



September 21, 2006

Colleagues:

Events of the past year have placed higher education squarely in the center of the public debate over America's future competitiveness in the world economy. During this period we have seen a variety of organized efforts seeking to boost our national competitiveness through change or investment in our system of higher education. These efforts have included the work of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education as well as three fine reports—*Rising Above the Gathering Storm* and *Beyond Bias and Barriers*, issued by the National Academies, and *Mortgaging Our Future*, by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. Congress has also made this link between higher education and global competitiveness in debates surrounding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and other legislation. And we increasingly see new initiatives—such as President Bush's American Competitiveness Initiative and efforts within other federal agencies such as the Departments of Education, Labor and State.

Clearly, this is an opportune time for the leadership of higher education to step forward and take advantage of this policy climate change. We believe we must proactively engage in this debate so that policy makers are aware of the enormous strength and diversity of higher education and the resources that we will bring to the process. As the policy discussions move forward, it is extremely important that we not be defined by those without a unique appreciation of our enterprise.

Though we continue to face challenges in the areas of research and graduate education, the current policy debates bear directly on undergraduate education, particularly as they relate to important issues such as access, affordability, curriculum and educational outcomes. The assumption underlying many of the policy recommendations we have seen in these areas is that change is necessary and that colleges and universities have been unwilling or unable to do so. We strongly challenge such assumptions, and demonstrate that our institutions are not only dynamic and diverse but ready to work proactively to improve undergraduate education from an already firm foundation.

Ultimately, each institution has to tackle these issues individually based on its mission and educational objectives. And it is true that we could probably do a better job of collaborating with each other. But the multiple patrons of, and participants in, higher education all have roles to play. State and federal governments, to cite the most obvious examples, have essential supporting roles. The Washington-based presidential higher

education associations, working with allied organizations, must play a convening and coordinating role in helping their member institutions address these issues.

Therefore we commend to you the attached document, *Addressing the Challenges Facing American Undergraduate Education*. We believe this document represents a crucial first step in a process that will not only marshal our own association resources to harness this climate of change, but also the collective resources of 3,500 U.S. colleges and universities to engage and leverage efforts with state and federal policy makers. We look forward to your active involvement in this process.

Sincerely,

George R. Boggs, president, American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC)

Constantine W. Curris, president, American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

David Ward, president, American Council on Education (ACE)

Robert M. Berdahl, president, Association of American Universities (AAU)

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Peter McPherson, president, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)