "Beat Canada or South Korea!" is not an effective rallying cry for change in the United States for most audiences. Nevertheless, let us take a look at where the United States stands globally because in the final analysis it is important.

According to the most recent (2011) OECD data (OECD, 2012), the leading provider of international comparisons in the education space, the United States has slipped to 15th in the world in the percentage of the younger workforce (25-34 years old) with a 2- or 4-year degree. A close inspection of the data reveals that older U.S. workers (55 to 64 years) are the most educated in the world. America once did a good job in educating its workforce but now is going in the wrong direction. In almost all other OECD countries, significant advances have been made so that their younger workers (25-34 and even those 35-44 years old) are more educated than their older workers. They are moving in the right direction.

As every governor and economic development officer knows, states are no longer competing with neighboring states for companies and jobs. They are competing internationally. A comparison of state education data with international data clearly shows that many states are currently at education levels that put them in competition with places like Slovenia, Greece, and Poland. If living-wage, paying job creation is the slogan of the post-recession era, this is not good news.

In the U.S. domestic economy, the shortage of people with quality college degrees and certificates is a growing problem. In 1980 the wage premium for a 4-year college degree was 40% over that for a high school diploma. In 2010 that premium was 74%. If those attainment numbers do not increase, that premium will be at nearly 100% by 2025 (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). While that may seem like good news for the limited number of people who complete college, it is very bad news for the huge numbers of low-income, first-generation, adult, and students of color left behind. It is also bad news for the economy as a whole. It is estimated that adding the 20 million plus additional degree holders to the workforce that Goal 2025 demands will add billions to the gross domestic product, increase

productivity, and still leave a 46% wage premium for college graduates—a more optimal level for economic growth (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). More immediately, expanding college opportunity for adult workers ravaged by this recession must be a priority. Economic analyses suggest that in each recession since the 1970s, the jobs lost increasingly reflect "structural" change or permanent job losses, not temporary layoffs. The jobs that are going away are in large part those requiring a high school degree or less. To reemploy the casualties of this recession requires providing accessible postsecondary opportunities to prepare them for the jobs of the future. The jobs they lost are not coming back (Groshen &Potter, 2003).

How to Achieve Goal 2025

The international and U.S. economic data provide a compelling rationale for pursuing Goal 2025. I have only touched on that data here. I have not discussed at all the impact of an educated population on the health of our democracy and on social justice in America. We all have seen the data showing that a more educated population is more civically engaged and, I would argue, more able to engage in reasoned policy discussions that go beyond demagoguery and unenlightened self-interest. Moreover, all of the attainment gains will need to come from those groups least well served to date by higher education (the fast growing Latino population and other people of color, first-generation, and low-income students). Hence, by definition, achieving Goal 2025 will reduce the gaps in education opportunity that are threatening to create a permanent underclass and tear apart the fabric of U.S. society.

So, then, how do we put ourselves on track to better educate our country and bring it back from the brink of economic stagnation and social fragmentation? Here I want to focus on those actions most relevant to advisors working with millions of students across the country. However, I would note in passing that achieving this goal will require significant policy changes at the national, state, and institutional level. Lumina has a policy agenda (www.luminafoundation.org) and aggressively engages in policy advocacy to support Goal 2025. This includes eliminating bad policies that hinder progress (e.g., institutional financial aid policies that succumb to the disease of elitism and divert resources to wealthy students with high test scores) and putting policies in place that promote the behaviors that advance progress (e.g., funding public higher education in significant part on increases in the number of students they graduate rather than the number of students they enroll with special rewards for institutions that succeed in graduating many more underserved students). We also understand that we need strategies to *build will* among different constituencies to do the right thing. In many instances policymakers know what must be done, but just cannot seem to muster the will to do it. Lastly, higher education needs to focus on *scaling up effective practices* that work for students. In almost every area of work we find examples of effective practices supporting college access and success, but they constitute "a thousand random acts of excellence." All stakeholders must find ways to scale these effective practices and make them a part of the water supply in higher education.

With that overview, let me focus on some specific directions for the efforts to achieve Goal 2025. First, to succeed, higher education must focus on 21st century students. Until recently, when asked about our mission at Lumina, we would say it is to help more low-income, first-generation, adult students, and students of color complete college. We realized, however, that by phrasing it that way we inadvertently conveyed the message that these students were somehow a special group of students within a larger universe. In fact, as the data make clear these are the increasing majority of college students and will continue to be even more of the postsecondary population as institutions pursue Goal 2025. Among current undergraduates 75% "are juggling some combination of jobs, families, and school while commuting to class. Only one quarter of today's students attend full time at residential colleges with their parents paying the bill" (Complete College America, 2011). Students like my son, who began attending a 4-year college in 2011 and is living in a dorm, are a shrinking minority of the students higher education must serve.

As just one example of the 21st century students to be served, approximately 35.8 million adults in the current workforce (22% of the total workforce) have "some college but no degree." That is, they attended college (many of them obtaining significant numbers of hours and debt) and left without any kind of degree (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). These college stop outs must be a target for college access and success efforts. In the economy emerging from this recession, these Americans are increasingly at economic risk, if not already unemployed. Higher education has a moral and a strategic obligation to bring these students back to prepare them for a better future for them-

selves and create a better future for the country.

Despite the data so clearly showing the nature of the 21st century students to serve in growing numbers, many postsecondary policies (e.g., financial aid) and practices remain mired in a mid-20th century vision of higher education where students are full-time, live in dorms, go to football games on weekends, and hang out on the quad. Higher education must redesign the delivery of quality learning, support services, and financial support to address the needs of the 21st century students. I know many NACADA members are involved in developing advising programs supporting these students, but colleges and universities are a long way from making such effective programs the norm in higher education.

Second, to reach Goal 2015, higher education must close the gaps in opportunity and success that exist between students of different ethnicity, race, and social class. This too is part of serving the 21st century student. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (as cited by the Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010), 42.2% of White Americans had a college degree, Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans had degree attainment rates of 18.6, 26.2, and 22.5% respectively. Among the young workforce (25-29 years) the disparities are as great or greater. Latinos are by far the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) projects over 80 million more Latinos in the United States by 2050. Yet this group has the lowest college attendance and college success rate of any group. The fastest growing segments of the postsecondary population are being least served by K-12 schools and colleges. This must be turned around if the United States is to have any hope for a reasonably prosperous future. To draw attention to and begin to address this issue, Lumina recently announced a 4-year, multimillion dollar effort in 12 major cities with the largest or fastest growing Latino populations.

The impact of race and ethnicity is compounded by the inequities around class. In 2010, among 24-year-olds not in college, 79.1% of those in the highest income quartile held a bachelor's degree. Among the lowest income quartile that number was 10.7% (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2012)! So unless we believe that ability and capacity to contribute to the U.S. economy and democracy is defined by skin color, wealth, and for that matter zip code, "Houston, we have a problem." It is not a Latino problem, or an African/Native American problem, or a poor people's problem. It is an American problem. Not solving it will impact all Americans. Solving it will require a recommitment to the idea of the Unites States as a country committed to opportunity for all, not pathways reinforcing the advantages of the privileged.

So how, we might ask, are the country and its colleges responding to this challenge to reach Goal 2025 by better serving the 21st century student and reducing the equity gaps? While there are pockets of positive response (the thousand random acts of excellence phenomenon referenced earlier), let me share some data that suggest a darker picture but with a clear path to improvement. Specifically, how is higher education prioritizing precious financial aid dollars to help 21st century students meet the rising financial challenges of going to college? The bedrock for aid efforts targeting deserving low-income students is the Federal Pell program. In 1979-80 Pell grants covered 99, 77, and 36% of the costs of attending public 2-year, public 4-year, and private 4-year colleges, respectively. In 2006-2007 those numbers were 62, 36, and 15% (Education Trust, 2009). While the buying power of Pell grants has declined, there is good news. Recent changes in Pell led to a 50% increase in the number of low-income students attending college with Pell support (from 6 to 9 million). Everyone now needs to be involved in efforts to further expand and improve Pell to promote college access and success. Too many Pell students do not complete college. Smart financial-aid strategies that provide completion incentives and improved institutional accountability can help educators reach the goal.

The picture is less positive at the state- and institutional-aid level. Many states have financial aid programs (some funded by lottery dollars). In 1997-1998, 83.3% of those funds were need based. By 2007-2008 that dropped to 72.5% (National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs Report, 2008). The practical impact of this shift is that millions more dollars in state aid have begun going to students with high test scores coming from the best high schools, and yes, generally wealthier families. So while these programs are "running out of money" earlier and earlier so that low-income and adult learners who apply later in the process are denied access to college, students with strong support systems and resources, who would go to college anyway, are receiving a larger share of the pie. In one state with an entirely "merit" scholarship system, over $150 million went to families with an annual income over $200,000. A community college president in that state once called the state aid program a car-dealer relief program (since the aid dollars allowed so many of

these wealthier students to buy cars when they went to college).

At the institutional level, the picture is no less disturbing. Many people are unaware of the large amount of dollars public and private institutions (almost exclusively 4-year colleges) provide to students. Together those funds combined rival the federal Pell program in size. Recent data released by the Education Trust in its publication *Opportunity Adrift* (2009) show that flagship institutions in 2007 provided as much aid to students whose family income exceeded $80,000 as they did to students with family incomes below $54,000. Public 4-year colleges as a whole are demonstrating much larger percentage increases in aid to families making over $100,000 than to those making under $30,000. In short, at a time when higher education must reach out as never before to lower income students, when college costs are rising, when states and institutions could be buffering some of the pain for low-income families through better targeting the precious aid dollars available, they (we) are choosing not to do that.

What Should Advisors Do?

So what is an advisor to do? What role can you play on your campuses and what role can NACADA play to help the country reach Goal 2025 and serve the needs of the 21st century student? First, be a vocal advocate for the 21 century student. Ask the tough questions of your institution on their behalf. For example, is your institution an adult-learner focused institution? The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2011) has developed an institutional assessment (the *Adult Learner Focused Institution* or ALFI) that will help advisors identify strengths and weaknesses in serving the adult learner. In my previous role at the state system level, institutions were paid to conduct this assessment. It was extremely productive. Institutions found that they were doing some things very well for adults but that some policies and practices were powerful barriers to their access and completion. The good news was that removing many of these barriers did not cost much. It was simply a matter of looking at things through the eyes of a returning adult and realigning policies and practices.

Second, be an advocate for the use of high quality data and transparent reporting of the good, the bad, and the ugly findings around college access and completion for students disaggregated by race, income, and age. Encourage the courageous conversations required to face up to failures and improve outcomes for students.

Third, find out where your institution is spending financial aid dollars (if it has them) and advocate for targeting those dollars in ways that increase access for more students and promote completion. (For information about how aid can be best structured to encourage students to complete college, see www.collegeproductivity.org.)

Fourth, be a force on campus for maintaining a relentless focus on college completion and student success. It can no longer be about increased enrollment, or even worse, raising admissions requirements in the interest of entering classes with higher SAT/ACT scores and higher graduation rates.

Fifth, in addition to being an advocate for 21st century students on all these institutional issues, look with new eyes at your own advising systems. Make sure you have a 21st century advising system for 21st century students. This is your area of expertise and your most direct responsibility. You are the experts here, not me. But let me make some brief suggestions based on what we see working around the country.

1. Create partnerships with K-12 faculty and counselors, employers, and the community to create strong handoffs from high school and work coupled with comprehensive college support systems that are culturally attuned to the students being served. Such partnerships can allow you to focus on the whole student: their financial, cultural, and academic needs. It does take a village.
2. Focus on support for key transition points: high school to college, work to college (for adults), transfer from school to school, and college to life after college (more education or work). College is about learning and a career. Does your college know how its graduates fare in pursuing further education or a career? Does it regularly examine data on education-related employment and wages? If not, push for the data so it can better design the transition programs that ensure academic programs are preparing students for success in their next stage in life. Does the college track the success of transfer students (received or sent)? Does it analyze the performance of students from feeder high schools (how many go into remediation or persist generally?) and then work with those high schools to solve problems?
3. Create clear academic pathways to career readiness for students. This is especially

important for first-generation and adult students. Many of those 35.8 million adult college stop-outs simply lost their way and their motivation amidst the curricular complexities embedded in the course catalogs provided in the name of offering students choices.

4. Create and support accelerated pathways to degrees. The longer the education process is drawn out, especially for students with the most complex and fragile lives, the more likely they will fail. "Life" will happen. Advocate for *prior learning assessments* for adults so they can be credited for what they know coming in to the institution. Eliminate the bottlenecks that keep students circling like planes on a bad day at O'Hare airport because they cannot enroll in needed prerequisites or required courses. Question programs that have grown like stalactites over the years so students must exceed the normal 60 hours or 120 hours to earn associate or baccalaureate degrees. And yes, ask why institutions hold onto a semester- and course-based system when learning should be the priority. As one colleague of mine has said, "If you are focused on seat time for students, you are focused on the wrong end of the student."
5. Utilize the latest technologies to expand the capacity to reach more students, improve the quality of advising, better adapt to individual student needs, and reduce costs. These models exist. Some were present at the 2011 NACADA meeting. "One arm around one student" sounds nice but postsecondary institutions do not have enough arms or enough money to train and support those arms for all the students who need help.
6. Create an advising corps that looks like the students you most need to serve.
7. Use NACADA and other platforms to share and learn what works best for adult, veteran, transfer, low-income, first-generation, and students of color.
8. Lead those courageous conversations about the results of academic programs: Focus on what the data say. Do not suffer excuses that blame students for failure: "They weren't prepared enough" or "they didn't work hard enough" or "they were not college material." Yes, students make mistakes, but a higher education system that fails to graduate almost half of its students overall, including institutions with even higher failure rates, must confront systemic issues. The Teflon coating higher education has enjoyed to date around student failure is cracking. You can help destroy it once and for all.
9. Insist on a student-centered, data-based approach to all decisions. It is not about a specific sector, institution, faculty, or program any more. It cannot be. Students' lives and the future of our country are at stake.

I offer these suggestions humbly to a community that I know, as much as any in higher education, keeps students close to its heart. I hope the perspective I have shared here helps you advance their cause. One of my favorite poets, Adrienne Rich, offered an image decades ago that I think captures in part the challenge faced today by those seeking to provide opportunity and college success to 21st century students so that Goal 2025 can be reached. This is excerpted from her 1978 *The Dream of a Common Language:*

> The rules break like a thermometer,
> Quicksilver spills across the charted system….
> Whatever we do together is pure invention
> The maps they gave us were out of date by years.

I would suggest that many of the maps used to guide higher education policy and practice today are out of date by decades; they are maps that have taken the United States to a place that threatens its economic future, democracy, and commitment to social justice and opportunity. We need new maps and I know this community can help draw those. All of us must do this with an urgency driven by the belief that the lives of our students and our own futures depend on it, because they do. Your work as college advisors and student advocates has never been more important.

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