Once again, good evening and welcome to what promises to be an extraordinary event. I cannot tell you how delighted we are to host such a distinguished and accomplished panel of academic leaders, public policymakers, and members of the press.

As you know, we are here to explore both the opportunities and the challenges we face going forward...as adult learners continue to rewrite the rules and transform the landscape of higher education.

American colleges and universities once catered almost exclusively to traditional students...who enrolled right out of high school...and, for the most part, lived and learned on campus. But those days are long gone.

Of the more than 18 million college students in the United States today ...nearly 14 million are considered non-traditional. And within that demographic some nine million are working adults over the age of 25...who are coming back to school in record numbers for a variety of reasons.

To earn a degree or update a credential; to get ahead in the job or change careers altogether; to learn something new or pursue an ongoing interest. At a time when postsecondary access is fast becoming the gateway to economic prosperity.

In fact, President Obama recently said in a speech at the University of Texas that higher education may indeed be the most pressing economic issue of our time. Thus, he has challenged every American adult to complete at least one year of higher learning...as the first step in reclaiming our title as the best educated country in the world.

Needless to say, our institutions are scrambling to embrace this new reality, and in doing so, we find ourselves taking a long, hard look at how they must change to meet the unique and certainly complex needs of a rapidly growing and increasingly
diverse student population. Because while we tend to lump these older students under the general heading of adult learners...they are by no means monolithic.

As we can all attest, today's typical college classroom is very likely to include at least three generations of adult learners...each of which is defined by its own special set of life-defining historical events, social norms, and learning preferences.

What's more, within each generation, adult learners individually exhibit more than a few other characteristics that influence their academic trajectory...from ability and experience...to native language and cultural tradition. And add to that the hurdles they face when it comes to balancing the demands of school with the responsibilities of work and family.

With these issues in mind, we educators are reorganizing our institutional operations and realigning our academic practices not only to capture this burgeoning student market...but also to ensure its success.

That means providing a high-quality learning experience that is as empowering as it is relevant; as accessible as it is affordable. Full-time and part-time...online and in-class...with career-focused degree programs and comprehensive support services...along with options that include prior learning credits, accelerated program formats, and targeted career counseling.

In addition, as the adult student market becomes more competitive, adult-focused learning institutions are under increasing scrutiny by the accreditation bodies and public agencies tasked with holding them accountable for their outcomes.

Of course, I am singing to the choir when I say that reinventing higher education is a difficult proposition at best...especially given the drastic budget cuts, escalating enrollment costs, and dwindling endowments we are all struggling to cope with these days. Nor can we expect one hand...or in our case...one sector of higher education to cover the sun, so to speak, when it comes to serving adult learners.

Which is why we have asked you here this evening...to share your promising practices...while at the same time building true pipelines for innovation and investment...as we envision the future of adult higher education. That said, I will now turn the podium over to my co-host and editor of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Jeff Selingo...who will explain the overall format for tonight's forum.

Thank you,

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