Thank you, Don, for the generous introduction. And thanks to all of you for being here, for being engaged, for doing what you do every day to match students to colleges where they will succeed and learn.

But, thank you, too, for being awake. Because Don has asked me to talk about insomnia and it’s really hard to do that if everyone in the audience is dozing and even harder if I have to shout over the snoring. So, thank you. Now, Don called the topic common goals and common challenges. But for me, the topic is insomnia.

Why insomnia? Because those common goals and common challenges are what keep the women and men who oversee state higher education up at night. Why can’t they sleep?

Frankly, I cannot think of a single reason. All is well in the paradise that is American higher education. In Lake Woebegone, which is not my hometown, everyone is above average.

Well, we know that to be true in higher education and we know that we live in that Panglossian realm—the Best of All Possible Worlds. So, if I were a generous spirit, I would sit down now and let some of you angle your way toward that uneaten dessert that has been beckoning you from across the table.

But generous I am not. You and I both know that a lot is going well in higher education: more students are graduating from high school, more of them are going on to college, more of them are finishing college, those college grads are making more money than ever before, and society recognizes that postsecondary learning and credentials are essential for nearly 2/3 of new jobs. Talk about a growth industry in the throes of success!

But. And it is the but that matters most to higher education leaders even as they tell the stories of individual and collective success that characterize higher ed as an optimism business.

How many of you live in states where high schools will graduate fewer people next year than they did last? How many of you work at institutions where more students each year need financial aid to afford to pay your prices? How many of you are at colleges where 40% or more of your incoming students are placed into developmental education, either in special courses or in a co-requisite model?

Do the employers in your community tell the media how pleased they are that your graduates are productive on day one?

Does your institution know what your students are learning in every class and how that class prepares them for the next all the way to a degree or other credential?
Do your graduates find satisfying and remunerative employment immediately without grumbling about needing to go to coding boot camps?

And do parents, students, and elected state leaders strew laurel leaves in your path because your prices are so low and your value so high?

If you answered no to the first three questions and yes to the last four, you truly do dwell in Paradise and the rest of us can only yearn to follow you over to those Elysian fields once we, too, have passed on.

We live at a time when the value of a college education is being questioned even though degrees are associated with higher earnings—a correlation that has never been stronger.

But the value of a college degree is being questioned because we have priced it beyond the comfort of middle class Americans and beyond the means of society’s lowest earners—who are the only ones whose success will allow us to meet the aggressive education attainment goals that our states have set.

So, because college has become too expensive to be readily affordable, many question its value and its applicability to the needs of the modern work world.

For as long as I can remember (and I am so old the wrong Guinness is now interested in me), employers have decried the ability of graduates to step into work effectively. But because graduates now have had to pay so much for their credentials, they have joined the lament that they really are not prepared for work. This adds piquancy and stridency to the employers’ refrain, reinforcing the message and making it true in this post fact world.

If we learned anything from last year’s election, it is that facts are what people believe and not what can be shown objectively. Facts have become like Sorel’s view of myth: something can be true or not true but it must be believed. That belief makes the myth both real and a call to action.

The current myth, the current belief, is that colleges are too expensive and their degrees are worthless. A survey last spring suggested that colleges are viewed positively by just 19% of the American people—a bit above Congress.

How have we fallen so far from the days not long ago when only clergy were held in higher esteem than professors? My simplistic answer is cost. We cost too much for Americans to afford comfortably, so we no longer can rely on their esteem or on their accepting our value as given.
So, in a world where we objectively can argue we are successful but in which almost no one believes that, let us return to what keeps our higher education leaders up at night.

The first worry is about money. In public higher education, the main reason we are viewed as overly expensive is that tuition has skyrocketed due mainly to two factors: health care and pension costs for employees and reductions in state support per student.

Nationwide, state support per student peaked in 2001 at $9,300. By 2008, through ups and downs in the economic cycle, the figure stood at $8,400. Last year, it was under $7,000. Despite one of the most sustained economic recoveries since Treasury Secretary James Guthrie started tracking such things for President Franklin Pierce, only five states provided support last year at levels higher than prevailed in 2008.

But tuition per student, which was less than $3,900 in 2001 and about $4,600 by the time of the Great Recession, was more than $6,300 in 2016 and tuition income per student outstripped state support per student in more than half the states.

Now, did costs go up a lot? The sum of tuition and appropriation was $13,200 in 2001 and $13,300 last year, so the total did not change much but students paid 29% of the total in 2001 and 48% in 2016—a shift of $28 billion from states to students. Tuition revenue per student—what is actually paid even after discounting—rose by 63% after adjusting for inflation. No wonder students and families are feeling the pinch and governors and legislators in many states (who often do not recognize that their budget cuts have had any influence on tuition) are demanding tuition freezes or rollbacks as a condition of funding public colleges and universities.

But states are not the villains in this piece. Their budgets have been hammered by the rising cost of Medicaid and medical insurance and pension benefits for their employees.

Costs for colleges and universities, which have been fairly stable in real terms, also have had to accommodate higher prices for their own employee benefits, requiring cost reductions elsewhere in their operations (perhaps contributing to the increase in the use of adjunct faculty and the deferred maintenance backlog).

Higher education leaders, therefore, have to find ways to cut costs in order to pay for employee benefits and offset state budget reductions. Raising tuition has become less possible politically and less possible in real terms because more and more students just do not have the resources to pay our prices—even with year-around Pell grants and other financial aid.

Juxtaposed against the financial conditions is the expressed goal in most states to increase the share of adults with postsecondary credentials to levels ranging from 55% to 80%. No state approaches these levels today, with many hovering around 40% and others below that.
So, more degrees are needed, there will be fewer traditional aged students, and whatever students institutions can find are likely to be poorer and may be less well prepared for college than the current degree holders were when they in school—ah, insomnia.

But just as happens when I can’t sleep, higher ed leaders do not stop with just these headline worries. Colleges graduate just a fraction of their students, some institutions go out of business leaving students in the lurch, accreditors are under pressure to “do something” about problem institutions but woe betide them if they threaten the campus in my town, tuition discount rates at the independent institution down the street may signal financial desperation, student loans are the albatross around the necks of increasingly ancient former students, campus free speech, H1B1 visas, DACA, international enrollment, research funding and indirect cost recovery policies—all are daily concerns of just about every state higher education leader I know. And, increasingly, they are asked why graduates do not seem to know what they need to know to succeed in life and work.

So, how will these overstressed and overtired women and men ever get to sleep? Well, that is where you come in.

If you could only find more students (traditional age and adult), more students who are ready to learn, more students who have more money (I suggest you recruit lottery winners), and the right students who will stay and finish degrees in two or four years, and then hook those students up with the right programs that meet employer needs, ensure that the faculty know what those employers want and tailor curriculum and pedagogy so students learn what employers value, and provide students with the support they need—24x7—to learn and succeed, then you will have done the first part of your jobs. No problem.

The second part is that you will find ways to drive down the costs of education and the third part is that you will make students and employers so happy with the college that they become long term big donors.

Now, I have a lot of faith in you and what you do but even I realize that you are part of a campus ecosystem. Your success in meeting all these challenges will be enabled by the culture of your campus, its leadership, and the commitment of every campus constituency to enable students to succeed. It is not just the faculty, it is not just the president, it is not just the enrollment manager, it is not just the staff, it is not just the students, it is not just the alumni, it is not just the employers—it is the entire campus community who must dedicate itself relentlessly help students succeed.

In the years after Sputnik’s launch in 1957 (and, yes, I do remember craning my neck to catch a glimpse of it inching across the night sky), Americans did several things. We amped up science and math education, we increased college enrollment, we opened community colleges to raise
the overall education level of our people and give opportunity to everyone, regardless of income or age or gender or ethnicity to learn and to help us beat the Russians. It took time, it took investment, it took commitment—but we succeeded in educating far more of our people to higher levels than had anyone else in world history.

We did this as a national undertaking and viewed it as the shared responsibility of our entire society: federal, state, and local government; local schools; colleges and universities; businesses and unions—all Americans.

It was not solely the problem of college enrollment managers to solve.

And so it must be now. The world has changed. The level of knowledge and skills, the flexibility of mind, needed in today’s society far exceeds those required when I completed college in the 1960s. Just as Americans gradually realized, less than a century ago, that society needed most people to earn a high school diploma (which most American adults did not hold as recently as 1950), so now we must embrace the fact that society needs most people to earn postsecondary credentials.

It was not easy to get everyone to realize the value of a high school diploma when parents held good jobs with a third grade education. But we did it—battling inertia, ignorance, and xenophobia to democratize secondary education and make it a birthright of nearly all Americans.

We got there not just with economic arguments but with arguments about equity and ethics, about fear and aspiration, about all the realities and emotions that characterize human change. We made progress in fits and starts in pockets throughout the country—but by the 1970s we had gotten to the common expectation of a high school diploma as the ticket to an adult future.

But even then, we came to realize that was not enough—that the needs and desires of our nation would not and could not be constrained by a 12th grade ceiling. So, we developed community colleges to meet the increasingly technical demands of the workplace—even before we had fully realized the dream of making high school diplomas a general norm in all parts of the country.

But our progress did not take account of the selfishness of a generation who valued tax cuts over equity and personal gain over society’s progress. The postwar narrative was one of individual progress coupled with and tied to community progress. That narrative shifted in the 1980s to one of individual gain divorced from the larger community. As Gordon Gecko said, “Greed is good.”
So, while some leaders now lament that we have fallen behind other countries in educating our citizens at a time when the premium for an economically advanced society doing so has never been higher, most of our conversation has been about individuals not earning what they need to repay burdensome student loans and how that is the fault of a flawed education enterprise.

Yes, the education enterprise is flawed and desperately needs improvement: PK-20. And making that improvement adds to the insomnia.

But the solution is not to be found just in improvements in our education system nor in the holy trinity of technology enabled learning, badges and boot camps, and not even in the introduction of cost free artificial intelligence brought to us by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and the Wall Street wizards who find ways to monetize each scan or click.

No, the solution is much more fundamental and much more long term. The solution is a re-commitment by American society to American society. Our only real progress will come as a whole people—in fits and starts, in placidity and strife, in creativity tempered by reason, in relentless perseverance. That is always how we make progress as a people, as a nation, as a society. There are no silver bullets and there are no sleeping potions that cure the insomnia we suffer.

Instead, we need a new commitment as Americans, as all Americans, to a word that we once used freely: commonweal. That is the cure to insomnia, a cure that will take time and patience but the only cure to what keeps our higher education leaders up at night.

OK, fine. But what does that mean for me and my campus when even inviting speakers leads to police in riot gear? Colleges are society’s logical and respected forums for open discussion of ideas and beliefs.

But in a polarized world, how can a college invite such a discussion? Perhaps by fostering dialog among our students first.

“But their minds are made up,” you say. And so they seem. But consider for a moment the tension that pulses within each of us about just one polarizing matter—globalization. Do you believe globalization is an unalloyed good or an unmitigated evil?

People have debated this point not for months or even decades but for thousands of years. The disruptive technology of Phoenician triremes probably was not much appreciated in local communities around the Mediterranean 3,000 years ago. But they brought cheap and exotic goods from dozens of countries and regions, introducing new products and ideas, reducing the price of goods, and
changing the roles of many workers and artisans. That sounds like an argument for free trade—and it would be if it ended there.

But things are never that simple. Within the minds and hearts of those who gained jobs and those who lost them, those who benefitted from less expensive products of greater variety, were harbored two conflicting thoughts.

The first is the sense of discovery and wonder at new things and new technologies. The second is the sense of loss—loss of the world they knew and the comfort that knowledge of the familiar brought.

These feelings and thoughts warred within each person and each drew her or his own conclusion.

We think of Savanarola and Torquemada as zealots: one the rebel, the other the inquisitor. But their writings occasionally betray internal conflict about their beliefs. That is the human condition—to reach out for the new and to cling desperately to the familiar. Each generation longs for the good old days even as it eagerly embraces the benefits of its age.

Appealing to students to wrestle with their own inner conflicts as they strive to understand and decide about the important issues of our time is a role that college leaders should and must embrace, allowing them to test their ideas and arguments and understand those of others.

A couple of weeks ago, I was walking in Herbert Park in Dublin when I encountered some rather rough looking men engaged in conversation. As they parted, one of them told another, “Keep the faith.” Now, in an Irish context I expected these might be words between comrades on one side of a conflict. And that may often be true but, in this case, the response was “Yours and mine both.”

So my message to you is “Keep the Faith, Yours and Mine Both.” Keeping that faith will underpin the commonweal and bring blessed peaceful dreams to your college leaders. It will allow them paths to resolve their financial challenges and those of their students, address the learning imperatives for their students, make strong connections to society and employment, and fulfill the many and varied goals our state leaders have for higher education.

So, keep the faith—yours and mine both.

Thank you.