



The Proper Attitude: Challenges in Framing Higher Education Reform
A FrameWorks MessageMemo

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

By
Susan Nall Bales

December 2010

“That all comes down to the individuals basically. Today it’s so very expensive that if you don’t have the proper attitude, you shouldn’t even be there. If you’re not going to go there with all energy to get it done, then I think, you know, you shouldn’t be there period. It’s just too expensive.”

FrameWorks’ informant, Cultural Models Interviews, discussing higher education

Preface

This MessageMemo builds upon earlier reportsⁱ on work conducted by the FrameWorks Institute on how Americans think about education in America and how they might think more productively about specific education reforms that could improve that system. While earlier reports focused primarily on the K-12 system,ⁱⁱ as it was this system that proved top of mind for most Americans, FrameWorks researchers have methodically included questions about pre-K and higher education at each step in this multi-method inquiry. A secondary analysis of the original data provides us with focused insights into the shadowy and often inchoate landscape of public thinking about higher education. Following this analysis, a more pointed effort was made to determine if we could, in fact, conceptually reintegrate higher education into the overall system of education, using reframing strategies gleaned in the research on education more generally to incorporate higher education into a broad reform agenda. The operative question we address here is:

Can higher education be integrated into an education reform agenda and, if so, what is the best way to do this in order to advance not only higher education policies but also to continue to advance an overall reform agenda?

This MessageMemo, supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, follows the organizational template laid out in the earlier interpretation of the K-12 findings,ⁱⁱⁱ identifying:

1. **The Mental Landscape**, or those patterns of thinking that are chronically accessible to people as they consider higher education as well as those that prove harder for people to visualize;
2. **The Traps** that present themselves to education reform advocates as potential ways to boost the salience of higher education or to overcome observed obstacles to engagement, but actually offer false hopes; and
3. **Redirections** that emerge from the qualitative and quantitative testing and offer better ways to reframe education reforms to include higher education policies.

This interpretation is contextualized by findings from the original phases of research which served as a point of departure for this phase of work. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition here, readers are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the observations that are explained in the more comprehensive MessageMemo that resulted from the broader inquiry,^{iv} which was also supported by these same funders. Additionally, for those unfamiliar with the theory and methods associated with Strategic Frame Analysis,^v additional background may be required to appreciate common terms associated with this approach.

Introduction

Education reform advocates confront an uphill challenge as they seek to address higher education and to build public support for changes to this important arena of American education. That is the conclusion from a multi-year, multi-method inquiry into Americans' thinking about education generally and more specifically about higher education. In particular, Americans do not perceive this aspect of the education system to be "broken" whereas other levels of education are widely acknowledged to be in crisis. Many people struggle to see any contributing factors to differential access to and outcomes from higher education and, thus, fall back on that most American of explanations, individual responsibility. Certainly, lesser familiarity with the system of higher education and its actors contributes to this relative myopia, though it is prevalent even among the highly educated.

Some patterns of thinking observed in conversations about K-12 education are heightened when people discuss higher education. For example, the idea of education as a consumer good that people acquire in the amount they can afford further erodes the public's already tentative grasp of the public or societal value of education, in which a country invests in its future workforce.^{vi} Whether Johnny can read quickly becomes whether Sally can succeed, as individual achievement morphs into concern about individual careers in a job-threatened future. Unfortunately, little of this concern rises easily to the macro level of examining whether current education practices are preparing young people in the aggregate for a different world. In such a world, college is not for everyone, as FrameWorks' informants told us again and again. College is for those who can afford it, those who need it or those who can get it – but there are few consequences for the society as a whole if these numbers are diminished.

Finally, while the Chinese may be beating us and the Finns outperforming us, such invitations to reform frequently fall on deaf ears, as evocations of "global competitiveness" move Americans to even less support for reforms than do reminders of the common good and the need for a better educated workforce that matches our loftier expectations and values. Indeed, more careful orchestration of the narrative around higher education is required if people are to see a system that extends to college, that continues to reflect inequalities of access, and that is in need and can

benefit from changes in its structure and organization. Many of the reframing strategies identified in the larger body of research on thinking about education more generally proved useful but required specific “tweaks” to better direct people to higher education reforms. That said, this research strongly suggests that higher education can be integrated into an education reform narrative and that strategic reframing offers substantial gains over current habits of communications practice.

Methods

To determine the answer to our question, FrameWorks researchers:

- Undertook a secondary analysis of 49 in-depth cultural models interviews conducted with adults in five states (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island and California) by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in June and July 2008. Informants were selected to represent variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and followed an open-ended guide created by the FrameWorks research group. This guide included probes directed specifically to higher education (as well as to pre-K and K-12). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed based on principles and data-gathering methods adapted over the last ten years from the fields of psychological anthropology and cognitive linguistics.^{vii}
- Retested the two Simplifying Models^{viii} that had emerged from the earlier research in four Persistence Trials in March and April 2010 in Baltimore and Atlanta with a total of 32 informants.^{ix} The results of these trials are also captured in a brief trigger video.^x
- Conducted an experimental survey^{xi} with 2,860 registered voters in March 2010 to test the ability of values that emerged from earlier qualitative work for their ability to advance support for higher education policies as well as for pre-K and K-12 policies.

In addition to summarizing and synthesizing that body of work, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more detailed and prescriptive interpretation to inform the work of policy advocates.

While the reframing of higher education is more challenging than K-12, it is not categorically different. In the interest of brevity and to avoid repetition with the more general MessageMemo, quotes from cultural models interviews are used sparingly and only to underscore points of nuance or intensity between attitudes to higher education and those reported earlier with respect to the education system more generally. Particular quotes are selected from many similar representatives of dominant patterns of thinking.

I. The Mental Landscape: Patterns of Public Thinking about Higher Education and Education Reform

There are many cognitive routes people could take in attempting to understand the system of education in the United States and the place of higher education within such a system. In the following sections, we compare and contrast those habits of thinking that were first observed in thinking about education and education reform more generally and comment upon their heightened or weakened relevance as obstacles and opportunities for higher education. These have been reordered to reflect their relative priority as issues of concern.

1. **The System Is Broken: But not higher ed.** The universal acknowledgement that education is a broken system was evident across FrameWorks' qualitative research. We noted in research reports that this crisis thinking was generally sketchy and tended to quickly exhaust the informants' sense of the issue,^{xii} so it is not necessarily a foundation that communications can build upon. As people repeatedly said in Persistence Trials when asked to enumerate parts of the system that affect higher education, "it's not as clear when you get to college." Interestingly, one point of disjuncture between thinking about K-12 and thinking about higher education is the lack of brokenness or crisis thinking people attached to the latter. The cultural models interviews reveal an implicit assumption that the higher education system is working. This finding is closely related to the perception that higher education is not as "public" as K-12, therefore it is a more highly prized consumer good and likely to be more infused with a business orientation.

Interviewer: "So what if we shift and talk about higher education. Do you think that's working?"

Informant: "Much better. Much better."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Informant: "There's more money there [LAUGHS]!"

Interviewer: "What about when you think about higher education? Do you feel like that part of the system is working?"

Informant: "I think college is a different animal, because you have limited slots to get in. I think because you're really chosen to go versus having the opportunity to go. I mean for high school, you live in a town, you go to that school. It's kind of like a given. Versus college, you're really selected to go. So I think it's a little bit different in that perspective."

Implications for Communications: First, when education reformers cue "brokenness" or "crisis," they inadvertently direct people's attention to the K-12 system. Second, if there is no problem in this part of the system, the need for reform is weakened and, again, redirected to those parts of the system with greater needs. Finally, when specifically cued the notion that

higher education may not be fully functional, people default to patterns of thinking similar to those observed for education more generally: problems are explained as the result of mentalist models in which the motivation of students becomes the key source of the problem and the determinant of educational outcomes.

Relevant Reframing Strategies: This problem is best addressed by avoiding the Crisis Value altogether and using the metaphor of “remodeling” to explain how outdated aspects of the higher education system require regular updating, maintenance and repair.

2. **Little Picture Thinking: Higher education focuses attention on the student as the lone actor in the system.** The research on education more generally revealed a narrow set of actors that we referred to as “The Tangible Triad”: teachers, students and their parents. When talking explicitly about higher education, the focus narrowed further, as parents dropped out of mind with the advent of adulthood. Reasoning from this myopic view, educational outcomes are seen to be determined by students and their professors, or many times just by the students. Thus, when people are invited to consider the system of higher education and the many players or factors that contribute to it, people are largely at a loss for detail. Given that they know relatively less about how “professors” interact with a larger system, the professors tend to drop out of their thinking, leaving only the triumphant and driven future professional or, alternatively, the unmotivated “party animal” as campus actor.^{xiii}

“They [community college students] have to forgo a lot of consumption in order to do the production of learning. In other words, they have to forgo perhaps buying an iPhone. They have to forgo, you know, a surf trip to Baja – they have to forgo, you know, buying extra alcohol. But every dollar that the student spends of either their own money or money that’s, you know, given to them by their parents, or that they worked for, which a lot of community college students do, that’s a dollar that they’re forgoing of their education. There’s an economic term for it; it’s choice of forgoing consumption. And that by itself tends to produce more discipline.”

Implications for Communications: In general, connecting higher education to systems thinking will prove even more of a struggle than for K-12 education. In particular, connecting higher education to K-12 education will prove difficult as well, as the set of actors is more limited in the former. Attributions of responsibility to individuals, in this case students, will be almost automatic; that is, it will be very difficult to contextualize individual failure or to connect outcomes to resources, quality of instruction or social determinants.

Relevant Reframing Strategies: The metaphor of the orchestra developed for education systems more generally remains an important prerequisite to systems thinking for higher education as well.

- 3. Mentalism Explains Differential Outcomes: Who gets into college, what colleges they get in to and who stays in.** Whereas in discussions about K-12 education, people talk about the quality of education being exclusively determined by the quality of teachers (and teacher quality being about caring), when people talk about higher education, they don't even get that far – they get stuck on student motivation as the thing that determines educational quality. This creates a circular path of reasoning in which causes and outcomes are both explained by student motivation, drive and discipline.

Interviewer: “What do you see as the main goal of higher education then?”

Informant: “Discipline!”

“I think college is really whatever you put into it, you're going to get out of it. Okay. So, you know, I think that whether you go to a community college, whether you go to a state school, whether you go to a private college, I think you're going to get the same education for whatever you put into it.”

Importantly, differential access to parts of the higher education system is often explained by people as driven by student motivation.

“And the emotional postures of the participants in the community college system, and the state university system, and national university system, are likely to be very different and some are more likely to be motivated than others.”

Implications: The extremely familiar explanation that motivation and effort explain differences in outcomes crowds out all other explanations for differences in access, resources and achievement.

Relevant Reframing Strategies: The value of “Fairness Between Places” or the idea that access to higher education is impaired by a maldistribution of education resources shows significant promise for getting people to see beyond individual motivation as the key determinant of college access and success.

4. Education Is a Private Good, and Higher Education Is a Purely Private Good.

Thinking about higher education is shaped primarily by consumerist models in which “you get what you pay for.” While K-12 education still benefits from some connection to its perceived “publicness” in providing Americans with at least a recessive counter-narrative to privatized thinking, this is not the case for higher education.

College is perceived as a purely private good, subject to supply and demand principles, and regarded as a tangible and direct investment in one's own future. Once people begin to reason along these lines, other related assumptions come into play – such as the idea that success equals financial independence. The idea that education serves individuals is stronger in higher education than it was in K-12 thinking. This may be because the perceived distance between higher education and “job” is shorter than between K-12 and “job.” It might also be because higher education outcomes are more closely tied in public thinking to individual motivated students. But, regardless of whether people believe higher education is or isn't worth it, that evaluation is made on the basis of individual earnings.

“I mean, the more education you have, the better chance you have of getting a good job – Whether it's a GED...at least a GED, compared to a high school diploma, compared to college and all the way to a master's. I mean, I now have a master's degree, and I get 25% more than the guy out of high school... And ... that's the key right there. If you can teach kids that education is where the money is...”

“I guess it depends on what you're going to school for. I make \$80,000 a year and I probably could've made that money without going to school at all. And if I went to school for four years to be a teacher and I'd be lucky if I was making half of that. So, it's probably not worth it.”

Implications for Communications: The idea of individual success as the sole goal of higher education is easily cued by any discussion of achievement. This poses significant problems for terms like “the achievement gap,” for example, in that even if people acknowledge its reality, the only perceived consequence is likely to be at the individual level. This does not create a climate for reform or a definition of the problem as one amenable to public policies.

Relevant Reframing Strategies: The benefits of higher education for the country as a whole must be established early in any discussion. The values of Common Good and Future Preparation appropriately reorient people away from consumer thinking to the need of the country for a skilled workforce and an educated citizenry, as contrasted with individual goals of achievement and financial success.

II. Traps in Public Thinking

In this section, we expose common communications assumptions that are used by higher education reform advocates which, while appearing to offer advantages, in fact trap thinking into unproductive routes and ruts. In the interest of brevity, we include only those particular to higher education; an enumerated list of those common to various levels of education is provided in the more general MessageMemo.

1. **The Global Competition Trap.** Advocates and experts often rely on a cry to global competition as a way to heighten concern for the fate of American higher education. In quantitative experiments with a representative sample of Americans, the global competition appeal came in dead last, faring even worse than providing no framing.^{xiv} Whether this is due to the strength of the idea of American exceptionalism or to Americans' fatalism about their country's future remains unclear. What is clear is that this assumption of a larger value to elevate thinking about higher education as part of education reform is a losing strategy. Far more useful to the engagement of Americans in multi-level systems reform are the values of Common Good and Future Preparation, as both of these values set a positive vision for the country as a whole to which higher education is a means.

2. **The Everyone Should Go to College Trap.** Higher education reform advocates would be wise to appreciate the challenges they face in establishing the idea that many, if not most, Americans will need college preparation in the future. The assumption that college was for some and not for others and that this was a "choice," not determined by social class or race or other external factor, was nearly universal in our qualitative research. In the quantitative experiment, we see ample evidence that blacks and Latinos are especially oriented to seeing higher education as a private good; indeed, it was only when we provided an explicit appeal to common good that black and Latino respondents endorsed a more universal goal.

Interviewer: "Do you feel like everybody should be aiming for some higher education?"

Informant: "Oh, sure. But there are those who don't need it. So we need the leader. We need the guy who runs the show in the middle, but we also need the floor sweeper. I mean, we need everybody."

3. **The Everyone Knows Access Is Impeded Trap.** There is a strong assumption evident in the higher education discourse that people understand that access to higher education is blocked. This takes for granted that people are able to see structural determinants of achievement, to appreciate disparities in access and to see these as amenable to policy solutions. FrameWorks research on this topic, as on issues of race and disparities,^{xv} strongly suggests that such an assumption is ill-conceived. For higher education specifically, we found the dominant obstruction to higher education to be financial, and this obstruction was then fully explained by a consumerist or mentalist cultural model. That is, if you cannot afford higher education, you should work harder to get a scholarship or to afford the education you wish to purchase. Significant strides were made in the quantitative experiment by priming people with Future Preparation and Future Preparation+ Common Good. By contrast, explicitly evoking Fairness Between Groups and their differential access actually created a backlash among whites, who showed the least support for equity policies after exposure to this message compared to

those exposed to any other message.

III. Redirections

In this section, we provide specific recommendations for redirecting public thinking toward more productive conversations about education reform and the role of higher education within that reform agenda. Again, these reframing recommendations are pared so as not to duplicate those provided in the more comprehensive MessageMemo.

1. **Values matter but don't pull as much freight on higher education as on K-12.** None of the values tested for their ability to embed higher education into a K-college reform agenda achieved significance. We conclude that bolstering support for higher education is harder and embedding higher education in a K-12 agenda is harder still. However, there are statistically significant differences between current practices and the reframes that emerged from FrameWorks' earlier research; that is, using Global Competitiveness as an orienting value had a consistent negative effect on a variety of reform policies and was significantly worse than using Future Preparation, Future Preparation + Common Good and some version of a Fairness argument that either argued for Fairness Between Places or a very mild version of Fairness Across Groups, in which common values of opportunity were put forward.
2. **No values, no reform necessary.** Without values, however, people cannot see what reforms are designed to accomplish. The idea that you need to know the goal first was offered repeatedly by informants in the Persistence Trials with respect to Remodeling. The first step in reform is figuring out your goal, these informants asserted, the things you want your education system to do, just like the first step in remodeling is figuring out your needs and what you want whatever you are remodeling to do. Without a value at the head of a communication, people will struggle to see the point of reforming higher education in the first place.
3. **Use values that establish a collective goal.** The orienting values of Future Preparation, Future Preparation + Common Good and Fairness Between Places hold the greatest promise for reorienting Americans to a reform agenda that includes higher education.
4. **You must overcome Little Picture Thinking** and its correlate problem of assigning all problems in higher education to mentalism or individual failures of effort and discipline. This is one of the major issues that communications must address. Without reassigning responsibility to a broader system and connecting this to a public or societal goal, any perceived problems in higher education will continue to be perceived as amenable to small reforms of behavior and choice at the level of individuals. And, relatedly, any failures will be seen as affecting only the individual and his or her economic status. You can do this by using values (see above) and by getting more societal actors into people's

thinking about higher education as part of a broader system.

5. **Get systems into the discussion by refining the Orchestra metaphor.** The simplifying model or metaphor of Orchestra proved powerful in creating systems thinking for higher education as it had in K-12 priming. It effectively inoculated against the individualism and mentalism so prominent in thinking about higher education. It did, however, need revisions in order for it to realize its potential. And, importantly, it needs more specificity. Because people lack concrete knowledge of the context surrounding higher education, they need more enumeration of causal links to community and other factors that affect higher education outcomes; there is a danger that “college” becomes the orchestra. When Orchestra is aligned with a value like Future Preparation, or with the idea of resources as in Fairness Between Places, it allows people to see the goals of higher education more broadly and how it functions, respectively – ideas that did not come up without this priming. The Orchestra Model has the potential to reinforce this Big Picture View by forcing people to realize that, since orchestras have a lot of sections, higher education must as well. To help deploy this model effectively, the most critical components are enumerated below:
 - a. An orchestra is made up of many parts, both individual players and groups of instruments, all of whom must be skilled and working together for the same goal. This is an opportunity to enumerate the many partners and levels of the system that must be harmonized.
 - b. The orchestra’s sense of a shared collective effort is more important than the role of the conductor. This is an opportunity to orient the orchestra to a united value, like future preparation of our country.
 - c. Rehearsal is necessary to an orchestra’s musical success – which means there will be false starts, mistakes and numerous attempts, which do not indicate the orchestra’s failure if the attempts serve the larger goal of excellence. This is an opportunity to explain how new approaches need to be attempted and incorporated into the higher education system over time.
 - d. The educational system has been handed “new music” by economic and historical circumstances; this orchestra hasn’t chosen this new music, which also can’t be ignored. This is an opportunity to build into the metaphor the explicit external driver that is requiring change; this is helpful on this issue as, without this explanation, the system is not perceived as broken and not in need of change.
 - e. Note that “we” are the conductor in this model. The role of the conductor must be specified, not left to users’ intuitions. If it is, they default to conductors = professors, which leads to thinking of the education system only in terms of classrooms, not in terms of other organizational scales and types. Consequently,

system-wide thinking becomes impossible. But if “we” is well established, the Orchestra Model can help in the reassignment of responsibility to people in their public roles as voters and citizens.

- f. Other words that can be used to support the model: orchestrated, harmonized, and rehearsed.

6. **Use the metaphor of Remodeling to prime the notion of updating and ensuring functional systems.** The simplifying model of Remodeling also worked well in Persistence Trials to elevate the salience of a broad reform agenda and to connect it to higher education policies and programs. Once exposed to the idea, informants were able to talk about the need for change – something they did not do unprimed and did not do as much when exposed to Orchestra. Remodeling also diverted attention away from individual students – it’s hard to think about remodeling a student! Remodeling structured many conversations about future needs, or the need to prepare students with skills that the world will demand of them. Finally, Remodeling clearly communicated the idea of updating or strengthening what’s already working as well as fixing what’s broken. This helped overcome the perception that higher education did not need “fixing” because it wasn’t broken. Moreover, the idea of updating skills may work even better in higher education than in K-12 (where it was frequently subjected to a backlash over the primacy of basic skills) because of the proximity of higher education to workforce issues. That is, if college is about preparing people for a workforce that is changing, the idea of updating the higher education system to keep up with the changing needs of the world of work becomes logical. However, this model also required substantial edits, as described below:

- a. The entire education system is conceived as a structure – say, a house – and its parts are conceived as levels in the entire education system, from preschool to graduate school. It is important to enumerate these parts.
- b. This structure has a function; the implication is that this function can’t be fully met without remodeling. Here is the opportunity to assert a value toward which remodeling is a means.
- c. Everyone in society is conceived as occupants of this building, so everyone has an interest in seeing that the structure does its job and meets its potential. In this way, the Remodeling Model helps establish Americans’ shared interest in our education system, inoculating against the tendency to think exclusively about individual outcomes.
- d. Remodeling is about the calm, principled assessment of things that do work and do meet current needs, as well as an assessment of things that don’t work or that are old, and about incremental, planned replacements of those things. Using

Remodeling in this way inoculates against Americans' skepticism about large-scale change, particularly when government is involved.

- e. Remodeling can help prime a better discussion about access between parts of the system, a conversation that tended to default to consumerist or mentalist explanations: you wouldn't remodel a house without making sure there are clear doorways between the rooms, just as we have to make sure there are clear paths to each level of schooling.
- f. Remodeling can also be used to prime other critical missing pieces in public thinking, such as the need to plan for the future skills that our country will need: you wouldn't remodel a house without accounting for how the rooms might be used in the future, just as we have to make sure each level of schooling is flexible enough to meet challenges in the future.
- g. Attaching a human actor to the remodeling is crucial. In this version, "we" are the general contractors who will plan and do the work. Again, this establishment of a common goal and shared responsibility for the outcome helps overcome the tendency to see higher education as a private good and a private responsibility.

Below we provide examples of values and simplifying models that worked to advance policy thinking about education reform that includes higher education reform.

Values

Future Preparation + Common Good

The most important goal in reforming colleges and universities is to prepare our nation's children to contribute productively to our society and to the communities in which they live. People who believe in this goal know that we should be doing much more to promote the common good by educating and preparing our children for the challenges our society will face in the future.

We can improve our nation's prospects for the future by updating the entire educational system to reflect the skills our children will need in the future and making sure that it works for the benefit of all. So, we should use our resources for everyone's benefit by retaining what's worked well. But we must also provide a better educational foundation that prepares our children for the challenges of the next century. If we fail to adequately update the educational system, our nation will not be prepared for the future and all of us will suffer the consequences. Extending education's benefits to all ensures that our children will not be left alone to figure out how to address future challenges and our country will be able to draw upon everyone's skills and capabilities to confront the challenges we all will face in the future. Successfully reformed colleges and universities would produce a nation where all children contribute fully to our society and are capable of meeting our country's future challenges.

Fairness Between Places/Groups

The most important goal in reforming colleges and universities is to allocate resources fairly across communities. People who believe in this goal know that we should be doing much more to make sure that all communities have the ability to educate and prepare our nation's children. We can improve our nation's prospects by making sure the allocation of resources is fair between different places and among all groups in our society. So, we should use our resources to make sure that all communities have access to quality education. If we fail to adequately update the entire educational system, some areas will have good educational systems and others will not. Our country cannot afford to limit its talent pool by having great differences in educational quality from place to place. We need to make sure that all areas receive a fair share of educational resources. Successfully reformed colleges and universities would do a better job if they had the ability to draw from well-prepared students, no matter where they lived.

Simplifying Models

Orchestra

Supporting education as a skillful orchestra means helping all of the players in the educational system, from preschools to universities, to perform well together. Although each musician and instrument plays a different role in making the orchestra's music, the orchestra sounds best when each of the musicians is skilled, the instruments are well-tuned and they work together towards the common goal of playing the best music that they can. Right now, our education system is like an orchestra whose players aren't working well together. This makes it hard for them to rehearse and perform the new, more challenging music of the 21st century. Seeing preschools, elementary schools, high schools, community colleges and four-year universities as an orchestra makes the challenge for education reformers clear. Like an orchestra conductor, who must encourage the spirit of cooperation and secure the resources that the players need to perform well, we must make sure there is good cooperation among the parts of the education system, from preschools all the way up to graduate schools, so that it's up to the challenge of playing new music.

Remodeling

Our nation's success depends on our ability to remodel the parts of the educational system that are outdated. Adjusting the components of this system, from preschools to universities, means continually monitoring their performance and making regular improvements. Some features need to be updated and brought up to code, while some rooms have gone unconnected for too long. You wouldn't remodel a house without making sure there are clear doorways between the rooms, just as we have to make sure there are clear paths to each level of schooling so students don't have to guess about how to get from one to another. The task in front of education reformers is clear: we need to remodel our entire educational system, including preschools, K-12, community colleges and four-year universities. The good news is that when you remodel a building, you don't have to take down the building in its entirety, and you're not throwing out what you built but rather you are updating the parts of it that need repair. Like a general contractor, who must

renovate parts of structures that need updating, we must remodel our educational system so that it meets the goals we want to achieve in our society.

Avoid:

- ✓ Evocations of Global Competitiveness
- ✓ Statements of “brokenness” or crisis within higher education
- ✓ Appeals to close the Achievement Gap
- ✓ Focusing on Individual Achievement and Financial Success
- ✓ Shallow assertions of the need for all Americans to attend college

Reframing higher education in specific and getting higher education reforms into a larger education reform agenda will not be easy. But this research strongly suggests that it can be done, that people can improve their fuzzy thinking about this level of education with only minimal priming and that people can act on this more publicly-oriented view by connecting specific reforms to their larger goals for the country. With the right frame, people can overcome their quick defaults to individualist and consumerist thinking and are ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work on higher education. Unfortunately, there are not many examples in public discourse currently that invite them into the discussion in this way. The researchers and reframers at the FrameWorks Institute offer a number of applied materials at www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html#products to help communicators make that important transition.

About FrameWorks Institute:

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Standard rules for protection of intellectual property and citation apply. Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Bales, Susan (2009). *The Proper Attitude: Challenges in Framing Higher Education Reform*. A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

© FrameWorks Institute, December 2010

ⁱ For access to these reports, see www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html.

ⁱⁱ All reports that comprise this inquiry are available at www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bales, Susan (2009). *Framing Education and Education Reform*. A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Readers of this MessageMemo who are unfamiliar with FrameWorks' approach are strongly advised to take advantage of several explanatory guides on our website. For more on our approach, see www.frameworksinstitute.org/sfa.html; for more on FrameWorks' methods, see the extensive methodology section of our website posted at www.frameworksinstitute.org; for more on framing and reframing, see FrameWorks Institute. (2001). *A Five Minute Refresher Course in Framing*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, located at http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/five_minute_refresher_ezine.pdf explains elements of a frame that we use in our reframing recommendations, as does our series of webinars at www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html.

^{vi} For more on this common problem in seeing long-term goals of public tax investments, see FrameWorks' research on budgets and taxes at www.frameworksinstitute.org/budgetsandtaxes.html.

^{vii} The complete results are published in "Reform What? Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling: A FrameWorks Research Report" (Chart, H. with Kendall-Taylor, N. September 2008. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute).

^{viii} Simplifying models are defined by the FrameWorks Institute as metaphorically based frame cues that change the fundamental ways people understand what issues are "about." More specifically, FrameWorks defines a simplifying model as a research-driven, empirically tested metaphor that captures and distills a concept by using an explanatory framework that fits in with the public's existing patterns of assumptions and understandings (cultural models). A simplifying model renders a complex and/or abstract problem as a simpler analogy or metaphor. By pulling out salient features of the problem and mapping onto them the features of concrete, immediate, everyday objects, events or processes, the model helps people organize information into a clear picture in their heads.

^{ix} Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel, (2009). *Orchestrating Systems and Remodeling Reform: Reframing Education Reform with Simplifying Models*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^x See Higher Education Trigger Video at www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html#products.

^{xi} See Simon, A. and Davey, L. (2010). *College Bound: The Effects of Values Frames on Attitudes toward Higher Education Reform*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xii} *A Viewer's Guide to Simplifying Models Research: On-the-Street Interviews with Ordinary Americans*. 2009. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xiii} For more on Americans' thinking about adolescents, see FrameWorks' research at www.frameworksinstitute.org/adolescence.html.

^{xiv} Simon and Davey.

^{xv} See www.frameworksinstitute.org/race.html for more on this topic and access to the Talking

Disparities Toolkit.