Thank you for that kind introduction. It’s a pleasure to be here and a privilege to have been asked to be part of this remarkable program the College Board has assembled.

Jon McGee invited me here to comment on the looming crises and challenges facing higher education today. That’s a daunting task and an insurmountable one in the time allowed for this session. Never having been to a College Board Colloquium before, I logged on to the Colloquium’s website to see what’s been addressed here in years past that I could perhaps add to or build upon.

I was astounded at the breadth, depth and quality of the content at this meeting over the years. Regular attendees have to be among the best informed leaders in higher education. The commentaries and analyses that this organization has sponsored and produced are more than sufficient to acquaint anyone in our profession with the magnitude and the multitude of the challenges we face today and in the foreseeable future.

You are all too familiar, for example, with the impact of the current economic climate on our colleges and universities: the loss in family income and assets, rising unemployment, levels of consumer debt and charge-offs, diminished state support for higher education due to their fiscal constraints and loss of endowment value and earnings.

Apart from the immediate economic crisis we face, you know that there are demographic trends and projections that will reshape our enrollment profiles; continued crises in the preparation of students in K-12 and the so-called “leaky pipeline”; and growing gaps in access and attainment between the haves and the have nots.

You know that we face growing competition in the exploding for-profit sector in higher education. We face increasing accountability for achieving access, learning and productivity outcomes. We face growing government scrutiny of non-profit organizations in general. And there’s an erosion of public trust in societal institutions in general, higher education specifically, and concern about the relevance and value of what and how we teach.

Internally, we all know that we have students who don’t learn, faculty who don’t teach, parents who don’t back off, out of control intercollegiate athletics, a continued arms race in the pursuit of prestige and academic and administrative leadership who despite their advanced degrees, have addition as the only math they understand.

And that’s just a start.
As a litany of the crises we face today, there is nothing I can possibly add to that list from the small corner of the world that I occupy. What I can do—and will try to do—is offer some cautionary perspective that we should keep in mind as we try to “lead boldly in these perilous times” as the Colloquium’s theme this year calls us to do—and do so amidst all of this tumult, turmoil and tension.

As the title crafted for this session suggests, the rhetoric of our times is one of alarm, danger, threat, crisis and, indeed, peril. The current crises are severe, comprehensive in scope and frightening in consequence.

Let me start today by suggesting that perhaps the topic shouldn’t be the current crises in higher education but rather the constant crises in higher education. There’s a great old saying: “In times like these, it’s important to remember that there have always been times like these.”

That’s the perspective and the argument offered in a provocative essay called “The ‘Crisis’ Crisis in Higher Education” by Robert Birnbaum and Frank Shushok. Published in 2001, in the interesting text, “In Defense of American Higher Education,” it is nearly a decade old now but it reads like a contemporary commentary on higher education in 2010. As I begin my comments today, please allow me to draw liberally and quote verbatim from their insight, their analysis and their eloquence in that essay. Their work merits our thoughtful consideration as we consider this important topic.

Their point is basically this: as we review the history of higher education, it is always in crisis and college and university leaders appear to always be living in the most perilous of times.

For example, a prominent educational leader described his situation this way: “Within the past twenty or thirty years, our long-tested and successful system of collegiate instruction has…been so persistently decried and so seriously menaced as to fill the friends of sound education throughout the country with alarm…” That, my friends, was in 1865.

Another prominent leader said this: “Higher education in the United States...is beset by crises; crises of public confidence, questions of continuing relevance, doubts about continuing the emphasis on doctoral instruction, and a very real financial crisis.” That was 100 years later in 1972, at a time when most of us in this room were undergraduates in college. Who knew we were living in the worst of times?

Yet another leader said this: “The present crisis has both deeper and broader implications for the future than the repeated periods of stress facing colleges and universities since about 1970. It is a common refrain...that things are not going to be the same this time, or ever again.” That was in 1996.

The authors remind us that since “higher education is so integrated with the social, political and economic fabric of American society that it’s only natural that claims of academic crisis are linked to historic events.” As a result, we’ve had academic crises tied to the Great Depression, to the loss of students at the start of WWII and a flood of new enrollees at the war’s end, to the scientific climate caused by the Cold War and to the unrest during the Vietnam War. We had crises tied to the demographic shifts of the 1980s, which some of you may recall were predicted to result in such a precipitous enrollment decline we would most certainly see the closing of 10 to 30 percent of American campuses. Didn’t happen.

In fact, there is a citation in their essay of an astute observer at an education conference in 1981—nearly 30 years ago—saying this: “The word ‘crisis’ has been used here 4,913 times in three days, and the
predicted enrollment crisis hasn’t begun yet. You ain’t seen nothing yet, boys and girls, wait until 1995.”
In reality, between that date and the mid-1990s, enrollment actually increased nearly 20 percent and has continued to grow since.

Birnbaum and Shushok remind us that we are in perpetual crisis. We have continual crises of finance; crises of leadership; crises of technology; of teaching, learning and assessment; of public confidence; of access; of curriculum; of intercollegiate athletics; of accreditation; of governance and of values.

In historical treatise after treatise over the decades, we can find concerned commentators claiming that higher education is in grave difficulty, far greater than in the past, and that the consequences will be dire unless something is done. It reminds me of a comment I once heard in regard to faculty morale; there are only two states it can be in: “faculty morale is either ‘bad’ or it’s ‘the worst it has ever been’.” Perhaps so too is the general state of higher education in America—regardless of the decade.

It was no less prominent an observer of the American scene than Alice Rivlin who years ago noted in her observations on the 1960s and 1970s that “at various times, the crismongers have invoked the imminent demise of some type of institution: the death of the liberal arts college; the vanishing private higher education sector; or even …the special plight of the research university. When all else fails, the quality of higher education can always be deplored.”

In their analysis of the literature of higher education in the 25 years between 1970 and 1994, Birnbaum and Shushok found nearly 800 references to specific crises in higher education. They classified them into a intriguing taxonomy: pandemic, chronic, sporadic and idiosyncratic crises.

The obvious pandemic crisis—claimed continuously and frequently—is the financial crisis in higher education.

Chronic crises are those that occur with just slightly less continuity and frequency over the decades; they include: the chronic crisis of confidence; crises of curriculum; crises of stagnation in not responding to changing social needs; crises of diversity and equity; and crises of leadership/governance.

Then there are sporadic and idiosyncratic crises, typically related to enrollment trends or intercollegiate athletics.

Let’s just consider the pandemic crisis of higher education’s fiscal state of affairs. Birnbaum and Shushock note that “claims of a fiscal crisis in higher education have a long and honorable tradition.”

There were predictions in the 1960s that projected enrollment growth would threaten the viability of some sectors of higher education. These fears were succeeded shortly thereafter by fears of fiscal crisis caused by enrollment declines. Worsening conditions were predicted for the early 1980s. By the early 1990s, it was the astute president of the American Council of Education, no less, who declared that “higher education is in its most dire financial condition since WWII and things aren’t likely to improve until after the year 2010.” Yes, that’s right—back in the early 1990s, today was predicted to be the return to the good old days.

Or let’s consider the chronic crisis of confidence in American higher education. In the 1960s there were published claims of confidence being at low ebb. The authors note that such lack of confidence 40 years ago was triggered by public irritation with irrelevant curricula, uninspired teaching, adherence to outdated traditions, extravagantly high costs, etc. In the early 1970s, educators pointed to: “a serious
erosion of public confidence in colleges and universities that were once the pride of America and the envy of other nations.” Sound familiar?

This week’s Chronicle of Higher Education pointed to the crisis of accreditation of online for-profit providers and the need to radically transform our use of the “credit hour” as the coin of the realm. And it was Cliff Adelman, in a comment promptly posted in response to that article, who reminded us all that this was the same argument made in 1984 in the “Involvement in Learning” report that some of us recall as the national call to arms of that era.

So here’s one concern that I came to sunny California to share with you today:

Before we fixate on the crises themselves, it helps to be mindful of what motivates those who Rivlin, perhaps harshly, called the crisismongers in our industry. Birnbaum and Shushock put it this way: “The strong rhetoric and vivid images of crisis are useful tools with which to gain attention, power and control of organizational and symbolic processes in a noisy world.” The rhetoric of crisis seeks primarily to advance the priority of an issue on the always overcrowded public policy agenda; it’s usually not so much about increasing our understanding of complex issues. “The primary purpose of a [proclaimed] crisis is to justify claims for the allocation of scarce social resources”—or to bolster claims for increased public support and investment. Wasn’t that exactly what Nancy Zimpher was describing in her opening keynote address last night—her efforts to intentionally paint the crisis in the State University of New York system in a way to open purse strings in Albany?

Of course, that’s why we see inflamed rhetoric like the titles of some recent reports on today’s crises such as: “Empty Promises,” or “Access Denied,” or “Promise Abandoned,” and so on. That’s the language of advocacy, not analysis. Bold leadership in times of peril requires the ability to discern the difference.

Birnbaum and Shirshok remind us that “crises are social constructions so that belief in the existence of a crisis is related to the ideology of the viewer.”

The many chronic crises in our industry are created by basic disagreements over higher education’s core purposes and are exacerbated precisely because our purposes are many, broad and fuzzy. Different constituencies construct different narratives about things like who should go to college, about what should be taught, about the social obligation of institutions and so on. These are questions of values, not facts, and are influenced more by ideology than by data. So groups jostle for position to craft the dominant narrative and to marginalize others. The authors argue that “the social construction of a crisis is part of an interpretative process in which contending ideologies vie for supremacy through offering competing narratives.”

I think it helps to be mindful that crises are not a given; they aren’t just out there waiting in the world for smart analysts to come along and define them correctly and paint them vividly in PowerPoint slides. “They are created in the minds of people by other people, by leaders, organizations, and government agencies, as an essential part of political maneuvering...in a pluralistic and diverse society.” It’s not that the underlying problems are manufactured—but the crisis rhetoric is crafted for a purpose.

That’s what Birnbaum and Shushock remind us to keep in mind, and I think that’s an important perspective to keep as we and others gather at professional meetings and contemplate the challenges we face today and in the future and how best to respond in these perilous times, in the era of crises that is ours to own.
Birnbaum and Shusock go on to remind us that there are natural cognitive processes conducive to the creation of crisis. In a beautiful phrasing borrowing from author Otto L. Bettmann, they note: There is a tendency for the past “to recede into a benevolent haze… the dirty business is swept under the Carpet of Oblivion.” If we compare today with the good old days, “we cannot but feel a jarring discontent, a sense of despair that fate has dropped us into the worst of all possible worlds. And the future, once the resort of hopeful dreams, is envisioned as an abyss filled with apocalyptic nightmares.”

Those who fixate on crises in higher education may be seduced by the so-called “myth of the Golden Era,” in which the present situation is always unfavorably contrasted with the false memory of a fabled past…“past problems, having been resolved, fade from memory; current problems seem even more intense because of the cognitive tendency to give prominence to more recent events… Crisis is always related to change, and change always seems to be more rapid and volatile when it’s up close to us in time and space.”

I find some comfort in their essay by being reminded that seeing today’s problems as alarming crises is a natural part of the human condition and human cognition. Small solace, perhaps, but solace nonetheless.

There may be other motivations too besides ideology and the cognitive tendency to elevate the severity of the present situation. Henry Mintzberg, the great strategic planning guru, argued 15 years ago that “we are no more in crisis now than in the past half century, but we glorify ourselves by describing our own age as turbulent…. In other words, what we really face are not turbulent times but overinflated egos.”

Too harsh? Yes, I think so too. I begin my comments here on the so-called “Portents of Peril” facing colleges and universities by noting that perhaps the one thing to be most vigilant about, over which to lose sleep and have the most anxiety, is the tendency not to keep the crises of contemporary times in context and in appropriate perspective, perspective that these issues require precisely because they are so severe.

You see, I’m not saying the challenges before us aren’t serious or that our response to today’s crises aren’t of great consequence. After all, we aren’t just projecting hard times in some imagined future—we are knee-deep in dealing with them each and every day. However, as these crises become more extreme and the stakes grow higher, it’s even more incumbent upon us to discern the underlying interests that are shaping the rhetoric. Leading boldly in perilous times requires keeping some perspective on the nature of peril.

In fact, history tells us that peril is not always something to be avoided. As many of you will recall, this was demonstrated in the definitive cinematic documentary of medieval times, “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”.iii

As I reflect on the perils that define our moment in history, I feel a bit like Sir Galahad when being saved by Lancelot from the perilous temptations that you surely recall awaited him in the Castle Anthrax:

Lancelot: “We were in the nick of time, you were in great peril.”
Galahad: “I don’t think I was.”
Lancelot: “Yes you were, you were in terrible peril.”
Galahad: “Look, let me go back in there and face the peril.”
Lancelot: “No, it’s too perilous.”
Galahad: “Look, it’s my duty as a knight to sample as much peril as I can.”
Lancelot: “No, we’ve got to find the Holy Grail. Come on!”
Galahad: “Well, let me have just a little bit of peril?”
Lancelot: “No, it’s unhealthy.”

So you see, the historical record is quite clear. If we are the valiant guardians of our era—in search of the Holy Grail of our educational values and aspirations—well, we, like Galahad, are supposed to sample as much peril as we can - even if it’s unhealthy.

The Somnambulistic Giant

One of the more frequent conclusions in the many reports on the challenges facing American higher education is that we apparently all need a “wake up call.” The College Board itself has used this phrase in recent commission reports, such as in its report: “Coming to our Senses: A Wake Up Call to the American People and American Educators.” Even in the science magazine Nature, the recent book review of Bowen, Chingos and McPherson’s latest text on college graduation rates at public universities was entitled: “A Wake Up Call to Educators.”

A “wake up call.” That’s an interesting phrase and we should pause to reflect on what it implies. In every “wake up call” is an implication that our institutions or our professions or perhaps all of American higher education is asleep or (more likely) is sleepwalking. It implies that higher education is like a somnambulistic giant, sleepwalking through history without clear direction nor purpose, seemingly alert but fundamentally unresponsive and unaware, moving forward, but heading unknowingly to potential disaster.

My younger brother on occasion walked in his sleep when we were young. I could converse with him when he did so; he seemed alert and purposeful. If you paid close attention, though, what he lacked was any real sense of perspective or context or complete self-awareness. A lack of perspective and context—is that what characterizes our approach to the crises of the day? Is that why we need “wake up calls,” to jostle us from our somnambulism and get re-oriented with an appropriate sense of perspective, a fuller grasp of context? Perhaps.

So let me comment briefly on four apparent crises—four portents of peril—that are threats to us not because we are totally ignorant and unaware of their consequence, but because, as if sleepwalking, we fail to keep them in perspective and context. And for each, I’ll note what I think today’s Enrollment Management leaders can and should do in response.

Crisis of Demography

Everyone in this room is well aware of how the demographics of the nation have and will continue to shape in powerful ways all that we do. Regardless, it’s remarkable to me how frequently on our campuses the demographic trends, realities, projections and implications are grossly misstated, misinterpreted, misapplied and exaggerated. At campus after campus, committee after committee, I find simplistic and superficial considerations of demographic realities that are at odds with the facts, that lack perspective and context, that prompt ill-informed institutional responses and that are often framed to shape a particular narrative.
For example, sometimes we just misrepresent the data. We look at charts that show the downturn in 18 year olds and gasp at the precipice upon which we stand, at least until we attend carefully to the truncation of the x- and y-axes. When we extend the timeframe and we adjust the baseline comparison, we see a very different future. It’s a matter of perspective.

Or we paint a picture of the projected changes in the racial/ethnic mix of tomorrow’s students and the different rates of change over a given baseline year. However, this future unfolds from a present that isn’t best described with a common baseline, is it? Place these same projected growth rates against the current population profile and one gets a very different perspective on the population in years to come. Perspective matters. Context matters.

Sometimes we paint looming demographic changes in broad strokes based on national trends when, in fact, national data are relevant for very few institutions. The consequences of demographic shifts are, for most institutions, highly localized. Furthermore, no discussion of the demographic future can or should be addressed univariately. When we know that the primary determinant of advancing to college is a student’s parental educational attainment, we dare not omit that variable from our demographic analysis. Let’s explore one way of doing that.

There are standard demographic profiles produced by Human Capital Research for our enrollment planning at DePaul. The chart (below), drawn from recent census data, shows the number of youth in Chicago, ages 18 or younger. Four broad vertical bands show those Chicago youth in racial groups for Black, Hispanic, Caucasian and Asian. Within each of those groups we see three age bands, showing students who would be of age for college enrollment in four year bands (ages 14-18, 9-13 and 8-12)—our freshman classes out to the year 2023. The bubble shows the number of youth in each age band in each racial group. The rows show the parents’ educational level, from no college at the bottom to two advanced degrees at the top.
Just one look at this demographic snapshot of Chicago shows the diversity profile, the disturbing disparities in parental attainment by race, and how the college-age population is projected to change through the next decade. Upon careful review, we can see the significant growth in Hispanic youth—all of which is in families where there is no prior college education. When I listen to most of the dialogue about Chicago’s demographic future, it seems that’s the only implication to be drawn. Look more carefully and one sees that there is exactly the same numeric growth projected for Caucasian students with college-educated parents. That’s a perspective virtually missing from common discourse, but one that makes all the difference.

My point is simply this: much of the dialogue about the demographic crises facing American colleges and universities would benefit from the kind of perspective provided when there’s an appropriate level of complexity in the analysis, discussion and interpretation of what the future holds. If we need a “wake up call,” it’s not an alarm of some pending catastrophic demographic tsunami, but rather a cautionary reminder of the importance of a highly nuanced, multidimensional, localized perspective on the full demographic context for our planning.

**Crisis of Affordability**

To hear most politicians, journalists and business leaders talk, “college costs are out of control” and higher education leaders apparently “just don’t get it.” Those of us in academia must be sleepwalking. Do we not see (as everyone else apparently does) that college is too expensive—and far more expensive than it needs to be? After all, to reduce cost without adversely effecting quality all we need to do is address the overpaid and underworked faculty; eliminate administrative bloat (that’s you and me, by the way); resist the pressure to try to be all things to all people; expel the leadership, which I mentioned at the outset, that is unable to do any kind of math other than addition; and then transform the long-standing institutional cultures that are too rigid to change. Shouldn’t that be big of a deal.

The crisis in college costs is undeniable—and frightening. Yet as I noted earlier from Birnbaum and Shushock’s analysis, fiscal crises qualify as higher education’s **pandemic**. In the mid 1960s, they found many an observer noting the “skyrocketing” college costs and warning of increasing costs beyond the average family’s ability to pay. Through the 1970s and in the mid-1990s, we had claims that “if appropriate steps are not taken, higher education could become so expensive that millions of students will be denied access.” Yes, we’ve been here before—but this time it’s the real deal, right?

I won’t even begin to address the issue of the escalating college tuition; your conferences have been hammering at it for some time, issuing “wake up calls” about the inability of the vast majority of
American families to afford the price of college tuition. To its credit, the College Board has offered invaluable resources in reports like “Trends in Pricing” and “Trends in Aid” as well as many commission reports on the issue. This Colloquium, too, has provided valuable and insightful analyses of the economic conditions that are creating a crisis of affordability in higher education.

Unfortunately, the public understanding is a good bit less informed than it is inflamed—and it’s no wonder why. Do you recall the fascinating essay, “The Holy Cow Story: how the media covers college costs” by Jerrold Footlicker more than 10 years ago? It is still very relevant, and I commend it to your reading. That essay points out that the fault for the public’s confusion and consternation about the cost of college lies in part in the tendency of the media to only report extremes. More importantly, and in larger part, the fault rests in our inability—or perhaps our reluctance—to clearly articulate the complex issues of price, cost and value.

Again, though, let’s back up a bit. What’s the real crisis here? What perspective is lacking? Is the crisis that we now face based in the fact that there are institutions that now exceed $50,000 in annual tuition and fees? We certainly received some crisis-oriented attention in the media as some institutions crossed that threshold. But is that really the crisis?

This chart (at right) produced by the College Board depicts the reality that is so often overlooked—that about two out of every three college students in four-year institutions in the United States attend a college with a sticker tuition price less than $12,000 annually. An important perspective, don’t you agree?

Is the crisis found in the gap between our growing tuition price and our customers’ capacity to pay? That certainly appears to be the crisis the College Board focuses on; its rhetoric of the affordability crisis fixates on price. Let me suggest, however, that the real challenge has to do not with tuition price but with the costs of our enterprise which grow unchecked and are a primary—though not the only—driver of that “out of control” pricing. For whatever reason, costs seem to get a lot less attention than price in our crisis rhetoric and our crisis narrative.

I of course acknowledge that there are some regular references to controlling costs, such as in the College Board’s latest call to action—the report, “Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future”—where there is a passing reference to the importance of cost control. But I must say that while that overall report was valuable, the section on cost control was lame, at best. It recommends that colleges ‘strengthen cost control efforts and increase institutional productivity’. Really. It recommends using purchasing consortia and new technologies to lower costs. Is this all we can say from our vantage point about controlling costs in higher education? Are those really the best recommendations we can muster? In our professional roles and from our leadership positions, why are we so vocal in our dialogue on the crisis of affordability via sophisticated analyses of price, net price, aid, need and indebtedness yet so dumb by comparison on the question of the cost of our enterprises?

In part, it would help for us all to be more conversant in the literature about what drives the costs of higher education. And I don’t mean the throw-away explanations we toss out to students and parents. For example, all of us should be aware of and able to articulate concepts like Massy’s lattice and ratchet imagery for higher education’s cost structures. More importantly, we need to better understand how real, concrete decisions we make at our institutions drive up cost and thereby drive up price. I think the latest budget cuts many institutions have had to make have served to jostle even the most well-heeled institutions to look carefully at their cost structures—and this is a good thing, a welcome slap upside the head. Financial crises often serve valuable strategic purposes. (Just ask Tulane University how it capitalized on its post-Katrina financial crisis.)
If we are serious about responding to the crisis of affordability, we each need to take a proactive institutional leadership role by looking carefully at the real drivers of cost in order to bring necessary perspective to a crisis rhetoric that is fixated on price. That begins by acknowledging that our costs lie in our core enterprise; they are determined by our curriculum, our academic calendars, our schedule of classes, our faculty’s teaching load, their pedagogy and instructional delivery model and our portfolio of academic programs.

Addressing the crisis of affordability begins by developing a better informed perspective on how our core instructional enterprise affects costs. We can’t just tinker on the edges and effect change, and I count financial aid strategies, streamlined aid application processes, aid leveraging strategies and the like all as *tinkering* on the margins.

The crisis of affordability lacks essential context and perspective as long as we ignore costs and we fixate on price. Enrollment professionals have the responsibility to be more vocal gadflies, nagging advocates for real cost containment, not public relations apologists for an educational enterprise that we know all too well puts an undue burden on the backs of students in ways that too often create little or no value for them.

**Crisis of Accountability**

One of the drivers of cost is the growing demand for accountability. How many different additional reporting requirements does the latest reauthorization alone present us?

While we bemoan the increasingly burdensome yoke of government intervention in our happy business, it isn’t a reality that will go away. In this crisis, we need to help bring to our campuses some perspective on how the growing accountability demands are reflections of a larger shift in higher education’s status in the nation.

Years ago, Arthur Levine forewarned us all of an industry that was evolving and maturing. In a provocative essay, titled “Higher Education as a Mature Industry,” Levine outlined what happens when the general public posture toward any industry shifts from being one of investment and expansion to one where there is sufficient and suitable capacity. Such is the case with U.S. higher education.

Being part of a growth industry is what all of us have known for most of our careers in university administration. The general posture in the United States was to build capacity for expanding participation, access and educational advancement. In such a context, there is public investment, seemingly unquestioned confidence and relatively smooth sailing on the public’s dime. Rising support was the norm, public institutions multiplied and government aid was targeted to private schools to promote expansion. Such is the nature of growth industries.

In a so-called “mature industry,” Levine notes, the posture of the public and the government is not one of continued expansion and capacity building. In the shift from a growth industry to a mature industry, the government’s focus becomes one of regulation, quality control and accountability. It’s not about building capacity but about ensuring quality; not about expanding opportunity but improving productivity.
Levine points out that “government treats mature industries very differently from growth industries. It seeks to regulate or control them. It asks hard questions about the cost, efficiency, productivity and effectiveness. It attempts to limit their size and funding. It reduces their autonomy, increases their regulation and demands greater accountability.”

One needs to only look carefully at the Spellings Commission during the Bush presidency, and Bob Zemsky’s recent account of its work, to see evidence of what Levine foreshadowed years ago: that the ever-growing demands on us for accountability are not some episodic orientation of the current batch of policy wonks in D.C., those conservatives from Texas or now those socialists from Chicago.

No, viewing higher education as a mature industry where the public posture toward our work has shifted tectonically helps put all of the crisis rhetoric into perspective. It hasn’t occurred overnight; it’s been a slow maturation—an undeniable and irreversible change and not a sudden crisis at all. In fact, framing this as a crisis of accountability suggests we simply need to be more accountable; but in reality, we need to brace for a different era, an entirely new social-political-economic context within which we work to achieve our educational purposes.

We each have a responsibility to help our institutions recognize these changes for what they are and also recognize that much of what we are now having to respond to are the self-inflicted wounds of an industry that has been comfortably wrapped in self-serving and generally unquestioned affirmations about its value, its outcomes, its merits and its worthiness of both the public’s and the students’ investment. The so-called crisis of accountability presents all of us with welcome opportunity to engage in more honest reflection and assessment of what we know and what we don’t know about educational outcomes at our institutions, about student learning, about faculty productivity and teaching effectiveness, about the currency and relevance of our curricula, and so on.

While we’re at it, we need to stop being rankled by the rankings, as well; these too are self-inflicted, the outcomes of an industry too comfortable in its century-long growth mode to adjust easily to the demands made of it now in its maturity. That’s a topic for another day, though.

**Crisis of Attainment**

Not a day goes by, it seems, when there isn’t a new “wake up call” to address the national level of educational attainment as reflected in rates of degree completion from our colleges and universities; overall societal levels of degree attainment; and the wide disparities in college completion by race, income and so on. The data are as well documented as they are disconcerting and even a cursory overview of these staggering statistics would require the rest of this entire Colloquium.

The long-standing critiques of the rate at which Americans are successfully completing college degrees have reached an unprecedented decibel level of crisis, to be sure. Again, the rhetoric of this crisis needs to be tempered with a dose of more nuanced analysis.

First, for example, we bemoan abysmal college completion rates when we know that these overall rates haven’t changed much. College completion rates today are about the same as they were in the early 1900s. In fact, we can go back a good bit further in history and realize that in the beginning, there was attrition. In his 1936 history of Harvard, Morrison noted that “the first American-born students at Harvard were three sons of pilgrim fathers—Bradford, Prince and Winslow—who came up in the 1640s,
but did not graduate.” Yes, Harvard’s Student Retention Task Force in the mid 17th century defined being American-born as ‘high-risk’.

My focus today isn’t on the crisis per se but about the crisis rhetoric we use. In this particularly fascinating battle over what will be the dominant narrative of the attainment crisis, we are seeing warring perspectives played out before our eyes each week in the Chronicle and in Inside Higher Education. First, we’ve seen the articles about the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports citing how America’s competitive performance relative to other nations in degree completion and attainment has been sliding, and how the United States is losing ground in the international rankings of educational attainment. Those particular statistics of the OECD studies are what we are seeing so widely cited by the Education Trust, by your own College Board’s commissions and even by the Obama administration.

We now see a responding narrative. This past fall, it was again our colleague Cliff Adelman who has attempted to speak truth to power as only he can, bringing more context and perspective to these statistics than those who are elevating this particular crisis narrative. His argument is that there are such fundamental inconsistencies in the underlying conceptual rubrics and in the data definitions for these comparative studies that meaningful comparisons are impossible.

Do we have an attainment crisis? Sure we do. By any measure, these disparities and outcomes do not bode well for the future of our society. However, the manner by which this crisis is presented, profiled and parlayed into public discourse is worthy of critical review. The real portent of peril I see is this: we failed as educators and as a nation to get attention to this matter as an issue of social justice. Up until recently, we’ve been trying to show how the 45 years since the Higher Education Act of 1965 have not closed the equity gaps in access, participation and attainment. While we’ve increased overall participation, the persistent gaps between the haves and the have nots remain—both in participation and in attainment measures. It’s a social justice issue.

Appealing to social justice apparently hasn’t worked. It now seems that a new narrative—one of nationalistic fervor—is emerging as a way to get more public investment to address this crisis; and it may work. Our brilliant colleague Barmak Nassirian in Washington, D.C., told us recently that the extent of federal resources poised to flow our way partly because of this argument of international competitiveness is greater than ever before, but he also forewarns us that no good can possibly come from this much money flowing into American higher education. Portents of peril indeed.

My concern is that if the attainment crisis has shifted from social justice to national competitiveness as its overarching rationale and driving rhetoric, have we lost more than we’ve gained? If social justice didn’t open the purse strings sufficiently or wasn’t a sufficient catalyst for systemic change, have we just puntd those goals in favor of a more promising narrative, a new pitch for resources as we elbow our way up to the federal trough? When I read these studies and these emerging crisis narratives about our place in the world, I feel we are all being “sputniked,” subjected to a manufactured crisis fueled by nationalistic hubris pandering to xenophobic fears.

Tell-tale Signs

Maybe it’s just me, but I wonder if the kind of public challenge by David Brooks just hit a little too close to home. Four years ago, in his New York Times editorial entitled “The Education Gap,”

David
Brooks called us out: “…let’s say you work in a college or university, you are a cog in one of the great inequality producing machines this country has known. What are you doing to change that?” When I was asked to speak at this conference about the major tell-tale signs of peril that we need to focus on, I think this challenge right here more than fits the bill.

You see, I took to heart the language Jon used in describing this session, which said it was grounded in Edgar Allen Poe’s story of the “Tell-tale Heart,” using that as the parallel for our own reflections on the tell-tale signs of doom we hear beating as enrollment professionals in American higher education.

Let’s remember that in Poe’s classic short story, however, that there were no tell-tale signs or a beating heart. It was all imagined by the protagonist; it was a metaphor for the pounding guilt he felt for the murder he had committed. Or perhaps it was his own heart pounding as he was being questioned by the police investigators. Regardless, there were no overt, tell-tale signs of doom that existed independently of his own tortured mind and soul.

Perhaps it wasn’t intended this way when the description of this session was written, but I’m prompted to wonder about the tell-tale signs that are reflections of our collective culpability. What is it that we have done and are doing that is contributing to the current round and rhetoric of crisis in higher education?

As you’ve surely noted, that’s been my angle on each of the crises I’ve mentioned today.

- In the crisis of demography, we’re guilty of incomplete and simplistic analysis and hyperbole.
- In the crisis of affordability, we’re guilty of focusing on price and not leading the charge on costs.
- In the crisis of accountability, we’re guilty of whining about the intrusion of a government that has long subsidized our enterprise and is now just calling our bluff.
- In the crisis of attainment, we’re an inextricable part of a grand social stratification and reluctant to own up to it.

If a crisis doesn’t exist independently of how we frame the narrative, the response also has to be developed with a careful eye to how it is framed and who is framing it. I would like to suggest several things to which I think we as enrollment professionals need to attend to as we respond to the tell-tale signs of our own complicity in the crises of the day—especially the crisis that Brooks highlighted. I think we need to focus on the who, the how and the what of our dialogue together. With time being short in this session, let me focus only on the who.

It is always helpful to be mindful of the frames of reference that guide those who participate in any dialogue on important issues, who shape the narrative and who work to “bring the profession to its senses” from its somnambulism.

Let me show you briefly an illustration of what I mean with a simple little construct (below) my colleague Brian Zucker at Human Capital Research worked up, which arrays all of the nation’s private and public four-year colleges and universities on two axes—one academic and one financial.

First, we create as an x-axis an index of each institution’s academic profile and market position using an eclectic algorithm of freshman quality and levels of student demand. We then sort and rank all four-year colleges and universities on that scale left to right, low to high, and break them into six segments for easy display.
We then create a second index of institutional wealth, using an algorithm including net assets, instructional expenditures, faculty salaries and the like. We array all institutions on this index low to high, bottom to top, and break those into sixths as well.

The resulting matrix is a six-by-six grid where one can place each college and university at an intersection based upon its particular academic market position and financial wherewithal. You can see how this mirrors the kind of financial aid segmentation common in our industry, but here we have institutions, not students, as the unit of analysis that we place according to their academic and their financial profiles.

We then split this analysis into two groups: private institutions at the top half and public at the bottom, each computed with their own percentile indices and rankings on these two axes. So in one single chart we see two broad groupings of the institutional playground in which we play each and every day. As you can see, there clearly is a relationship between institutional academic profile and institutional wealth, an obvious correlation low to high on each dimension. Yes, you are right to observe that schools are like students in this respect.

The upper right corners represent those institutions that are in the highest sixth academically and financially; about 5 percent of all four-year institutions are privates in that category and about 2 percent are publics. At 7 percent overall, it’s a truly distinct, small subset of highly advantaged institutions on the American higher education scene.

This is our empirical representation of the array of four-year institutions in the national marketplace. Each institution—including yours—sits in one of these segments at the intersection of academic market position and institutional wealth. Every one of these 36 cells constitutes a segment of a market where
these particular financial and academic dynamics determine the present and the future for such institutions, and frames how they define and respond to today’s crises.

So just for kicks, I then took the roster of institutions represented at this Colloquium and placed them in this same context. Of course, it would be naïve to assume that a professional gathering like this would be evenly representative of the market at large, but I was surprised at how heavily skewed the concentration is of participants from one part of our industry.

While the segment of the market represented in the uppermost right corner of this construct represents about 7 percent of all schools, private and public alike, it represents about 70 percent of the conference attendees here today. That uppermost segment is overrepresented by a factor of 10 here today.

Why does this matter? You are here (are you not) to talk about strategies, opportunities and responses to the crises facing American higher education. My contention is that where one stands on the issues of the day depends on where one sits in market position. It’s not much of a stretch to assume that the position taken by the attendees of this Colloquium on the crises of our day is not likely to be a stance representing the entire landscape of higher education.

We can explore further how the enrollment dynamics facing any institution is a function of where they fall in this simple array of the marketplace. There are very clear correlates that align with this map of the market; let me share just a few of the most obvious. Let’s just take the x-axis of academic market position and profile and show some of the institutional realities that correlate with that one index (still represented here across the x-axis). The dark black line in each box shows the median value for each chart’s y-axis variable for each of the six segments; the box shows the range of values between the 25th and 75th quartile of the institutions in each of the segments. Green are public universities; yellow are the privates. As we look through the following examples, let’s carefully examine at how distinctly different the sixth segment to the far right is from the rest of the marketplace.
Whether we are looking at graduation rates, the prevalence of the poor in the student body or tuition price (the charts shown here), or if we looked at racial diversity, or the percent of financial need met, or the use of non-need-based aid or instructional expenses per student—the institutions in the top sixth in
market position are a fundamentally different animal than the rest of the industry. These few institutions have little in common with the other five sixths of the industry on some of the very metrics and measurements that underlie and frame our professional dialogue about the enrollment crises of today.

My intent here is not to go as far as Tom Mortenson and paint a segment of our industry as “gated communities” of privilege and prestige; that’s the rhetoric of advocacy, not analysis. I do think that we benefit from remembering the shape of the higher education market as Zemsky illustrated it in his famous diagram that you all know well – the paper airplane shape of the higher education market (see chart below). You disproportionately represent one end of this market hierarchy – and I think any dialogue benefits from being mindful that the realities that characterize a day in the life of your institution aren’t likely characteristic of the realities facing most institutions of higher education.

So here’s the portent of peril I see and the tell-tale beating I hear:

You in this room frequently argue the value and necessity of diversity in the classroom to promote learning. That is your repeated refrain (is it not) as you argue in both the courts of law and of public opinion for enrollment diversity? You’ve highlighted the limitations of any homogenous group exploring complex social issues, especially if that homogeneity is representative of privilege, affluence and access to resources others don’t and can’t have. Yet look around at these professional gatherings, at the who as well as the where, if I may be so bold. I hear conversations without the diversity of perspective, the representativeness of institutional types that is necessary to be inclusive of the extraordinary diverse array of colleges and universities in this nation. As we respond to Brooks’ challenge and the crisis of social justice, we need as broad and diverse a perspective as possible—and I’m not confident we’ve yet found a venue for that kind of dialogue. I suspect is certainly not going to happen at this Colloquium.

As a result, I hear the beating of a tell-tale heart and hope that you can too.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me return to Birnbaum and Shishok who noted that “to say that colleges and universities today are in crisis is to simplify to the point of absurdity an extremely complex and dynamic relationship between higher education and society.”
Moreover, their essay eloquently reminds us that “focusing on a fatally flawed present and an apocalyptic future makes it hard to remember that American higher education is doing a more thorough job of educating a greater diversity of students in a broader array of courses than ever before.”

But “just as a crisis may serve as a call to arms and an invitation to action,” they note, “it may also prove to be a self-fulfilling prophesy in which we become captives of our own rhetoric.” They go on to caution us that when we label something a “crisis” we “may transform an important problem that might be ameliorated through thoughtful incremental improvements into a political jeremiad accompanied by the sort of fanciful and unfeasible recommendations that are a recipe for inaction.”

Now that, my friends, is a wake up call! As serious as they are, painting today’s challenges with crisis narratives can stall rather than stimulate resolution by generating more rhetorical posturing than reasoned problem solving.

Even with that cautionary note, Brooks’ comments constitute the tell-tale heartbeats that we should all hear pounding long after our gathering here concludes and we return to our respective campuses. His is a jarring wake up call to each and everyone of us, zeroing in on our complicity in this grand engine of social stratification we call American higher education. Above all else, it’s the crisis of our day.

At least, that’s my ideology—so that’s my narrative and I’m sticking with it.

Now, as Galahad said, “I want to go back in there for some peril.”

Thank you for your kind attention.

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