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Statement by Jeanne Ortiz
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I am Jeanne Ortiz, Vice President and Dean of Students at Whittier College, a private liberal arts college with about 1,700 students located about 15 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. We were founded by Quakers more than 125 years ago, and while we are no longer religiously affiliated, our mission and ethos are still guided by principles of tolerance, respect for diversity, and service. Our students, faculty, and staff are richly diverse – ideologically, culturally, and socio-economically.

Today our student body is “majority-minority” and we are a Hispanic Serving Institution; 33% of our student body is Latino and another almost 20% identify as coming from other under-represented groups. Additionally more than 17 percent of our student body is first generation, one-third is Pell grant eligible, and more than three-quarters of our students receive need based financial aid. This is a sign of our commitment to providing access to populations not historically well served by higher education.

Not only does the composition of our student body reflect the state of California and the future of the nation, at Whittier we deliver on our promise to our students by providing a rigorous, but supportive educational environment that is committed to their graduation. For example, nationwide Latino students have a college graduation rate of 50%, at Whittier it’s 72 percent.

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How do we accomplish this success? It's through high impact practices such as faculty-student research, faculty-led study abroad courses, small classes, writing intensive courses, and extensive co-curricular programming. The inherent advantages of a small school are that students get individualized attention at every level from matriculation to commencement that yields significant results, particularly increased competitiveness upon graduation.

Given our results, we believe that these high impact practices are good investments. However, they are not cheap. The bottom line is that an institution like Whittier that offers a private liberal arts education with significant faculty-student interaction has higher overhead costs than one that delivers its programs to larger or more homogenous groups of students.

It is imperative that the presidential scorecard takes into account that value and affordability are not synonymous terms. The value of a private liberal arts education is exponential because it prepares graduates not only with the knowledge and skills employers want, but with a commitment to civic engagement for the common good.

If the scorecard seeks to address this nation's interests, why don't we look at what skills employers seek in their new hires? Multiple studies show that employers from across industries want students who think critically, communicate clearly, and are able to solve complex problems. These are the habits of mind fostered by liberal arts colleges like Whittier.

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One such recent study, conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities shows that 74 percent of business and nonprofit leaders report “they would recommend a twenty-first century liberal arts education to a young person they know in order to prepare for long-term professional success in today’s global economy.”

Yet another survey shows that 60% of liberal arts graduates feel well prepared for the workforce, compared to 34% who graduated from flagship public universities.

Let’s ensure the scorecard values these skills as much as employers, students and their families and can communicate the characteristics of schools that provide them

And while Whittier graduates are definitely prepared for employment in a wide variety of fields, we do not believe their starting salaries are the only appropriate measure of their success, as proposed by the scorecard.

The top profession Whittier graduates contribute to is education, with public service of other types another very common occupational path. These are noble professions that fill a national interest. However, they undoubtedly skew downward our graduates’ earning potential, particularly at the beginning of their careers. The scorecard should not devalue the very professions that deliver the highest impact for the benefit of our society.

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I want to be clear that at Whittier, we applaud any efforts to improve quality of education and support the nation's students. We fear, though, that any scorecard is incomplete if it focuses on earnings upon graduation and does not address the complexity of assessing the transformative nature of the education provided at Whittier and colleges like us.

Moreover, we fear the scorecard has the potential of disproportionately penalizing schools with smaller endowments and comparatively limited resources, like Whittier, the very schools that are working so hard to grant access to the underserved.

Liberal arts colleges have long argued that ranking systems based solely on numerical values do not tell the complete story. Embedded in the fabric of who we are, we educate our students to look at a variety of factors to understand the fullest picture. We urge the scorecard to do that same.

Thank you.