Each fall, the Forum for the Future of Higher Education convenes for its Aspen Symposium to explore changes and issues affecting the future of the nation’s colleges and universities. This report, *Forum Futures 2004*, summarizes the research presented at the Aspen Institute to share more broadly the insights gained from the papers given there and the inquiry they sparked.

Creative approaches to teaching, learning, and research may provide the key to enabling higher education to make meaningful contributions to addressing local, national, and global needs. Indeed, Maria Klawe, Princeton University, notes that the increased collaboration between industry and higher education in the United States has brought the creative engine of the knowledge economy to rest on the shoulders of academic researchers. In terms of teaching and learning, Edward Ayers, University of Virginia, and Peter Donaldson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, present their efforts to harness the power of new learning media and the Internet to help students learn, in these instances, about the American Civil War and Shakespeare. It is notable that each of these long-term efforts began well before the advent of the World Wide Web, and evolved with the Web by embracing the opportunities it presents to enrich and expand learning.

Clara Yu, Middlebury College, describes unique, collaborative efforts among small residential colleges to lower costs by sharing, among other things, research and development efforts. Their goal is to create tools and technologies that enhance scholarly activities and, likewise, facilitate the metamorphosis of the liberal arts environment.

Undoubtedly, higher education makes a tremendous contribution to society by continually pushing the frontiers of knowledge. V. S. Ramachandran, University of California, San Diego, describes one of the most exciting new frontiers—the study of the brain in an effort to understand human nature. Scientists have begun to approach questions concerning just how fixed neural connections are in the adult brain, and whether there may indeed be more malleability in the human brain than ever realized. Research focused on the neurology of creativity—what is actually happening in the brains of artists, poets, and novelists, for example—is beginning to address how the power of the mind might best be tapped so as to maximize individual potential.

The vast potential for discovery at the intersection of disciplines is becoming more and more recognized throughout the higher education community. Many Forum Scholars agree that the most exciting questions lie at the interface between disciplines—not just between the sciences, but at
the intersection of those disciplines with the humanities and social sciences as well. Research environments that support creative collaboration across boundaries and disciplines expand the possibilities for discovery and positive contributions to society. Similarly, learning environments are enriched by interdisciplinary approaches—again, not just between the sciences. Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College, notes that interdisciplinary studies of relations across racial and ethnic groups can be strengthened by widening the cultural lenses through which students typically view such issues. Encouraging students to step into unfamiliar territory and engage in cultural activities and dialogues they might not have otherwise can be a powerful approach to learning.

The link between knowledge and democratization arises frequently throughout the course of discussions on how to more widely disseminate and enact knowledge. Robert Weisbuch, The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, affirms the liberal arts for the capacity they engender to think beyond ourselves and our experiences—an important attribute of a democratic culture, wherein respect for individuals and social equality are the norm. Further, the critical-thinking skills associated with the liberal arts present a means to cultivate students’ capacity to effectively participate in a diverse world. On another level, new technologies offer learning tools for wide audiences at a minimal cost, thus helping to democratize education by offering rich learning environments to everyone who has access to a computer and the Internet.

In a similar vein, the Ford Policy Forum, cochaired by Michael McPherson, The Spencer Foundation, and Morton Owen Schapiro, Williams College, focuses on the United States’s pursuit of universal access to higher education. Some compelling facts emerge from that forum. With regard to providing affordable access to higher education, Sandy Baum, Skidmore College, raises one particularly disturbing statistic: virtually the same proportion of the most affluent students with the lowest test scores (77 percent) go to college as do students from the lowest socioeconomic group with the highest test scores (78 percent). In terms of state support for higher education—which far exceeds federal support—Thomas Kane, University of California, Los Angeles, points out that if the share of state appropriations for higher education in 1977 had been maintained, state funding would have been $21 billion more in 2000 than it actually was. Finally, for those who do enroll in college, James Rosenbaum, Northwestern University, warns that success is not assured: college students with average high school grades of C or lower have a 52 percent chance of earning no college credits whatsoever, as they most often begin their higher education with noncredit remedial courses. Further complicating this picture is the intense competition among institutions that leads to increased costs for faculty, student recruitment, merit-based financial aid, and facilities. Robert Frank, Cornell University, describes this arms race, which leads to higher tuition and threatens need-based aid—with serious implications for access to higher education and the social mobility it affords.

Perry Mehrling, Barnard College, introduces a creative approach to a related fiscal management problem. He challenges traditional endowment spending rules and suggests that the notion of intergenerational equity does not require endowments to grow by spending less than the income they generate.

Clearly, colleges and universities simultaneously pursue multiple goals. Yet multiple goals can often make it difficult to define clear objectives and to measure progress toward their achievement. David Collis, Harvard Business School, notes that as institutions expand their scope of activities and try to do many things, control over their activities is stretched thin and they risk losing their clarity of mission. Campus leaders can minimize that risk by identifying the core values that best fit their institutions. Jim Collins, coauthor of Built to Last and author of Good to Great, encourages leaders to engage in deep reflection and discussion to distill the complex world of institutions into organizing principles that can serve to guide their decisions. These principles work best when they are considered non-negotiable; they remain fixed over time and provide an enduring sense of purpose—one that will guide campus leaders as they build the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and creative higher education environments of the future.

It is our hope that the following summaries serve to inspire your reflection and insight as you consider the future of both your institution and the role of higher education in our society.