

# Postsecondary Futures

a national conversation on research priorities



## NATIONAL CENTER FOR POSTSECONDARY IMPROVEMENT

### An Agenda-Setting Initiative

To identify national research priorities for postsecondary education, NCPI is convening a series of conversations on the changing conditions of postsecondary education. We have selected four themes as starting points:

- the emphasis on student learning as a central organizing principle for curricula and departments;
- the changing nature of faculty roles and academic work;
- the role of markets in shaping postsecondary missions and outcomes; and
- the need to reinterpret the social charter that links the academy and broader societal expectations.

These will be tough—and we hope tough-minded—discussions that are designed to assist policymakers, faculty, students, administrators, and employers as they consider the changes underway in postsecondary education.

#### Student Learning

Student learning is a core function of American colleges and universities. Market shifts, both across the nation and abroad, are accompanied by increased student diversity—in age, socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic background, and life experience. These changes have generated new demands for skills and

knowledge that prompt America's colleges and universities to re-examine their academic programs as well as the processes and outcomes of student learning.

The Conversation on Student Learning will explore how research can inform colleges and universities as they seek to improve the quality of student learning experiences and the content and structure of program offerings.

#### Faculty Work

Faculty are expected to teach, conduct research, help govern the university, and perform public service. Such expectations are deeply embedded in the academic culture. Now, however, shifts in technology, markets, the social charter, and student preparedness are challenging traditional thinking about how faculty time should be distributed among these sometimes competing roles. In addition, conditions of heightened accountability, fiscal uncertainty, and new academic management practices are transforming criteria for evaluating faculty work.

The Conversation on Faculty Work will explore the avenues of research that can shed light on these issues and improve institutional responses to these changing conditions.

## The Role of Markets

Accelerating competition among postsecondary institutions has been driven, on the one hand, by students and parents who demand higher quality and value from a postsecondary education and, on the other, by the availability of information about institutions, such as the rankings conducted by *U.S. News & World Report*. Higher education institutions themselves are seeking to market their educational programs to prospective applicants, competing for the "best" students through more aggressive marketing campaigns, price competition, and offering more attractive programs, schedules, and targeted financial aid.

The Conversation on the Role of Markets will specify the kinds of research and areas of inquiry that would produce a better understanding of how market forces are reshaping higher education.

## The Social Charter

Historically, postsecondary institutions have been expected to provide affordable access, to assist the disadvantaged, to contribute to economic development, and to serve their local communities. In turn, postsecondary institutions have expected society to promote their freedom of inquiry and their commitment to preserve knowledge in enduring fields as well as to grant them a measure of autonomy. Many believe, however, that the increasing salience of market forces threatens to erode this social charter.

The Conversation on the Social Charter will

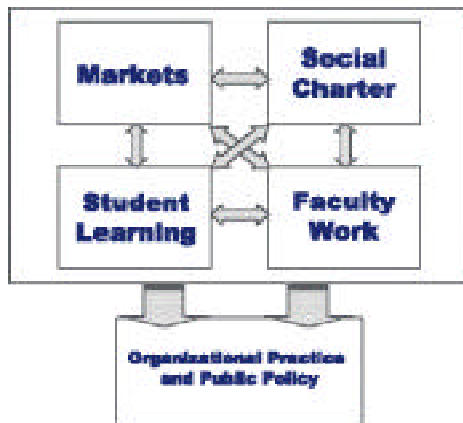
address how research can shed light on the tensions between the expectations of a pluralistic democracy for higher education as a public good and the expectations of a market-driven society that places a premium on individual choice and private benefit.

## Intersections and Drivers of Change

While these four themes serve as points of departure for our conversations, the most interesting discussions

may occur at their intersections. For example: What is the market's impact on the social charter? How are changes in student learning affecting expectations for faculty work? How are changing student needs affecting market dynamics?

A fifth conversation will focus on the implications of these changes for transforming organizational practices and public policy. Discussions will also explore the impact of such critical contextual forces as globalization, technological change, and knowledge change.



## Add Your Voice

We'd like to know your perspectives on these themes, or others that you think warrant consideration. Please take a moment to send us your thoughts. NCPI will weave the insights gained from these conversations into a report that will be released in Spring 2002. We envision that these national conversations and our culminating report will help guide the philanthropic, research, and policy communities in their support of postsecondary research priorities for the coming decade.

## For more information

National Center for Postsecondary Improvement  
Stanford University  
School of Education  
508 CERAS; 520 Galvez Mall  
Stanford, CA 94305-3084  
Phone: 650-723-7724  
Fax: 650-725-3936

Website: <http://ncpi.stanford.edu>

Patricia J. Gumpert, *Executive Director*  
Christopher Roe, *Managing Director*  
Julie Slama, *Information Coordinator*

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