

# Diversity, Access, and the American Dream

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**F**or decades, we in America have made a decision as a country that we must invest in our children and young people, in education, and in research if we're to continue to grow and thrive as a nation. When we think about the American dream, it's not just about a house. It's not just about a car. It's not just about a job. It is that we honestly believe as a nation that any child should have the opportunity to work as hard as he or she can, to dream about all the possibilities, and to reach those dreams to be the best human being that person can be.

Recently, I was at an event at Boston College in Massa-

helped me, how can I not come back and help the next generation?"

That is what you're doing as board members. You are saying that you realize how important an education is, and that others have helped you. In many cases, most of you could not have dreamed that one day you would be in the positions you're in now. What made the difference was education. Where would you be if you had not received it?

I want you to think about the transformative power of education in our country and other countries for families, for individuals, for institutions. I want you to think about the period from the 1950s on to now. And finally, I want you to think about what we, as col-

In fact, one of the presidents from a prestigious university said, "If you put these veterans in our institutions, our campuses will become academic hobo jungles." The mind-set then was that only the privileged should be in college.

Within a couple of years, however, more than 1 million veterans had gone to college. They were mainly white men with some exceptions; yet, for the first time, many people who were not from among the privileged were attending college. And that set the stage for what happened afterwards.

All of a sudden, colleges and universities became very important, and institutions were able to get federal money to help the war effort and America. As a result, we saw a

in wartime, all of a sudden, more Americans—including women and people of color or from poor backgrounds—began saying "We want to be a part of the mainstream. We want to be involved."

It was around that time, in the 1960s, that I came of age.



## Another fundamental question is: How do we not only talk about access for students, but also success?

chusetts. At one point, I asked a female trustee in attendance, who is a judge from New York, "What makes you want to be here and support these students?" She responded, "I'm a judge in New York now, but I grew up in the Bronx. A counselor told me as a young, poor black woman, quite frankly, that I should become a secretary, that there was no way I was going to college. Yet somebody in that school believed in me. I was able to get a scholarship to Boston College, where I found people who were willing to say, 'Don't worry about your circumstances, dream about the possibilities.'

"Because those people helped me," she continued, "I went on and was able to finish law school. I've done well in New York. I'm now a judge. Because people at the college

leges and universities, need to do, and most important, what role board members can play in helping us as institutions and as a nation to reach our goals.

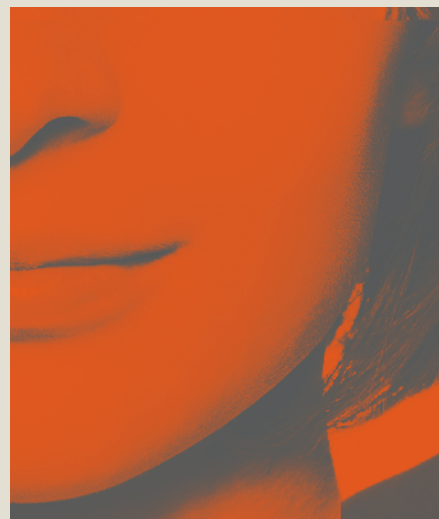
### Looking Back

It's hard to believe that during World War II, under 5 percent of Americans had a college degree. When the GI Bill came along in 1944, amazingly, one big group was against the idea of veterans going to college. Can you guess which one? It was college presidents, including the most liberally educated and those from the most prestigious institutions. They wanted to help people, but they just thought that somehow veterans would not be able to handle the work and would somehow change colleges and universities for the worse.

connection between the federal government and higher education institutions. After that, Vannevar Bush, head of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development in the 1940s and 1950s, said, "Well, if universities can do so much during wartime, imagine what they can do in peacetime for health care, defense, and economic development."

So the federal government began to put more money into higher education. All of a sudden, in the '50s, the nation began saying "Let's build these institutions." Still, we had very few research universities, only a handful. Even by 1960, just about 20 research universities received half the money coming from the federal government. But, given what happened to veterans and what universities had accomplished

I grew up in Birmingham, and when I was about 12 years old, a man talked of a planned peaceful protest and said, "If the children participate in this peaceful march, all of America will understand that even our babies want a good education." I asked, "Who is that guy?" Of course, his name was Dr. Martin Luther King. It was the first time that I had heard somebody say that maybe I could go to a school where we wouldn't





have hand-me-down books from white kids, a school that had resources.

All of a sudden, I was being told that maybe I could do something to help with the movement that would give me a chance to get a better education. I thought that if people saw how hard some of us were willing to work, they would understand that we're not second-class citizens. That we could be as smart as anybody

those in Birmingham and other cities, the March on Washington, and what a lot of people of all races did in this country, the Civil Rights Act was passed 50 years ago. The Voting Rights Act was passed. The 1965 Higher Education Act was passed. The federal government began building colleges and universities and giving out financial aid. Our nation went from having under 5 percent of Americans with a college degree to about 10 percent of Americans with a college degree within a few years. Now, we're all the way up to 30 percent of Americans having degrees—more than one-third of whites, almost 20 percent of blacks, about 15 percent of Hispanics, about half of Asian-Americans, and a small number of Native

students who start college to actually graduate and be well educated?

A third question is: If we raised degree attainment 10 or 11 percent in the '60s all the way to more than 30 percent today, why do we want to make that number go up much higher?

My answer to that question is that we want to do it because, in a democracy, we need people who are well educated, who can think well. And if we in America are to be competitive not just in terms of educated citizens for democracy, but also in the world, we need many more people with two- and four-year degrees.

Indeed, a recent study from Georgetown University said clearly that about one-third of new jobs will require at least

graduate who are prepared not only in the humanities and the arts and social sciences, but also the STEM areas? Because when you think where most of the jobs will be coming from—fields like health care, biotechnology, and cyber security—or when you think about all of the challenges with the natural environment, we need people prepared in science and the policy areas.

So the big questions boards need to ask themselves are, how do we educate our students? How do we make sure that they succeed? How do we know that they're prepared for the workforce? Are we listening to employers to understand what we're doing well and what we need to improve on?

In the end, it's about our dreams for the next generation.

## What do we have to do to help students who start college to actually graduate and be well educated?



else. That we had something to contribute.

So we marched, and I led a group. I ended up spending a terrible week in jail. Dr. King said: "What you do this day as children of America will have an impact on children who've not even been born." And he was right.

As a result of efforts like

Americans. We've seen progress in this country.

### The Questions Ahead

Yet today, one of the big issues that boards and their institutions must deal with is: With all the progress we have made for all types of groups, how do we help those at the bottom economically right now? What we know is that if you're from the top groups, you have got a far greater probability of not only going to college but also graduating. But if you are from the bottom economically of any race, you have a very small probability of actually graduating.

Another fundamental question is: How do we not only talk about access for students, but also success? What do we have to do to help

two years of higher education, and another third will require at least a bachelor's degree. When I talk to people at the National Science Foundation, they are projecting a deficit of about 1 million jobs that we cannot fill only because we don't have enough people graduating in computer science. Thirty years ago, one-third of computer science majors were women. Today, it's down to about 18 percent. This is a critical issue in America.

The National Academies' Committee on Underrepresented Groups indicates that only about 5 percent of Americans at age 25 have degrees in science or engineering. In Europe, it's almost 12 percent. India is creating hundreds of additional universities. What can we do to help people

So I would also ask each board to ask itself these big questions: At our institution, do we board members understand substantively what we are facing as a university or college? Have we created a climate in which people are asking the hard questions that the most enlightened places are asking based on data and analytics—looking at actual trends and getting away from relying just on anecdotal information? Are we giving support to the president and the college or university as they face the real challenges? And are we putting the resources in the right places to support today's students? ■

*This essay was adapted and excerpted from remarks at the AGB National Conference on Trusteeship in April.*