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Reflecting on the Red Balloon Project

George L. Mehaffy

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On a warm July afternoon in 2010, AASCU convened its Academic Affairs Summer Meeting in Chicago. The hotel ballroom had a festive look about it, with red balloons hanging from every imaginable place. At that conference, we used the red balloons to announce the launch of the Red Balloon Project, a national initiative focused on reimagining undergraduate education. The Red Balloon Project grew out of three critical challenges for AASCU institutions: declining state support, increasing expectations, and dramatic changes in technology. The year 2010 witnessed an acceleration of disinvestment in public higher education as states, struggling with the consequences of the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression, continued their precipitous withdrawal of financial support. Yet ironically, expectations for higher education were increasing dramatically. President Obama had set a goal that by 2020 America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. At the same time, the Lumina Foundation had just announced its goal for 2025: 60% of Americans would have high-quality degrees or certificates. And caught between declining funding and increasing expectations, our institutions found themselves confronting revolutionary changes in technology that would forever alter the landscape of American higher education. Reflecting the kind of technological change seen in other industries, such as music publishing and photography, the technology innovations were starting to be seen as a challenge to every aspect of American higher education.

The Red Balloon Project was named for a contest sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), an innovative agency of the Department of Defense. Since its beginning in the late 1940s, DARPA has been involved in a variety of initiatives, including the development of advanced prosthetics and driverless cars. In 1969, DARPA invented ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet. In 2009, on the fortieth anniversary of ARPANET, DARPA wanted to test the social networking capabilities of the Internet by sponsoring a contest. The Red Balloon challenge was to find ten bright red weather balloons suspended at various locations throughout the continental United States. The winning team found all ten balloons in 8 hours and 52 minutes. For me, that contest was both a metaphor and an analogy: a metaphor for the way knowledge

is now being collaboratively discovered, aggregated, and disseminated; an analogy for the way that people have to work together to solve complex problems. I thought the transformation of American higher education, buffeted by the winds of financial challenge, rising expectations, and technological change, was certainly a complex problem, and I named our project in honor of that unique contest.

Fast-forward to late fall 2012, and the three issues that prompted the creation of the Red Balloon Project have, if anything, intensified. State funding for public higher education continues to be a challenge in many if not most states. But now, the transfer of cost from states to students by raising tuition is prompting a backlash. Students, parents, and policymakers are voicing increasing concerns about the cost of college and the steep annual increases. Moody's recently declared tuition levels at a "tipping point." This year, student debt reached \$1 trillion, exceeding all of the credit card debt of Americans. And perhaps most ominously for public institutions, public support for higher education seems to be declining. In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, 80% of survey respondents said that they did not think that college was worth the price.

The second issue prompting the Red Balloon Project, rising expectations, has not declined in the two and a half years since the launch of the Red Balloon Project. In fact, given increasing levels of competition from around the world, the need for a well-educated citizenry in the knowledge economy of the 21st century is more evident than ever before. Concern about how well educated our college graduates are has added complexity to the issue of expectations. The release of a new study, *Academically Adrift*, has raised some new questions in the area of expectations. The study reported that 36% of college graduates score no better on tests of critical thinking when they graduate than when they entered the institution four years earlier. Adding additional concerns, the National Association of Manufacturers reported that last year more than 600,000 manufacturing jobs, all of which required substantial college education, were unable to be filled because businesses could not find qualified candidates.

But among the three circumstances which prompted the beginning of the Red Balloon Project, the most powerful factor has been rapid changes in technology. Since 2010, we have seen the licensing of driverless cars in Nevada, telephones that talk to us, and computers that can play Jeopardy and win. In higher education, technology has already changed access to information. Now we are beginning to see rapid advances in online education, creation and analysis of large data sets, and smart machines that can enable deeply personalized learning environments. The most popular of these advances are the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that promise to deliver courses free or at substantially reduced cost, anytime

and anywhere. Just this year, we've seen the creation of two consortiums, EdX and Coursera, with almost 40 institutions participating, as well as Semester Online, a collaboration of 10 institutions with a for-profit provider. These new entrants have contributed to dramatically alter the landscape of higher education. Meanwhile, several institutions and companies are experimenting with the integration of large existing data sets with data generated from students as they participate in classes, making possible a robust set of predictive analytics that facilitate greater learning outcomes and student success. We are also watching the development of a whole series of intelligent systems that can observe and guide students through complex levels of materials, analyzing mistakes and offering pathways to success, through both not-for-profit efforts such as the Open Learning Initiative (OLI) at Carnegie Mellon University, and for-profit systems developed by companies such as Pearson.

How are our AASCU institutions responding to this rapidly changing and complex landscape? Since July 2010, I have made more than 50 Red Balloon presentations, many of them on AASCU campuses. During those campus visits, I have had an opportunity to talk with institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students about their responses to this new environment. As you might imagine, campuses find themselves in different places, a function of their unique circumstances, history, and culture. I worry about the vulnerability of AASCU institutions in this new age, sandwiched between lower-priced community colleges and better-resourced research universities. The most vulnerable of the AASCU institutions will be those without strong faculty and administrative leadership, where resistance to new ideas and resistance to collaboration with one another will create a toxic environment. But I am enormously heartened by what I see taking place at a number of campuses, where faculty and administrators are working together to confront the challenges they face. These forward-looking institutions are willing to reconsider a broad range of policies and practices as they work in a new highly-competitive environment. These institutions are also experimenting with new models and new approaches. And finally, they are undertaking the incredibly difficult work of thinking about the unique contributions that they will be able to make in a transformed world of higher education, the unique value that they offer, no matter how much changes around them.

The articles in this special issue of the *Teacher Scholar* are examples of the kind of innovation and experimentation that I think are so critical to the success of our AASCU institutions in the future. I know that on many of our campuses, creative and imaginative ideas are taking hold, and bold leaders at every level are undertaking the difficult work of changing institutions and cultures. In our Academic Affairs Summer and Winter

Meetings since July 2010, we have seen a rich collection of Red Balloon initiatives and projects, and we will continue to showcase those ideas as a way of fostering their continued development. I applaud the bold leaders on so many AASCU campuses who are engaged in the difficult work of helping to forge a path to higher education in a new century. As I have traveled around the country, I have been honored and privileged to be a witness to this transformation. And I remain optimistic that the institutions that engage in this transformational work will not only survive but thrive in a new age.