A Joyful Series of Breakthroughs

An Interview with

MOLLY BROAD

A leading spokesperson for American higher education, Molly Corbett Broad has written and presented widely on strategic planning for higher education, K-16 partnerships, information technology, globalization, and biotechnology. She became the twelfth president of the American Council on Education (ACE) in 2008. She was the first woman to lead the organization since its founding ninety years earlier, in 1918.
Broad came to ACE from the University of North Carolina (UNC), where she served as president from 1997 to 2006, leading UNC through a period of unprecedented enrollment growth. Due in large part to the success of the Focused Growth Initiative, minority enrollment at UNC grew at more than double the rate of the overall student body during her tenure. She also spearheaded the creation of a need-based financial aid program for in-state undergraduates and the establishment of the College Foundation of North Carolina.

Before her tenure at UNC, Broad was with the California State University system, where she served as senior vice chancellor for administration and finance from 1992 to 1993 and as executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer from 1993 until her election as UNC president four years later. Earlier in her career, Broad served as the chief executive officer for Arizona's three-campus university system (1985–1992) and in a succession of administrative posts at Syracuse University (1971–1985).

Broad graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a baccalaureate degree in economics from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, where she earned a General Motors Scholarship. She holds a master's degree in economics from The Ohio State University.

Earlier this year, Broad talked with EDUCAUSE President and CEO John O'Brien about her early career, her gratefulness for opportunities, her views on technology and higher education today, and her advice to IT professionals (“put on your running shoes”).

JOHN O'BRIEN: Throughout your career, you've been a champion of the role that information technology can play in higher education. Where did your interest in technology start?

MOLLY BROAD: I think it all started when I was in college and I was taking statistics. I didn't know anything about statistics, but it was a required course, and I loved it. That's where I met my future husband, Bob. The story he tells is that I set the curve in the class. After a number of occasions on which that happened, he decided to take me out for coffee.

So this course at Syracuse University was where my interest in information technology began. I was intrigued with statistics. Then, after graduation and after Bob and I married, he was transferred to Ohio, and at that point I went to Ohio State for my master's degree in economics. While working on my thesis, I had a great opportunity to take advantage of the IT capacities at the university. This was during the time of punch cards. I was doing some analysis on the tax structure of the state of Ohio, so I was calculating the sums of the squares and the sums of the cross products, it was earth-shattering to me, realizing the powerful mathematics that were possible and that you couldn't do with a pencil and paper. It was such a new expansion of what mathematics can accomplish in partnership with technology.

We returned to Syracuse when Bob was transferred back. At the university, I was working on the earliest effort to use digital technologies as telephones. We did the store-and-forward from one college campus to another university, until it reached the ultimate destination. Can you believe that?

“I have experienced this. When I put the plugs in to build the sums of the squares and the sums of the cross products, it was earth-shattering to me, realizing the powerful mathematics that were possible and that you couldn't do with a pencil and paper.”

O'BRIEN: I remember the first time I saw this thing called email. You could see it go from Boston University, to George Washington, and on . . .

BROAD: It really was quite amazing. I found this all to be so intriguing that it clearly became part of my DNA, even when my job evolved into something entirely different over the course of the years.

O'BRIEN: Do you think we’ve lost that joy, that amazement, that sense of “wow”?

BROAD: No. I absolutely do not think we have. I certainly haven’t lost it. I may be more apprehensive about technology now than I was before, because the level of potential and the complexity is very,
very challenging. I’m finding it harder to keep up with technology, and I’m sure I’m not alone with this problem. But it is inspiring at the same time. Don’t you think?

O’BRIEN: Oh, I do. My story would be very similar. Technology gives me a sense of wonder that I haven’t lost yet.

BROAD: I believe the role that technology can play in teaching and learning is just beginning to unfold. I can imagine that we could conduct online courses, and using various cognitive capabilities from artificial intelligence, we could provide opportunities for students to think of information technology more as a utility than as a very important vehicle for deepening students’ understanding. We’re going to have to move beyond that.

When we think about what the future holds, and about how we’re going to sustain and grow our economy, clearly we’re going to have to provide opportunities for individuals—potential students—who are juggling family responsibilities and a job. If we want colleges and universities to be successful, and if we want students to be successful, we must deliver education in ways that we have not done traditionally.

Lumina Foundation’s Goal 2025 calls for 60 percent of Americans to hold a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential by 2025. This involves increasing the number of people with credentials by more than half. I think this is going to result in some uncomfortable changes. But don’t we all need to be able to adapt when change is on the horizon?

O’BRIEN: What is needed for us to move beyond taking technology for granted? Do you believe that the senior campus IT leader needs to be part of the president’s cabinet?

BROAD: Absolutely. It’s very worrisome to me that IT leaders are not engaging as fully as possible with the chief academic officer and with the president. I hope that changes.

O’BRIEN: This is the biggest component of the EDUCAUSE “Expanded Partnerships and Collaboration” priority. Information technology is both a strategic opportunity and a strategic risk, and it can’t be buried in an institution.

BROAD: Right. I remember when I was on the first board of trustees for Internet2 in 1997. This was at a time when U.S. corporations wouldn’t invest in the development of an expanded Internet because the leaders didn’t think that they could recover their investment. So in October 1996, 34 universities made a multi-year commitment to build the first version of Internet2. We did it because we had faculty and students who were eager to take full advantage of the potential of the Internet.

To think about it now, and about the potential loss of net neutrality today, it seems that what higher education invested in has somehow been eclipsed by wealthy corporations that have the capacity to outbid us. If only the FCC chairman would have a further thought and conclude that net neutrality is good for the whole country—not just for certain parts of it.

O’BRIEN: As you look at this and other challenges facing colleges and universities today, what else would you urge EDUCAUSE members to pay attention to and why?

BROAD: I think the transformation of how higher education is delivered and how faculty members support, advise, and guide learners is going to be critical to a significant segment of colleges and universities.

But I also hope that we will continue to have strong liberal arts colleges, along with other higher education institutions where 18-year-olds can go and be transformed in the process of deciding what they want to be when they are fully developed.

At the same time, it is vital that we find ways—very different ways, no doubt—to make it possible for individuals to get a job, or to keep a job, or to get a better job. This is, I think, going to be very taxing on all of us. But to fail to keep up is to have an economy that is not maximizing our potential.

O’BRIEN: We’ve also seen a lowering
of the public’s perceptions of the value of higher education. It’s distressing.

BROAD: Yes, it is distressing. I don’t want to blame it on the media, but I do think that the simplicity of how the media is describing higher education is not fully accurate. It’s quite disturbing to have so many students believe that their higher education wasn’t worth what it cost them. We’ve got to do a better job, certainly, but I think the press has hyped the cost of higher education. When states were not generating enough revenue in the 2008 recession and they had to make cuts, the largest discretionary part of their budget was higher education. It was very easy to just chop off the funding for a portion of higher education.

O’BRIEN: Another disconcerting trend, and another that is a priority for EDUCAUSE, is the continuing underrepresentation of women in information technology. As a pioneering woman in higher education, do you have thoughts on this topic?

BROAD: In June 2017, ACE released American College President Study 2017, which shows that women (30%) and persons of color (17%) are still far behind in the percentage that they represent in leadership positions. We’re making progress, but it is very slow. I am nevertheless very optimistic that, ultimately, the full value that women can bring to their families, and also to the economy and the workforce, is going to be increasingly important. Maybe because we need that talent, we’ll be able to reach out more deeply than we have.

O’BRIEN: Your career is an inspiration not just to women but to all of us. Of your accomplishments, what makes you most proud?

BROAD: I don’t feel a sense of pride. I just feel so fortunate. People saw in me what I didn’t see in myself and gave me a chance and urged me to try new things. I’m very grateful and appreciative of all the faculty members who urged me to reach out a little farther than I thought was safe.

O’BRIEN: Who were your mentors? Who were the people inspiring you to reach?

BROAD: I was so lucky. I received a full scholarship—tuition plus room and board—at Syracuse University, and I felt a strong responsibility to make that investment in me worthwhile. I had the benefit of an extraordinary number of faculty members who supported me throughout my college life and beyond—the finest faculty members.

When I went to Ohio State, there was a very senior, very smart individual who took me in. He thought I looked like “a deer in the headlights.” He was very helpful to me in getting my arms around the next phase of technology. So I have had the benefit of many individuals who gave me a chance because they saw something that I might not have seen in myself.

O’BRIEN: Clearly you haven’t lost that sense of gratefulness and humility. How did you keep that even while you took on all your prestigious appointments, with their incredible influence and power?

BROAD: I don’t know how to answer. I’m grateful for all the opportunities that I have been given, which went way beyond what I could ever have expected. It is easy to be humble when you’re the beneficiary of some investment or some hard work that somebody else provided for you. I hope that students in American higher education can feel that way—can feel that there’s someone who sees in them what they may not see in themselves and who helps them reach as far as they can.

O’BRIEN: Do you have any advice for IT professionals who may be
wondering where they want to go or whether they want to be a CIO?

**BROAD:** I'd say they need running shoes, because the pace at which technology and higher education is changing is so rapid that it is very difficult to stay still. No one really knows what the impact of technology is going to look like—not even as soon as two, three, or four years from now. So my advice is: put on your running shoes.

**O’BRIEN:** Do you have education-related plans for your retirement?

**BROAD:** We have seen a fifty percent increase in mental illness in college students over just one year. That is stunning to me. We also have large numbers of college students who do not have food security. I’ve been asked if I would be willing to collaborate with two other former university presidents and with some foundations doing work in these areas. My overall plan is to see if I can help other people in the ways that I was so lucky to have support and help, both from my family and from higher education. Since I have been the beneficiary of so many good things, I would be grateful to have a chance to help others.

**O’BRIEN:** Will there be a Facebook account in your future?

**BROAD:** I have a Facebook account now, but it’s very quiet. That’s mostly because my time continues to be consumed by current work. I will not be at the cutting edge, for sure, but I will try to be as technologically strong as I possibly can.

**O’BRIEN:** So it’s not your dream to be off the grid?

**BROAD:** No, no, no. I am definitely not going to be off the grid in my retirement.

**Notes**
1. Lumina Foundation, Goal 2025 (website).

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