From the Director:

Reports on Education Push Workforce Preparation

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Although the linkage between the American education system and the US economy is not an altogether new issue, it has sparked a great deal of recent attention. Several national commissions, including the National Governor Association’s Task Force on American Innovation and the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, raised questions about the American education system’s (both p-12 and higher education) ability to prepare students for the workforce of the future. The Spelling Commission focused its concerns primarily on higher education and the transition from high schools to higher education.

These reports represent a mere sliver of the discourse focusing on the quality of education in the US and its (in)ability to prepare students and adults for the global workforce. In 1990, the first Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce warned that globalization of the world’s economy would send low-skilled jobs to countries where the price of low-skill labor was the cheapest and advised the US education system to focus on educating US students and workers to focus on developing a highly skilled workforce.

This spring a report from the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which is made up of former Cabinet secretaries, governors, college presidents, and business, civic and labor leaders, reported that the first commission got its forecast only half right. The 1990 commission did not anticipate the trend of outsourcing higher-paying jobs that demand high –level skills, as well. The report, Tough Choices for Tough Times, argued that a growing number of countries (e.g., China and India) have large numbers of highly educated workers who are willing to work for lower wages than similarly educated citizens of the US. The report noted, for example, that a company can choose to hire an American engineer at $45,000 or an Indian engineer for $7,500 a year. In response to this trend, the new commission has called for “a dramatic overhaul” of the American education system.

The fact that these commissions viewed the current US education system as needing to be improved is unsurprising; the mass media is overflowing with similar themes. Both reports provide a number of recommendations for renovating and/or improving both the education system and student outcomes. Recommendations include recruiting and training a teaching force from the top third of high school students going to college; building a high –quality and free early childhood education system; providing the nation’s disadvantaged students with the resources they need in order to meet new standards and graduate from high school; providing every adult worker a free high quality professional education supported by a system of new board exam standards, revamping education standards and assessments to reflect not only academic knowledge but also values deemed critical for the workforce (i.e., creativity and teamwork), and preparing teacher (and very likely leaders as well) through Teacher Development Agencies in each state. Schools of education, districts and other interested parties would compete for the right to recruit, prepare, and/or license teachers.

Regardless of where you stand concerning the conclusions or values of the three reports and their recommendations, the discourse of a failing US education system steadily continues to flood the public mind and provides the context in which both educational leaders work and leadership faculty prepare them. Although there are counter stories (and commissions that come to different conclusions), they are less likely to be printed and repeated. It is a contemporary reality, by which many in our field are frustrated and in which a growing number of faculty are trying to influence—regardless of the odds of doing so—through their teaching, service and research.

It is important for faculty, current and future leaders, and communities to engage these issues. Education faculty should not play the role of passive bystander on issues that speak to the heart of our work. Our classes should be spaces for critically engaging with these and other critiques and counter-stories as well as the data that both supports and negates them. Although educational leadership programs have multiple goals and responsibilities and are being influenced by policies and regulations that seem to reduce and constrain what programs can achieve, critical conversations that push thinking must remain a priority.

Our leadership programs should provide opportunities to explore new possibilities for schools and they should be
places where future leaders sharpen their thinking skills, enhance their knowledge and develop important skills. Moreover, future leaders should not only have an opportunity to explore such contextual issues, they should leave our programs prepared to respond proactively. Responding proactively, however, doesn’t simply mean being able to respond to media and public inquiries into school issues or understanding how to spread messages about school successes. It might also involve being able to engage school community members in thoughtful conversations about such critiques and counter-stories that support understanding and efforts for school improvements, ensuring that one’s school is staffed by teachers who have strong skills and who are highly committed to the success of all students, and working to ensure that one’s school curriculum is rich and delivered appropriately.

Faculty should be engaging with these issues, not just in the classroom with their students but with their colleagues and communities. As teachers, researchers and scholars of leadership, school reform, equity, social justice, community engagement, governance, finance, policy, etc, faculty who work in educational leadership programs should be engaging in critical conversations about issues, such as the future of schooling, to inform their work and push their own thinking. Such conversations are indispensable.

References

