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We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

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[Nancy Cantor](#)

It's Graduation Time -- So What Do We Want From Universities?

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It is that season of graduation again, and this year's group of college and university graduates is [poised to enter](#) an ever more difficult and volatile global marketplace. At the same time, on the world stage, struggles abound, wrought by overconsumption of environmental resources and rampant failures at peaceful coexistence. At home, the results of the 2010 census frame a national dialogue about changing demographics, and the weight of job losses intensifies the zero-sum debates on immigration.

Even across the aisle of political differences, it is routinely acknowledged that there is little hope for prosperity without remaking metropolitan America, where more than half of the nation's population now [resides](#), and especially turning around the nation's failing urban schools. The preferred blueprint for prosperity may differ depending on one's geographic and political perch, but the centrality of education to sparking innovation is broadly known. After all, education, now stretching from K-20 as our season's graduates know well, is the one aspect of royalty -- the one royal road to social mobility and economic growth -- that Americans have always embraced. From the GI Bill and its post-9/11 Yellow Ribbon reemergence, to the federal Pell Grant Program and even proposals for the Dream Act, we have always known that a healthy country educates its youth.

With these challenges in mind, it is tempting to turn for solutions directly to our newest graduates. Instead, it seems fairer really to ask their colleges and universities, how well positioned they (or as a university president, I should say "we") are to help fix what ails?

Can we build, to borrow from our corporate friends at IBM, a "smarter planet," or join with our partners at JPMorgan Chase in finding "the way forward"? When civil unrest erupts on a daily basis across the globe, will our experts in public diplomacy or the artists and humanists, who may speak a more universal language, be ready? Can we shoulder some of the burden with our underresourced and oft-beleaguered school districts in making sure that no groups of children get left behind, and when our post-9/11 veterans return, often with war-related disabilities to shoulder, will we be there for them and their families? Are we ready to reach out to the ever-growing pool of talented students who attend and graduate from community colleges, rather than go straight from high school to more expensive four-year institutions that often feel out of reach?

Do we see these challenges as rightfully a part of a contemporary vision of higher education as an historic public good, one to be engaged by public and private institutions alike?

These are some of the questions, in this season of educational renewal and economic struggle, which must be asked, certainly of research universities, where innovation that can matter to these "sticky" global challenges is produced and the future leaders of industry, the media, the government, the courts, the arts, the information world are trained.

Yet, when we ask these questions of national and global urgency, we too often seem to answer with zero-sum thinking that pits competitors, rather than unites potential collaborators. We focus doggedly on separating the major institutions, which compete for the lion's share of federal research dollars in medicine, engineering and the sciences, from the broader array of research institutions, whose maps of excellence might well also be needed in salvaging our cities, our schools, our collective health and social relations and our environment. We continue to take our lead from *U.S. News & World Report*, rewarding colleges and universities more for the number of talented students they can reject than for those (diamonds in the rough) they can reach, in our ever-more diverse democracy.

Surely, we haven't forgotten the barn raisings in which neighbors pooled their talents as their children grabbed opportunity afforded by the Morrill Act to attend one of many burgeoning land-grant institutions dotting the 19th century American landscape. We must not fall prey to the all-too-American hubris that glamorizes institutions and individuals for rising all alone above others. The truth is, we can't do it alone this time, and we probably never did.

If we are to remake our cities, recapture our land, educate more of our children, learn how to make peace, we better roll up all our sleeves, just as they did back then. We better learn to collaborate in the agile, entrepreneurial ways that know no boundaries of birth and status for individuals or for institutions. Yes, we absolutely need that critical federal support in select fields of medicine, science and engineering that comes through arduous peer review competitions. We also need the diverse portfolios that remind us to pool resources, working in teams that cross federal, state, local, corporate and non-profit sectors. What if the next great innovation came from regional clusters of institutions, large and small, partnering with communities of experts in and outside the academy, linked across our country?

Yes, we each need to be good -- very good indeed -- to tackle today's challenges, but we also need to keep focused on building a better world with all hands on deck, and that might well require opening more doors, rather than priding ourselves on increasing the distance between us. Winning on this playing field will certainly involve all kinds of disciplines, all kinds of excellence, all kinds of people, and all kinds of institutions -- so we better refind our melting pot, and raise a few good barns.