EXECUTIVE PROFILE

BILL HANSEN
President and CEO, USA Funds

William D. Hansen, President and CEO of USA Funds, has more than 30 years of experience in education at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, including 15 years of service in the public sector and 20 years in the corporate and nonprofit sectors.

Hansen served as deputy U.S. secretary of education from 2001-2003 and was chairman and CEO of the Madison Education Group, a Washington, D.C. consulting firm. He also served as president of Policy Impact Communications, a Washington-based public relations and government affairs firm. Hansen joined USA Funds in July 2013.
Foundation: You’ve held leadership roles in government and the private sector. What spurred your passion and involvement in education?

Hansen: Improving education has been a lifelong passion for me. I was fortunate to have great role models within my own family. After her husband died, and while she was raising three children, at age 50, my grandmother went back to college to get her degree to become a teacher. My dad was a teacher as well. And I’ve had a unique opportunity both to shape education policy during my service in the federal government and to develop innovative tools to improve education through the leadership roles I’ve held in several private-sector companies.

Foundation: How are you transforming the work of USA Funds to support the mission of “Completion with Purpose”?

Hansen: For the last 50 years, USA Funds has been one of the most innovative nonprofit organizations promoting higher education access for students from every socioeconomic level. Given the tough economy and the pressures facing higher education, we are now looking to step up to the plate and be part of the solution. We’re focusing on what I like to call “completion with a purpose”—to reshape higher education to bring better alignment between the skills of college grads and the needs of employers; to bring technology to bear to improve the affordability and effectiveness of higher education; to help students pick the right college, the right degree, and the right financing that will lead to rewarding careers and fulfilling futures.

Foundation: How do you see the future of higher education evolving?

Hansen: There have been many smart people talking about the “unbundling” of higher education. Largely through technology and online learning opportunities, students now have ever-expanding options to pick and choose their education services from a variety of providers. In addition, the student demographic has changed dramatically. There are an awful lot of 25-to-45-year-old working adults who are going back to school to complete that degree they never finished or are trying to retool their skills because of the tough job market. So the delivery models have been disrupted and will need to continue to change to meet the changing demands of students, working adults, and employers.

Foundation: What is the greatest innovation in education today?

Hansen: The rapid advances in technology are dramatically changing the ways students learn. Because of the technology tools they have, my own children and grandchildren interact socially and learn in very different ways than the people of my generation did. Technology is changing just about every sector of the economy, so it is having a dramatic impact on how we teach, the way we learn, and how people prepare for jobs and new opportunities.
Foundation: What is the biggest challenge we face in transforming higher education?

Hansen: Frankly, it’s changing the delivery model and all the rules, regulations, and financial systems that are built around that model. The financial aid model, the accreditation model, the accountability models are all antiquated. The systems are very cumbersome. I think the cost drivers, the regulatory drivers, and the other impediments to change are the greatest obstacles to overcome at the state, federal, and institutional levels.

Foundation: What is your vision for the impact that USA Funds can have on student success in higher education?

Hansen: We’ve had some terrific history in helping students make the right choices with our financial literacy, default prevention, debt management, and other tools that we’re looking to build on to broaden our impact on improving higher education outcomes. Among our goals would be to provide students with more affordable higher education programs and more postsecondary options so they are not saddled with student loan debt that is going to preclude them from pursuing the dreams that they would like to go after. We would also hope that our efforts would result in students being better prepared for the workforce, so more graduates find meaningful employment related to their studies.

Foundation: How important is the business community’s involvement in education and education reform?

Hansen: It’s probably more important now than it’s ever been. Approximately 4 million jobs go unfilled in our economy because we are not graduating students with the skill sets that the business community demands. So there’s got to be a better alignment in workforce supply and demand. The business community has to step up in a big way to identify both today’s jobs that are in demand and also looking down the road the next 5, 10, 20 years of what the jobs of the future will be and what are the requirements that students need to meet to be prepared to fill those jobs.

Foundation: What’s the biggest misconception business leaders have about education and likewise the biggest misconception that educators have about business’ involvement in education?

Hansen: In all of my business experience running different companies, we always looked at our customers and suppliers as making rational, market-driven decisions whenever we were buying from or selling to our partners in the supply chain. Frankly, education hasn’t necessarily been perceived as a market-driven supplier of what businesses need. There needs to be better dialogue, better information going back and forth, both with the companies’ expectations as well as the education sector’s expectations. This enhanced dialogue between business and the academy needs to take place at all levels because a company CEO may not know as well as the supervisor on the factory floor what skills are really needed in the organization’s employees.

What advice would you give a student considering what path to take after high school?

Hansen: It’s so important for students to assess who they are, what they want to be, and to make smart, informed decisions about how they’re going to get from here to there. College may or may not be the right choice for every student. There are many different ways to get the skill sets that you need through different training and education options. But everyone needs to get a very firm foundation of basic skills because our economy changes, our labor market changes, and so you are likely to change jobs several times during your career. I’d suggest students discover what their passion is and pursue opportunities that will allow them to apply their skills to an area that’s of interest to them.