Plenary Session I
Higher Education: Public Good and/or Private Benefit – Returns on Liberal Arts Education

Monday, May 12, 2014
10:00 – 11:00 am
Anasazi Ballroom
Plenary Session I:  
Higher Education: Public Good and/or Private Benefit –  
Returns on Liberal Arts Education

This is the first of the sessions at this meeting on whether American higher education is a public good, a private benefit, or both. This theme was prompted by two ideas bubbling around in the contemporary press: one being that American higher education is being privatized and that, at least in part, this is because of the emerging sense that it provides primarily private goods rather than public benefits, as reflected in increased wealth for those individuals who possess a college education and thus are the principal beneficiaries of the education; the second being that the idea that higher education serves the public good by being the great equalizer in opportunity is being dispelled by the persistent, if not permanent, gaps in educational achievement for individuals from different social classes.

It is interesting how strikingly similar these perspectives are to those presented a half-century ago by the philosopher Ivan Illich and the economist Richard Freeman.

This first session focuses on the returns, both economic and otherwise, to individuals and to society, for those individuals who receive a liberal arts education rather than an education in applied or scientific fields of study. Dennis Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, will present data recently compiled for presentation at the annual national convention of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. These data present compelling evidence that a liberal arts education, on average, provides a substantial return on investment, albeit over a somewhat longer time frame than for more applied or scientific collegiate preparations.

Speaker: Dennis Jones, president, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)

Biographical Information on the Speaker

Dennis P. Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), has more than 40 years of experience in research, development, technical assistance, and administration in the field of higher education management and policymaking. A member of the NCHEMS staff since 1969, he assumed increasing levels of responsibility within that organization, becoming president in 1986. Under his leadership, and in collaboration with an extraordinarily talented staff, NCHEMS has achieved a position of preeminence as a leader in the development and promulgation of information-based approaches to policymaking in higher education. Jones is widely recognized for his work in such areas as: developing “public agendas” to guide state higher education policymaking; financing, budgeting, and resource allocation methodologies for use at both state
and institutional levels; linking higher education with states’ workforce and economic development needs; and developing and using information to inform policymaking. He has written many monographs and articles on these topics; has presented his work at many regional, national, and international conferences; and has consulted with hundreds of institutions and state higher education agencies on management issues of all kinds. Jones is a graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and served as an administrator (in business and institutional planning) there for eight years prior to his joining the NCHEMS staff. He has served as an advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education, Lumina Foundation, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and numerous other associations, policy organizations, and state agencies.