



# Difficult Dialogues, Rewarding Solutions: Results of an Initiative to Engage Stakeholder Groups in Solving the U.S. Human Capital Challenge

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Chris Rasmussen, Midwest Higher Education Compact  
Christine Lepkowski, University of Minnesota  
Krista Soria, University of Minnesota

# Background



- ▶ Emergent narrative: The U.S. is falling behind other nations in investing in a college-educated citizenry, and that without a dedicated response, the nation will become increasingly less competitive in the global economy
- ▶ Lumina Foundation response: “Making Opportunity Affordable” grant initiative

# Background

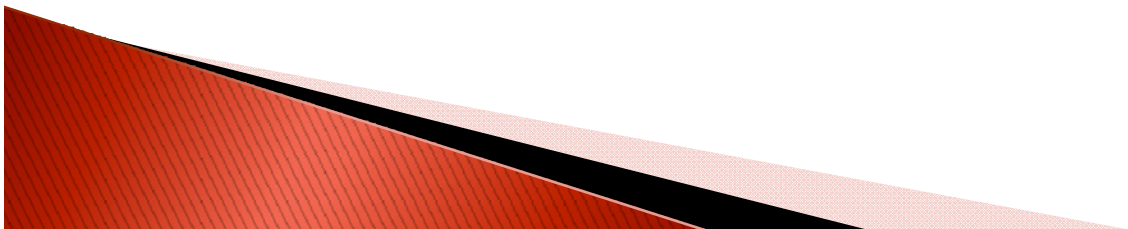


- ▶ Midwestern Higher Education grant for “Difficult Dialogues” project to facilitate cross–sector dialogue and problem solving in an “intellectually safe” environment
- ▶ How do we significantly expand the proportion of American adults with valuable postsecondary credentials in an era of severe fiscal constraints and without any reduction in quality of postsecondary education?

# The Process



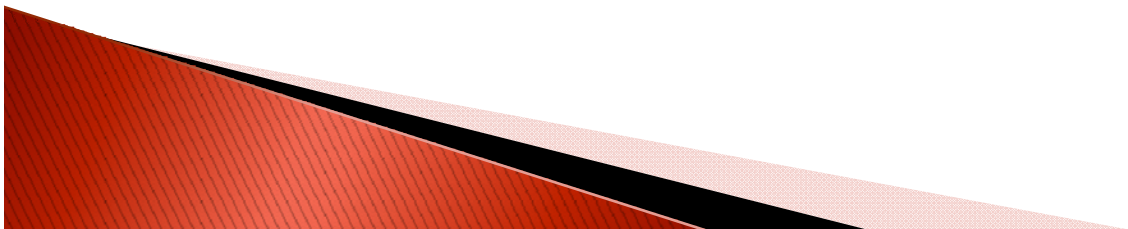
- ▶ Phase I: a policy summit held in late 2008 to further define the particulars of the challenge and to identify innovative strategies and solutions
- ▶ Phase II: a series of similar dialogue groups held with focus groups in each of 12 Midwestern states between April and December of 2009.



# Stakeholder Theory



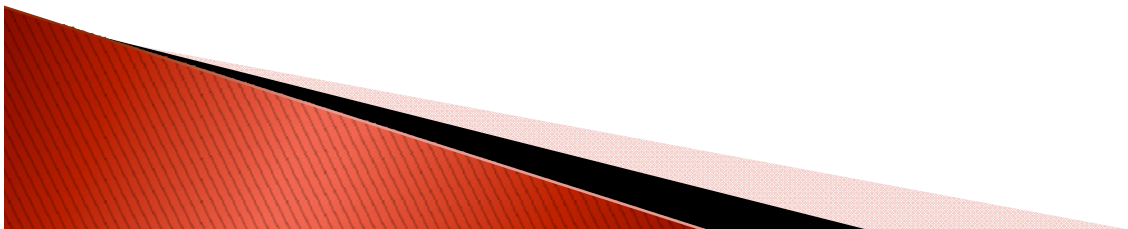
- ▶ Stakeholder identification and stakeholder participation is critical to strategic planning, to crafting strong policy, and to identifying problems to be solved
- ▶ Within higher education, stakeholder identification and participation is especially important because success is often reliant on an even broader range of “customers”



# Stakeholder Theory



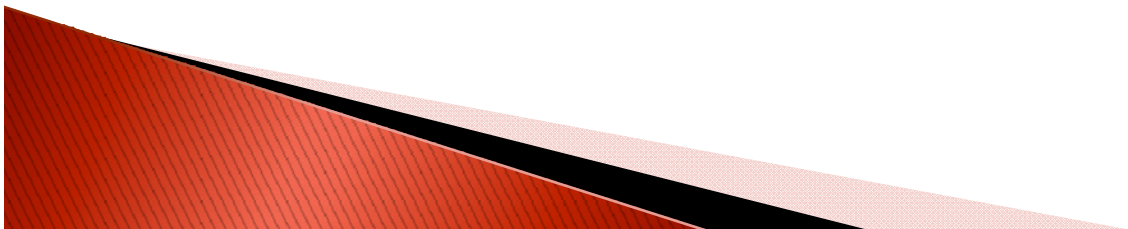
- ▶ Prior stakeholder research is quantitative (surveys) and relates to opinions about the importance of and the cost of higher education
- ▶ Very little research engages the public in identifying the best means through which to solve some of the larger problems facing higher education.



# Stakeholder Theory



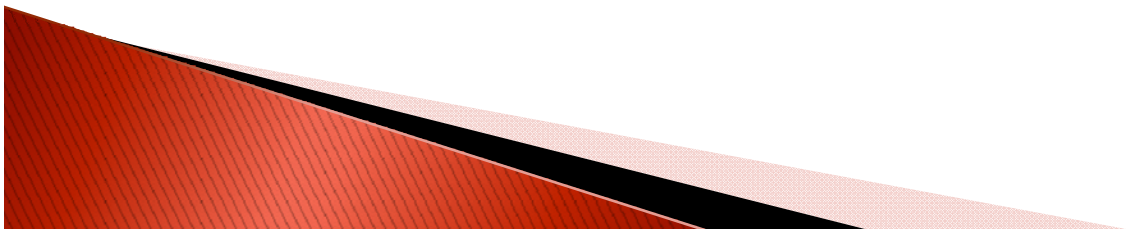
- ▶ Goal: gather the most information-rich data on the public's perception of increasing the proportion of Americans with a postsecondary credential.
- ▶ Theory-based strategy of sampling to capture insights from key higher education stakeholder groups.



# Dialogues



- ▶ Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured manner utilizing a choice work framework with three approaches:
  - Institutions
  - Systems
  - Students

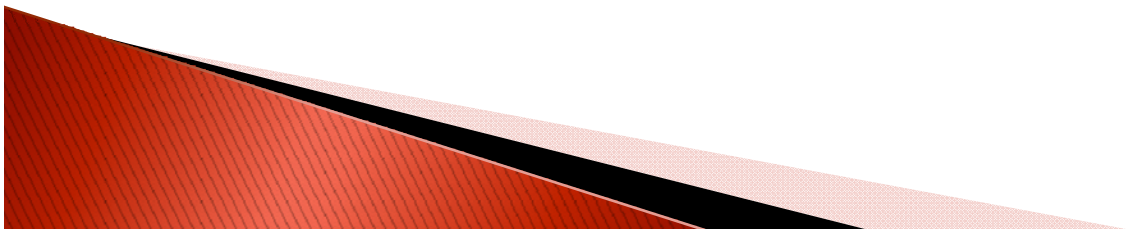


# Dialogues



- ▶ Solutions were organized around a thought experiment:

“Suppose you had to increase the proportion of adults in the United States with a college degree by 20 percentage points by 2025 with no increase in funding and no decrease in quality. How would you do it?”



# Participants – Phase I



- ▶ 12 cross-sector dialogue groups
  - State legislators
  - Other state government officials
  - Faculty and institutional administrators
  - System personnel
  - Association representatives
  - Community leaders

# Participants – Phase II



## Single stakeholder groups:

- ▶ Administrators – public comprehensive
- ▶ Adult/continuing education directors
- ▶ Employers
- ▶ Community college leaders
- ▶ Community organization leaders
- ▶ Faculty
- ▶ Graduate students – public flagship
- ▶ K–12 teachers
- ▶ Legislators (2)
- ▶ Undergraduate students – private college
- ▶ Recent college graduates/young professionals

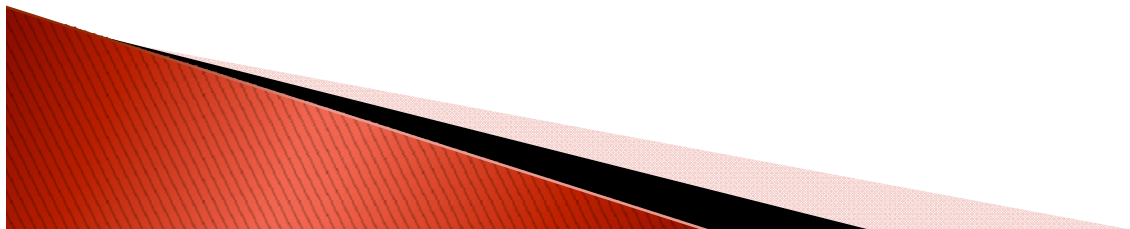
## The Choices in Brief

Approach 1: Focus on Institutions	Approach 2: Focus on Students	Approach 3: Focus on Systems
<p>We should focus our efforts on making institutions run more efficiently.</p>	<p>We should focus our efforts on student preparation and on efficient transitions.</p>	<p>We should focus our efforts on coordinating statewide and regional systems.</p>
<p>Therefore, we should:</p>	<p>Therefore, we should:</p>	<p>Therefore, we should:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rethink the business side of higher education</b> by adopting business models to streamline administrative functions, and by adopting business metrics to drive ongoing improvements to make the administrative/operational functions of institutions more cost effective.</li> <li>• <b>Rethink curriculum/graduation requirements</b> by creating a core curriculum of carefully-aligned required courses with fewer electives, and by providing incentives for institutions to eliminate low-enrollment majors and those that do not lead to strong career opportunities in today’s economy.</li> <li>• <b>Rethink curriculum delivery</b> by increasing the use of technology in large, lower-division courses, expand distance-learning opportunities, and by shifting full-time faculty towards course content and assessment instead of classroom teaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Improve the school-to-college transition</b> by increase K-12 rigor, bettering aligning high school and college curricula, improving assessments that gauge college readiness, and by offering more accelerated learning opportunities (such as AP and dual enrollment).</li> <li>• <b>Improve supports and incentives to encourage students to complete degrees</b> by improving counseling services at all levels of schooling, and by tying student aid to progress toward degrees.</li> <li>• <b>Improve the preparation of non-traditional students</b> by coordinating systems to integrate literacy, ESL and job training programs, and by providing incentives to employers that make it easier for their employees to pursue and complete postsecondary degrees and certificates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Create incentives that encourage colleges and universities to contain costs</b>, such as sharing facilities/programs, and tying state aid to completion rates rather than enrollment numbers.</li> <li>• <b>Avoid “mission creep”</b> by limiting the number of research institutions/focusing regional institutions on teaching, and by directing more students to lower-cost options like community colleges</li> <li>• <b>Create new educational models</b> that meet state and regional goals by allowing students to progress by successfully completing assessments (rather than taking courses), and by working with businesses and economic development agencies to provide alternative certification programs.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Tough Questions for this approach:</i></p>	<p><i>Tough Questions for this approach:</i></p>	<p><i>Tough Questions for this approach:</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shouldn’t students be allowed and even encouraged to explore different subjects in college to get a well-rounded education rather than rushed through in the name of “efficiency”?</li> <li>• Don’t many of these ideas endanger educational quality while failing to get at the real problem, which is that too many students are simply not prepared to succeed in college?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isn’t it this just the old blame game, in which educators point the finger at under-prepared students rather than taking responsibility themselves for improving results?</li> <li>• Aren’t there larger forces at work driving up the cost of higher education that we have to address, besides the preparation and behavior of individual students?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even if this approach leads to some costs savings, how is it going to help students who aren’t prepared to succeed in college earn meaningful degrees and credentials?</li> <li>• Do we really want to give this much power over higher education to policymakers far away from the day-to-day reality of the college classroom?</li> </ul>

# Phase I: Problem Definition



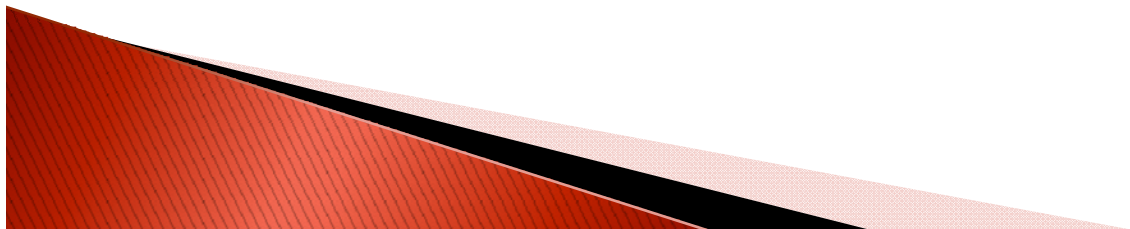
- ▶ Shared sense of urgency
- ▶ No easy answers
- ▶ Move past blaming others to develop systematic approaches
- ▶ Less consensus on benchmarks and definitions
- ▶ Unease with business models (and language)



# Phase I: Solutions



- ▶ Improve college readiness to reduce the need for remediation and promote student success
- ▶ Improve retention of current college students
- ▶ Create integrated P–20 systems
- ▶ Use incentives and business models
- ▶ Encourage innovative approaches to teaching, learning, advising, and management



# Phase II: Methodology



- ▶ A total of 156 individuals participated in the phase two dialogues, which lasted between two and three hours
- ▶ Group size ranged from five to 28 members, with 156 total participants and an average group size of 13
- ▶ 30 hours of audio recordings, transcribed verbatim, resulting in 550 pages of data

# Phase II: Methodology

## Coding & Theming



- ▶ Coding scheme
  - A priori
  - Selective coding
  - Open coding
  - Axial coding
- ▶ Established 95% inter-coder reliability
- ▶ Themes: built toward theory by gleaning information that was combined and ordered into larger themes as the researchers worked from the particular to the general

# Phase II: Institutional Level Themes



- ▶ Improve course selection to match more directly students' major/professional aspirations
- ▶ Expand relationships with business and other entities related to curriculum advisement, internships, early hiring options, and opportunities
- ▶ Better information on why students leave
- ▶ Improve utilization of technology for common courses
- ▶ Shift focus from class completions to competencies that can be demonstrated
- ▶ Provide a “no-frills” option for students who are looking for a higher education without the amenities that contribute to increased costs

# Phase II: System Level Themes

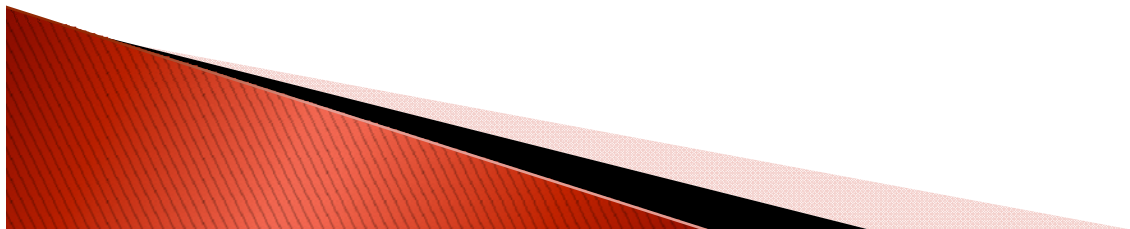


- ▶ Better coordination within and between educational sectors
- ▶ Improve mobility of students among institutions
- ▶ Outreach to “stop outs” and accommodation of varying enrollment patterns
- ▶ More inter–institutional cooperation and less competition
- ▶ Maximize current system capacity before expanding individual institutions

# Phase II: Student Level Themes



- ▶ Three themes emerged:
  - Students are underprepared academically, cognitively, and emotionally
  - Parents and advisors/counselors are insufficiently involved
  - Student choice within postsecondary education is complicated and compromised by lack of support and developmental readiness

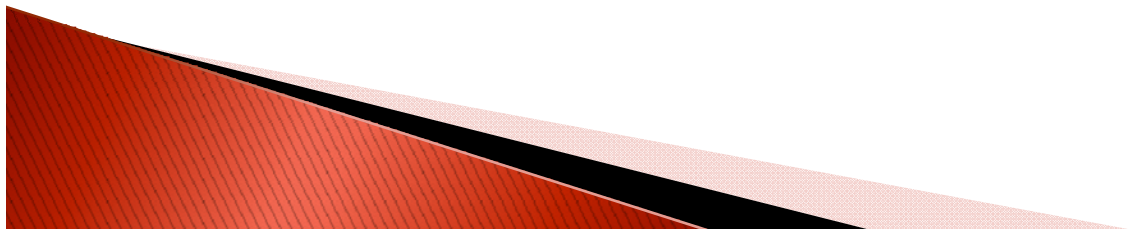


# Underpreparedness



- ▶ Academic, cognitive, and emotionally underprepared:

“generally speaking, a bunch of people who are first time, full time students don’t make it past the first or second semester because of academic preparation. They arrive at the door not able to do the work.”



# Underpreparedness

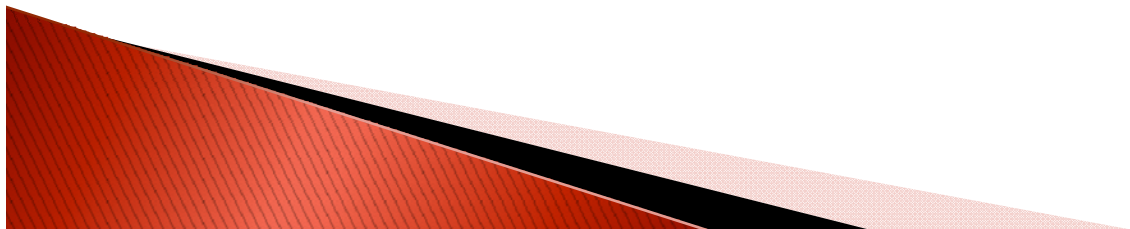


“[there’s] not much emphasis on...students emotional development, preparedness developmentally. One of the things that I’ve noticed with the students coming into undergrad is that no matter how good their grades are, if they’re not emotionally prepared to deal with the rigors of college, then that’s what ultimately causes them to fail. So I think...one of the things that came to mind was better collaboration between campus units, talking about student affairs, academic affairs, working hand in hand in ensuring not only academic success but the overall development of the student.”

# Insufficient Support



- ▶ Parents were seen as insufficiently involved
- ▶ Advising and counseling was thought to be largely absent or ineffective
- ▶ Students were described as challenged developmentally to make choices in a system that regularly presents decision points regarding where, what, and how to study—decisions that bring significant consequences if one changes his or her mind or life circumstances require a change in plans.



# Insufficient Support



“So we're probably always going to have that group of students who decide sort of last minute that I need to do something after high school, and I'm going to go to my local community college, and sort of figure things out. And maybe they're underprepared. Maybe they haven't had the kind of comprehensive advising and counseling, either in the high school, or parents, just don't have the cultural capital to impart in terms of what it takes to be successful in college.”

# Insufficient Support

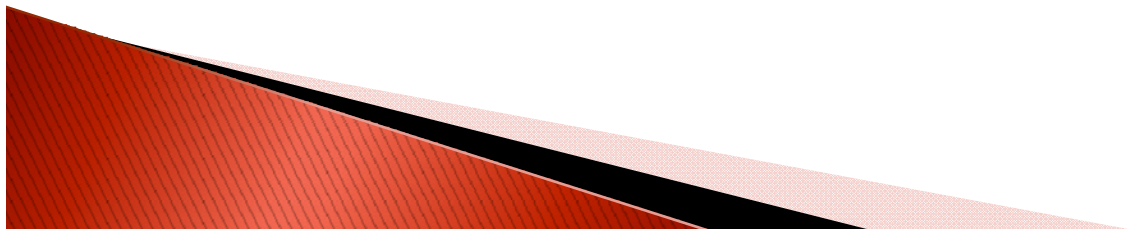


“there’s very little conversation in the high school with the parent, so even the parent may not have ever gone to college, but they could understand if somebody sat down with them and said, ‘Look, in order for your kid to go to school, they need four years of English. They need three years of math. You’ve got to help us force’—but nobody says that to parents. They have no – you know, we talk to parents all the time, and \_\_\_\_\_ ‘I want my kid to go to school.’ And it’s like, ‘Well, they didn’t take enough English.’”

# Insufficient Support



“Students need to start thinking about going to college, at the latest by middle school. And it’s much more than academic preparation. We have to somehow—and, again, this is hard because I don’t know the exact mechanism for doing this, we have to reach not only the child, but the child’s parents and the child’s peers.”



# Student Choice is Compromised

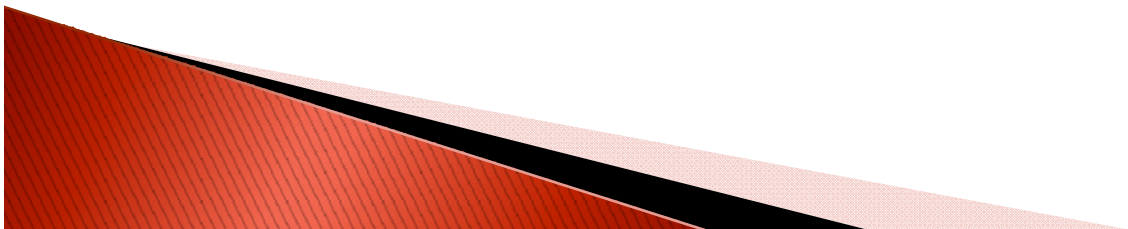


- ▶ Students' lack of readiness to engage in the complex decision-making process required to “choose the right college” or post-secondary option was thought to be complicated by their
  - general lack of academic preparedness
  - limited access to good advising
  - parents', family members', and peers' narrow understanding of the college choice process and what it takes to be successful in college

# Perspective on Choice



- ▶ Students' relative preparedness to make choices that often carry significant weight and that can result in negative consequences if personal preferences or circumstances change down the road
- ▶ Postsecondary participation: a series of decision points, choices that must be made repeatedly



# Perspective on Choice



- ▶ Choices are frequently made at the age of 17 or 18, at a time when one's cognitive and emotional capacity may be insufficient to the task.
- ▶ Consequences for the “wrong” choices—or for changing one's mind at a later date due to a shift in preferences or in response to unforeseen circumstances—can be severe within systems that can be unfriendly and unforgiving.

# Theory of College Choice



- ▶ We know much about initial college choice but very little about decision making processes that occur once a student matriculates
- ▶ Three phase process of Predisposition, Search, and Institutional Selection
- ▶ Econometric perspective – Human Capital Theory
- ▶ Limits of Rationality

# “The American Narrative”

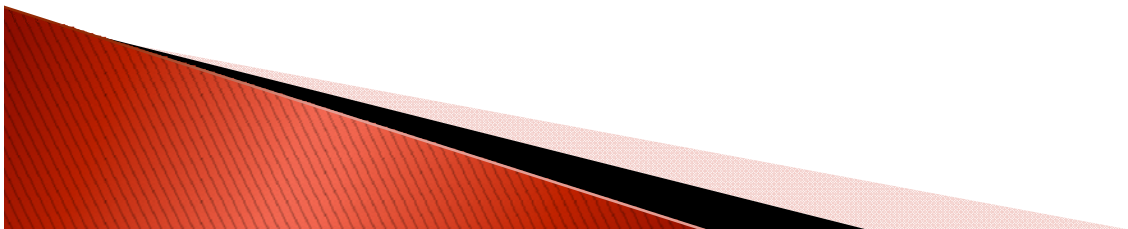


- ▶ Autonomy and choice
- ▶ Fairness and equity
- ▶ Self-determination and individual responsibility
- ▶ Participants struggle with the prospect that fundamental changes in our higher education system required to increase production while maintaining affordability and quality might challenge some of these strongly held beliefs

# Contradictions and Conundrums



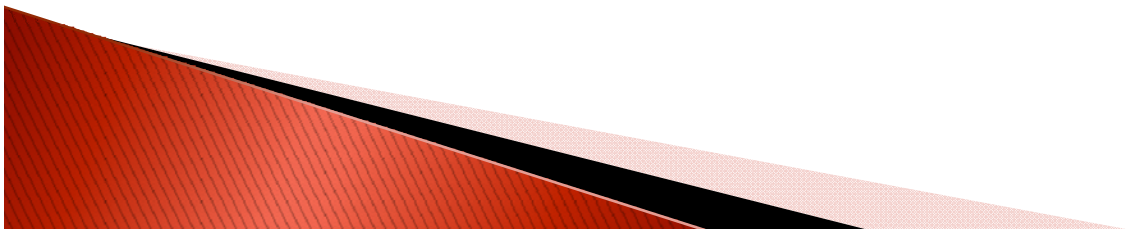
- ▶ Focused curriculum vs. opportunity to explore
- ▶ Duplicate programs vs. geographic access
- ▶ System standardization vs. institutional autonomy
- ▶ Opportunity for all vs. high cost of failure



# “College for all”



- ▶ Teachers, school counselors, and parents often reinforce this notion for a variety of reasons
- ▶ Many students may end up being pushed into college without the appropriate skills, preparation, maturity, or interest to succeed



# Analysis



“Although it is not meant to be deceptive, the college-for-all norm can inadvertently encourage a deception that hurts many youths, including the disadvantaged youths it is meant to help. The college-for-all norm encourages all students to plan on college, regardless of their past achievement. So as not to discourage students, the college-for-all norm avoids focusing on requirements, but in the process it fails to tell students what steps they should take to be successful in college, and it does not warn them when their low achievements make their college plans unlikely to be attained.”

Rosenbaum, J. (2001). *Beyond college for all: Career paths for the forgotten half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, p. 57.

# Analysis



- ▶ Normalizing the notion of “access” without consideration of how much or what type of access is enough, or how one will know when access objectives have been achieved.
- ▶ To suggest that perhaps not everyone should go to college, or that their curricular options should be curtailed, or that the interests and abilities of many young people might be better served by following an alternate pathway to a career or into the workforce, can have significant political consequences.

# More Questions for Dialogue

- ▶ What core functions of higher education must be preserved or enhanced?
- ▶ What systems of delivery are the most effective and under which conditions?
- ▶ What radical changes can be made to higher education system's infrastructure that better fit today's needs?
- ▶ How can we better connect and enhance support systems that assist students at critical junctures?

# More Questions for Dialogue

- ▶ What is the taxpayer's responsibility for higher education and what are the responsibilities of students and families?
- ▶ How do we improve student retention?
- ▶ How can the system be more "user friendly" for students, especially for returning adults?
- ▶ How do we better align needs of the workplace with the education and training delivered?
- ▶ How do we balance the need for students to explore and have a well-rounded education with the need to prepare them for the workplace?

# Policy Challenges



- ▶ To act boldly toward producing real change while remaining sensitive to fundamental values and beliefs about the purpose and role of higher education that are connected intrinsically to the American narrative
- ▶ To have faith that increased investment will generate long-term gains
- ▶ To measure the impact of individual investments and to develop genuine systems of accountability
- ▶ To manage higher education like a business without suggesting that higher education is a business!

# Contact



Chris Rasmussen

Vice President for Research and Policy Analysis

Midwestern Higher Education Compact

1300 South 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Suite 130

Minneapolis, MN 55454

[chrisr@mhec.org](mailto:chrisr@mhec.org)

(612) 625-2431

