Paul L. Gaston, a consultant to Lumina Foundation, was scheduled to speak at the DEAC meeting in Indianapolis in April and was looking forward in particular to the discussion. The following executive summary has been prepared for DEAC members in the hope that a discussion may still take place.

Unlocking the Nation’s Potential
A Model to Advance Quality and Equity in Education Beyond High School
An Executive Summary for Distance Education Leaders—and a Modest Proposal

Since its founding, Lumina Foundation has maintained a consistent focus on the three closely related requisites for the expansion of genuine educational opportunity beyond high school—access, quality, and equity. In the fall of 2018, the Foundation convened a Quality Credentials Task Force to develop recommendations on two of these requisites: ensuring quality in postsecondary education and expanding equity for those who are underserved and disadvantaged.

The 22 prominent individuals (college presidents, analysts, workforce experts, accreditation leaders, association CEOs) who accepted the foundation’s invitation to serve on the Task Force expressed their charge memorably: “Without improved quality, there can be no meaningful equity. Without improved equity, claims for quality ring hollow.”

That recognition informs all four of the task force’s recommendations. For a full overview of the work of the task force, please order your free copy of the report, “Unlocking the Nation’s Potential: A Model to Advance Quality and Equity Beyond High School,” by dropping an email to www.luminafoundation.org You can also read the full report online at https://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/unlocking-the-nations-potential For this executive summary, the four recommendations may be summarized as follows:

• Better data, gathered broadly, organized systematically, and made more widely accessible should guide postsecondary educators in making better decisions and in collaborating more effectively and efficiently.

• Providers should offer students clearer and more coherent educational pathways.

• Postsecondary constituencies should “operationalize a commitment to quality and equity” by working together in the interest of “correcting historical wrongs and creating a brighter future for all.”

• The postsecondary education community should seek to mitigate the consequences for students of abrupt institutional closures and mergers.

The report expresses the view that such reforms will require (1) the coordination of institutional efforts with those of government, accreditors, and associations and (2) dynamic and cooperative leadership within and on behalf of all sectors. By the close of 2019, the recommendations of the Task Force were gaining traction, action planning was well under way, and there was every reason to believe that significant progress would be made in 2020. Then the pandemic began—and the problems at the heart of the Task Force recommendations were exacerbated.

In particular, inequities in access to quality distance education and to the technology it requires have become more apparent. Although many experienced distance education providers were well prepared for the
challenge, less experienced and less well prepared institutions have had to ask faculty members to familiarize themselves almost overnight with good practice in distance education—an impossible task for many. In time, additional training and the eventual relaxation of distancing requirements will help to ameliorate the problem, but the inequities revealed by the crisis will have to be addressed. The leadership of experienced distance education leaders will be critical.

The purpose of this executive summary is to invite you to reflect on the role distance education leaders can play in addressing these recommendations—a role that has become even more pivotal in light of the pandemic and the influence it will likely continue to have on postsecondary education.

You will doubtless be able to suggest additional questions your experience and expertise have prepared you to address, but, for the present, we suggest the following as a point of departure for further discussion:

• Although the pandemic may in some respects be “distance education’s moment,” opportunities may be offset by risks. How do you define these opportunities, and what are your recommendations for taking advantage of them? What risks do you see, and what are your recommendations for addressing them?

• What advice would you offer to institutions neither experienced in nor well prepared for offering instruction exclusively or primarily on-line? Are there criteria concerning quality distance education you might share more broadly? Are there consultants you would recommend? Are there resources that might prove helpful?

• Looking ahead to a post-pandemic age, do you anticipate significant growth in distance education? If so, how well prepared are you to lead that growth? Or do you anticipate a return to “business as usual”—recognizing, of course, that “business as usual” is likely to include increasing reliance on distance education over time.

• What advice can you offer to higher education with respect to the equity issues made conspicuous by the pandemic? As the New York Times and other sources have reported, the suspension of traditional instruction has revealed profound disparities. Some students have access both to adequate technology and to experienced instruction. Many have neither. Should distance education accreditation seek to assert a stronger influence in this regard?

Please consider these questions and direct your responses to Lumina Foundation’s consultant on this project, Paul Gaston, at pga@kent.edu as you prepare to participate in this webinar conversation.