This summer I was invited to Prague to serve as a featured speaker at an international conference entitled, "New Horizons in Education." I did not use state funds for this trip. The conference organizers paid all expenses for two Governors State University colleagues and for me because those planning the conference knew that educators from around the world were eager for our insights on the conference's theme, "New Horizons" -- ideas for teaching innovation and creativity.

It was astonishing to observe the participants' hunger for ways to transform higher education in their countries. Educators from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Russia, Mexico, Taiwan -- 15 different countries -- flocked to our sessions and sought us out for further discussion. I came away from that conference with a clear understanding that the United States is truly the envy of the world for our capacity to reform education to meet 21st century needs.

We are familiar with newspaper headlines criticizing the performance of U.S. students on math achievement. We know we have fallen behind in the percentage of adults with college degrees. And, let's make no mistake about it, we must improve on those measures. But let's also acknowledge our opportunities to lead the world in creative, innovative and critical thinking.

At the "New Horizons" conference, my colleagues and I better understood that education in other countries depends to a great extent on formulaic, rote learning. Because educators in most countries are answerable to national ministries of education, educational reform, actually creative change of any kind, is exceedingly difficult. Ministries of education are notoriously political.

The conference underlined for me the relative freedom we have in U.S. higher education. While elected officials may seek improvements in our system of regional accreditation, I believe that anything that moves in the direction of a U.S. ministry of education would...

suppress the greatest strength of higher education in this country — our freedom to innovate and to teach students to be creative thinkers.

I returned to Governors State University with a renewed commitment to make the best possible use of this freedom.

As we plan for our first freshman class in August 2014, we have the opportunity to create a first-year college experience from the ground up. GSU faculty members are working hard within the framework of the Illinois Articulation Initiative -- core courses in general education -- which will transfer to any Illinois public college or university.

But GSU faculty members are designing ways to infuse the teaching of creative, innovative and ethical thinking into these courses. Imagine a freshman composition course that stimulates students to think outside conventional frames of reference, to write about the ethical implications of decisions, and to consider the civic consequences of a well-argued editorial.

Preparing students for the 21st century means education for new horizons, a world dominated by change. The United States is the leader in this endeavor, and we expect Governors State University to be an inspiring model of what higher education in a free society can accomplish.

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