

Talking About a Revolution: Looking to the Past to Save Our Future

BY CHARLES DESMOND AND ELIZABETH GOLDMAN

For close to four centuries, New England has symbolized America's regard for ideas and education. The American Revolution began here. So did American literature, Transcendentalism, the anti-slavery movement, and public schooling. New England's skilled workforce created the American Industrial Revolution.

New England has re-invented itself time and again—from a largely farming economy, to a highly industrialized one. It is reinventing itself even now to accommodate an economy driven by information and technology. Today, this new economy, coupled with dramatic shifts in population, challenges our region once more to capitalize on the strengths and ingenuities of its people.

The face of the region is undeniably changing. Immigrant populations, people from low-income families and young people of color are now among the fastest-growing populations in New England. According to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's 2006 report, *New England 2020*, all six New England states will witness dramatic increases in the percentage of their workforces composed of minorities. By 2020, the Massachusetts working-age population will be 28 percent minority, up from 13 percent in 2000 and well above the record-breaking projected national average of 15 percent.

The dilemma, however, is that the foundation of the region's future economic prosperity will be intellectual. Higher education will be critical. But, like the rest of country, New England has not done a good job of preparing low-income and minority students for higher education.

Meeting the crisis will call not only for resolute leadership; it will also require a new kind of leadership.

Although today's educational failures are local, the underlying problems are widespread, interconnected and complex, and are not unique to any one state or city. The solutions will necessarily be widespread, interconnected and systemic. Whether in rural Maine or Hartford, Connecticut, underperforming schools and poverty limit peoples' access to information and relationships that could improve their lives. Underperforming schools deny poor students access to high quality teaching and the state-of-the-art technology that enable them to gain access to higher education. These conditions deprive communities of the human and social capital New England needs to compete in the global arena.

We believe New England's six land-grant universities—the Universities of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont—are best positioned to assume leadership and champion a massive transformation of education.

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New England's land-grant universities were part of an initiative proposed by Vermont Senator Justin Morrill, and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 to provide leadership to a nation undergoing massive social change in the years following the Civil War. The first federal investment in conjunction with states to improve higher education, that investment underwrote many of the advances in agriculture, health and manufacturing that 20th century Americans enjoyed.

The land-grant universities occupy a privileged place in the educational landscape. Created by public funding—the federal government provided tracts of land to states to finance the establishment of the land-grant colleges—for the purpose of providing the teaching, research and service of greatest use to the citizens of each state, they are the original "peoples' universities."

Like private colleges and universities, land-grants serve to conduct research, advance knowledge and meet the general needs of the public. But while private colleges and universities may operate from a narrower perspective, governed by the interests and concerns of those students whom they select to educate, the land-grant institutions are governed by the interests and concerns of the public at large, which, rightfully, views these institutions as their own.

The land-grants' purpose is broader and reaches further than that of private colleges and universities. Land-grants exist to serve, protect and advance the public's values, ideals and interests. To do this, they must fight to ensure that the reality of educational excellence and opportunity remains available and accessible to all through the concerted, unified and rigorous use of knowledge to improve teaching practice.

The legislation that created the land-grants originally defined them as agriculture schools. Their leaders had a clearly defined problem before them: to research and disseminate agricultural practice and science. Their efforts created the most productive agriculture in the world.

Now we must create, if you will, the most productive minds in the world.

This task will not be easy. In order for our land-grant universities to serve this role, they will need to step forward and provide the kind of leadership that launched the agricultural revolution and advanced industrial capacity in the U.S.

While these institutions will certainly need input from and cooperation with other sectors—governors, congressional delegations, state and local legislators, corporations, philanthropies, non-profits, adult educators, public school teachers, researchers and community agencies—they are best suited to convene the relevant problem-solvers to learn from our successes and build a 21st century educational system. Many organizations, public and private, are dedicated to improving education. But the land-grants have the widest reach. They can attract the best knowledge and information on educational reform from both the public and private sectors. Drawing on knowledge wherever it can be found, the land-grants could organize, synthesize and produce action steps that would address the public's need for highly skilled, well-educated students who could compete on the global level.

Many leaders in the region are themselves graduates of land-grant institutions and are natural allies. The land-grants have a history of success at broad-scale, paradigm-altering research and development. And it is what they were created to do.

The manifold demands placed on the presidents of these institutions—assuming the roles of fund-raiser, faculty leader, legislative liaison and the public face of the institution, among others—certainly make it difficult for them to focus on these new challenges of demography, poor schools and poverty.

For this reason, leadership must address the challenges our region face in a collaborative manner. The opportunities we can create as a region will dwarf anything any single state or institution can do. For example, the region could focus an intensive research initiative on education in urban and rural communities where poverty, poor schools and changing demographics are pervasive. Bridging research from a range of fields—from neurobiology and pedagogy to economics and creativity —“centers of excellence” in rural and urban education would provide the solutions to the problems of educating all students to 21st century standards.

A combination of public, private and philanthropic resources should underwrite a planning process to bring New England's best minds—researchers, academics, educators and community activists—together to begin establishing such rural- and urban-focused centers of educational excellence.

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We know what we can achieve. Even without near-instantaneous communication or computer-aided design, our predecessors were able to generate, share and adapt knowledge to create world-class industries in shipbuilding, whaling and textile manufacturing. Today, we know that skilled teachers, working to high standards, can reverse the effects of poor education. New England is making educational progress, but not at a speed or breadth commensurate to the crisis we face.

We face a mutually determined destiny. The “blessings of liberty” the authors of the Constitution sought to pass on to us cannot—do not—transpire in conditions of poverty. Those goods we value—a higher standard of living, health care, social support structures and so forth—depend on economic success for all.

New England has the institutions with the expertise; the regional knowledge base is enormous. What is necessary is to create the connective tissue that will allow this knowledge and expertise to circulate and inform the educational transformation circumstances require.

Our region has always been a source of revolutionary ideas, from Women's Suffrage and Abolition to the Revolution itself. With the right leadership, we can provide for all students the rigorous education the future will demand of them and create the revolution necessary for our time.

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