

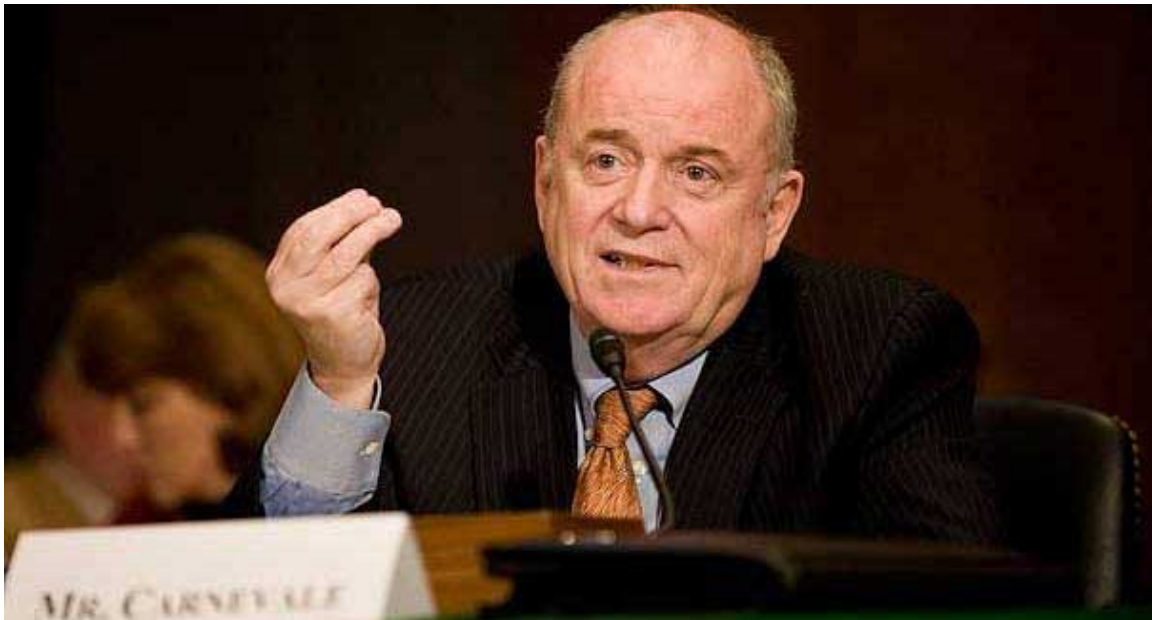
Diverse Issues in Higher Education - September 30, 2010

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LORELLE L. ESPINOSA
“As higher education scholars have repeatedly shown, diverse learning environments not only result in positive learning outcomes, but they are critical to sustaining a democratic citizenry.”

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NEWS

Summit: Improving American Education Key To Maintaining U.S. Living Standards

by Jamaal Abdul-Alim , September 30, 2010

Dr. Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University National Center on Education and the Workforce, said the current recession is different from previous recessions in that the jobs that have disappeared have been lost permanently as well as entire industries.

WASHINGTON - Maintaining the U.S. ability to compete globally is often taken for granted as a basis for improving American education. One Washington think tank scholar, however, went against the grain Wednesday at a national education summit and dismissed competitiveness as a dangerous and misguided basis for increasing education quality and access.

“The competitiveness idea may seem an innocuous way of motivating us to do what we ought to do anyway,” said Dr. Phil Levy, an economist and resident scholar at the American

Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

"There is a danger, though," Levy said. "If the principal threat is presented as competition from abroad, there is always the temptation to stifle that competition rather than addressing the root problems head on.

"I would argue that we need to adopt better policies for their own sake, because they will determine our children's standard of living, not because we're looking over our shoulders at foreign competitors who might or might not be gaining on us," he added.

Levy made his remarks Wednesday at the College Savings Foundation 2010 Summit entitled "The Importance of Education on Global Competitiveness and the US Economy." The event drew education and economic experts and dozens of people from higher education and college savings and college access advocacy organizations.

While most of the speakers did not take direct aim at competitiveness as a motive or ideal, like Levy, most touted a college education as the means to a better life, both for individuals and society as a whole.

One speaker, Mark McGuire, an instructor at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, sounded an increasingly common alarm and said a better educated workforce is vital to America's national security.

To make his point, McGuire cited the conclusions his students made in their end-of-course remarks, in which they stated that education is what enables quality performance in both warfare and diplomacy.

More specifically, the students concluded, education is essential for the functioning of aviation, aerospace engineering, shipbuilding, computer systems and other components of America's defense.

McGuire said producing a quality workforce is "very important for our national security."

Irwin Kirsch, director of the Center for Global Assessment at the Educational Testing Service, said three factors are creating a "perfect storm" that is shaping—and threatening—the U.S. economy: the demand for higher skills among workers, inadequate literacy skills among large segments of the population, and continued demographic shifts driven largely by immigration.

"These forces are going to interact and continue to grow, and as a rule they will threaten our country with a widening inequality and perhaps a reduced standard of living," Kirsch said. "We could see a fading of the American Dream."

To bolster his point, Kirsch cited statistics that revealed how income disparities have increased over the past half century between college-educated individuals and those who only finished high school or dropped out of high school. Lamenting the nation's persistent high school dropout problem, he said those with a high school education or less will find it increasingly difficult to find their place in society, which will in turn hurt the nation as a whole.

"We are losing way too many kids," Kirsch said. "We are not developing the human capital we need to go forward as a country, and that's contributing to the growing inequalities that we see."

Dr. Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, made similar remarks in his keynote speech, in which he said the current recession is different from previous recessions in that the jobs that have disappeared have been lost permanently as well as entire industries, where jobs were mostly manufacturing positions. Carnevale said post-secondary education will serve as the means to current and future jobs that provide the work experience that enable individuals to improve their earnings.

"If you don't have some form of post-secondary education or, in many cases, training, you can't get access to a growing share of occupations," Carnevale said. "In the end, it's access to work and learning on the job that drive earnings over a lifetime."

N. Scott Millar, senior director of human resources for camera-maker Canon Virginia Inc., said his company is looking for skilled individuals who can perform complex tasks, such as taking apart and repairing the company's digital cameras and being able to estimate accurate costs for customers with cameras in need of repair.

Other speakers highlighted programs that enhance college access and affordability, such as 529 college savings programs and college access organizations that help low-income students find as much financial aid as possible.

Dr. Mirta M. Martin, dean and management professor at the Virginia State University Reginald F. Lewis School of Business, spoke of a program that enables students to access "open source" textbooks digitally for free, saving them an average of \$200 per textbook or as much as \$1,000 per semester.

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