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A New Morrill Act: Higher Education Anchors the 'Remaking of America'

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A New Morrill Act: Higher Education Anchors the 'Remaking of America'

By Nancy Cantor



One might think that a global financial crisis would be no time for college and university presidents to think expansively. Hunkering down is the more natural reaction to a threat of the magnitude that the economy continues to present. But expansive thought is exactly what we need right now—not necessarily the kind that grows our physical plant or our list of program offerings, but a fundamental reexamination of what American higher education is all about and where each of our institutions fits into that ideal.

President Barack Obama recalls the bold leadership of Abraham Lincoln in multiple dimensions, not the least of which is that it was Lincoln who signed the most important legislation in American history for colleges and universities. The Morrill Act of 1862 brought higher education to millions, creating the land-grant university system to conserve, encourage, and promote agriculture, which at the time employed more than half the nation's population and deeply influenced its prosperity.

We felt reverberations of Lincoln's boldness when President Obama, in his inaugural address, called on us once again to roll up our sleeves and collaborate to "remake America" for today's knowledge economy. This entails advancing science and innovation, achieving environmental sustainability, revitalizing cities, reversing our failing schools and health care system, and promoting peace and intercultural understanding. The president is ensconcing these goals in public policies, carving out a pivotal role for higher education, effectively piecing together a 21st century Morrill Act, and calling upon all colleges and universities—private and public—to embrace their roles as public goods.

Heeding that call requires each of us to leverage our diverse and unique institutional identities as place-based institutions. Where we are located is tied inextricably to what we are—and inevitably, we are anchor institutions in our communities, entities whose engagement profoundly impacts our communities' prospects and prosperity. The work of college and university leaders in helping remake America starts at home, so it makes sense to examine our institutional and regional histories to determine where our best opportunities now lie. . . .

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