Fast Foreword

THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION and the breakneck speed of technological advances over the last quarter century have redefined our world. Instantaneous global communication is available today to any business or person with a laptop and an Internet connection, fueling globalization and worldwide interdependence. International issues such as terrorism, climate change, and the spread of infectious diseases underscore the joint destiny of nations and peoples worldwide. As the gap between advanced, developed countries and poor countries left out of the global economy widens, pressing social problems grow more severe. In our global community, where knowledge and education are the currency that matters most, American higher education has the potential to contribute to the effort to build a better society. The scope of the task is daunting, but the imperative to tackle it cannot be overestimated.

Each fall, the Forum for the Future of Higher Education convenes its Aspen Symposium to explore changes and issues affecting the future of the nation’s colleges and universities. This report, Forum Futures 2005, 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.

The Forum launched a major new initiative at its most recent symposium: The Forum on Politics, the Economy, and Education is dedicated to exploring the role of higher education in the global political economy. To help build the foundation for this inquiry, Lester Thurow, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Joseph Nye, of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, share their views of the current global situation. Thurow notes that realistically, economic globalization requires a degree of political globalization—but there is no global government to initiate, lead, or regulate the process. International organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, he says, present a partial answer to the need for global management, but for a number of reasons their authority is restricted. Nye describes his notion of soft power, which is becoming more important than in the past due to globalization. Soft power rests on the ability to shape what others want to do as opposed to using force to make them do what you want them to do. It derives largely from a nation’s culture, political values, and foreign polices when others find them attractive.

Thurow and Nye urge American colleges and universities to instill in students a better understanding of power, cultures, and the realities of our interconnected global society. Further, on a broader scale, American higher education can contribute to the development of international organizations that can effectively manage globalization and build a pros-
Barry Bosworth, of the Brookings Institution, maintains that the United States’ best resource is education. However, he points to the lagging productivity growth in education as a source of serious concern. To be successful in the global economy, he says, we must find a way to transform a large proportion of the American population into highly skilled workers.

As society becomes more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to be deeply knowledgeable and able to speak out judiciously on a range of issues. Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, describes such respected individuals as societal trustees. He notes their decline over the past 50 years and argues that given the plethora of complicated political and moral issues we face today, the need for informed and charismatic trustees is acute. He suggests a number of ways in which institutions can help foster trusteeship so that society is well guided and functions productively. Another effect of globalization—one of immediate relevance to colleges and universities—is the increased mobility of students, hundreds of thousands of whom each year leave their home countries to pursue their education. Robert Stevens, of Oxford University, describes the threatened status of England’s most prominent institutions and the reasons behind the decline. He notes that students are free to find top-quality universities—if not in England, then elsewhere. No one is immune from competition in the global economy.

Given the complexity of the environment and the dynamism of life in American colleges and universities, Linda Hill, of Harvard Business School, says that the development of leadership talent in higher education is fast becoming a strategic imperative. She firmly believes that leaders are made, not born, and outlines lessons from business that, most importantly, shed light on how to build a culture conducive to learning to lead. Only those institutions that are well led will be able to achieve success and fulfill their missions.

Several Forum Scholars are devoted to transforming teaching and learning by taking full advantage of technological advances. Andries van Dam, of Brown University, describes software such as MathPad2 and ChemPad that fosters deeper understanding of difficult topics that often discourage students. Beyond that, he advocates next-generation educational software based on integrated models that vary in complexity depending upon the learner. The models unify unrelated strands of knowledge and thereby make possible discoveries that lie at the intersection of disciplines. In the same spirit, Don Marinelli, of Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), cochairs a program in entertainment technology that offers a joint degree from CMU’s fine arts and computer science schools. The program is based on project work—students learning by doing in a multidisciplinary environment in which creativity flourishes. Stephanie Barish, formerly of the Annenberg Center at the University of Southern California, and Elizabeth Daley, of the School of Cinema and Television at the University of Southern California, focus on multimedia scholarship to transform, expand, and bridge academic research, pedagogy, and publication. One of the key advantages of multimedia scholarship they highlight is the potential for a wide range of sensory experiences that deepen comprehension of the material at hand.

Neuroscience research convincingly demonstrates that the more parts of the brain that are involved in and activated by an experience, the more memory traces are recorded—and thus the more likely it is that one will be able to retrieve that experience and the knowledge gained from it. John Gabrieli, of Stanford University, describes how the emergence of functional neuroimaging techniques offers unprecedented opportunities to discover how the brain learns and remembers. This new knowledge holds the potential to make important contributions to the quality of people’s education and lives. V.S. Ramachandran, of the University of California, San Diego, speculates about artistic universals from a neuroscientist’s point of view. He believes that the solution to the problem of aesthetics lies in a more thorough understanding of the connections between the brain’s visual centers and its emotional limbic structures. Once we understand those connections, the insights they offer into the human brain will have a profound impact on both the sciences and the humanities. Indeed, Ramachandran’s hope is that these insights will help us bridge the gulf between the two and usher in a new era in which specialization becomes old-fashioned and a 21st-century version of the Renaissance person is born.
Higher education institutions around the world pursue a variety of missions and engage in a staggering array of activities. American college and universities, however, are unique in their sponsorship of intercollegiate athletics programs. The Ford Policy Forum, cochaired by Michael McPherson, of The Spencer Foundation, and Morton Owen Schapiro, of Williams College, focuses this year on aligning athletics and academic values in higher education. John DeGioia, of Georgetown University, takes a philosopher’s approach to framing the discussion about college sports and its place in American higher education. He outlines two compelling and conflicting understandings of what constitutes human excellence. One emphasizes balance in one’s life and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the other focuses on the pursuit of boundary-breaking achievements. Each institution must actively articulate its values and mission and, likewise, where it wishes to be on this continuum. Welch Suggs, of the Chronicle of Higher Education, discusses why colleges and universities sponsor intercollegiate athletics programs and the various factors that affect their decisions to field teams in specific sports. He believes that the essential question for institutions of all sizes and missions is to consider how their sports programs contribute to the basic goal of educating students. Robert Malekoff, of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, notes the growing divide between intercollegiate athletics and institutional missions at all levels of competition. He describes Mellon’s College Sports Project involving NCAA Division III members dedicated to ensuring that athletes are representative of the rest of the student body and that athletics programs are fully integrated into the rest of the institution.

One key ingredient in fulfilling institutional missions—however defined—is the judicious use of institutional endowments. Today, nearly three-quarters of colleges and universities target their endowment spending at about 5 percent of a three-year rolling average of total endowment value. Paul Goldstein, of Stanford University; Perry Mehrling, of Barnard College; and Verne Sedlacek, of Commonfund, present their views on establishing more nuanced endowment spending rates and rules—all of which, despite their differences, emphasize balancing short- and long-term needs. Where that balance point lies at any one institution depends upon its particular circumstances at any given time.

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

EDITOR’S NOTE: The editor wishes to acknowledge the authors who contributed to this volume and whose ideas are directly reflected in this foreword. Much of the work summarized here will be published in full-length hard copy and will be available at www.educause.edu/forum. —MED