

Provocative Questions, Courageous Answers

ARC19 -- WSCUC Academic Resource Conference

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Once upon a time provocative questions on campus sounded like this: “Is there intelligent life elsewhere in the universe?” “What is beauty?” “What if the South had won the Civil War?”

When I was in college our idea of a provocative question was: “If we take over Lowe Library can we end the war?” or “Why don’t Yale and Williams admit women?”

And much of our effort today is shaped by the brave souls in higher education who finally asked this provocative question: “Do we know if they’re learning what we’re teaching?”

Thank you for accepting WSCUC’s standing invitation to promote student success and institution effectiveness, this week and throughout the year.

On the road to ARC we heard many provocative and urgent questions. The public is asking fundamental questions about the value of higher education. We can answer those questions by understanding whether educational engagement across WSCUC yields the learning and core competencies promised by the institution. And then we *must* do better at making those learning outcomes and core competencies, and the post graduate value of higher education, widely understandable.

Here’s a provocative question of the moment: Is college for everyone? Actually, I have a quick answer to that one: if you aspire to college for your children, or value your own education, then the opportunity for college is for everyone. Not everyone will choose it, and that’s fine as long as it’s not distributed according to ZIP code or disability or wealth or gender.

Recently Congress, the US Department of Education, and the White House are raising some long-standing questions that can be summarized this way:

- How can we balance innovation and accountability, supporting new ways of delivering and organizing learning without opening floodgates to waves of fraud and empty offerings?
- Would more choices and competition among accrediting agencies help education become stronger, more responsive to student and workplace needs, and more affordable?

- Can we more effectively protect students when schools close, and can we spot closure coming sooner?

And it has to be said: the indictment of a few amoral families and greedy coaches, far too many of them here in California, have shattered the illusion of meritocracy. Former Secretary Arne Duncan said it well: this is an “acute manifestation of privilege,” but it pervades education at every level, starting with early childhood education. Others have described it as “dreamhoarding” by the “new aristocracy.”

These indictments have created a profound moment of recognition and self-analysis. Do we stand for prestige, selectivity, and status, or for opportunity, egalitarian access, and excellence? It’s been said that a crisis is too important to waste. Let’s not waste this moment of examination and the sense of urgency it has engendered.

This is a time for WSCUC to stand firmly on our assets and vision:

- Rock solid commitment to equitable student success
- Insistence on institutional integrity in board governance, financial dealings and accurate representation of institutional condition, conflicts of interest, responsible recruiting and admissions, handling of complaints including violence or harassment, and academic policy
- Scores of volunteers willing and able to help us apply the judgment and experience necessary to understand institutional mission, effectiveness, stability, and responsibility
- Willingness to be reflective, even self-critical, in the interests of students and institutions
- To be a leader in innovation and transparency

In that regard I was proud to hear the head of MakeSchool talk at the ASU-GSV conference Tuesday about WSCUC’s creative, reasonable approach in approving its incubation arrangement with Dominican University to combine their computer science and liberal arts strengths.

At this moment, every one of us has the responsibility and also the satisfaction of doing what it takes to maintain mission, momentum, and morale in the face of obstacles, imperfections, misunderstanding, and setbacks.

For the clutch of college coaches who failed their schools and their teams, there are thousands of advisors and faculty and experts like you researching success models, mentoring students and redesigning curricular pathways and, yes, wisely coaching student athletes, to assure success for first gen and less advantaged students.

For every critique of accreditation, there are dozens of you listening carefully and working determinedly to make WSCUC accreditation the fairest, most rigorous, and also the most constructive ally to students and institutions that we can be.

Before I close by telling you about the three powerhouse plenaries we have ahead of us, please join me in a few important thank you. I'd like to add my thanks to the WSCUC Commissioners, the elected leaders who set our vision and exercise the institutional and policy decisions that make us proud of WSCUC. I also join our Chair in thanking our many volunteers – without you, this model of accreditation would not be possible.

Please help me thank the WSCUC staff for their work year round in supporting you and your institutions, our process and volunteers, and for engineering this terrific gathering. Can you believe there are only twenty of them?

This year I'd like to recognize our colleague Dick Osborn, who is retiring at the end of the year, so this will be his last ARC as a vice president. In his ten years with WSCUC Dick has been our guide, historian, and storyteller. You know him as an astute and caring liaison, a shepherd through eligibility, an experienced college president, and a wise counselor. It is too soon to say good bye, certainly, but it's always appropriate to say thank you.

Our thanks to all of you for coming to ARC to engage and learn. We can ask provocative questions, but we count on YOU to find the courageous answers.

In that spirit I ask each of you to promise to ask a provocative question here at ARC, and one back on your campus, a question that will advance the conversation, crack open an assumption, start a better conversation.

I for one like really concrete questions, questions you can do something with. I think of Bridget Burns of University Innovation Alliance, who asks, "What are your three biggest indicators that a student will drop out?" And of Beverly Daniel Tatum, formerly President of Spelman College, who was certainly provocative when she titled her book, recently reissued: "Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in Cafeteria?"

I hope you are prepared to ask questions that are collegial and yet also profound: Why do we do it that way? Who wins and loses? Who have we forgotten? Will you work with me on that?

Let me conclude by telling you about the provocative questions we have chosen to focus on in our three ARC plenary sessions, in reverse order. When we conceived "Provocative Questions, Courageous Answers," we had a few bold questions to put before you:

- I. How can public policy and concerted statewide effort accelerate equity and student success that in turn spur economic growth, opportunity, civic engagement? Specifically what strategies will the Newsom administration put at the top of their list and what will it take to get results?

Friday morning the Governor's top higher education adviser, Dr. Lande Ajose, will address those questions. She inspired us in her brief time on the WSCUC Commission before the Governor also saw her talents and whisked her to Sacramento. I am confident Lande will be provocative and courageous, equity-minded and compelling.

- II. Second, for all the attention and effort you and we are putting into assessment and research and data, is that work actually making a difference in the quality of the learning and life opportunities of our students? Have there been unintended consequences of these efforts that hold us back? Or – she said hopefully – are we about to crest the hill of design and capacity building and explaining and expense to generate an explosion of value and insight from our struggles?

We have assembled an ideal group to dig deeply and honestly into questions like that. The panel includes disrupters, pragmatists and researchers, skeptics and practitioners, professor and provost, upstarts and stalwarts. All we asked of them is to tell it like it is, to consider nothing sacred, and maybe to surprise us.

- III. Finally, I'm honored now to introduce the keynote session, addressing this question: What does an organization do if it has the luxury of a laser focus on student success, and the flexibility to design every aspect of its program for that purpose?

Every day you think about student success. But some of you also think about teaching psychology, art, or French, or the research budget or software upgrades or office assignments. What if every single thing you did every day was directly related to student success? If every system was designed from scratch intentionally around that purpose?

We're going to hear first from two exceptional leaders, CEOs Alexandra Bernadotte and Kim Mazuca, who share your commitment to student success, but have that luxury of focus. Their stories, their students, are our students, too – the people 10,000 Degrees and Beyond 12 serve go to our schools, to SF and Sonoma State, to Dominican and Berkeley, to career programs and our sister community colleges.

What can we learn from them and their organizations to help students at our institutions? Alex and Kim will share their stories. Then James Minor, assistant vice chancellor and senior strategist, and one of the main energy sources of the CSU Graduation Rate 2025 Initiative, will guide a conversation to share insights and challenge us to work together to serve all our students.

On a personal note I am excited to bring together WSCUC and these three amazing leaders. James was my deputy when I was assistant secretary in the US Department of Education. Kim has been my teacher and guide. And I worked for Alex at Beyond 12. Along with you in this

audience, they are the provocative, courageous leaders we need to erase the equity gap and honor our vision of quality education for all.

I wish you a wonderful and rewarding ARC. Please make it your mission to ask your own tough questions, from wherever you sit, and to answer courageously.