

# It's the Learning, Stupid

By Jamie P. Merisotis

*Adapted from the 26th Annual Howard R. Bowen Lecture by Jamie Merisotis, at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, Calif., October 14, 2009.*

This evening I will speak about the importance of college-level learning—and share with you what I and my colleagues at Lumina Foundation are doing to emphasize the importance of what students who complete courses of study should know and be able to do. Now on the surface this may not seem like a very bold theme for a prestigious lecture at such an august, internationally recognized university. But as the not-too-subtle title of my talk this evening suggests, I have some rather specific things to say about learning that occurs in colleges and universities, and about how we view it at this point in the history of the American system of higher education.

My thesis is this. We live in a world where much is changing, quickly. Economic crises, technology, ideological division, and a host of other factors have all had a profound influence on who we are and what we do in higher education. But when all is said and done, it is imperative that we not lose sight of what matters most. To paraphrase the oft-used maxim of the famous political consultant James Carville, *it's the learning, stupid.*

I think it's important to understand the context for my remarks on college-level learning, which are grounded in the ambitious agenda we have set for

ourselves at Lumina Foundation. I think many of you are familiar with Lumina, but for those who aren't, let me offer a quick overview. Lumina Foundation for Education is a national foundation—one of the 45 largest, in fact—with assets in excess of a billion dollars. This makes us the single, largest foundation in America that focuses exclusively on getting more Americans into and through college.

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For most of the two years I've served as the Foundation's president, we have pursued that mission by focusing on one specific aim—what we call our “big goal.” That big goal, simply stated, is that **by the year 2025, we want 60 percent of the American population to hold high-quality college degrees or credentials.** As many of you know, new figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) put the current share of Americans with degrees in this country at essentially the same level it's been for four decades: 40 percent.

So, to restate this big goal: Over the next 16 years, Lumina wants to increase the percentage of Americans with college degrees—a rate that

hasn't really budged for 40 years—by 20 percentage points.

That's right: We don't call it a "big" goal for nothing. We know the goal is ambitious, but we're convinced that it is attainable. Even more important, we also feel this goal is vital to the nation's economic security and social stability, for several reasons:

**One obvious reason is global competition.** The troubling fact is, college attainment rates are rising in almost every industrialized or post-industrial country in the world, *except* for the U.S. In fact, though we led the

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world for most of the postwar period, our 40 percent rate now ranks only 10th among developed nations for adults ages 25 to 34.

In several other countries, more than half of young adults are degree holders—and rates in many of these countries are continuing to climb. So, if we hope to remain competitive and ensure our nation's continued prosperity and stability, we must aim high—and that's one reason for the 60 percent target.

**Perhaps an even more compelling reason for reaching the big goal is that our changing workforce demands it.** The knowledge economy requires

Americans to have more advanced knowledge and skills. Experts agree that today's "middle-class" jobs—those that ensure a good quality of life for citizens—are less and less attainable without education or training beyond high school.

Noted labor economist Tony Carnevale at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce has estimated that by 2018, 63 percent of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training. That's a huge increase since the mid-'70s, when less than 30 percent of jobs required anything beyond a high school education.

Carnevale's data fit seamlessly with the latest feedback from employers—most of whom seem to be *pleading* for better-educated workers. In a survey released just last week by the Business Roundtable's Springboard Project, 65 percent of employers said they require an associate's degree or higher for most positions. Looking ahead four years, employers say their greatest need will be workers with more technical skills, more advanced degrees or certifications, and better qualifications. And right now, half of these employers say there is such a serious gap between their needs and their employees' skills that productivity within their companies is slipping.



**JAMIE P. MERISOTIS** is president and chief executive officer of Lumina Foundation for Education, one of the nation's 45 largest private foundations. Under his leadership, Lumina employs a strategic, outcomes-based approach in pursuing its mission of expanding college access and success,

particularly among low-income, minority and other historically underrepresented populations.

Before joining Lumina in January 2008, Merisotis founded and served 15 years as pres-

ident of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Higher Education Policy, one of the world's premier education research and policy centers. He previously served as executive director of the National Commission on Responsibilities for Financing Postsecondary Education, a bipartisan commission appointed by the U.S. president and congressional leaders. Merisotis also helped create the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps), and has served on numerous national and international boards of directors, including Scholarship America, the European Access Network in London, and Bates College in Maine.

Without a doubt, the workplace is becoming more demanding. If you need a concrete example of that, visit your local auto-repair shop—or just pop the hood of your car and take a look at the complex collection of computerized machinery that your engine has become. A generation ago, nearly two-thirds of America’s car mechanics were high school dropouts. Today, more than a third have attended college...and that trend toward higher-level skills is sure to continue.

So, global economic and workforce trends are compelling us to work toward this big goal. But there are other reasons, too. One is simply to extend to more *individuals* the financial benefits of earning a degree. Those benefits are obvious and undeniable. Since 1975, the average annual earnings of this nation’s high school graduates fell in real terms by one percent, while earnings among college graduates rose by 19 percent. And increasing degree completion will bring *societal* benefits as well: Higher rates of volunteerism, voting and philanthropic giving...decreased rates of crime and poverty...a reduced need for public assistance, including healthcare. These are benefits we all share when attainment rates rise.

Finally, our big goal is an important means for addressing social inequity. Right now, the benefits I just listed are being distributed unfairly—and this inequity is a threat to all of us as Americans. Higher education attainment rates among certain population groups in this country—including adults, first-generation college going students, low-income students and students of color—are significantly lower than those of other students. These achievement gaps have endured for decades, and are now actually *widening*. This trend is especially

alarming, given demographic trends showing that, by 2050, “minorities” will actually constitute a majority of the U.S. population. They already do in four of the 50 states—California, Texas, New Mexico, and Hawaii.

So, for all of these reasons, you can see why Lumina has embraced this big goal. And it’s clear that others have embraced it, too, including the President of our country, who has pledged to make the United States the best-educated nation in the world by 2020. Policymakers

in many states are looking for ways to boost student success as a way to improve their long-term economic outlook. Many of our peers—including the Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, just to name a few—are making significant investments in efforts to improve college completion.

Clearly, this issue is moving higher on the national agenda. But we at Lumina are convinced it must move up even further. In fact, for us, the issue of college completion *is* the agenda. Everything we do is geared toward achieving that big goal.

And, because we are an organization that is relentlessly focused on outcomes, we didn’t just stop after establishing the goal. Rather, we developed a workable plan to **reach** it. And we have taken great pains to make that plan accessible, actionable and widely available.

Lumina’s Strategic Plan is not a concept. It is very real and tangible. It truly guides our decisions and our work. It is clearly delineated in a Strategic Plan

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that we've printed and disseminated widely. There is no secret plan that we are *actually* following—this is it, and it's been widely available including via our Web site.

Our Strategic Plan identifies three critical outcomes—three significant results that must be produced for our big goal to be reached. Those three outcomes are:

**Preparation:** Students must be prepared academically, financially and socially for success in education beyond high school.

**Success:** Higher education attainment rates must be improved significantly.

**Productivity:** Higher education must become more productive so that it can increase capacity and serve more students.

Of course we know we can't reach any of these three major outcomes in one step. A number of intermediate

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outcomes will be necessary in each area to get us where we need to be.

To give you a better understanding of how Lumina approaches this work, let me take just *one* of these three critical

outcomes and “unpack” it to show you what we think needs to happen—and what Lumina plans to do—in that area. Keeping in mind that steady progress must be made on *all* of the outcomes if we are to reach the 60 percent goal, let's look closely today only at “success.”

We believe that, to significantly increase higher education attainment

rates, three intermediate outcomes must first occur:

- **Higher education must use proven strategies to move students to completion.**
- **Quality data must be used to improve student performance and inform policy and decision-making at all levels.**
- **The outcomes of student learning must be defined, measured, and aligned with workforce needs.**

To achieve these outcomes (and thus improve success rates), Lumina has decided to pursue several specific strategies. I'll cite just a few of these many different strategies:

- **We will advocate for the redesign, rebranding and improvement of developmental education.**
- **We will explore the development of alternative pathways to degrees and credentials.**
- **We will push for smoother systems of transferring credit so students can move more easily between institutions, including from community colleges to bachelor's degree programs.**

Again, these are just illustrations of the strategies we have identified as closely aligned with the outcome of increased student success. But you get the main idea here: We at Lumina see specific outcomes that must be achieved, we have identified specific steps to help us reach those outcomes, and we have shared those steps very publicly in a thorough and transparent plan of action.

Ironically, there is one aspect of our Strategic Plan that has loomed especially large lately. I say “ironically,” because the item I’m referring to is literally a footnote in the Strategic Plan document. Footnote One, in fact.

There, in tiny type at the bottom of Page One, it whispers to us—and nothing gets your attention so much as a whisper, right? It says, in part: “Lumina defines high-quality credentials as degrees and certificates that have well-defined and transparent learning outcomes, which provide clear pathways to further education and employment.”

As we pursue our big goal, we are increasingly convinced that ensuring the *quality* of degrees is every bit as important as increasing the quantity. These are not concepts that are constantly in a war of competing tension, or part of some sort of zero-sum game in which increases in one inevitably lead to decreases in the other. And—as Footnote One softly but incessantly reminds us—quality, at its core, must be a measure of what students actually *learn* and are able to *do* with the knowledge and skills they gain.

Oddly enough, the concept of learning—a subject that seems critical to every discussion about higher education—is often overlooked in the modern era. We all talk endlessly about the *processes* of higher education—about ensuring access and fostering students’ success, about increasing college completion rates, about aligning standards—and yet we seem reluctant or unable to discuss higher education’s true *purpose*: equipping students for success in life.

We need to confront some important questions: What exactly are our students learning—and what *should* they be learning? What knowledge and skills must they have so they can thrive—

both as workers in the 21st century global economy and as productive citizens in this democracy?

Confronting these questions is not just an exercise. Like Lumina’s Strategic Plan, it is practical, tactical and very real. And it points to what we at Lumina see as a huge opportunity for higher education and for the nation. In fact, without a renewed focus on what students are actually learning, there really is no way to properly ensure the quality and value of a college degree or credential.

Research has already shown that higher education institutions vary significantly in the value they add to students in

terms of what those students actually learn. Various tools and instruments tell us that some institutions add much more value than others, even when looking at students with similar backgrounds and abilities.

Such tools are helpful, but more work is needed in this area. We need to find more and more consistent ways to measure a college’s or a university’s “value-added” capabilities. We need to find ways to better ensure that credits, degrees and credentials actually represent the skills and knowledge students obtain and can demonstrate.

**Learning**—that is, the knowledge, skills and competencies a student gains by taking a college course or program—really needs to be recognized as *the primary measure of quality in higher education*. Right now, that is simply not the case.

In fact, for many Americans, a “quality” education has no real connection to the actual knowledge a student

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gains or the skills he or she develops in college. Rather, it is a function of reputation or prestige. In other words, a degree from an elite college or university is seen as a high-quality degree. Degrees and credentials from “lesser” institutions are thought to be of inferior quality.

That’s because, in nearly all cases, perceptions of quality in higher edu-

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cation are now based on “inputs” rather than on measurable outcomes. To put it crudely, and, yes, perhaps even stupidly: “High

quality” happens when high-achieving students attend highly selective, richly endowed institutions, where tradition, along with well-paid faculty and other resources, ensures their predictable success.

The question is: What do these students actually *learn*? How much do they improve? What do they really gain? What do *we*, as a society, gain from their attendance? And do we as citizens and taxpayers gain more when a less-selective public institution or a community college takes a “B-minus” student—or maybe even one not typically thought of as “college material”—and helps ensure the success of that student? In addition, the relevance of what students learn is important. Is the learning linked to the student’s needs and interests? Will it lead to further education and employment?

Right now, unfortunately, these questions are largely rhetorical. That’s because there is too little credible data to justify the quality distinctions that are often made in higher education. We simply aren’t doing enough to *measure* the specific learning that takes place in

individual courses and degree programs. In most cases, we can’t really tell what value an institution truly adds to its students’ lives.

Clearly, this needs to change. My colleagues and I at Lumina Foundation believe strongly that the American higher education system must move away from the input-based definitions of quality that so often dominate rankings to a “value-added” approach, one that is firmly rooted in measurable outcomes.

And what is the most important thing we ought to measure? I think you know my answer by now...it’s the learning!

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***What exactly are our students learning—and what should they be learning? What knowledge and skills must they have so they can thrive—both as workers in the 21st century global economy and as productive citizens in this democracy?***

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We understand that such measurement is relatively new...and that it is not easy. But we can no longer argue, as some have done, that most of what we do in higher education is not measurable. Tools like the Voluntary System of Accountability and the Collegiate Learning Assessment have already demonstrated that it *is* possible. No tool is perfect, and no single tool should ever drive decision making for such a complex endeavor as learning.

However, we do need to learn from the tools that already exist and build on their successes. Here in California—home of the Early Assessment Program, or EAP—evidence of the learning that can occur has been unfolding for five years right before our eyes. As most of

you probably know, this measures students' college readiness during the junior year of high school, and then helps enhance that preparation the following year, prior to college enrollment.

In just five years, EAP has become a national model—many say *the* national model—for how to align K–12 and higher education in terms of objectively measuring what students know and can do. The program is effective because high school teachers and college faculty members sat down together, talked about, and decided what students actually need to know to be successful in college math and English. They then figured out how to make sure all high school students in California can see where they stand in

terms of readiness—and they can see it in time for the unprepared students to do something about it.

This is a terrific model, but it is just one tool. The lessons it is teaching us at the transition between high school and college need to be applied more broadly, and more consistently, particularly in higher education.

In fact, my Lumina colleagues and I believe those lessons need to be applied systemically *throughout* higher education. An

intense and systematic focus on learning should be the hallmark of higher education—from the freshman year through graduate school.

For us, learning doesn't just matter. It matters most of all.

Again, that idea seems so fundamental, so basic. And yet, learning—how to define it, how to

measure it, how to nurture it in students and ensure its relevance and currency in the world—the topic that should be the central conversation about improving education, has somehow devolved to background noise. If I may, I'd like to bring it to the forefront this evening and discuss it in some detail.

Learning outcomes in higher education can be grouped in two fundamental categories: **generalizable, transferable skills**—such as abstract reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, communication; and **subject-specific skills and knowledge**. Traditionally, we have thought of these as being acquired in different areas or levels of higher education. “General

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### Lumina Foundation for Education

Lumina Foundation for Education is an Indianapolis-based, private foundation that strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access to and success in education beyond high school. Through grants for research, innovation, communication and evaluation, as well as policy education and leadership development, Lumina Foundation addresses issues that affect access and educational attainment among all students, particularly underserved student groups such as minorities, first-generation college-goers, students from low-income families and working adults. The Foundation bases its mission on the belief that postsecondary education remains one of the best investments that individuals can make in themselves and that a society can make in its people.

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education” or the undergraduate core has been the place where students develop high-level thinking; field-specific knowledge and skills are developed in the student’s major or occupational field.

This two-track concept may help us understand the importance of each type of learning, but it can hamper our understanding of how learning

really happens.

That’s because it represents a false dichotomy. In today’s economy and society, *both* types of learning are necessary for everyone. Both are vital in the workforce and

everyday life, and both must be developed together at all levels of higher education.

As I indicated earlier, the quality distinction in Lumina’s goal is critical. As I’m sure you’ll agree, increasing the number of degree holders without ensuring the quality of those degrees would be a very hollow achievement for this nation—a major step backward even. Clearly, maintaining high quality in college credentials—even improving on that quality in coming years—is a must if we hope to remain globally competitive and ensure a robust middle class.

Much work remains to flesh out the definition of quality in Lumina’s Footnote One, to hone in more precisely and specifically on what students in various fields of study must *know*—and what skills they must possess—to succeed in life and in their chosen fields.

That’s why a focus on what students are really learning must go hand in hand with efforts to improve graduation rates. And this means that *all* institutions—

two-year and four-year, public and private, online and brick-and-mortar, for-profit and nonprofit—must focus on and measure what is being learned. They must clearly define what students should know and be able to do, help their students achieve those outcomes, and accurately track institutional and student performance.

At Lumina, we’re looking very closely at various tools, tactics and systems that can help in that task. We see our work as supporting and advancing the work of others who have been toiling in this field for some time—like the Association of American Colleges and Universities and its work on liberal learning outcomes—led by the many good faculty that have taken learning and its assessment seriously in their courses but whose work has not rolled up into coherent frameworks for whole programs and degrees. We see a great deal of promise in several of these efforts, including some we are actively funding. We think they can lead to real progress in redefining quality in higher education.

Here are some examples:

#### **Collegiate Learning Assessment.**

Perhaps the best known, the CLA helps an institution measure how well it contributes to a student’s mastery of higher-order thinking skills. It is not subject or major specific. Students who take the CLA are presented with realistic problems that require them to analyze complex materials. Their written responses are evaluated to assess their ability to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems and communicate clearly.

**Voluntary System of Accountability.** The VSA, as its name indicates, is a voluntary initiative developed by

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four-year institutions to increase institutional transparency and to provide a tool to help students in their college searches. One of its major goals is to measure a specific set of educational results as a step toward improving educational practices.

**Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency.** CAAP is a standardized test from ACT that enables colleges and universities to assess what students learn in general education programs. Similarly, the **Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress**, or MAPP, developed by ETS, is another tool for assessing these types of learning. Both of these instruments can be cited as part of an institution's publicly reported VSA profile.

**Voluntary Framework for Accountability.** VFA is a new effort, similar to the VSA, except that it is being specifically developed for use at community colleges—an increasingly vital sector in higher education, and one in which Lumina has invested substantially. This just-announced project includes Lumina, the Gates Foundation, the College Board, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the Association of Community College Trustees as partners.

**Transparency by Design.** This project, another Lumina-funded effort that is just getting under way, will attempt to gather reliable information about learning in online programs—another vital and growing sector, particularly for serving adult students.

All of these studies and programs demonstrate that, throughout Ameri-

can higher education, people are developing, using and reporting on common metrics that attempt to show what students really learn.

But we shouldn't limit ourselves to **American** higher education when pursuing this new emphasis on learning. After all, we live and compete in a global society. Shouldn't we know how other countries

are educating their citizens—especially when some of them are outperforming us? Though it's probably unwise and perhaps even

impossible to import systems directly from abroad, we should certainly take good ideas and adapt them to the American system. That's why we are also pursuing several important international projects that can inform our learning-outcomes work.

I'll share two examples:

First, we are working with OECD to develop a method to compare learning outcomes across national borders. Called **AHELO**, for Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, this project seeks to measure what undergraduate students internationally know and can do. The goal is to *improve* upon these results and better link them to the needs of the global workforce.

Second, we're taking a long, hard look at the Bologna Process. As you may know, this is the process by which 46 European countries have been working for a decade to promote transparency, coordination and quality assurance among their various national higher education systems. As the Bologna group sought to establish a set of commonly understood and commonly accepted postsecondary credentials, the organizers came upon an idea called "**tuning**," which we at

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Lumina think may apply well in this country.

The idea with tuning is to take various programs within a specific discipline—chemistry, history, psychology, whatever—and agree on a set of learning outcomes that a degree in the field represents. The goal is not for the various programs to teach exactly the same thing in the

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same way or even for all of the programs to offer the same courses. Rather, programs can employ whatever techniques they prefer, so long as their students can

demonstrate mastery of an agreed-upon body of knowledge and set of skills. To use the musical terminology, the various programs are not expected to play the same notes, but to be "tuned" to the same key.

Tuning is a *faculty-led* process that also involves students and takes into account the perspectives of employers and recent graduates to define what a student in a particular discipline should be able to know and do upon earning that degree or credential. Earlier this year Lumina launched a pilot project called Tuning USA, in which faculty members, students, and education officials in three states—Indiana, Minnesota and Utah—are drafting sets of learning outcomes in a total of six disciplines: biology, chemistry, education, history, physics and graphic design. They will also attempt to map the links between these outcomes and graduates' employment options.

The teams in all three states are attacking the work enthusiastically, and we're eager to see what they

come up with. Whatever emerges from Tuning USA, however, we know that its underlying message—the message conveyed by all of these projects I've discussed today—will ring loud and clear:

Learning doesn't just matter. It matters *most*.

All of these efforts, and others that I lack time to mention today, are rooted in and serve to amplify two basic truths:

**The first is that learning—all types of learning—*can* be objectively measured.**

**And the second is that these measurements are absolutely vital in ensuring the *relevance* and *value* of a college credential.**

Measuring learning isn't just about testing students' recall and understanding of facts, formulas, theories and processes—though content knowledge is certainly important. Increasingly, successful learning is seen as being dynamic and flexible. It's not so much what students *know* these days; rather, it's about mastering the skills required to constantly know *more*—and to *use* what we know. Students need to "learn how to learn."

Certainly, it's easier to measure—and to test for—knowledge of facts and formulas than it is to assess a student's mastery of skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning and the ability to break down and solve problems. But it's not impossible. The projects I've discussed today are creating and refining such measurements.

But we have far to go. These and similar efforts must continue and intensify in coming years. By doing this work, we will be better able to ensure the relevance of the degrees

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and credentials our colleges and universities award.

This issue of relevance is particularly acute now, when our economy is being tested in unprecedented ways. We need to abandon our historic view in higher education that we don't train people for jobs. Of course we do. That doesn't mean it is the *only* thing we do, but to deny that job skills development is one of the key purposes of higher education is increasingly untenable. Education also must equip people with the skills they need to adapt in whatever way is necessary as their lives change, jobs evolve, and new opportunities arise.

Unlocking the learning puzzle is important because it's really our only viable strategy to ensuring individual and social success over the long haul. After all, what we know and can do, coupled with our ability to learn, is the one thing that multiplies and magnifies our options in life. If we hope to keep all of those options open, we need to get a better handle on how to measure what students are learning.

For this reason—and really, for a growing number of reasons—we need a national approach to determining what people with specific degrees and credentials know and can do. A focus on learning naturally leads us to some very practical and useful steps that can improve higher education—for individuals, for states, and for the nation as a whole.

If we focus on learning as a priority:

**We will improve the interaction between K–12 and higher education.**

**We will find ways to ease students' transfer between institutions, especially transfer between community colleges and bachelor's granting institutions.**

**By defining quality in terms of learning, we will foster innovation. This is critical if we hope to effectively serve more students.**

**Finally, we will create more tools that can help us better assess prior learning or “experiential learning” among returning adults and military veterans. We need to recognize not all people start higher education in the same place.**

Any of these steps—all stemming from a focus on learning—could bring about massive improvement in higher education. Of course it will require work and time and patience for states and higher education systems—

working closely with faculty, employers, and students—to make the shift from an input-oriented approach to one

that is driven by clearly defined outcomes. And that shift will certainly be more difficult in some states than in others.

Anyone who's heard or seen a news report in the last year surely must appreciate the enormity of California's fiscal problems. Just last week, in San Francisco, I had an opportunity to be one of an opening tandem of speakers keynoting the annual meeting of the national Association of Community College Trustees. As my tandem partner, Governor Schwarzenegger, said in his remarks, the situation facing public higher education budgets is unprecedented. These budgetary challenges can't help but hamper even the best efforts of higher education institutions and officials in your state. And yet there *are* relevant and worthwhile options even here,

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steps that could generate huge payoffs in California's human potential. For instance, by simply making a commitment to better assessing prior learning, the state of California could unlock a wealth of this potential.

Census figures show that 23 percent of the state's working-age population—that's 4.2 million people between the ages of 25 and 64—have attended college but lack even a two-year degree. In other words, hundreds of thousands,

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perhaps millions, of Californians are quite close to college completion. If they could demonstrate college-level knowledge and skills arising from their life

and work experiences, how much closer would we be to that big goal I've been speaking of?

Today, there are also 49,000 California veterans enrolled in college using GI Bill benefits, and the VA is approving 300 applications *every day* for post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in California. These veterans are returning to your state with significant education, training, and experience. Some of that shows up as credit on a college transcript, but much of it—including such vital skills as leadership, critical thinking and teamwork—does not. Wouldn't it be

great if all of this knowledge and these skills could be assessed and recognized by both employers and the education system? Wouldn't that help these veterans, and millions more adults like them, move more rapidly into and through the higher education system? And wouldn't that benefit all of us?

Certainly you see my point: Benefits, not just for a few, but for *all* of us, that's the promise of higher education. And that's the ultimate purpose behind Lumina's pursuit of the big goal...behind everything we do.

So as I conclude my remarks to you this evening, let me reaffirm my central thesis. I know you appreciate higher education's promise of a better life. For many of you—and certainly for me—that promise is fulfilled every day in dozens of ways. You know, as I know, that opportunities to learn are a precious gift that truly matters. So at the end of the day, with the debates about state funding, about tuition and financial aid, about accreditation and government regulation, about tenure, about teacher education, about retaining students, and about a whole range of other terribly important processes and systems, let's remember what this great enterprise we call higher education is all about. It's the learning. And that is what matters most.