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Huck Finn Is Everywhere

By Laura Skandera Trombley

Last spring, while I was checking in at my doctor's office, I struck up a conversation with the receptionist, who shared that he was an engineering student at a nearby California State technical college. The institution had already announced that all summer courses were canceled, and he had just found out that, very likely, none of the classes he needed to complete his degree would be offered in the fall.

"Budget issues," he was curtly informed by way of explanation. "I'm a history minor right now," he said, "and I'll probably make that my major."

I responded that the change from engineering to history would have enormous implications and asked if he could possibly transfer to another California State college. He shook his head no. He could not move, he explained. He was married, needed his job to pay tuition, and worried about his loan debt if he had to extend his schooling for another year. He added that his parents were pressuring him to graduate because he would be the first member of his family to do so. I was saddened and troubled to meet such a nice young man, so full of promise, caught in a compromised system of higher education that demanded he defer his dreams.

There is nothing darker for me than the thought that the current generation of young people—who have fulfilled their end of the social contract by studying hard, being good citizens, and earning solid grades from kindergarten through 12th grade—will be denied their opportunity as young adults. That is why I am convinced that this is a time when we as presidents must, more than ever, embrace our roles as public intellectuals in order to tell the story of higher education and its contributions to the development of our states and nation. In our era of reductions and permanent cuts, it becomes increasingly important that we continually reflect on the core purpose of our special endeavor and communicate it to policy makers and taxpayers. If the leadership of the academy does not work boldly, and with insistence for the recognition that a society's academic resources must be considered—not just in the light of the

moment but for the future well-being of that society—much will be lost.

In his book, *Leaders in the Crossroads: Success and Failure in the College Presidency* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009), Stephen James Nelson contends that a college president's primary responsibility is to secure the future of the academy and to ensure its survival. I am in full agreement. While over the almost four centuries since Harvard University's founding the academy has changed in significant and profound ways, Nelson notes that the presidency has remained a fairly static and tradition-bound position. But since the start of the economic crisis in 2008, we have all been operating in what I call the "new economic reality."

Each week the news grows bleaker about my state's weakening commitment to higher education. Recently California State University system officials announced that they would reduce enrollment by 40,000 this year due to a \$564-million decline in state appropriations. I worry knowing that these young people have nowhere to go; certainly no jobs are waiting for them in this time of double-digit unemployment.

How did we arrive at this place, so markedly different than was envisioned nearly 50 years ago when the California State Colleges system was founded and the California master plan for higher education went into effect? A half-century goal of making California the education state is fading before our eyes.

Some observers have asserted that private colleges are working to leverage the fiscal travails of the University of California and California State University systems into an admissions bonanza for themselves. Colleagues have commented that my college will most likely enjoy an increase in applications. Although Pitzer College, where I serve as president, has not made any special offers to students either enrolled in or accepted by the state systems, there may be truth to the idea of state-system flight: Inquiries at Pitzer are ahead of last year's by more than 30 percent. Over the past eight years, we have substantially increased the financial aid we award students and, as a result, can now be more affordable than state institutions for families earning less than \$60,000.

Yet who wants to succeed at the cost of this and subsequent generations' futures? Even those of us not immediately deeply affected by the national economic meltdown still feel its effects. Every fall I attend two invitation-only presidents' meetings: the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges in Washington. Discussions this year included such topics as the economy, H1N1

virus, conflict-of-interest policies, three-year degrees, and Moody's ratings. During the most-recent gatherings, the hallway chatter consisted of painful stories about how badly one's institution had been affected by the recession. The specific woes will sound all too familiar: staff reductions, lower student-aid packages, frozen positions, reduced salaries, increased teaching loads. I sympathize and am grateful that my college has not had to make those difficult choices. And then there are the tales of small institutions that just could not survive the downturn and had closed. The death knells of higher education.

Presidents must be able to reflect the new state of the academy in their speeches, essays, and decision making. In *Socrates in the Boardroom: Why Research Universities Should Be Led by Top Scholars* (Princeton University Press, 2010), Amanda Goodall gives four reasons why it is important to have college presidents who are scholars: They make for "more credible leaders," they have "expert knowledge" about the enterprise, they are a "standard bearer," and they "signal" to faculty members that their scholarly values are shared.

There is much to Goodall's argument, particularly in such difficult times. For people in leadership positions who are facing pressure to severely reduce their budgets because of state cuts in appropriations or endowment losses, the questions must be carefully framed from within the experience and thorough understanding of mission. It is essential to have someone in the leadership position who understands the particular and complicated culture of academe. Decisions based strictly on bottom-line considerations are violations of principle. Education is about people, about the future.

Goodall's work argues against the recent trend toward appointing as the college leader a person from outside of higher education. There are plenty of examples where, whatever the institution's immediate crisis, the governing board apparently believes it can be best handled by naming as president a specialist in that area: a chief financial officer, an admissions dean, a former business executive, a vice president for fund raising. That single-lens approach misses completely the institution's principal mission, namely education and the pursuit of knowledge. That is why we must also add trustees to the list of people to whom we as leaders of higher education must make our case. To sustain the quintessential value of our crucial endeavor, we need the right leaders in place.

I am keenly aware of the impact that a college education has on a person. At various times as president I have been invited to speak to students about my area of specialty. As a Mark Twain scholar, my

favorite lecture is one I give to first-year students, "Why Huck Finn Still Matters." I talk about the character of Huckleberry Finn, a young boy whose mother is dead, who skips school and who suffers severe abuse at the hands of his alcoholic father. No one in his world much cares about what happens to Huck. He is poor, uneducated, lacking in social status, and without influence. Without the kindness bestowed upon him by Jim, the escaping slave, he most likely would have died at his father's hands.

I then tell the students the story of my father. He was born in 1919 in New York City just nine years after Twain's death. At that time, America was experiencing the largest influx of immigrants in its history. Their adopted country reviled those people from Eastern and Southern Europe. My father's immigrant parents settled in the lower eastside of Manhattan, in an area called Five Points.

This new world destroyed my father's parents. His father became an abusive alcoholic who deserted the family, and his mother collapsed from tuberculosis while scrubbing stairs. The neighbors didn't notice for a week the four children living by themselves in a tenement room. My father was 6 when he and his siblings were relocated to Happy Valley, an orphanage on Long Island where they did farm work and went to school.

My father had access to a high-school education and eventually won a scholarship to college. In 1938 he drove in a Model-T Ford with his brother to California where he worked himself through Pepperdine University and eventually earned an M.B.A. at the University of Southern California. He became an elementary-school teacher and dedicated himself to educating children. He narrowly escaped a much different kind of fate because academic resources, as meager as they were, were there for him. I tell my students, my father—poor, orphaned, yet full of potential—is Huck Finn.

Maybe that's what we all need to remember in these hard times: Huck Finn is everywhere. Just read the paper, drive less than a mile away from the college, visit a shelter or a food bank. While the tendency in this terrible economy is to hunker down and focus only on resolving our own institutional travails, or to turn another institution's losses to our advantage, we should look at the big picture. We must work together to make our voices heard on behalf of all those Hucks in our midst.

Over the past decade, higher education has been engaged in an arms race: fixating on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, stealing star professors from sister institutions, building expensive athletics programs, hiring star architects. But while we have been working so hard to beat each other, perhaps we have only wound up beating

ourselves. I want to live in an America where education for all is treasured, protected, and supported—and where I no longer have to meet young people with dreams deferred.

If we do not learn to collaborate and commit ourselves to serving as important standard bearers in the debate about the future of higher education, we will only see more young people dispossessed of their right to be educated. The loss will be collective, and possibly irreparable.

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