

**The Future of Higher Education:  
Brief Introductory Comments  
By Andy Lester  
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Thank you, President Shirley, for that kind introduction. First, let me say how much I always enjoy being on the campus of OSU-Oklahoma City. OSU-OKC is a shining star in the Oklahoma State University constellation of schools, and that is in no small part due to the leadership of Natalie Shirley. Just look, for example, around the campus at the improvements that have been made since President Shirley arrived. And her expectation of excellence is contagious. Thank you, President Shirley, for your continued service to the State of Oklahoma, and particularly here at OSU-Oklahoma City.

It's hard for me to imagine anything we do as a society that is more important than higher education. Perhaps I feel this way because I come from an academic family. I grew up next to a

college campus. My dad was an academic, my sister is an academic, and now my daughter is furthering family tradition, teaching first year English Composition at the University of Central Oklahoma. I have been an adjunct professor for over 25 years at Oklahoma City University, and have served on the board of Eureka College, a small liberal arts college in central Illinois, and as a trustee of the UCO Foundation.

My assignment today is to discuss my thoughts on the future of higher education. Well, I've never considered prophecy as one of my strong points. But, given my long term interest in higher education, I believe I have seen several trends that have had and will have an effect on higher education.

Ponder this question: Other than college athletics, what does the public at large hear about higher education? According to what I've seen in popular media over the past several years, it may be this: students pay too much on campuses that are not safe

enough that are supported by too much public money.

When I grew up, it seemed as if everyone knew that obtaining a college degree was important. No one had to talk about the value of attending college; we simply assumed that a college education was the key to a successful life. Well, no longer is that a universal thought. Knowing this is central to understanding the challenges those of us who value higher education face today.

You can see this in the fact that over the last 25 years, the public commitment to higher education has changed dramatically. In 1990, the state appropriation to the OSU budget was approximately 3 times the amount of tuition and fees. Now, tuition and fees contribute almost double the state appropriation.

Unfortunately, many government leaders have backed away from our society's long-term commitment to higher education. For example, in one recent article, a powerful member of the state

Legislature claims institutions of higher education are about to, and should, disappear. He asserts, as if his word is final, that “in the future higher education will be free.” No, he isn’t saying the state should pay for it. Quite the contrary. He apparently thinks no one should pay for it. The internet, he says, will make this happen.

This politician doesn’t want the internet to supplement higher education; he wants the internet to replace higher education. In much the manner of the old Alice Cooper anthem, he virtually chants: no more pencils, no more books, no more, as he puts it, “mediocre lectures” at “middle-ranking institutions.” Just “go on line,” he says, “and watch world experts.” He completely discounts the value of the classroom, and asserts that the only thing that could inhibit students from getting their education for free would be “immoral politics.”

Perhaps those who have not experienced a higher education

can blithely belittle what college is all about. But they are wrong, and we must aggressively combat these repeated assaults on higher education.

There is little doubt in my mind that higher education is in the process of changing, and online access to information is assuredly a part of the change. But a higher education is much more than the sum of lectures or writings of knowledgeable people. It involves personal interaction; guidance; coaching; mentoring; listening to other ideas; learning to discuss, to debate and to respect; trial and error; working with groups; and so much more. I don't know what all the changes will be. But I do know that those of us who value higher education, those of us who care so deeply for OSU's land grant mission, must be prepared for change, and even to lead it.

So, how do we confront the new reality that many question the value of higher education? I think we must do three things.

We must listen. We must learn. And we must lead.

First, we must listen. If people think college costs too much, we need to hear what they have to say. To be sure, we can explain that OSU offers a highly cost-efficient education. We can say that in three of last seven years, OSU has not raised tuition at all. In any event, we must listen and, having listened, we must act.

Second, we must learn. Listening won't do much good unless we are willing to learn. After the Penn State debacle a couple years ago, our Board of Regents commissioned a task force to review our policies with an eye toward making our campuses safer for our students, our employees and all others who use our campuses. And we learned that, while we were already doing a good job, we could do even better. Of course, learning is not a one-time affair; it is a continual process. Higher education must continue to learn how we can do a better job.

Finally, we must lead. And for a public institution like ours,

leading involves engaging the public, including our elected officials, and educating them as to the true value of higher education. We must show why attending OSU is important. We must demonstrate how OSU transforms lives. We must publicize the fact that college graduates are much more likely to enjoy their careers, to be community leaders, and even to earn more.

The future is bright. A higher education is more important today than ever before. But the burden is on us to make sure others know how vital higher education is to all our lives. Let's go tell our great story.