

REVISED  
B-U-L-L-E-T-S  
Commissioner Thomas C. Meredith  
Strategic Initiative Summit  
Luncheon Address  
Telcom Center, Jackson, MS  
Noon, Wednesday, February 13, 2008

- Thank you for coming! With the intellectual resources in this room, all things are possible.
  
- Dr. Borsig began today by thanking the Strategic Initiative Steering Committee. Let me add my personal thanks as well. I also want to thank Jim for his leadership on this project. He and Annie Mitchell have done

yeomen's work putting today together plus the legislative session. There were many hands involved in the process.

- We heard Kati Haycock this morning paint the picture of not only where we are as a country and as a state, but also where we are in relation to the rest of the world.
- We heard Phil Pepper talk about our relative position and what kind of difference we can make on the economic status of Mississippi.

- Reggie Sykes opened some doors of thought regarding the “pool of potential” on the campuses of our community and junior colleges.
- As our opening video proclaimed, a shift has happened. I believe there are at least three major shifts that have occurred. The first shift is happening in terms of academic and economic achievement in other parts of the world like we never imaged.

- Not long ago, the global economy was only discussed by economists. Today, we all know the topic.
- We used to only worry about losing manufacturing jobs to Mexico and the Philippines. Now we are legitimately concerned about losing jobs requiring professional expertise and brain power to countries like China and India. Some of my best friends on the telephone are now in

Bangalore, India. The commitment of these countries and so many like them around the world to the expansion of higher education has caught us off guard.

- 30 years ago we had 34% of the world's higher education enrollment. Today, it's 14% and dropping.
- Thomas Friedman's book, The World is Flat, talks about this in great length.

- “JFK wanted to put a man on the moon,” said Friedman in The World is Flat. “My vision is to put every American man or woman on a campus.”
- According to Friedman, just as putting a man on the moon was JFKs hope for winning the Cold War, education is our moon shot, the only hope for winning the “war” of global competition.

- The second shift has occurred in our country. Our nation has always believed that to have university graduates in greater numbers in our communities was a societal benefit. After all, university graduates bring:
  - Higher salaries
  - Pay more taxes
  - Lower unemployment
  - Create businesses
  - Create jobs
  - Pay business taxes
  - Stay healthier

- Have health insurance
- Provide health insurance
- Philanthropic
- Volunteer more
- Less use of social services
- Less crime
- Live longer
- Vote more
- Teachers, doctors, lawyers,  
journalists, preachers, social service  
providers, etc.

- This is certainly a no-brainer for you and for me. However, over the last several years, especially since 2000, it appears that the thinking has shifted to seeing a university education as more of an individual benefit instead of a societal benefit.
  
- State funding has fallen off for higher education in most states (other demands have taken priority) and tuition has increased to try to make up the difference. Since tuition is now covering more of the

cost of providing a higher education, some are now calling it a “user tax.”

- I believe we all would agree that *both* sides—society and the individual—win in this equation.
- This situation was further exacerbated when need-based grant programs began to turn into loan programs and the Pell Grant fell further and further behind the actual cost of attendance.

- Thank goodness there is a Pell increase beginning in 2009 that will be an amount larger than our tuition and fees.
- Kati talked about the differences in achievement between those with higher income versus those from lower income families.

- We are in danger of splitting society even more by keeping low income students out of universities.
- That is why 20 university systems across this country—including Mississippi—enrolling over 2 million students have joined the Access to Success initiative sponsored by NASH, the National Association of System Heads, and The Education Trust in Washington. We will cut the achievement gap in half!

- The third shift is now underway in universities across the country. Indeed, this shift is already happening on your campuses.
- For so long, universities had the luxury of being able to say, “We will offer courses in the right sequence, at decent times, for you to get your degree. The lights, AC, and heat will be on, a learned professor will be in front of the class and the necessary

instructional equipment will be in place.  
Whether you learn anything or get your degree will be your responsibility.

- And for a long time, most of them got their degrees. It was a sort of survival of the fittest and most were fit.
- However, something happened that threw this out of kilter. All of our efforts to increase access to a university education began to pay off.

- As a result, more and more students who were under-prepared were coming to our doors. More and more students were coming to us from homes where no one had ever been to college.
- High schools were having to deal more and more with social problems and were finding it hard to adequately prepare the masses for a university education.

- Some institutions adjusted with remedial programs (20%) and summer programs to try to overcome their students' under-preparedness. But most continued to conduct classes as they always had conducted them.
  
- The resulting numbers have proven to be disturbing. Granted, these numbers vary between institutions, but for full time/first time students, in our System, only 50% who

began their courses with us, graduate in 6 years.

- Our retention rate is about 75% for the System from the Freshman to the Sophomore year, which isn't too bad. However, our losses after that are disturbing.
- We look at data in our core courses by discipline and see that in some institutions as many as 50% of our students in some of

these classes are receiving a D, F, or  
Withdrawal.

- We must now become more data driven by looking in excruciating detail at what is happening to students, class by class, and then figure out how to help them become more successful.
- Thanksgiving Ham

- Many of you are addressing these concerns already and I applaud you. You realize we no longer can simply say it is the student's responsibility.
- All of us are in the education business. There are things we can do and you are doing many of them already.
- So, this third shift deals with how we approach the process of making sure that

students who come to us receive a university education.

- This is not about spoon-feeding or letting up so that students can pass and graduate. It is about looking at an incoming freshman class or a group of community college transfers and thinking and then saying, “You will be successful. I will do everything possible to make sure that happens.”

- Many of you have heard of William Glasser, a noted psychiatrist who has written a lot about failure over the years.
- He tells of his first day in medical school at UCLA. He knew what was going to happen as he waited with his class in the auditorium.
- The dean would arrive with bushy eyebrows and a scowl. He would glare down at them and say, “Look to your left and your right.

One will be gone in six weeks and the other in one year.”

- Instead, the dean arrived with a smile and no bushy eyebrows. He congratulated the class on being accepted and lauded their academic talents.
- He introduced the faculty with great compliments and then told the class that he and the faculty were committed to their success.

- And since this class was extraordinarily capable, he and the faculty would do all they could to make sure they all became excellent doctors. He gave out their phone numbers and said they were available 24/7 to make sure that happened.
- Glasser said the weight was off his shoulders. His fear turned to energy and excitement to get started.

- When I first read that many years ago, it changed how I approached my classes and my administrative responsibilities.
- This is exactly how many of you approach this great responsibility we have, but it must be spread to all of our colleagues. If we don't make this fundamental shift administratively and in our classrooms, we can't be competitive in the global marketplace and neither can our students.

- If not, the number of graduates will not grow at a rate necessary for us to be in the game.
- So, how does this all tie together? There are so many parts that must be addressed for success to occur with this Board of Trustees' Strategic Initiative.
- You and I can't control all of the variables, but we can do our part to increase the

number and percentage of graduates from our universities.

- At the same time, we can push the quality of those graduates even higher.
- We can't fix the high school dropout rate, but we can help. Our new feedback system now being distributed should help, as well as our new education website. We can't force more community college students to pursue

a university education, but we can do more to show them the way.

- We can, however, do our part on our campuses on the things over which we do have control.
- It is critical we use all that we know to help more students graduate. That is what you will be working on at each of your universities.

- You are pursuing many of them already and I thank you.
- The bottom line is it will take a partnership between us and K-12, the Community and Junior Colleges, our funding partners in the legislature, the Governor, and the business community.
- K-12, the community and junior colleges, and our universities comprise this state's public education system. We can't be pitted

against each other if our state is to move forward.

- This can only be accomplished as a partnership.
- We have the brainpower here today and on our campuses to make a difference, to help more students achieve that huge dream of becoming a university graduate.

- A shift in our focus on student success and a great partnership with K-12 and the Community and Junior Colleges will make this initiative successful.
  
- The bottom list is what we can do to make this state better for our children and our grandchildren. We all know that having a more educated population will make Mississippi a better place for them in so many ways!

- As Steinbeck said, “It is the nature of man to rise to rise to greatness if greatness is expected of him.”
- It is time for us to raise our expectations.

[END]