It’s an honor to speak with you today, as we recognize the remarkable leadership of Carol Geary Schneider. As we all know, one of her many positive attributes is that Carol is a straight talker, so I’m going to try to follow her example.

I don’t think anyone who has devoted their lives to our work can be satisfied with the way higher education is presented these days. The press follows the scandal or the absurdity of the day, while op-eds and candidates for office rake us over the coals. The language tends toward bitter critique or a lament for a better time at some point in the past.

In these critiques, higher education suffers from what we might call The Great Conflation. Every sin and failing of one institution becomes the sin and failing of all. People speak of “higher education” or “college” as if it was all part of one big fast-food franchise. There are 5,500 colleges and universities of the United States that employ 3.6 million people; four-year colleges, by themselves, stand as the sixth largest employer in the nation. Compared to most other places in the world, the U.S. has a remarkably decentralized and varied network of higher education. And yet people make
pronouncements about that complicated world as if it were one integrated mass.

One variant of the Great Conflation argues that colleges have become immune to, and incapable of, market-based discipline. With federal money pouring in, the charge goes, we waste it on misguided social engineering, counterproductive quests for political correctness and diversity, and undisciplined spending on tenured faculty disconnected from accountability. Costs have skyrocketed because too many people with too little preparation go to college with government subsidies and come out little more prepared for a job than they went in, burdening the institutions with inflated demand and burdening themselves with enormous debt.

The solution is to let the market do its work of disruption and displacement, for fewer people to strive for a college education. Advocates of this view would have colleges emphasize courses of immediate demand, often taught in mass and at a distance, presided over by adjuncts with fixed curricula. They would abolish tenure, deskill the teaching ranks, and look to corporate R&D to create new knowledge. They would reduce staff who work to foster social diversity, wellness, and civic engagement.
There are many responses one can make to each criticism, but they all ignore one fundamental fact: the remarkable expansion of those benefited by America higher education over the last forty years. The range, depth, and diversity of Americans achieving higher education has increased exponentially. Between 1970 and 2010, the total number of students increased from 8.5 million to 20.6 million and the numbers and rates are still increasing. Between 2002 and 2012, the percentage of 18- to 24-year olds in higher education rose to 41 percent, the most ever. The number of female students increased from 3.5 million to 11.7 million between 1970 and 2010. The percentage of our students of color has doubled since 1976.

Demand for all kinds of education has never been stronger. Our community colleges are bulging at the seams; public universities of all sizes and kinds are flooded with applicants; for-profit and on-line enterprises have grown up to meet a demand that states and non-profits cannot meet. We know from surveys that the great majority of college graduates are glad they went to their college, felt they got their money’s worth, and would go there again. There is no other affiliation so significant that it wins a coveted place on license plates and rear windows for the rest of a person’s life.

So, in other words, American higher education has never educated more people; it has never educated a broader array of people; it has never
offered an education that embraces so many fields of learning; it has never offered degrees more valuable and more coveted; it has never been more respected and appreciated by the people who benefit from it. The world admires and copies every aspect of America’s diverse system of higher education, from our liberal arts colleges to our research universities.

*Of course* higher education costs more when it finally begins to serve a vast, diverse, and often poorer student body. We should expect it to cost more as it educates more people from more backgrounds in more ways. Higher education is hard, intellectually and socially, and it’s not surprising that those who are the first in their family to go to college or who speak English as a second language or have other work responsibilities sometimes struggle and sometimes require more support. Student welfare, engagement, and protection have become institutional responsibilities and those responsibilities bring a cost.

That does not mean that the institutions are failing; it means they are accepting new challenges. But if we are so great, why the Great Conflation? A cynic could point to a numbness among many critics to the aspirations of other people and their children, or a general aversion to government investment in the public good, or a disdain for intellectual independence. But that would be fighting cynicism with cynicism, a common but always
losing strategy. Instead, let’s focus on a legitimate cause for concern, the fact that drives and sanctions all the other critiques: the increase in student debt over the last two decades. At the very time education has become available to a broad public, our public investment has stalled and shifted costs to students and families. At the very time American higher education has finally begun to open to Americans of all backgrounds, students labor under a debt that no previous generation had to incur. Even as the prospect of higher education beckons, poorer students find many impediments along the way, before they even apply.

Targeted public policies could help reduce student debt in various ways; that is a matter of political will and it may happen sooner than we think. The problem in the meantime is that the anger over debt has metastasized into an attack on the very idea of higher education for a growing number of Americans and on virtually every element of our institutions. As a result, the Great Conflation is of little use in actually changing things. Its portrayal of American higher education is so broad and shallow that it offers no way forward. It can only counsel retreat from our highest aspirations. It changes nothing even as it discourages many Americans from taking advantage of opportunities to make their lives better.
Sadly, many of us in higher education are complicit in this conflation. While we know enough, and are self-interested enough, not to make some of the same criticisms that others make about us, we are sometimes eager to caricature entire segments of higher education, often to defend our own segment.

I’ll admit that it took me a long time to understand my own habits of thought and I still have to fight against those habits. Higher education has given me every chance I’ve had in life, but it is easy, decades into a career, to remain myopic about how the various pieces fit together. It is easy to focus mainly on our departments and our disciplines, seeing everything that does not immediately help those bases of loyalty as irrelevant at best, threatening at worst.

I learned about other parts of the university largely through accident. When I became chair of the faculty senate at the University of Virginia, for example, I suggested that we have a university-wide conversation about teaching. I was sure that the rest of the university would be enlightened by the excellent example of history. To my surprise, I learned that innovative and dedicated teaching was also taking place in the business and engineering and education and law schools. It turned out that other parts of the university were not so easily caricatured.
When I became Dean of Arts and Sciences at UVA a few years later I was further deconflated. Reading hundreds of tenure files, I came to see 27 disciplines from the inside. I came to see how ridiculous it is when people in the humanities argued that scientists don’t pull their weight and conversely how ridiculous it is when scientists imagine that what they do is harder than, say, exploring medieval France or producing a play or conducting a complex survey. Every discipline has its own burden, whether it's the incessant demand for grant proposals or the impossibility of getting a grant in the first place. Reading anonymous letters of evaluation from students, I saw good teaching in many forms, from labs to large lectures, changing lives every day. After looking under the hood, it was harder to patronize entire fields of study and ways of sharing discovery.

When I went out on the road as dean to talk about the college, I discovered that alumni were at least as smart as I was and, if they were talking to me, probably more philanthropic. I also discovered that all of them remembered faculty members who changed their lives and asked about them and asked me to pass on their memories and gratitude. After that, it was harder to caricature alumni as engaged only by football and reunion parties.

Along the way I discovered, too, that a common target for
conflationists, the much-maligned “administrators,” are some of the best people I’d ever known. The amount of good will, expertise, mutual understanding, and larger purpose demonstrated every day among remarkably selfless people working for the common good was a belated revelation to me.

I knew from teaching that the lifeblood of education flows through capillaries, small vessels that reach into small classrooms, quiet conversations, silent reading. But I came to see that those capillaries require arteries and veins of admission, registrar, finance, deans, and provosts to allow the blood to flow, the institution to live. People far removed from the classroom make it possible for people to be teachers and students. They minister to our students when we professors are not there in the middle of the night, call the parents when a terrible accident strikes, make sure the classrooms and offices work, balance the budgets and protect the benefits of everyone. After seeing the work of the committed people behind the scenes I knew that the blanket and patronizing criticism of such people, from inside and outside the academy, was often misplaced.

So, after a few years as chair of the senate and as dean, I was already less fun when people wanted to offer easy explanations for what is wrong with higher education. I had long ago learned as a professor that trivializing
the ambitions and accomplishments of 19 year-olds was harder when you actually talk to them, when you read their writing, when you meet their families, when you watch them grow semester by semester. After I served as a dean, I saw that getting rid of administrators seemed less compelling when I understood what administrators actually did. Writing off entire schools and disciplines seemed less persuasive when I saw the good work they accomplished. Making fun of alumni or parents or neighbors or coaches was less fun when I actually knew them.

Despite those belated lessons, I still had a lot to learn about other kinds of institutions than those I had known. After I became president at Richmond, I was asked to serve on the board of the American Council on Education and co-chaired a committee to write a report on accreditation in higher education, another common target of conflationism. In that work, I saw how all kinds of schools, ranging from Princeton to small for-profits, from vast regional and urban publics to tiny faith-based colleges, fulfilled their distinct missions. Those institutions had little in common beyond a determination to do the right things for their students, a determination that naturally took many shapes but that succeeded in ways other schools did not even attempt. Conflating all success to one measurement diminishes all success.
I also learned from the presidents of other colleges and universities in Virginia. I was humbled by the challenges they faced and by their accomplishments. In some, over 60 percent of their students received Pell grants, making them among the poorest students in the country. The schools took students who might have stumbled in high school and helped them learn how to succeed. With only small amounts of support from the state, with tiny endowments and no margin for error, these schools have changed lives decade after decade. I saw that HBCU’s make an enormous impact, generation after generation.

I came to know and admire those who run and teach in our community colleges. They taught me about the pride that comes from working with people from over a hundred different countries, with English at various levels, who had only a limited time to devote to their course because they were working and raising a family. Those who work in community colleges, and most I’ve met in the public four-year schools, don’t buy into the notion that the more thoroughly preselected the students, the smarter the professor or the more important the work. The key measurement of success is the distance teacher and student cover together.

As I received this belated education in higher education the more frustrated I became with the banal language of the Great Conflation, in all its
forms, whether it came from outside or inside. It bothered me not because it hurt my feelings, but because it leads students and their families to believe its half-truths, to believe they won’t be able to take advantage of the single most reliable means of building secure lives for themselves in this nation: higher education. Because they hear about a trillion dollars in debt they don’t look into the hundreds of millions of dollars of financial aid available. Because they read exaggerated articles about getting into college they miss opportunities in their backyards. Because they are told that only the skills that employers want right now matter, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to acquire tools for a lifetime.

I am angry at the Great Conflation because it creates cynicism and defeatism just when higher education is finally within reach—if not always the grasp—of people who would benefit the most from it.

The best way to counter the Great Conflation is to deconflate it, to show its hollowness. We can begin by disaggregating its simplistic numbers to show the patterns beneath. The people in this room know some of those numbers:

A median college graduate makes $69,000 a year instead of $35,500 dollars a year; over a lifetime, that is $1.5 million. In light of that, an average debt of $30,000 is a reasonable investment. Factoring in financial
aid, the net price of a college degree increased 32 percent over the last 20 years—or less than 2 percent a year at a time when the value of a college degree has risen dramatically. At the institutions with the highest sticker price, financial aid means that debt is low or even non-existent.

Higher levels of student debt have arisen from demographic, governmental, international, and long-term processes, not from moral flaws in our institutions, not from some incapacity for innovation. Rather than looking for quick salvation through unrealistic dreams of corporate-driven technology or abolishing administrators, we need to begin by asking what can we fix now, doing what we know works. We cannot so casually dismiss what so many hands, working in so many places, have been able to build over the last forty years.

Defending things wholesale in higher education, of course, is its own kind of Great Conflation. We all know that we face serious problems, some of our own making. All our skills will be necessary to address those problems in the institutions where they can be addressed now and with consequence.

Think about this one apparently simple sentence, for examples: “Debt afflicts those who do not finish college, and those who do not finish are those who struggle in the first semester because of lack of preparation or
problems at home.” Each of those components requires its own kind of understanding, its own response from financial aid, from academic advising, from resident assistants, from counseling, and from teachers. We have to take things apart before we can put them back together. Conflating them keeps us from fixing things that we can.

We must move beyond conflation to common purpose. We do that by respecting the special purpose, heritage, and capacity of each of our institutions. Rather than conflation, we need solidarity, a solidarity born of respect for the different missions of institutions and individuals within those institutions.

We have new tools to build that solidarity even as we maintain our individuality. The document at the center of many discussions at this conference, *Open and Integrative*, points to exciting possibilities before us. Rather than imagining new digital teaching and learning tools only as disruption and displacement, that document helps us see how we can use those tools to do what we know what works, what the AAC&U has shown us that works.

We are only at the beginning of discovering what digital tools can do, of, as the book says, “making a quality liberal education available to all, equitably.” The flexibility of the digital world can be a powerful ally for the
diversity of American higher education, for our responsibility to reach new students with new possibilities.

We’ve learned from Carol Geary Schneider and the American Association of Colleges and Universities that the key to effective education is to pay close attention to exactly what our students need. And they need different things at different stages of their lives, from different kinds of institutions. Our differences are our strength. The problems of higher education are real, but they are specific to specific kinds of institutions with specific solutions. The Great Conflation, despite its knowing tone and sweeping pronouncements, fixes no problem at the same time it creates its own.

Higher education never has been, and never will be, in alignment with all the things we want and need it to be; it will always be behind or ahead or beside what some people want it to be. That is its very nature, for education is where the past and future, change and stasis, tradition and invention confront each other.

Those of us in the vast, lumpy, and churning world of higher education might as well admit, in the face of cynicism, that we are invested in an idealistic effort. Every class has an ideal of exchange, of excitement, of learning at its heart. Our quiet and sometimes vulnerable idealism is
hidden in plain sight, experienced by parents, students, faculty, and administrators every day, changing lives and remembered for lifetimes. We must protect that idealism at the same time we confront the real challenges that endanger it.