

# Coming Home

EVAN S. DOBELLE

*You can't go home again.*

Or so they say. I have the rare opportunity to come home to New England. Moreover, I have the high honor of leading an organization that I believe will have quite a bit to say about whether the future of New England will be marked by worsening social and economic polarization or by true commonwealth.

The polar route is too familiar. Punish school districts because they are poor. Allow privilege to dominate college admissions. Build a wall between the college campus and the surrounding community. View the world beyond our national borders as little more than a source of cheap labor. Go it alone.

The route to shared regional prosperity, in contrast, is marked by partnership: innovative pre-K-20 educational partnerships, seamless pathways between two-year and four-year colleges, and a shared international savvy that seeks to understand and engage the world's vibrant cultures and emerging markets.

I come to NEBHE knowing something about this business of partnership. As president of Middlesex Community College, I had the experience of building new collaborations in the very different communities of Bedford and of Lowell, Mass. At Trinity College, I had the privilege of forging a remarkable partnership that bound together a private liberal arts college and a complicated Hartford community. In San Francisco and Hawaii, we energized huge urban

institutions with initiatives that revived neighborhoods as we forged vital partnerships with business and labor.

Unfortunately, however, I return to a New England whose commitment to educational excellence is under siege in Washington and under strain here at home.

Our region's knowledge-driven economy depends upon successful, accessible higher education systems. Yet the recent higher education budget proposals from the administration in Washington, and its recent revision of Pell Grant eligibility formulas, represent an extraordinary assault on higher education access and affordability.

**People everywhere exploit the name "New England" to convey an image of superior higher education. But we don't use it to our own advantage.**

From the Morrill Act that created land-grant universities in the 1860s through the post-World War II GI Bill and the Pell Grant legislation of the 1970s, our nation's leaders have recognized that educational opportunity is the ticket to the American Dream—and the hallmark of an upwardly mobile society. Now, some in Washington would stand squarely in



the door of our colleges and universities and tell middle-class working people, single parents, poor, minorities and recent immigrants that they need not apply. We need to resist these efforts to privatize opportunity.

In addition, we need to be more innovative here in New England. That begins with *meaningful* early childhood education programs for all our children. Kids who had effective pre-K experiences whether at Boys Clubs, YMCAs, CYOs or Head Start centers, tend to thrive. Kids who didn't may be already left behind when they enter first grade, destined for a life of remediation at every successive level. Yet the Head Start program for lower-income families is always underfunded.

We also need to find new ways to keep students on track to college and the educated workforce. The youngster who is about to drop out of high school is usually bored and lacking not intelligence, but direction. These kids can and must be engaged and excited by "early college high schools" combining high school and college or skills training programs modeled after European apprenticeship systems.

We need to nurture interactive, real-time distance learning programs, always keeping an eye on quality, which means, among other things, limiting class sizes and paying faculty the same for distance learning courses as for classroom instruction.

Most importantly, it has been said that the regions that will succeed in tomorrow's economy will be those that most effectively turn immigrants