



STATE OF WASHINGTON

HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

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February 2, 2012

Dear Governor Gregoire, Honorable Members of the Legislature, and Higher Education Stakeholders,

We are honored to serve as your representatives on the Higher Education Coordinating Board and to continue our work on behalf of students, families, and the state's public higher education institutions. As charged by state law, we have completed the process of updating the 2008 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education in Washington. An executive summary of the plan update is attached for your review.

Unfortunately, as we complete our task, we are deeply troubled by the apparent disconnect between the goals defined in the plan – goals ascribed to by all of the key stakeholders in the process – and our state's ability and commitment to deliver on its expectations and promises for future students and our businesses and communities.

We are not on track to raise our citizens' educational attainment. In fact, **we are losing ground**, heading in a direction that will result in even fewer opportunities for Washingtonians to educate themselves and their children. For example, we rank near the bottom of all states in the number of bachelor's degrees produced per 1,000 citizens aged 20-34. And we are well behind in achieving increased degree production that would help us gain ground – 9,000 degrees short of being on track to meet the goal of 39,000 degrees annually called for in the 2008 plan.

The grave possibility of continued deep budget cuts for our higher education institutions, reductions in student financial aid, and unprecedented tuition increases, are creating a firestorm that is reducing academic options, denying access, and eroding affordability for thousands of students.

When we cut higher education funding, we disinvest in a critical economic priority and we abdicate our responsibility to offer and incent educational opportunity to all our citizens.

What must be done going forward? How will we collectively address our state's woeful higher education state of affairs and meet our future economic and societal needs?

- First, we must **embrace the central goal** of the Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education – **to raise educational attainment – and make it the focal point for the discussion** of how best to advance support for higher education in Washington.
- Second, we must recognize that **student financial aid programs** play an integral role in achieving critical student achievement goals. These important aid programs are intertwined with the priorities of the strategic plan and **should not be detached from system planning and oversight**.
- Third, we must **step up and fund the future** by leveraging the excellence and innovation currently in the system, and by incenting performance that meets the Strategic Master Plan goals.

We can no longer sit by quietly watching the erosion of our excellent higher education system and the collaborative work currently underway to meet the goals of the Strategic Master Plan, and not raise our collective voice in alarm. We believe this tide can change, but only if we stay focused, leverage the great aspects of the current system, and fully rise to the challenge of funding. We owe that to every citizen who aspires to seek higher education.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Bringham Sheila Burke Roberta Kneese Bill Gimstein
Earl Hale [Signature] [Signature] [Signature]
Samuel W. Smith [Signature]