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Thank you for inviting me today. I want to recognize some independent colleges and universities that have been important to me. First of all, New York University, where I work. Wellesley College, where I received my undergraduate degree. Columbia University, where I earned my doctorate in the history of American education. And St. Joseph’s College in Brooklyn, where I have many dear friends.

Although I have been on the faculty of two institutions of higher learning for the past 35 years, I don’t usually address higher education. Typically I conduct research, write, and speak about K-12 education.

When I was invited to speak today, I looked closely at what is happening in higher education, and I discovered that the same trends that are corrupting K-12 education and the teaching profession are rapidly advancing in higher education.

For the past two decades, our political leaders have been imposing business practices on elementary and secondary schools. The trend began with governors who listened to corporate executives in their states. They wanted tough accountability. They wanted measures of productivity. They wanted the schools to pay attention to the bottom line. They wanted heads to roll.

In 2000, Governor George W. Bush said it was relatively simple to reform the schools. All that was needed was a strong accountability system. Set the goals; give tests annually; publish the results; reward the teachers and schools that got higher test scores; humiliate those that did not. When Texas did this, Governor Bush claimed, wonderful things happened: test scores went up; graduation rates went up; the achievement gap between students of different racial and ethnic groups narrowed; and dropouts fell.

It was a compelling story, and Congress bought it. They passed No Child Left Behind in 2001 and President Bush signed it into law on January 8, 2002. After a full decade of NCLB, we have learned three important lessons:

First, there was no Texas miracle. On the federal tests called the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Texas is in the middle of the pack, nowhere near the top. Its high school graduation rate is below the national average.

Second, No Child Left Behind left many children behind. Indeed, the students who were left behind in 2002 are still left behind in 2012. The law identified the achievement gaps but never provided the tools to close them.

Third, NCLB has changed the language of education. We no longer talk about the needs of children, the conditions of their lives, the external factors that affect their learning, or the resources needed to help teachers and students. Instead, policymakers are focused solely on test scores as measures of productivity and punishment.

With their eyes fastened tightly on productivity, policymakers listen only to economists who treat test scores as the most important, most authentic outcome of education. Policymakers no longer listen to cognitive psychologists who provide insight into how children learn. They no longer listen to sociologists who study communities and families. They disregard those economists and other social scientists who point out that family income is tightly correlated with test scores. Whether you consider the SAT, the ACT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress or international tests, you see the powerful influence of family income on test scores.

Since the passage of NCLB a decade ago, the schools have been subjected to annual testing of mathematics and reading in grades 3 through 8. The law declares that every student in every school must be proficient
by the year 2014 or the school will suffer an escalating series of sanctions. The ultimate sanction is that the
school that fails to make adequate yearly progress will eventually be turned over to private management; its
principal and staff will be fired; or the school may be closed altogether. Bear in mind that no high-
performing nation in the world has such punitive policies towards its public schools. Not Japan; not Korea;
not Canada; not Finland.

For a nation that once valued public education and considered its public schools to be a proud democratic
achievement, these are draconian punishments. Testing is now the linchpin of public education, and
privatization is the ultimate sanction.

President Obama said in his State of the Union last week that teachers should not “teach to the test.”
Everyone loves that sentiment, and President Obama’s words resonated with teachers. But his signature
program, Race to the Top, requires that states evaluate teachers based on the test scores of their students. It
encourages states and districts to award bonuses to teachers based on the test scores of their students. It
recommends that states and districts fire staff and close schools if their test scores are too low. Under these
circumstances, how can teachers avoid teaching to the test?

The U.S. Department of Education—under both President Bush and President Obama—loves measurement
and data. The new language of education prizes data-driven decision-making. Federal funds now pay states
to build warehouses of data so that students can be tracked from their earliest years through college and
beyond. The Department wants colleges of education to be held accountable if the students of their
graduates don’t get higher test scores. Presumably they will be sanctioned too.

Now the children of NCLB are arriving on college campuses. These are students who have spent a large
part of their lives preparing to take standardized tests. They have been taught year after year how to read a
short passage and select one of four bubbles. One of the four bubbles is correct. The others are wrong.
Under the pressure of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, billions of dollars have been spent to
increase testing and measurement, and to ignore learning.

The lives of teachers and principals, and the survival of their schools, depend on whether students pick the
right bubble. Careers will be ruined if students pick too many wrong bubbles. In some states, the legislature
has decreed that test scores will be used to fire teachers if student scores don’t go up. One would think
these tests are unerring scientific instruments, but they are not. They are not barometers or thermometers;
they are social constructions. They mirror culture and demography; they rank and rate children beginning at
an early age.

Testing experts warn that the tests are subject to statistical error, random error, human error. Sometimes the
questions are wrong. Sometimes there are two plausible answers and the thoughtful student will pick the
wrong answer. No one asks what it does to students’ way of thinking when they are subjected—year after
year—to this reductive approach to assessing their skills and knowledge. No one asks what it will
eventually do to our society when an entire generation has been trained to guess the right answer.

But never mind all that. Data now drive our decision-making, even if the data are themselves of dubious
validity. In the past year alone, we have seen major cheating scandals in Washington, DC, and Atlanta,
Georgia. There will be more, as the stakes grow higher. But the corruption of measurement and the
obliteration of educational purposes don’t matter. The data are all that matter.

Who are the victims of these short-sighted policies? First, the students, who have been taught to find the
right answer. Unless they had a daring teacher, they were not taught to ask their own questions or to
challenge the allegedly right answer. When they arrive on your campuses, you expect them to read difficult
texts, but they have little experience of that. You expect them to challenge the conventional wisdom, but
they have been taught to respond obediently on command, not to ask why.

Teachers have also been the victims of this regime of standardized testing. Teachers who love teaching are
constrained by this regime; they became teachers because they want to open students’ minds and expose
them to new ideas. They don’t like what federal policy is doing to them. They know they are losing their
professional autonomy. Experienced teachers are demoralized, depressed, and confused. They chose a
difficult and demanding profession, never expecting that the public and the media would blame them for low scores.

Our policymakers tell them that their masters’ degrees don’t matter; that their experience doesn’t matter. State legislatures are attacking teachers’ seniority, their job protections, their pensions, their health benefits. This constant drumbeat of criticism of teachers—coming not only from the U.S. Department of Education but from governors and the media—has had a terrible effect. Twenty years ago, the modal years of experience for American teachers was fifteen, meaning there were more teachers with fifteen years’ experience in the classroom than any other group. The latest data, from the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey for 2008, show that the modal teacher in the U.S. is in his or her first year of teaching. Experienced teachers are leaving the classroom. This is a tragedy for our nation.

The mindset that has unleashed so much harm on our K-12 schools is now moving inexorably towards higher education. Just a few days ago, President Obama says he wants a Race to the Top for higher education. Race to the Top has been disastrous for our public schools and teachers, but he now wants you to share the pain of government-regulated accountability. President Obama says that colleges and universities must cut costs, or he will cut back federal aid. Don’t make excuses about states cutting the budget for higher education. President Obama wants colleges and universities to begin collecting data about outcomes so families can gauge your quality.

For years, we have told ourselves that American higher education is the best in the world, and indeed it is. It is world-renowned for its excellence, its diversity, its efforts to expand and enrich our democracy. Our universities have been great engines of research and, more than any other sector in our society, they have reached out to enroll students from many different backgrounds. The great economic, technological, cultural, and social advances of the past half-century have been fueled by higher education.

President Obama’s agenda echoes the decline and crisis rhetoric that has become commonplace over the past several years. We have seen a spate of books and commission reports warning that our universities are failing, that students aren’t learning anything, that colleges and universities are cheating the public, that tenure must be abolished, and that accountability is needed, preferably a cost-benefit analysis for individual professors and courses.

Yale scholar Peter Brooks wrote recently that the purveyors of doom and gloom are wrong; that the crisis rhetoric is a red herring intended to divert our attention from “the larger crisis in American society: the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots, the retreat from any commitment to economic fairness, the sense that the [economic] system is rigged to benefit a tarnished elite that no longer justifies its existence.”

Those who work in K-12 education have seen the same red herring claims used to distract our attention from fundamental issues of fairness. More than one of four of our children lives in poverty—this is a national scandal—yet the only thing that policymakers and the media want to talk about is teacher evaluation. Test scores are low, they say, because of bad teachers. If we find them and fire them, test scores will go up. But this is nonsense. The root cause of low test scores is poverty; low academic achievement is concentrated in districts where there is concentrated poverty and racial segregation. Lack of medical care, lack of basic nutrition, lack of economic security—all these affect academic performance. But it is the teachers of these children who will be held accountable, not the underlying causes.

Now higher education is on the firing line. The critics want measurement. They want data. The Spellings Commission report of 2006 complained that higher education lacks accountability. It complained that students, parents, and policymakers are not getting enough information to figure out which institutions are giving them their money’s worth and which are teaching them “what they need to learn.” Like the “Nation at Risk” report of 1983, which said that the schools were responsible for a “rising tide of mediocrity,” the Spellings report warned that higher education was likely to lose “market share” and to risk becoming obsolete, like railroads and the steel industry.

Just days ago came a report from the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, an organization funded by the Carnegie Corporation, representing some of your own campuses, pointing the way to a grim future. Although the report makes the customary bows to the value of knowledge and
problem-solving abilities, what the report recommends is setting goals, collecting data, assessing outcomes, gathering factual evidence of what students should learn and have learned.

As I read this report, sponsored by a collection of illustrious organizations, it sounds alarmingly like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Institutions will, it says, articulate measurable goals about what students “should be able to do, achieve, demonstrate, or know upon the completion of each undergraduate degree.” Levels of achievement should be assessed against “an externally informed or benchmarked level of achievement or assessed and compared with those of similar institutions.” Student progress towards the goals will be disaggregated by “gender, race/ethnicity, and other variables…” Institutions will make clear “when, how, and how frequently learning outcomes will be assessed.” Assessment will be “integrated into the work of faculty, administrators and staff.” Performance will be compared to other institutions and among subgroups of students.

You can expect that as this scenario unfolds, the government will insist that you rank your professors according to their effectiveness and productivity. Which are producing graduates who are ready for the workforce? Whose students have learned the most? And if Race to the Top is implemented in higher education, you can expect the government to insist that you replace the professors whose students do not make measurable progress at the end of their courses.

Ah, me, this is indeed NCLB and Race to the Top. While critics complain that higher education spends too much on administration, you must prepare to create a new administrative department of assessment and accountability to oversee these new responsibilities. Yes, the federal government will insist that you collect more data, that you hold your professors accountable for student progress, and that you make data-based decisions. We now know from Race to the Top that if students don’t learn, it is not their fault, it is their teachers’ fault, and the teachers must be held accountable.

In early 2010, Texas A&M decided to determine what their professors were worth. Urged on by Governor Rick Perry, the university created an evaluation system for its professors comparing their salaries to how much research money they attracted and how much tuition revenue they generated. When the Chronicle of Higher Education reported this story, the comments were illuminating. One professor wrote: “I'll teach the introductory class with 450 students. I'll give everyone A's and have 100% retention. I'll be first on the list! Send me my raise.”

Another wrote: “This will.. ensure that all those teaching intro to sciences and those doing research will far outpace the worth of any in the humanities. The humanities just doesn't bring in that kind of money. Those in the Freshman Comp programs will get creamed. Their classes are small compared to a 100-level lecture course. How could you ever compare the two? Not to mention the lack of research dollars. Just another reason to get out of the Texas education system all together.”

Another: “What is the value of Latin? Philosophy? Art? If you'll excuse me, I'm off to scout local caves for future inhabitation during the inevitable Dark Age.”

And my personal favorite: “Sounds like the college of corporate clowns sponsored by Wall Street.”

When Texas A&M completed its survey in the fall of 2010, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that most faculty members were generating more money than they cost the university. Larger classes generated more tuition revenue than small ones. But it turned out that some of the most prestigious professors were operating—as the Chronicle said—in the red. The big names were costing more than they received because they didn’t teach large lecture classes. The AAUP described the process as a “cost/benefit analysis of individual faculty members. It tends to reduce the whole process of education to how many people can you cram into a classroom and how much tuition can you charge them…”

Forgive me, but this cost/benefit analysis smacks of anti-intellectualism. This misapplication of assessment and accountability mechanisms smacks of anti-intellectualism. Something wicked this way comes, a rough beast, a bottom line mentality that cares not a whit for imagination, creativity, innovation, or serious scholarship. Left to fester, this spirit will destroy American higher education, and impose the same mindless accountability that is crushing the life and spirit out of K-12 education.
How shall we measure the knowledge and skills gained in a course on art history? Music appreciation? The History of the Middle East? Shall students take pre-tests and post-tests to check how much they have learned in each course? How shall we calculate the value of a scholar who teaches Greek literature or freshman composition or sociology? How shall we calculate the return on investment of a scholar who spends years writing a book? Shall we measure the value of a book by its Amazon ranking? Shall we value scholars by the number of their citations on Google Scholar?

How much time and money will be devoted to these exercises in accountability? Who will be held accountable if students take courses and don’t acquire the necessary skills and knowledge? What if students cut that course? Shouldn’t students have some responsibility for their learning?

The glory of American higher education has derived from three specific ideas: the freedom to teach, the freedom to learn, and the freedom to think.

How will this freedom be affected by the mania for data and accountability? The more we attempt to quantify what cannot be quantified, the more we narrow the purposes of education.

Professors will be required to tailor what they teach and how to teach because a committee outside their classrooms created measurable goals and outcomes. Professors will be judged not by their peers but by assessments that are unrelated to their own goals for their students. The freedom to teach will be abridged by the demand for quantifiable outcomes.

Students will no longer be responsible for their learning. Instead, their professors will be held accountable if students don’t do their reading, don’t attend class, and exhibit no effort. And if NCLB and Race to the Top are our guides, then we can predict that students will lose the freedom to learn because they too will be subjugated to the accountability juggernaut. Pity them if they diverge from the official curriculum, if they dare to think unscripted thoughts, if they pursue avenues of inquiry that cannot be quantified or assessed.

There is no standardized test that can tell us whether professors are successful. There is no standardized test that can fully measure the important values that the higher learning seeks to transmit.

It is not the bits and bytes of skills and knowledge that matter most. What matters most is whether students leave institutions of higher learning with the zeal to continue learning. What matters most is whether students learn the habits of mind that enable them to question received wisdom, even the wisdom of their professors. What matters most is whether students leave their campuses as men and women determined to think and act without the whip and goad of test scores and grades.

Certainly there are major problems in higher education. Tuition has gotten beyond the reach of most families. Even many public institutions are now too expensive for many of our young people. Far too many, whether they attain a college diploma or not, are burdened with heavy debt. This is not the failure of higher education. This is the failure of public policy, the refusal of elected officials to support students in their desire to continue their studies. It is frankly a disgrace that this great nation and so many legislatures have passed the cost of higher education to students and their families. A few months ago, I visited Finland, an educational wonderland, where there are no standardized tests for students in school and all higher education is tuition-free. It is tuition-free, I was told, because education is a basic human right. What a novel idea!

Which country, I ask you, is preparing for the 21st century? The one that makes higher learning free or the one that makes it too expensive for most students today? It is truly a disgrace that this great nation and so many legislatures have passed the cost of higher education to students and their families. A few months ago, I visited Finland, an educational wonderland, where there are no standardized tests for students in school and all higher education is tuition-free. It is tuition-free, I was told, because education is a basic human right. What a novel idea!

The growth of for-profit online higher education—which may be an oxymoron—is a problem for our society, because so many students are lured into thinking that there is the quick and easy way to get a college degree. Computers are wonderful tools, but they can never take the place of the magic that occurs in those moments when an inspiring teacher lights a spark in the mind of a student, when an entire classroom joins in lively discussion, argument, and debate.
Too many young people arrive in college and university without the necessary skills and knowledge for the work they are expected to do. Too many campuses are allocating precious resources to remediation, because the high schools have been pressured to hand out diplomas to students who are not ready for college-level studies. This is not a problem of your making, but it is one that lands on your doorstep. It will not be solved until policymakers in Washington, D.C., and in state capitols stop demanding that high schools boost their graduation rate without regard to the quality of education of their graduates.

Should you stop awarding tenure? Absolutely not. Now, just as a century ago, your professors need the protection of academic freedom. Now, as in the days of the Red Scare and the McCarthy era, your professors need protection to speak freely and without fear. They need to know that they can challenge the advancing corporatization of American education without risking their livelihood.

American higher education achieved international greatness because scholars were free to think and speak and teach the subjects in which they were expert.

American institutions of higher education became the great engines of research and the mechanisms of technological innovation because they were bastions of free inquiry for both their scholars and their students.

American higher education became the wonder of the world not because it watched the bottom line, not because it graded its professors with scores, not because it prepared its students for careers and vocations, but because it cultivated the minds, the ingenuity, the creativity, and the judgment of its students.

Do not let the data crunchers destroy your mission. Do not let them corrupt your purposes. Do not compromise your independence. Do not let them subordinate your institutions to goals, outcomes, assessments, data, and accountability for results.

The results speak for themselves: We have been and we must continue to be, a nation where our colleges and universities are the guardians, champions, and generators of intellectual freedom.

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