

A Changing Educational Landscape

By Nicole Suozzi, Chief Strategy & Services Officer, SSATB

In January, I had the opportunity to attend, along with a number of my SSATB colleagues, a conference on the future of college admission in the United States. Hosted by the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice (CERPP) at the University of Southern California, the conference “College Admission 2025: Embracing the Future” delivered a number of thought provoking sessions from some high profile policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, including Dr. Ted Mitchell, Undersecretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education, Dr. David Longanecker, President, Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, Dr. Marta Tienda, Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Princeton University, and Dr. Michael Kirst, Professor Emeritus of Education and Business Administration at Stanford University and President of the California State Board of Education.

CERPP Executive Director Dr. Jerry Lucido opened the conference by reminding us that the class of 2025 is already in the educational pipeline. As we reflect on our schools’ role in preparing students for their post-secondary careers and the ability of our students to succeed in the society that awaits them, six important conference themes emerged:

1. Diversity must be embraced as a strategic advantage.

The engine driving cultural and ethnic diversity in our country is no longer immigration, but rather fertility. As a whole, the U.S. is mostly “above replacement” fertility but has fallen below replacement specific to Whites and Asians. Added to this is rising inequality, a shrinking middle class, and an aging White population. As a result, U.S. college attainment numbers are stagnating as competitor countries are quickly gaining ground. We must embrace the idea that today’s youth are tomorrow’s workers and forge the first “world nation.” The key to our success will be our ability to move beyond the notion of diversity to one of integration—and to prepare our students and our schools for managing in such a different context. As Dr. Tienda so eloquently put it, we must, “Harness diversity to leverage a demographic dividend.”

2. The nontraditional student is the new normal.

There is a common story in U.S. higher education—a significant number of students do not complete college and, worse, many others aspire to post-secondary education but for whom the path is anything but clear. Colleges and universities need to provide more flexible opportunities than have been offered in the traditional educational model. These new traditional students are typically first generation, under 18 years old, and members of a minority group. They take a more attenuated path (usually involving work); they are likely to consume higher education in modules over time (even from providers other than colleges and universities); and they are likely to attend multiple institutions. In a world in which the nontraditional student is now traditional, enrollment management does not happen once—it is continuous. As Dr. Mitchell described, “It is the difference between joining an organization or subscribing to a service. It’s a complete shift in mindset.”

3. The concept of student learning is rapidly evolving.

Dr. Longanecker emphasized that evidence-based practice has caught on in public policy, which means there is a great deal of angst in educational circles as the push for external validity, along with the analytics to back it up, redefines the traditional role of everyone involved in the educational process—from teachers to institutions to governing boards and government. As the concept of readiness evolves, so too does the concept of student (early learning, adult learning, workforce/workplace partnerships),



The SSATB Team with Dr. Jerry Lucido



and this expanded definition of student naturally leads to new methods of assessment and an entirely new definition of remediation. It was postulated that competency assessment (and demonstrated competence) will radically change higher education. In sum, learning is by definition a mastery of skills, and assessments will need to offer predictive feedback to provide for real-time learning. Equally important, institutions of higher education will need to be rated on their performance.

4. The Common Core is actually pretty bold.

Dr. Kirst asserted that the Common Core is the biggest, boldest initiative to bring K-12 and higher education back together. At their essence, the standards are fewer (content that is no longer a mile wide and an inch deep), higher (geared towards college readiness), and deeper (cover more complex materials and requires more synthesis and analysis). These standards necessitate innovative assessments that are online, adaptive (individualized), allow for expanded response, and assess task performance. Kirst emphasized that colleges need to use their cache and bully pulpit to come out in support of the Common Core, and they need to lead the reinvention of teacher preparation programs. In the end, Kirst hopes that student scores on the Common Core assessments will be evaluated by enrollment managers as part of a student's profile.

5. Community colleges will play a more central role in post-secondary education.

Community colleges will play a greater role in helping the new normal student attain a post-secondary degree. As described by Dr. Stephen Handel, Associate Vice President, Undergraduate Admissions, University of California, there are three forces coalescing that will help restore the bond between community colleges and universities—the current political will, the value-proposition question, and the inevitable shifts that demography will bring. Renewed attention to and support for the transfer student will be a critical piece of this puzzle as will the focus on helping students make the transition from high school to community college. Perhaps Dr. Frank Chong, Superintendent/President, Santa Rosa Junior College, described it best when he said, “We serve the top 100%.”

6. National and state governments need to invest in education and innovation.

Many states' spending on higher education has not rebounded since the great recession, and thus the financial burden borne by students and families has increased. Simply put, public funding per student is down but is made up by tuition increases. Across states, there is an average decline of 23% in higher education investment. Couple this with systems of financial aid and student loans that are “fraught with difficulty,” and the economic outlook is bleak. As described by Dr. Mitchell, states are facing a problem that is not only economic, but also demographic and moral. Describing the basic moral problem as a dangerous trajectory of elitism, Dr. Mitchell said, “The ticket to the middle class cannot become a luxury good.” The obligation of the federal government, he noted, is to set the basic principles for how we wish higher education to work, to support innovation directly, and to work on scale.

Coming on the heels of President Obama's State of the Union Address, which pushed for increasing post-secondary degree completion, the conference teased up a number of themes related to the national and state governmental policy contexts in which colleges and universities maneuver. While strikingly different from the mostly legislation-free zone in which U.S. independent schools operate, the lessons were nonetheless highly relevant—the way we provide education is changing, whom we educate is changing, and how we finance education is changing (Dr. Longanecker). 🌱