



THE FUTURE OF  
**HIGHER EDUCATION**

IN THE UNITED STATES

A CITIZEN DISCUSSION REPORT

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With Developmental Assistance from Jeff Prudhomme

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Interactivity Foundation  
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# The Future of Higher Education in the United States

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	TYPICAL POLICY REPORTS	IF CITIZEN DISCUSSION REPORTS
WHY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To make or influence immediate decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To provide a starting point for exploratory discussions</li> </ul>
WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of a problem</li> <li>Recommendations for solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Areas of concern</li> <li>Diverging possibilities</li> <li>Possible outcomes</li> </ul>
WHO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experts and representatives of interest groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expert-specialists and citizen-generalists</li> </ul>
HOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public discussions</li> <li>Decisions made by compromise or consensus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In “sanctuary”</li> <li>Freedom to speak openly</li> <li>Focusing on ideas, not personalities or participants’ interests</li> <li>Decisions made through convergence while preserving contrasts</li> </ul>



## Thinking About the Future of Higher Education as an Area of Public Policy Concern



In the United States, we tend to agree widely about the need to provide universal access to education from K–12. But what does society want and expect from education that begins after high school?

Who should receive higher education? How should we make decisions about who gets access to higher education? Who decides what counts as “higher education”? What, if anything, should be done to stop education systems from widening social disparities? How might we manage the benefits, or harms, that could be created by educational institutions? Who should benefit from higher education? Who should be accountable for the benefits or quality of higher education?

Should higher education be oriented to the common good? Or, should it be designed to produce individual excellence or individual advancement? To what degree should higher education be focused on issues and problems shared by a community? To what degree should it be focused on playing a major role in the individual development of people? What role should it play in our economy?

With the many advances in communication technology, how might new media and new technologies impact higher education? How might we better create and deliver educational content in these new media? How might these new media impact the cost-effective delivery of higher education?



## Thinking About the Future of Higher Education as an Area of Public Policy Concern



The Interactivity Foundation supports the creation of policy possibilities through a citizen-based discussion process. Typically, two panels of citizens (an expert and a generalist group) meet for approximately one year to have productive and enjoyable discussions. These sessions yield a series of contrasting policy possibilities that are detailed in this discussion guide.

At the end of a yearlong discussion process, the two groups of panelists gathered as one large joint discussion panel. That conversation created the policy possibilities that are presented on the following pages. As you proceed through these possibilities, you might feel awash in ideas. The participants who helped form this discussion felt the same way. Yet, as the six possibilities emerged, the value of a slow-moving, deliberative process became evident to all involved.

In these policy possibilities, we hope you explore the tension between global and local aspirations alongside the many purposes of higher education. You might wrestle with how we can assist people in “learning how to learn.” As citizen discussants, we’ll feel we have succeeded if these possibilities get you thinking and talking about how our society might approach and deliver higher education for generations to come.

## Policy Possibilities at a Glance

The policy possibilities summarized below respond to many concerns. In general, policies A–D outline different goals for higher education; they are concerned largely with the purpose of higher education. Policies E and F address the relationship higher education has with a community. These two policies are concerned primarily with accountability and access issues.

Possibility	Motive		Action
	Concerns	Vision	
<b>A. Career Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic competitiveness</li> <li>Unemployment rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A higher education system that prepares people for specialized work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Business and education stakeholders form partnerships</li> <li>Identify natural talents</li> </ul>
<b>B. Education for a Better World</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared problems left unaddressed</li> <li>Addressing conflict with excessive force and/or violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A higher education system that aims to improve the common good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrate curriculum around problems</li> <li>Engage civic/societal groups to participate</li> </ul>
<b>C. Innovation Labs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of critical thinking in learning</li> <li>Antiquated ideas being applied to new circumstances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A higher education system that increases the capacity to innovate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster an experimental culture of learning</li> <li>Design evaluation methods to gauge innovation</li> </ul>
<b>D. Guided Learning for Well-Being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Imbalance toward “book” learning</li> <li>Inadequate social skills to interact with diverse people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A higher education system that develops balanced individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create mentor system</li> <li>Embed experiential learning into core curriculum</li> </ul>
<b>E. Community-Focused Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accountability in higher education</li> <li>Inability to address and solve local problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A higher education system that serves, and is accountable to, local communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a governing board with community and educational members</li> <li>Create funding model for many to have a stake in the outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>F. One-World Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barriers to access higher education</li> <li>Differing standards that prohibit collaboration between higher ed. institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A uniform higher education system accessible throughout the world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop global curriculum standards</li> <li>Create enhanced digital learning tools</li> </ul>



## Policy A Focus Higher Education on Career Training

A vision for a higher education system that prepares people for specialized work to more efficiently match individuals' unique skills and talents

**Policy Vision:**



This policy would focus higher education on the task of preparing people for work with highly specialized job training. The assumption here is that a person has natural abilities that suit certain types of work more than others. In this system of higher education, a person's natural abilities would be identified and cultivated so he or she might perform well at work. Only people equipped for highly specialized work would be admitted to this system of higher education.

Under this policy, primary and secondary school curricula would be streamlined with higher education goals and outcomes focused on career training. Learning would be measured by mastery of job- or career-related concepts and skills to allow adequate time for individuals to progress at their own pace. The emphasis is not on earning credits or maintaining a high grade point average; rather, this possibility is interested in the successful mastery of the competencies necessary to do a certain kind of work.





## Policy A Focus Higher Education on Career Training

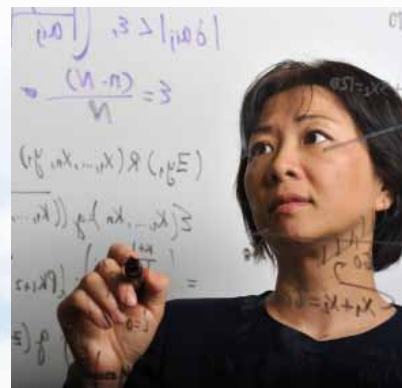
### Actions for Implementation:

An important dimension to this policy possibility could be to establish an evaluation system to identify a person's natural abilities. This would help to identify, at an early age, the mind set and abilities of a young person. In preparation for higher education, an early intervention could be made to guide a young person down a particular educational track that is highly specialized to better match that individual's abilities.

Given this policy's focus on career preparation, student instruction could come, in part, from experienced people in a given field. For example, in an apprenticeship or industry model, a major corporation might take on students and prepare them for this line of work. Another approach might be a public service model (think military and Peace Corps), where people learn specialized skills through public service. Finally, a family-based entrepreneurial model could create job opportunities for children in a family-run business. Investments would be made in learning to create new business opportunities.

To make this policy work, significant work would have to be done to engage key economic stakeholders in a conversation about the skills necessary to create a strong economy. This conversation would include business leaders and government policy makers.

Not all work requires highly specialized training that would be offered under this system of higher education. Therefore, other job-training programs would need to be developed for people who were not part of the higher education system.





A vision for a higher education system that aims to enhance the common good by pooling our intellectual resources

**Policy Vision:**

Another vision for higher education is to harness our collective thinking ability to advance the human condition. This vision of higher education is one that would focus on creating a better world by solving the problems that hinder society. The goal is to create greater understanding of the major problems people face collectively. It is difficult to imagine addressing collective problems without acknowledging that we share one earth and that this earth has finite natural resources. These resources would need to be managed in a sustainable fashion to serve the common good. The working assumption for this policy possibility is that since we are all in it together, there needs to be a high degree of collaboration among people worldwide to address our common needs.

This approach to a higher education system would be shaped by a service mentality, where people learn by providing needed services. The notion that higher education should be in service for the betterment of humanity means that it would have to be open to, and immersed within, diverse cultures. This immersion would cultivate a sense of empathy. The higher education system would serve as the moral compass, aiming for the greater good of a society. The key point here is that this policy embraces an expansive and inclusive mission for higher education, one that is focused on service to the common good.





**Actions for Implementation:**

Since a key focus of this approach is to connect learning to the complexities of the real world, instructional staff would be expanded beyond formal teachers or scholars to include those who have experience or firsthand knowledge about a given context or people. This might include, for example, nonprofit and nongovernmental (NGO) workers, whose on-the-ground experiences could assist in providing instruction. This would require a broad examination of the qualities necessary to provide good teaching.

Implementation of this policy possibility would require a blend of people who are scientifically trained and people of different social or civic groups. These people, working together, could establish the vision and goals for the curriculum.

This approach to higher education would connect it more closely to current events. Pedagogy might focus on teachable moments that illuminate the moral dimensions of this policy possibility. For instance, the democratic protests in the Middle East could be used as a teachable moment to raise the issue of public participation and democratic governance. Moreover, the interactions and issues alive within a classroom could be highlighted as a “case in point” to learn about a concept.

A higher education system that works for the common good within the constraints of sustainable resource management would open up a broader conversation about natural resource management and the role of education within an economic system based on sustainability.

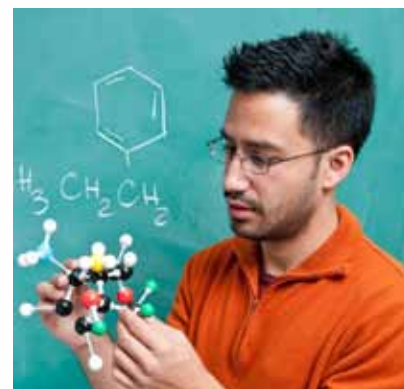




## Policy C Transform Institutions of Higher Education Into Innovation Labs

A vision for a higher education system that increases the capacity to innovate by fostering schools as laboratories of innovation

### Policy Vision:



This policy vision would focus on enabling innovation. Higher education would foster the new, facilitate breakthroughs, and incubate ideas to go beyond the known and expand the horizons of human knowledge and accomplishment. This policy possibility essentially sees the “university” as an idea lab. Imagine higher education institutions being composed of centers of innovation. These high-performing academic units would be designed to invent theories, products, and performances to name a few possibilities. Maximizing the environment for creativity would foster new discoveries and enable the cross-pollination of ideas.

Colleges or universities as centers of innovation might be driven by broad, centrally organized objectives. These objectives might be aimed at achieving

a competitive advantage in the global marketplace, enhancing the security of the nation, or improving living standards or quality of life for the general population.

This possibility would work to deepen the capacity of students to be innovative. In this system, quality of performance or of the product of innovation would be the benchmark of success. The proof is in the pudding. Depth of understanding that enables new discoveries would be preferred over breadth of knowledge about a content area. The focus of this approach to higher education is not on repeating what is known. Rather, the focus is on creating something new. It is about discovering new knowledge and making applications in previously unforeseen areas. In this system, experimentalism is an idea that





## Actions for Implementation:



These methods would not be the standard multiple-choice exam or an A-F grading scale. Rather, an evaluation process would need to be created that focuses on creative thinking and skill sets that lead to invention. Evaluation would also focus on the quality of the creative products or innovative discoveries made through the higher educational process. Only the strongest academic units, teachers, and students likely would find success in this system of higher education.

A group of researchers and students might compete to create centers of excellence in all disciplines. Departments and programs would compete with others to have the strongest offerings.

Putting this possibility into practice would entail an alignment with primary and secondary education. During these formative years of education, students would need to develop the basis for being able to innovate, i.e., a strong work ethic, creative and critical thinking skills, and collaborative

social skills. This would allow students to enter higher education with the maturity to excel and innovate. Getting elementary and high school teachers to focus less on the content of subjects and more on ways to approach and solve problems would be important areas to consider for this possibility to actualize.

It was imagined that a central government would need to establish the primary funding mechanism for these centers of excellence. A national dialogue would need to happen on why innovation is a national strategy and how to develop appropriate levels of funding.

Higher education might look similar to a graduate school model of education in which students work closely with faculty members on research and teaching projects. Here, a group of faculty and students would interact in a robust manner. The system would have a high tolerance for failure since innovation requires risk of failure.



## Policy D Higher Education as Guided Learning for Individual Well-Being

A vision for a higher education system that develops balanced individuals through mentor-based learning environments

### Policy Vision:



This policy vision focuses on the full development of individuals' unique capabilities. Imagine students who are being educated in mental, spiritual, and physical well-being. This system of education would cater to their full development as individuals. The assumption is that higher education, particularly for students arriving straight from secondary schools, comes at a unique stage of human development. Students need to learn social literacy; this includes developing self-confidence, maturity, communication skills, and personal character. In other words, higher education is as much about developing a student's abilities to interact with others as it is about developing that student's knowledge base.

This policy possibility would strive to create self-actualized human beings through a balanced learning experience. This means that people would fulfill their potential and

recognize that we all have many different aspects to ourselves. This approach is informed by a belief in the importance of individuality and the ways that each individual has unique potential. The idea, in part, stems from classical education's emphasis on developing a student's mind and body. It also has roots in spiritual traditions that promote mind-body-spirit connections.

To achieve personal growth and balance, this policy approach envisions a highly personal and individualized educational experience. This would take the form of a mentoring model of learning that would be more customized to the needs of individual students. The policy would promote instructor-learner relationships as mentor-student relationships, which are significant and personal at the core of the system of higher education. A mentor would be used to help guide a person through the process of learning.





### Actions for Implementation:

Establishing a pool of qualified mentors to guide students through their educational experience would be a major focus for enacting this policy possibility. Unlike an education system that is “sink or swim,” mentors would be accountable for helping students successfully find their way within the system.

The social aspect of this policy is another important consideration. Higher education campuses would be places where students “mix it up” and experience people unlike themselves. The space would be designed to enhance social experimentation.

Aligned with the space for social development is a curriculum that cultivates social literacy in students. Focusing on the different ways of knowing via the mind, body, and spirit could provide a balanced base from which to

interact with others. For instance, athletics would be recognized as an important learning experience available to all students. Or, students might “find themselves” through travel, developing a craft, or completing a service project. These examples would all be considered “courses” where experiential learning is the primary method of instruction.

Making this policy possibility a reality would require a shared commitment to higher education’s focus on the holistic well-being of individuals. To enable this commitment, the policy requires broad-based conversations about what it means to live to one’s potential and how higher education might support this. These talks would include an examination of cultural values that might be in competition with one another (e.g., economic productivity versus relational satisfaction).





## Policy E Focus Higher Education on Serving Local Communities

A vision for a higher education system that serves the needs of local communities

### Policy Vision:

To whom is higher education accountable? This policy approach would make institutions of higher education accountable to local communities. Instead of serving the individual needs of students first, higher education would be designed to address the problems and opportunities articulated by the surrounding communities.

This policy approach seeks to integrate institutions of higher education into their home communities. It seeks to enable greater input from community members, including a measure of local control. It is motivated by a sense that “we’re all in this together” and that we should use our shared resources, including our higher education institutions, to address shared community needs.

Higher education would be accountable to people who have the most to gain or lose from its actions. This approach would help close the actual or perceived “town and gown” gap that exists between residents of college or university towns and those who study and work at those colleges or universities.

How might we determine the community to whom higher education institutions are accountable? We might imagine a higher education institution to be dedicated foremost to contributing to the benefit of the state in which it is located (much as was articulated by the Wisconsin Idea from the early 1900s). Or, we could envision an



education system or institution as serving an urban area, a region, or countywide initiatives. In this way, how a “community” is defined becomes an important aspect to this policy possibility, particularly when some in education circles might think of their institution as a “learning community”—a group of people focused on a shared intellectual venture. The community might mean the people who are officially part of an organization. And community has been used to refer to anyone who has a direct stake in the success or failure of higher education. These varying definitions suggest that people are loyal to, and engaged in, multiple levels of community at any given time. These different senses of community are important to the design and implementation of community-focused education.





### Actions for Implementation:

This policy asks all institutions of higher education to mimic the original mission of land-grant universities: to serve the people of a state. This would apply even to private institutions, at least in so far as they receive public support or subsidies. Putting this motto to practice would require great degrees of collaboration between education and community stakeholders. For instance, the community and university would need to figure out a way to enable input and share control of the budgeting process.

Implementation also includes a process for setting priorities and standards for curriculum and teaching/research. Community members and education experts would need to figure out a process by which educational institutions could be evaluated on how well they accomplish their goals to serve the community. These stakeholders would have to decide the balance of power. In other words, who has final authority when high-level decisions are made?

Funding sources are another consideration with higher education systems that serve local communities. Does local control mean that the cost burden would also be local? Moreover, funding could be tied to how well a given educational institution met the needs of the community. The “ranking” of these institutions could be determined by this same benchmark.





A vision for a uniform higher education system accessible worldwide.

### Policy Vision:



To what community is higher education accountable? This policy possibility responds by expanding our global vision. Higher education should be connected to the citizens of the world. This policy approach also responds to a question of access: Who gets to participate in higher education? This policy would create an international higher education system that could be accessed by students worldwide. Higher education would be organized around a uniform global curriculum. That would allow students to move from institution to institution and take the same curriculum or enter into the same program of studies.

The policy possibility is shaped by the desire to remove barriers from higher education, particularly barriers of geography and overly idiosyncratic admissions or transfer standards. Enhancing freedom of mobility is a key value for this approach to higher education. Being able to move across the world and receive transferable credits with similar course content opens up the possibilities for higher education. Not only would students and teachers be able to physically move about the world to learn, but courses would also be available via distance educational methods. A virtual, or “Google University” of sorts, could be available online for those without the means or desire to physically travel.





### Actions for Implementation:

This policy could take shape by envisioning higher education as a network of learning modules. These modules could be delivered in face-to-face settings or via high-tech media. This approach delivers educational content to any would-be learner through systematic indexing of content knowledge that includes multiple forms of learning (text, video, etc.). In various communities around the world, there would be campuses offering students the chance to interact and learn with others in a face-to-face setting. In addition, other communities would offer support networks that would provide instructional assistance and learning spaces. For instance, a local library might provide spaces for people to work and get face-to-face assistance.

By opening up the system internationally and using online delivery methods, an educational program could be customized to a particular student's needs similar to a home-schooling model of education. Students will demonstrate that they know how to learn and apply their learning in a beneficial way.

Other issues involved in implementing this policy include:

- **An international cooperative body would need to be formed to establish the parameters for the system. This body would include education and digital computing experts.**
- **The content for a particular subject area would be developed by disciplinary organizations with a focus on producing and delivering specialized knowledge.**
- **At the local level, a school of instruction could be started by a group of concerned citizens or taken on by large-scale universities.**
- **In this system, foundations and nongovernmental organizations might lead the way by funding spaces for instruction.**

