Each fall, the Forum for the Future of Higher Education convenes for its annual Symposium at the Aspen Institute to explore change and issues affecting the future of the nation’s colleges and universities. This report, *Forum Futures 2003*, summarizes the research presented at the Aspen Symposium to share more broadly the insights gained from the papers given there and the inquiry they sparked.

Although the presentations and discussions throughout the course of the Aspen Symposium were wide-ranging, common themes emerged. Change and its implications have long been discussed by the Forum community, and yet the scope and depth of transformation expected by many of the Forum Scholars is striking. Simply put, because new information technologies change the relationship between people and knowledge, they are likely to have a profound impact on both the mission and function of the university. The fundamental activities of the university—creating, preserving, integrating, transmitting, and applying knowledge—are being deeply affected by ever-advancing technologies.

Technological change was framed as both a creative force enabling renewal and as a destructive force requiring dramatic adaptation. Even the prevailing definition of literacy—being able to read and write words—is being challenged by the increasing use of multimedia methods of expression. Change for higher education is expected to be not only profound but also rapid and discontinuous, making it harder to predict and assess.

Nurturing organizational cultures that foster open, honest discussion, wherein people are free to imagine what might happen under various scenarios, was strongly encouraged to help prepare people and
institutions for change. Indeed, careful examination of our often unstated assumptions in light of the possibilities the future may hold may be the best course for ultimately preserving the critical functions of the university.

Campus leaders would do well to encourage and support ongoing monitoring of the external environment, self-examination, and constant renewal. Effective leaders will develop contingency plans to address the unexpected circumstances that undoubtedly will arise. In addition, establishing an overall framework for understanding and shaping the impact of new technologies is key, as it acknowledges that not only will we simply respond to our changed environment but we can also from time to time change it in important ways. Two specific institutional efforts designed to direct change—one comprehensive, the other focused on curricular reform—were reviewed and discussed in detail. A common feature of each is that it will be ongoing; that is, each effort will be revisited and refreshed on a regular basis.

Collaboration within and among institutions and outside organizations was often suggested as an avenue to address the challenges associated with technology and change. Many forms of collaboration were discussed, ranging from Internet2, efforts to preserve and store digital scholarship, and the development of “middleware” that allows institutions to share administrative and instructional technologies, to a postretirement health care benefit consortium. Given today’s fiscal climate, perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for collaboration is the significant opportunity to save time and money.

On another level, flexible organizations that free people from traditional structures and allow them to collaborate in different ways by forming partnerships and going in fresh directions, are in a better position to tackle the new kinds of problems we face today. Flexibility and collaboration encourage a multidisciplinary approach that leads to creative problem solving. One important benefit of technology-enabled collaboration is what many see as the breakdown of the divisions between disciplines, in that as faculty collaborate across boundaries they vastly expand the possibilities for discovery at the intersection of disciplines.

A global perspective was offered by scholars of comparative higher education, who noted the increased attention to higher education worldwide as its importance to economic growth has been documented and widely recognized by state ministries and similar entities. Massive reforms are under way around the globe, many of them based on the United States’ higher education model. Primary goals of the reforms include increased competitiveness and privatization of institutions, stronger leadership, greater accountability, and increased efficiency and effectiveness. Despite the view of the United States as a model, it was emphasized that real value could be derived from learning more about higher education in other countries, as much as such study enriches and broadens our perspectives on how best to address the complex issues we face today. The reforms also were cast as moving other nations’ colleges and universities into a potentially strong position to fulfill the growing worldwide demand for higher education.

The meaning of a liberal education, encompassing questions such as the purpose of cross-cultural study and how to help students cross the bridge from civic to political engagement, was addressed in depth. Regardless of how institutions may eventually settle such issues locally, on a larger scale, much concern was expressed about the need to improve teaching and learning and to dramatically expand access to higher education worldwide. Indeed, there was a strong sense of obligation that colleges and universities contribute to what must become a massive effort to solve the difficult and disturbing problems in what has become our global community.

Today’s challenges call for inspired and informed leadership of our nation’s colleges and universities. We need to create a compelling vision for the future of our institutions, one that anticipates and exploits the transforming innovations on the horizon. At the same time, we must acknowledge that we cannot predict the future and that the unexpected is bound to occur. In the best of cases, those unexpected changes will open the way to greater opportunities than we can possibly imagine today.

It is our hope that the following summaries serve to inspire your vision and imagination as you consider the future of both your institution and higher education as a whole.

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