Dr. Kevin Manning Headshot

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**Contemporary Challenges Facing American Higher Education**

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College and universities have always had mottos, usually expressed in Latin, that captured the essence of their missions -- truth, light, reason, and other words that drilled the purpose of education down to its essence. If there is a new motto for all of higher education, it might be "Change is Constant" or "Innovate or Die."

The reality is that colleges and universities have always been challenged by uncertainties. In the past, most issues were unique to each institution; one school might have faced an enrollment decline while another could face accreditation problems. Today, however, widespread challenges of a national scope are affecting all of higher education.

Each January, college presidents from independent institutions from across the country attend the Presidents Institute conference organized by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). The conference serves as a forum to discuss the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing higher education in the year ahead and beyond.

This year three major trends -- from the perceived value a college degree to the impact of the Internet on program offerings and the nature of the traditional college experience -- stood out for me and other leaders attempting to predict the arc of American higher education over the next decade.

The Federal government has always been at the forefront of financial support to students attending various American colleges. Now, for myriad reasons, this support is being questioned. One reason is the record amount of money debt incurred by students seeking a degree coupled with national economic challenges that impact their employability. This issue has brought a spotlight on the financial and recruitment activities of for-profit institutions in recent years, but for independent non-profit universities such as my own the issue it is just as important.

Added to this concern at the Federal level is a growing public perception about the long-term investment value of a college degree. This is a trend that poses a serious public relations challenge for higher education in the coming years. In the eyes of many families, long gone are the days when a college degree was perceived as a cornerstone achievement that guaranteed the degree recipient a place in the job market. Fortunately, this is a trend where each institution has an opportunity to shape the national conversation more directly.

There are solutions to this problem, and a more robust notion of career preparation during a student's college years is key to restoring the American family's confidence in higher education. But institutions must first acknowledge that the job market is vastly different than decades ago and with that the very notion of what career preparation is must change. How do we build a model that brings career preparation and education together meaningfully for students and families sacrificing to achieve a college degree?

At my own institution, we foresaw this trend more than a decade ago and have worked to make career preparation more than an adjunct service of the university but an essential part of the educational model of the institution--and for every student from the start of the freshman year onward. We make this explicit in our mission and marketing, but clearly higher education as a whole needs to do a better job of integrating career education with the academic experience.

Lastly, the other presidents and I spent a great deal of time discussing the future role of the Internet and technology. It is clear that technology is changing--and will continue to change--the character of higher education, and at a pace for which traditional higher education has not always prepared. The use of online instruction for adult students has been clearly established during the past 15 years, and we are beginning to see the integration of online study as standard part of the undergraduate experience.

The 2014 Survey of Online Learning, which polled more than 2,800 academic leaders, concluded that 70 percent of those universities reported online learning being a critical component to their long-term strategy. But with this reality comes new questions: What is the role of the traditional residential campus and how do institutions that have invested decades in promoting the traditional model of delivering education transform and reinvent themselves at the ever increasing rate of technology? There is no one answer to that question yet, but we will all be watching the higher education marketplace over the coming years to see the winners and losers in this brave new world.

One thing is clear, though, amidst all this uncertainty: if higher education is to serve our nation and its citizens in an ever more competitive marketplace, innovation must be at the heart of every institutional mission. We will all have to learn to be more nimble and to adapt and transform at light speed in order to remain viable in the global marketplace of education.