A Topical Theme related to Public Leadership in the NW: Revisiting Access to Higher Education in Washington State

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With Everett Community College’s recent interest in and drive to become a 4-year school¹, the issue of access to education again rises to the surface for residents of Washington State. ECC administrators are not alone: other community colleges around the state have pondered entering the arena of offering four-year school curricula over the last decade, or more. However, the system of higher education as it is currently envisioned and practiced may be challenged to adapt to such a move in Washington State. Trends of decreased state funding, increasing pressure to prove ‘outcomes’ of education, and declining ability to reward and retain high-performing faculty and staff, among others, increasingly contribute toward a decline of the ‘common good’ solutions surrounding education and rather give rise to considering issues of ‘private rights of individuals’.² In addition, uncoordinated efforts to increase access locally without intention or thought given to a more state-wide, comprehensive plan may prove detrimental to access in the long term. However, Washington is not alone with this challenge. The education system in the United States faces great challenges of access in the future, and how to lead and navigate the state through such an important and far-reaching issue remains a critical leadership issue in the Pacific Northwest. One in which the current ‘triumvirate’ of key leaders representing Washington State in Olympia and Washington D.C. might lead the way across the nation.

The theme of access to education is an increasingly critical one for our state. As immigration continues to bring diversity and new residents to our cities—from Asia, Africa, and beyond—the need to continue to examine and re-examine our policies and priorities toward access to education is gaining momentum. In addition, given that many of our
community college students are increasingly women and minorities, the state leadership has
an opportunity here: to lead by example and commit to financing and supporting a strategy
which builds upon the strengths of our state. One of these solutions might encourage
diversity in hiring and selection practices across all institutions of higher education. Another
might involve a state-wide examination of future demographic trends in order to plan for
and meet the access challenges before they become critical. Currently, for example, the lack
of diversity in the University of Washington faculty contributes to fewer perspectives
represented in the classroom and further detracts quality applicants from selecting the UW
because of concerns about climate and acceptance of students of color on its campus.
Conversely, a community college which traditionally maintains a far more diverse faculty and
student-base, may begin to attract under-represented students for a 4-year degree and in a
way put educational institutions in competition with each other for resources, and
increasingly students from diverse backgrounds. Or perhaps the competition itself will
provide the incentive to finally motivate educational leaders to follow through with concrete
steps to fulfill aspirations toward diversity. However, these issues and how they are
managed in Olympia have long-term consequences for the future and character of education
and access in Washington State.

When considering the topic of how one might begin to re-think the structure of education,
and how the system of incentives and culture might perpetuate the current crisis of access, it
came to me as a dramatic realization to learn in class about the trust and forethought that
got into the development of the educational curricula at Evergreen State College. The idea
that in order to build something truly innovative, one must contribute the space, time and
company necessary to allow that to happen. This philosophy of creating the ‘structure for
innovation’ became clear in the support for faculty in developing the curricula—a full year’s pay and administrative budget in order to bring together a team of leading thinkers in education to co-create what such an innovative curriculum might look like in practice. The striking lesson learned from that class discussion for me was the idea that the reshaping of current structures (in this case in a university) was in fact more complicated and often more challenging that simply naming it as a different kind of institution: in other words, the challenge to change the culture by changing the incentives. An example of this is in encouraging faculty to become deans by building a significant and coveted award—a sabbatical—into the rewards structure for taking on that important but challenging job of dean. Another example of reexamining the structure before expecting to solve the problem was the fact that Evergreen State University’s founding administration specifically planned in advance to provide the necessary training and development to ensure the goals would be reached. This commitment to build capacity while simultaneously changing and affecting the culture surrounding higher education toward community-based outcomes rather than individually-based outcomes and incentives can be seen in the emphasis on team-teaching and subsequent creation of a collaborative summer teaching institute to invest in the transferring of that culture.

Furthermore, Dan Evans spoke in class about the dramatic hallmark of shared decision-making in the running of an institution of higher education—more so than in government or certainly in the private sector. That with the structure of the organization such that there are so many independent departments and incentive structures which discourage cross-collaboration, there is little reward or support for the kind of innovations needed to follow the vision and create dramatic and transformational change needed to face the global,
international and inter-related future of education and future populations who demand an education that will address those increasingly inter-connected themes.

In this way, I began to see that creating the inter-related structures and incentives behind the chosen solutions for change on a statewide level could give the creators of a new system of education the best possible chance to build something innovative, accepted—and lasting. As in the 1970 ‘Governor’s Statewide Television Address on Citizen Unrest’, Dan Evans articulated directly what students suggested they’d like to see changed about the education system in this state—and many of those requests still ring true today: ‘Students would like to have the teachers of our universities spend more time teaching and less time in the research and in the non-teaching functions of the university—hardly a radical or a different thought from most of the citizens of our state.’

No matter that this statement was made almost exactly 35 years prior to where we are today, in 2005, this is still a radical statement to a university system steeped in a tenure tradition based on research—not teaching. I would argue that this is indeed a radical idea for a Research One (R1) institution such as the UW to consider and put into practice. This state’s leaders might learn from the examples of Evergreen’s interdisciplinary teaching and learning and creating model—but consider and implement it on a larger, more interconnected scale throughout the entire system of higher education in Washington State. One comment which struck me from our discussion on Higher Education was particularly appropriate in considering this challenge: ‘That if you depend on team teaching, you need to have a shared future.’ I think this comment generates and drives home an important theme related to leadership in the field of higher education: that without understanding, and more
importantly without experiencing a truly shared future—including incentives, support and culture—it remains unlikely that dramatic change can be instituted to the level desired, or promised.

Again, in his 1970 statewide televised address, Dan Evans spoke presciently about what issues students felt strongly about then, and I would argue as is also the case now: ‘[Students would] like to see education change with the times, and not always be chained to the tradition of the past if those traditions are not relevant to today’s needs, and it’s up to us to work with students to retain those things that are valuable of the past and to change those things that need to be changed in the educational process.’

Perhaps rethinking the structure and incentives will be a start, in coordination with making fundamental changes to the process which would allow for the feedback from the students and citizens to reach the decision-makers at the top of the University and governing system allowing for the ongoing conversation to continue around the importance of access and teaching. It must be acknowledged that an emphasis on research is important to continue as an integral part of the mission of a R1 state institution such as UW; however, commitment to teaching is equally critical, and perhaps in these times a higher priority, especially in light of the pressing need to teach more than ‘just books’ and to address the increasing challenge and crisis of access and relevancy in education in this state.

In closing, the concept of examining priorities for education in relationship to other priorities seems as pertinent and important at this time as it was 35 years ago, and perhaps as
good a place from which to start. A final excerpt from Dan Evans on this topic suggests how to create a lasting legacy:

‘It’s time for us all to look at the priorities within the field of education as well as the priorities in all of the other things we do. We all have limited money and limited resources to do an effective job, and we simply have got to put the most important priorities first if we’re going to have any hope of a better future tomorrow.’

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i Article in The Seattle Times, ‘Everett CC wants to draw 4-year programs’, December 7, 2005
iii Quote by Dan Evans, ‘The Legacy of Public Leadership’, Higher Education discussion, October 27, 2005
iv Transcription of television address, ‘1970 Governor’s Statewide Television Address on Citizen Unrest’, June 4, 1970
v ibid.