I would like to express my appreciation to the U.S. Department of Labor and Assistant Secretary of Labor Emily DeRocco for making this conference possible.

This is a critical moment in the history of our nation, both in terms of our economic history and the history of American higher education. It is probably the first time in the 230 years of our republic that we confront a number of factors that we have never before faced. Whether we realize it or not, all of us are affected by the pace of change around the globe. As a nation we may be doing well, but the same could be said for a lot of other nations, many of which have been picking up speed, and are, in fact, actually moving faster than the United States.

As a nation we face unprecedented competition on a vast scale. As the edge of economic transition sharpens, greater and greater disruption will become more commonplace than ever in the past, becoming the standard modality both in terms of labor markets and the workforce. More and more knowledge inputs are increasingly required to perform almost any job in the new global knowledge economy. Yet there are more engineers being trained in China today than in the United States. The convergence of such factors diminishes our competitiveness and leaves us vulnerable. And to address this vulnerability, innovation and creativity must be enhanced in our educational system.

In this global knowledge economy, education is the main driver for success, both for the individual and the collective. But in order to advance we must throw off some of the yokes of the past and rethink the entire concept of education. Learning is a lifelong process that begins when you are an infant and ends when you die. Our education and training and the skills we acquire both in the classroom and on the job contribute to our success and happiness, and largely determine how we work, where we work, how long we work, and how we change careers.

We need to rethink our institutions and become innovative in connecting them to the needs of society. Some colleges and universities are so little connected to one another or the needs of our society they may as well be orbiting on the dark side of Mars. There are community colleges that
have not established relationships with universities, and universities that do not have the kind of outreach required to make the right connections to their communities and constituencies. In order to succeed we must establish connections across the entire spectrum of our educational systems, from K–12 through community colleges and universities. At Arizona State University, for example, we have entered into a partnership with the local community college district that allows students to enroll in both the community college and the university but to attend the community college for as long as three years, if personal circumstance requires.

There is a vast disparity between our theoretical knowledge of how individuals learn and what we put into practice in the classroom. Our educational system does not reflect the fact that people learn in different ways. Academic culture recognizes verbal and mathematical intelligence, but what about emotional intelligence? This is a factor not even considered in admission to colleges and universities. SAT tests measure verbal, analytical, and mathematical reasoning, but that does not represent a complete picture, or indicate an individual’s potential to succeed.

We are mired in academic practices that are no longer relevant in this century. The standard academic calendar, for example, assuming that learning takes place during two semesters or three quarters followed by summers off, is a practice that requires reevaluation. And who still imagines that learning takes place only in our classrooms and libraries?

At Arizona State University we are pioneering a model for what we call a New American University. America is a place where every single individual should have access to something as fundamental as learning. We do not consider learning a privilege—we consider it a right. A New American University is an institution that offers excellence, inclusion, and impact.

At ASU we are not building a tiered university system where research is conducted on only one side of the street where only elite students are allowed. We are building an institution that aspires to excellence throughout, and where research and teaching are given equal accord. ASU represents academic excellence and inclusiveness, and this means that no one who is qualified to attend will be excluded. If your family income falls below the poverty line, and you are qualified to attend, the costs of your tuition, room, fees, books will be covered.

The New American University is committed to societal transformation. We are building an institution that combines excellence and commitment to the social, economic, cultural, and environmental well-being of the communities we serve. We seek to provide the best possible education, integrating knowledge, discovery, and learning, to the broadest possible spectrum of the community, embracing the educational needs of the entire population.

Not everyone has the same objective in seeking higher education. We need to develop new approaches to training individuals for the workforce. To respond to the needs of students seeking experience-based learning and applications-based problem solving, ASU is building a polytechnic campus that will enroll 15,000 students. It is designed to educate students with broad types of intelligence in a new curriculum focused on practical application. The campus is linked with community colleges, industry, and workforce developers, and prepares students for direct entry into the workforce. ASU will work at all levels to advance our mutual objectives with public schools, community colleges, and employers. The Arizona legislature is committed to our vision and has invested generously in advancing the campus.

Our colleges and universities are the most transformational institutions in society, but they are sometimes content to remain aloof and analytical rather than risk engagement.
It is time that our systems of higher education make a commitment to address inequality in this society. We must consider the societal consequences of a system of higher education that encourages the perpetuation of a class-based system of segregation: rich kids have opportunities to attend certain schools while poor kids go to other schools. These are inequalities that we must no longer tolerate.

As we have seen today, there are some of us that view the world differently. We need to work together. We need to find a way to take the processes of learning and discovery and adaptation and bring everyone together. Now is that moment. We must make a stand: Here is what we are about, this is what we are trying to do, and this is why we will make a commitment to work with the U.S. Department of Labor. All of us assembled here have the same objective: to prepare America for the future. At Arizona State University we are advancing this mission by building a New American University, devoted to excellence, inclusion, and impact. It is a vision that can transform colleges and universities everywhere.