INaugural Address
David E. Van Zandt
President

Introduction

Thank you.

I welcome and thank all of you for being here today: our Trustees led by Mike Johnston, our deans and vice presidents, members of the faculty, students, and staff, and my friends and family. Lisa and I have appreciated the warm welcome that all have extended to us over the past year. While many people have helped us get settled, I thank especially Tim Marshall, our Provost, for all his work for the school both before and after I arrived. It is great to come into a position such as this with a partner like Tim already in place.

I would also like to extend a special welcome to one of my predecessors in this position, Jonathan Fanton, who so ably led The New School for over 17 years, from 1982 through 1999. Unfortunately, my immediate predecessor, Bob Kerrey, could not be with us today, but I want to take this opportunity to thank him for all his efforts for The New School over the past ten years. Without the foundation that both Jonathan and Bob laid during their tenures, The New School would not be poised for its promising future. Finally, I am honored to have my mentor, former Northwestern University President Henry S. Bienen, participate today. No one gets anywhere without help, and Henry is certainly a major reason I am here.

Higher Education

It is my great honor to be asked to lead this remarkable and unique institution, The New School. And, this honor is magnified by being chosen to do that during a time of dramatic change in both higher education and the world. For generations, higher education in the United States has been one of our proudest institutions and a beacon for the rest of the world. This has remained so up to this very day even while we watch with dismay as our primary and secondary school systems have slumped.

But now, even higher education is coming under pressure. American higher education remains in tremendous demand around the world and our research still is the gold standard. It continues on average to be significant in the life chances of those who complete it and obtain degrees when compared to those who do not. But the world is changing: the costs of higher education have escalated and are reflected in increasing tuition. By choice or circumstance, governments have been less generous in supporting both private and public higher education and more belt tightening is certainly on its way.

The expense of pursuing a bachelors or higher degree is causing many potential students and their families to question whether it is worth the cost. First, almost 60% of those who start undergraduate programs in the United States do not graduate within six years. Even for those who do graduate, the career prospects appear dimmer. In particular, the traditional liberal arts education is struggling with relevance as employers question whether graduates, even college educated ones, have the skills necessary to compete. The plain vanilla Bachelor’s degree is becoming the new high school diploma in terms of what is required to obtain employment even at lower levels of pay. While it remains true that the job prospects for those with college degrees is far superior to those without, the higher levels of unemployment in our nation

---

1 A. Cole, K. Jayaram, & M. Laaboissiere, Boosting productivity in US higher education, McKinsey Quarterly (April 2011)
have hit those with college degrees, particularly those who have earned their degrees recently. In the past, an undergrad-
uate degree from any arguably decent college was a passport to good employment. Today, the quality or perceived quality
of the college and the education it provides makes a significant difference in those job chances and lifetime income.

All this has given critics of higher education a great playground. For example, Peter Thiel, the founder of Pay-Pal, argues
that if you are already talented, going to college does not have much value. He has offered the Thiel Fellowship—24
$100,000 fellowships to students if they drop out of college and go to work with mentors from Silicon Valley. A second
critique contained in the recently published book, Academically Adrift, provides substantial data to argue that traditional
liberal arts colleges do not have much impact on improving students’ critical thinking skills, one of the most significant
professed goals of the liberal arts education. Another critic, Richard Vedder, points to the fact that less than 40% of
students in four-year undergraduate programs graduate in six years, making paying for college a risky investment. More-
over, he claims, there is a significant mismatch between what colleges teach and the skills that the modern labor market
requires. He points out that college may be more of a process of social maturation because college enrollees average only
30 hours per week on going to class and studying. Finally, there is a lot of talk of the higher education bubble: our gov-
ernments and society in general have promoted the goal of providing higher education for everyone and have provided
students substantial loans to support that, just as we did with respect to the ideal that that everyone should own a home.
It may be that people are overinvesting in higher education.

While I do not agree with many of the points of these critiques, they certainly have some merit. Higher education has
not kept up in many ways. And the almost universal strong demand for higher education whether or not justified has
allowed us in the academy to increase prices and provide little fundamental improvement in return. Until now, few have
really asked us to be accountable for what we do: are students really learning what they need to know or what we say we
are teaching? Are we doing the best we can in terms of keeping costs down? Life has been too easy until recently.

**DRAMATIC CHANGES IN ECONOMY AND WIDER SOCIETY**

All these pressures and challenges for higher education are taking place in the context of tremendous change in the wider
society and economy. Globalization is a powerful trend and challenge to all of us. For the first time in history, more
people live in urban communities than do not. Our resources and environment are being strained and damaged, and the
search for more sustainable designs and practices is essential.

Finally, and most disturbingly, we have seen dramatic increases in inequality in income between those with education
and those without. This is most obvious in the decline of traditional manufacturing and other activities that require only
craft-based skills. Such industries used to provide blue collar jobs and middle-class incomes, often supported by strong
labor unions, to a large percentage of the population.

Many different factors have contributed to this gap. There is the never-ending pressure of globalization as the rest of
the world catches up to us and provides more competition for jobs and products. Technology has replaced many lower level
jobs and enabled outsourcing to other parts of the world. A third factor, particularly in the United States, has been the
mix of poor governmental policies and the inability of any government to impose their will on a global world.

This is a challenge for the entire world. There are no quick and easy solutions to the problem of the income gap. So, stu-
dents and their families certainly want them to be on the positive side of that divide. To do that, they need an education
that will give them the higher end abilities and skills needed to compete in this world. The advantage today goes to those
who are creative, innovative, and able to solve complex problems. Graduates today must also be adaptable in applying
their talents in new and ever-changing situations: the era of one job per career is fading. Technical skills are no longer
Enough. Steve Jobs said at the launch of the iPad:
“It’s in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing”.

Success in the future will not go to those who are simply smart and have studied traditional subjects or to those who have mastered a technical skill. It will go to those who understand both the problem and the context of the problem and how to design or create solutions that are efficiently and aesthetically satisfactory to real people. The problem may be how to create an aesthetic object of art or an effective product; it may be how to design an environment that is sustainable and meets the needs of its inhabitants; or it may be how to create and design an effective social organization. The most successful results will come from focusing on how people use, interact with, and improve the objects, environments and people around them.

**POSITION OF THE NEW SCHOOL: WHAT IS THE NEW SCHOOL?**

I firmly believe that The New School is positioned to prepare our students to navigate these challenges. And, I believe that because of what The New School is. But what is The New School?

One thing it certainly is not is “new”, in the sense of age. It was founded almost 100 years ago in 1919. No, the “new” in The New School means something different. That meaning varies, however, depending on whom you ask. There are different views of The New School out there based on the point of contact someone has with its programs.

- For those in Greenwich Village and the wider New York City community, The New School is a fixture on the cultural landscape because of the adult-continuing education courses in the arts and on social and political issues it has offered since its founding.
- Those in the drama world especially in New York City, know it as a place of cutting edge drama productions beginning in 1940 when Erwin Piscator and the Dramatic Workshop brought agit prop from Europe.
- My own knowledge of The New School comes from the fact that I am a sociologist. If you are an academic, particularly in the social sciences and if you come from or live abroad, The New School is the “University in Exile”, a place known for heterodox and left-leaning views and as the American base for the Frankfurt school of critical social theory. It is also known as the place that became the academic home for social scientists escaping fascism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. I certainly knew of The New School as the home of Claude Levi-Strauss, Leon Festinger, Alfred Schutz, Wolfgang Kohler, and Hannah Arendt.
- You will find other people, if you put your finger on the pulse of the New York City Jazz scene as well as in Tel Aviv, who know The New School through our wonderful our Jazz faculty and students.
- You have a whole other view of The New School if you live in the world of classical music in New York City or abroad. Mannes, The New School for Music, is well known as a training ground for performing classical musicians, but it is rarely thought of as connected to The New School.
- The same can be said for those in the art, fashion, and design world. Parsons is a global name, but again it is rarely thought of as being part of The New School.
- To college bound students and their parents, The New School is the Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts known as a small liberal arts college in an urban environment.
- Finally, and coming back to those in New York City, The New School is the Milano School and well known as a progressive management education institution for those in New York City government and non-profit organizations.

Why so many different versions of The New School? I believe it is because of its nature right from its founding. The New
School has always been mercurial, flexible, entrepreneurial, and willing to try new things. Its founders, who included Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, Thorsten Veblen, and John Dewey among others, saw their creation in opposition to the traditional university, such as Columbia from where most of the founders emigrated. In their mind, the traditional university structure was stifling and prone to conservatism. In fact, some of the basic founding principles of The New School were that it was to have no buildings, no endowment, and only a very small full-time faculty. The founders were progressives in the early 20th century meaning of that word: education needed to change with the times, much as laws needed to do the same. They did not want to build the structures that they thought ossified the traditional university education of the time. One might call this idea behind The New School “counter-University”; the Founders certainly did not want The New School to be a traditional university.

Some of the founders’ principles were quickly breached—we had a building by 1930, the wonderful Urban building in which we currently sit, and we began to build a sizable full-time faculty in 1933; unfortunately, we only got around to the endowment under Jonathan Fanton’s leadership in the 1980s, which Bob Kerrey did much to build.

However, The New School remained flexible and creative. When no one else would, it brought in and welcomed large numbers of academics fleeing Nazi Europe and built one of the finest social science schools ever. Even before then, its reputation in the arts grew as it provided a home to present the creations of avant-garde composers, choreographers, and theatrical directors such as Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and Martha Graham. In the area of public affairs, The New School engaged New York City, particularly working with the New York City government on urban issues. In undergraduate education, beginning in 1943, The New School provided access to higher education to individuals who were not traditional college students. The New School was always ahead of its time. The New School was never afraid to take chances in trying out the new and sometimes shocking others and speaking truth to power.

All of this was done on a financial shoestring. From the beginning, The New School had a flexible structure that was highly entrepreneurial and almost Darwinian. Activities for the most part had to support themselves both in terms of public interest in taking courses and in financial terms. There was a healthy turnover in programs and activities. Programs would rise, thrive for a period, and then close down as the public interest faded or the program leader departed. All the time, older programs were being replaced by newer ones. The New School remained at the cutting edge. The “New” in our name does not refer to our youthfulness but to the fact that we were always pushing the envelope.

From this, I believe I can summarize the essence of The New School in two ideas:

- First, The New School is creative, innovative, and always strives to be on the cutting edge or avant-garde. It is entrepreneurial sometimes to a fault. It does not do traditional things or try to copy traditional universities. If anything, it distrusts the past and past practices. It focuses on the creative and the emergent whether that is a new art form, design idea, or idea about society. And it is flexible.

- Second, The New School is engaged with the world, with an intent to improve it. The New School is engaged with New York City, and it is engaged with the rest of the globe, particularly the urbanizing world. The point of that public engagement is to pursue social justice, to right wrongs, and to make the city, urban life, and the world better. Its teaching practices have always been and continue to this day to be embedded in New York City and the world around it. It has never been ivy-towered. Right from the beginning with its adult education courses, it sought to bring open social and political debate as well as new forms of art and aesthetics to the Greenwich Village community and that engagement has spread throughout the world. Our activities today are truly global.

WHERE WE ARE HEADED
So where are we headed? Because of its history, its New York City location, and its DNA, The New School is well positioned to be a leader in higher education. Our students and faculty have the privilege of living and studying in one of the greatest urban communities on earth, an earth that is increasingly urban. Another strong trait of The New School is its global nature and outlook. We have the most international undergraduate student body in the United States. And our alumni are spread around the world working in governments, universities, design firms, and NGOs. Most importantly and distinctively, The New School has the creativity, flexibility, and engagement to provide a different kind of education to prepare our students to succeed in this dramatically changed world.

The New School is not a traditional university and never should aspire to be one. By doing so, it would only water down, even destroy, its essence. It will not and cannot be all things to all people. It should remain true to its self and not try to be what it is not.

Fortunately, but not surprisingly given The New School’s history, what it is today is what will make the difference in the world going forward. It is what the world needs. It must focus itself on creating and preparing graduates in all of its programs to be creative problem solvers devoted to improving the world around them. The New School itself must remain publicly engaged through its educational practices here in the Village, New York City, and the other side of the world.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Looking at the current state of our society and economy and the current stresses on higher education, we have a great responsibility to our students. We must be accountable for all we do. Unlike some of the elite traditional colleges and universities, we are tuition-based and thus highly dependent on what our students pay us, often by borrowing large sums of money. The trust they show us means that we in turn owe them a great education that will prepare them for the flexible and challenging careers they face. For our undergraduates, we must be sure that they graduate with the basic competencies that all college graduates must have:

• They should be inquisitive, able to think critically and broadly, and possess the ability and desire to continue learning over their entire lives.
• Every student should be a master of multiple forms of communication—written, oral, and technological.
• No student should leave here without:
  o a basic quantitative literacy,
  o a basic understanding of the scientific method, and
  o a basic comprehension and willingness to embrace technology.
• Finally, in a world that is only more and more diverse, no student can thrive without substantial cross-cultural knowledge and the competence to work with, understand, and help people across all types of cultures and beliefs.

I and many others believe that all colleges dedicated to the liberal arts should try to provide their undergraduate students with those basic competencies in one form or another. That is a challenge for all higher education, certainly not unique to The New School.

But The New School must do more in preparing its students. In addition to these basic general competencies, we must be sure that our graduates come out with an additional set of competencies, broad abilities informed by social science and other research, that uniquely prepare them for the world I have described. It is these competencies and focus that I believe all New School graduates should acquire to succeed both professionally and personally in the creative and innova-
tive parts of our culture and economy. We must form students who are:

- Flexible and adaptable,
- Creative in a broad-based way that understands history and differences
- Publicly engaged
- Oriented toward and eager to solve problems of many types, and
- Able to work effectively on teams in doing so.

As you will have noticed, I was not as definitive in describing the creative competencies that should be unique to The New School. That is our work ahead. We must reach out to learn from and work with those industries and organizations in the creative economy in which our students will spend their careers. My challenge to our community—our faculty, our students, our alumni, our staff, and our Trustees—is both to identify those competencies and alter our educational practices as needed to ensure that our students graduate with these crucial creative abilities.

Whatever New School competencies we identify, however, we must be accountable to our students in providing them. We must be sure that our students leave here with both the general and creative competencies, and we must be able to demonstrate that to the outside world. That means understanding, following, caring about, and working for our graduates throughout their careers.

PUBLICLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

A second reason that The New School is so well suited to the challenging environment in which we live is its commitment to rigorous future-oriented and applied scholarship. We must give priority to research that develops a critical understanding of creative, cultural, and emergent social practices. We live in a wonderful “urban laboratory” that provides opportunities to study and improve the world around us. We enjoy a unique opportunity among universities around world. We can meld our commitment to understanding and educating our students on creative and innovative design practices with our well recognized capabilities in the social sciences. No other educational institution has that type of ability and breadth. We must be focused on this great area of creativity that has the promise of doing so much to improve the world and extend our dedication to social justice.

COMMITMENT TO INNOVATING OURSELVES

Finally, in taking on these challenges, we must also challenge how we work. It is not easy to be creative and innovative in an organization that is not. The New School is not and never should be a traditional university. We should not fall victim to the traditions of the university that often stifle the ability to change, create, design, and express. Our own culture must be one of flexibility and innovativeness. Not only should we prepare our students to be creative and innovative problem solvers and contribute cutting-edge research on creative and social design practices; we as an institution should be a leading innovator in how we do our work: how we teach, how we organize ourselves, and how we support our academic efforts.

CONCLUSION

I want to close with this: The New School approach is framed by our distinctive legacy of progressive political and social engagement and a history of entrepreneurship, creativity, and broad notions of design. We must be dedicated to the “New”: the avant garde, the emergent, the cutting edge, the creative. We will not be all things to all people, but we will focus on what we do best, and we will look for students and faculty who wish to be part of that enterprise.
We have much work to do. I have tried to lay out a general direction, but it is now up to all of us to tackle the challenges that the world presents to higher education and our world. While we should always be critically reconsidering what we do in an effort to be better, the past 8 months have been and the next few years will certainly be an intensive period of doing just that.

I am excited by the challenges we face, and I urge all of our community to join me in working to address them. My hope is that each of you will share the excitement I feel and take tremendous pride not only in the wonderful past of our school, but also in its promise as we strive to be at the cutting edge in preparing our students for a changing future, a future that puts the focus on making the world a better place.

Thank you.