Thank you for inviting me to be part of this conference. I count it an honor to be included. I offer a special thanks to Tom Layzell for asking me to participate. As one of Kentucky’s key leaders in higher education, Tom was right to force the action in having us consider the topic of student engagement and its potential for good in the Commonwealth’s colleges and universities. You can decide later whether he was smart to invite me as the keynote speaker.

Before breaking to my prepared remarks regarding the National Survey of Student Engagement, let me visit with you about the future—your future, my future, our future. It has a bearing on student engagement, or at least on the status of American higher education. And, you should know that I am, by nature, an unabashed optimist. If, at the end of my remarks, you believe I am discouraged, you have missed my point.

Now, about that future? Forecasters tell us that the number of American men and women over 85 will double before 2020. They report that the impact of information technology in our day-to-day life will outdistance anything we might imagine, even today. They speculate that we may finally move away from our near total reliance on fossil fuels. They report that an environmental disaster, and now terrorist disaster, of proportions we have never known is somewhere between possible and probable. They predict that children will be less fit in this century, though exercise equipment will offer virtual reality options that will make one’s workout unbelievably lifelike. They judge that the United States’ remarkable diversity will grow and spread more evenly across the nation. They speculate that our country’s renewed interest in matters of faith will continue to grow even as church attendance declines.

More specific to higher education, we need to understand that America still “rules” the world in higher education. Of the top 20 universities across the globe, eight of the top 10 and 17 of the top 20 are in these United States. Smaller, residential, liberal arts and sciences institutions—like Centre College—don’t really exist anywhere else in the world, and, again, it is generally understood that national liberal arts colleges, the top tier at least, represent the very best experiences one can secure for undergraduate education. So, I can report that American higher education, with all of its issues and problems, remains “king or queen” of the hill, at least for now. But, the fight—the competition—is far from being over. A great many of those who comment on higher education suggest with some urgency that America is losing its stronghold. I agree with them, and would suggest that the fight to maintain U.S. supremacy in education is just getting started, and it will be formidable, and it will not be coming for the UK or Europe. India, Japan, and China will be our competition, and they will be forces with which to be reckoned.

And, what of technology? I remain puzzled by some of my presidential colleagues who believe that institutions like the University of Phoenix and a host of others who offer high-tech, lower-cost, 24-7 educational experiences are not a threat to American higher education as we have known it, or at least not a threat to the kind of higher education their institution offers. I am convinced that high-tech education is just getting started and that it’s impact will not miss those of us in Kentucky—to include places like Centre that might believe they can miss this fight because they place such a high priority on low faculty-student ratios, small class sizes, highly engaged learning, “personal education that leads to extraordinary success,” if you will. These high-tech enterprises are the discount providers of the future, and as people’s lives get busier and costs continue to escalate, their market share will grow.

Before moving on to our consideration of student engagement, we also need to remember that those who speculate about the future should be heard with some caution. (Count this as a lighter, historical moment in my remarks.) Remember that Charles H. Duell, Director of the Patent Office in 1899, said, and I quote, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.” That Lord Kelvin, President of the Royal Society in 1895, was quoted to have said, “Heavier than air flying machines are impossible.” That Nobel Laureate in
Physics Robert Milikan said in 1923, “There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom.” Remember, too, that no one imagined that the telephone, the laser, the computer, and the cell phone would have such a profound impact on our world.

And, lest we forget, there was nothing in colonial America to suggest that higher education was going to become an enterprise of some 3,000-plus colleges and universities. We need to be reminded that in 1776 there were only 3,000 living graduates of the American colleges. Harvard—our country's first institution, founded in 1636—graduated a less-than-remarkable 63 students in the Class of 1771, a number that would not be reached again until the early 1800s. One should never forget that young women did not become part of higher education's landscape until 1837, and that the doors to education opened even later for African-Americans and Native Americans. In the 18th century, the overwhelming majority of young men “… stayed home, farmed, went West, or became—without the benefit of a college education—a Benjamin Franklin or Patrick Henry.”

If the history of those who predict the future tells us much, and I believe it does, then the future we might expect will almost certainly be strikingly different than we imagine. And, my friends, there is reason to believe our world's future will be even more extraordinary than the millennium we left behind just six years ago.

But, hey John, are you gonna’ get to the part about the National Survey of Student Engagement? Yes, now it’s time. Why should we care about student engagement? Why should we dedicate a conference to the subject?

Let me say, first, that we should care deeply about the learning experiences our students have on our campuses. The National Survey attempts to go beyond college rankings by asking students about their level of engagement during their first year and senior year in college. We should care about the results of a study that asks students a variety of questions developed to measure their experience while attending the institution, not just choosing to matriculate. NSSE asks what I believe are the most important questions to the student and his or her parents: What will happen to me because I attend your college or university? What are the things I will learn, what skills will I acquire, what values will I examine and, perhaps, take into my character because I spent four of the best years of my life on your campus. NSSE’s level of engagement is measured through five major benchmarks, and at Centre we look at all five categories:

- level of academic challenge
- active and collaborative learning
- student interactions with faculty
- enriching educational experiences
- supportive campus environment

Through its survey, NSSE attempts to shed new light on the college experience by providing students and parents in the college search process new student-reported information about what type of learning experience they can expect at a given college or university. All of us should care about finding out what students think about their experiences; information that can be used to assess existing programs and services and determine new directions to better meet the needs of students on campus.

I will speak in a few minutes, as I finish, about how the National Survey of Student Engagement has helped Centre to improve its program of study, but let me spend several minutes discussing the second reason that NSSE matters.

The National Survey of Student Engagement represents a much needed alternative to the plethora of ratings and rankings that now appear year-round. U.S. News and World Report and countless others need some serious opposition, some push-back. I remind us all that we in higher education did not create these rankings and categories, though almost all of us—Centre included—provide them each year with data so that they, the magazines and guides, can “issue” their reports—and to be sure, all of us, I repeat all of us, wait on pins and needles each fall and hope that our college or university has moved up or, at least, remained at the same rank from the previous year. Then, when the guidebooks are reissued, we go through similar
anxiety. As some of you know, I have a very low tolerance for all these rankings, many of which are based on flawed research methodology and flawed further by data that is inaccurately reported. I must add that most of these rankings are exceedingly kind and generous to Centre. Ranked 41st among national liberal arts colleges by *U.S. News*—actually we are tied with Furman, Occidental, and Skidmore—judged to be the 9th best buy in the nation in our category, considered to have the 9th ranked international studies program in the country among all colleges and schools, one could argue that these ratings and guides are very beneficial to Centre College.

I dislike them, nonetheless. I recognize that Centre's status as the Commonwealth’s top-ranked national institution is a point of great pride for our trustees and alumni, but I have urged them not to take these reports too seriously. The various college guides tell our story with great conviction and, no doubt, are part of the reason Centre has enjoyed three straight record years in admission, but their cost is real. I do not think they bring out the best in us—all of us, and I do not think they do much to improve the quality of experience offered to our students—the most precious part of what we do in American education. My real worry about almost all these rankings and the guides is that they are based almost exclusively on “inputs”—the size of one’s endowment, the relative prestige associated with an institution, the metrics of one’s admission program, and a host of other criteria that are arguably important, but say nothing about what happens when a student attends and graduates from your college, your university. I have said, and will continue to say on my campus, that our first obligation should be to do those things that add real quality to Centre College, regardless of whether those actions do or do not benefit Centre in the rankings.

Having said this, and feeling a little righteous, too, I must tell you that these rankings are taken very, very seriously by nearly everyone—prospective students and parents, high school teachers and counselors, captains of business and industry, and others. They matter! We might wish this were not so, but we would be foolish not to acknowledge the importance of these rankings and guides in American higher education. What they—the rankings and guidebooks—don’t tell you much about is outputs. What happens to me because I attend your place? All of us have some of these answers, of course. At Centre, we can tell prospective students that if they come to Centre, 80% of them will graduate in four years, more than 80% of them will study abroad, all of them who choose will have one or more internships, 35% of them will go directly to graduate school (many of them to some of the best graduate and professional programs in the country), and so forth. This outcome data is known because it’s the College’s history over the past 10 years or so. But, I think we should want to know more.

The *National Survey of Student Engagement* tells us more and offers a clear and striking alternative to the rankings and guides, again, because it measures outputs. So, I need to tell you, I really like what NSSE does. This is true, in part, because Centre College does these very, very well in this survey. If George Kuh and his colleagues at Indiana University “ranked” the 558 institutions—nearly all of the brand names and others who hope to be—Centre College would likely be in the top five of all institutions of those reporting that make a measurable “difference” in the lives of their students. NSSE has elected not to rank, a position I support even though it probably works to the disadvantage of the college I represent. God only knows we don’t need another ranking that, in short order, all of us would begin to pursue. Let’s save ourselves from that madness.

But, the real reason I like what NSSE does is a result of how it has helped us at Centre to measure the impact of our academic and general student life programs. We have participated with NSSE since the survey’s inception. We have elected to make our results public from the start, acknowledging that this was not much of a risk, as our “scores” are among the best in the country. Instead, we have elected to study our findings and discover areas where we might strengthen our already strong position and programs. And, I should add that this data has significant value as a way to measure and assess institutional effectiveness as it relates to our friends in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

An example: We have determined that we may need to strengthen our offering of active and collaborative learning, and have elected to make this a part of our strategic planning process underway at
the College. It’s not that we aren’t engaged in active and collaborative learning. Indeed, it is a foundation piece at Centre. Rather, the students from our comparison group in NSSE, some of the most elite colleges in the country, report stronger scores in this area than we do. Our students tell us this, and we have elected to take a hard look at how we are doing in this highly effective approach to teaching.

A second example: Finding some relative weakness in the area of “enriching educational experiences,” a discovery that has much to do with our students thinking that they would profit from more opportunities to interact with students of different religious beliefs, political opinions, and racial and ethnic backgrounds, has prompted us to redouble our efforts to increase minority representation among our faculty, staff, and student populations, as well as identifying other ways to highlight “differentness” as a aspect of the learning experience at Centre. And, I must tell you that knowledge, or in this case data, is power, as we have used and will continue to use this information with our community and our trustees to make the point that NSSE data can inform us as we move through our strategic thinking and planning process.

This information, of course, does not make decisions for us, but it does provide us with evidence of “how we’re doing,” “where we can improve,” etc. Rather than just working on inputs—building one’s endowment, increasing the strength of one’s admission profile, and so forth—we are able to imagine how we might improve the experience of the students we serve. Improve the output—the thing that matters most!

My point with all of this is to indicate that the National Survey on Student Engagement can help you identify things you can do something about. This does not mean Centre will stop trying to work on improving its inputs. The College has raised $118 million of its $120 million five-year campaign in the first three years. The quality of our entering classes continues to improve in all ways. Support for hiring new faculty and retaining current faculty continues to increase in substantially. Inputs remain a priority at Centre, but, now, NSSE gives us the chance to understand our impact, the measure of how we make a difference in the lives of the students who come our way. As educators and those who are in position to influence best practice in Kentucky higher education, we should expect nothing less. Our students, those who are with us now and those yet to come, deserve to have the advantage of being more fully engaged in their study. NSSE affords us the chance to know about how we are doing on our respective campuses. Let’s not miss this opportunity to do so.

Let me close my remarks by indicating that I count you as colleagues—friends in this enterprise. As one who believes that “all ships are lifted by a rising tide,” I look forward to hearing of your successes and accomplishments. When good things happen to other colleges and universities in Kentucky, I believe Centre also wins! Thank you and goodnight!