

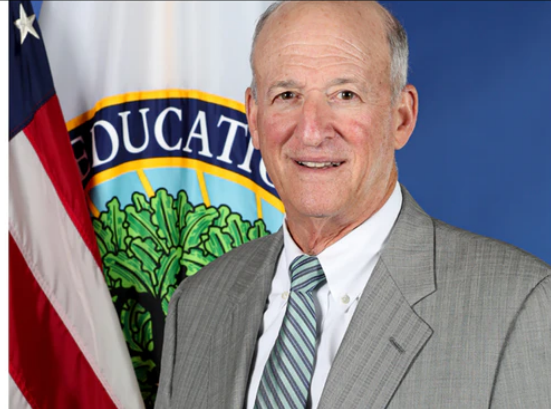
Interviews with Influencers: Robert King



Interviews *with* INFLUENCERS

ROBERT
KING

*Assistant Secretary for
Postsecondary Education at the
US Department of Education*



Nicole Siegel

Senior Education
Communications
Manager

[@NSiegel_DC](https://twitter.com/NSiegel_DC)

Bob King's career in civil service has spanned nearly 4 decades, with the last 20+ years focusing specifically on higher education, with his first role serving as the Chancellor of the State University System of New York (SUNY)- the largest comprehensive system of higher education in the US with 64 campuses. The job offer came as a surprise to him, having little to no previous experience working in higher education. But nearly two decades later, just a few months after being confirmed as Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education at the Department of Education, it's clear that King has found his calling. That's why we jumped at the chance to chat with him – just a few weeks into his new post at the Department.

Q: You've served as Chancellor of the SUNY system, President of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, and were recently confirmed as Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education at the Department of Education. What

inspired you to work in education, and what keeps you interested?

A: I would say that what really got my interest flowing in education was when I served in the New York State Legislature, and served on the committee on education. I began to see not just the importance of education, but the deficiencies within our public education system – at the point focusing more on K-12 than higher education. When I was asked to serve as Chancellor of the State University of New York, I was surprised. I had little experience with higher education at that time, but the chairman of the board said I had other skills that really mattered, and they could teach me about higher education. And so I agreed. In the five and a half years I served as Chancellor of SUNY, I fell in love with higher education. I saw how vitally important it is to the future of our country, and how transformative it is for people's lives.

So that's how I got hooked, I guess. And much of my career since has been dedicated to working in higher education. *(King also spent time working at a foundation in Arizona– the largest single provider of scholarships in the state, other than the universities themselves. And during this time he became friends with and a big fan of Arizona State University president, Michael Crow, who King calls “one of the most dynamic university presidents in the country.” [You can read our interview with him here!](#))*

Q: What was your most memorable experience as Chancellor? And how did that experience shape your work in policy both in Kentucky and now in DC?

A: There are two experiences that come to mind immediately. One was developing a really deep understanding of the importance of community colleges. They are critical to the economy, and a gateway to postsecondary education for many students. I found at the community colleges, faculty were sometimes dealing with students who were less

prepared, or returning to continue their education from the workforce. This resulted in much deeper relationships with faculty and their students, which you don't always see in traditional four year schools.

The other story that comes to mind was the launch of SUNY's Centers of Excellence. When I was Chancellor, many states had just benefitted from large tobacco settlements, and New York was one. There was a big push for the SUNY system (with four medical schools and three hospitals) to invest in biotech, but a physics professor at SUNY Albany approached me and said there were other promising technologies we should invest in. After many conversations with the Governor and key stakeholders, we married funds from state, university, federal and private sector resources to create these centers. The most successful program on Nanoscale Engineering and Nanotechnology was housed at SUNY Albany. The program started to attract graduates of Harvard, MIT, and Princeton (to name a few) and to date has attracted nearly \$14 billion of investment in and around the Albany area.

Q: What's one change to federal higher education policy you hope to see made during your time at the Department?

A: Well, there's my dream, and then there's reality. A change I believe I can legitimately address in the near term is to focus on how we measure the effectiveness of the grants we administer. Tens of millions of dollars go out the door every year, but we don't do much to determine whether or not they're actually having an impact on students. We tend to measure how much money the grantees spent down on their grant. But the grant is just a vehicle we use to try and improve student outcomes, so we need to change what we're measuring. Sometimes (as I learned during my time in Kentucky), the strategies that are being funded by the grants are not always effective. We need to stop spending money on what's not working. We need to require that grantees track

data to help us understand whether or not their program is actually having an impact on students in a favorable way.

The other change I'd like to make, if I have the time of course, is to observe that each state in the US has a strategic plan in place for their higher education system. The federal government doesn't. We need to have a plan that helps guide how we spend the federal dollars we expend on postsecondary education. Collectively, we have this incredible resource that is our nation's higher education institutions. Our prosperity grows out of having a highly educated, highly trained workforce, and we can all be doing a better job to ensure we're creating systems of higher education that work for our students and our future.

Q: Folks on both sides of the aisle have been talking about how we can ensure students and taxpayers get a return on their investment in higher ed. What do you think the federal government's role should be in that space?

A: I think we're starting to respond to that directly through the College Scorecard. A number of states, and now the federal government, have been developing these longitudinal data systems. By following a student from their postsecondary journey into the workforce, we have access to data that can better inform prospective college students about the choices they seek to pursue. And the College Scorecard is moving in the direction of being able to do that for every college that is eligible to receive students who are Pell- and subsidized loan-eligible. So now students and families will have an opportunity to say, "If I go to this university, here's the likelihood I'll complete, here's how much I could reasonably expect to earn. Or at least this would be the range that I could expect." So those systems, which were developed in a handful of states are now being proliferated across the country, and federal student aid is working on that. It's a very high priority for the Secretary.

Q: Who are your influencers in education and beyond, folks that come to mind for you?

A: Boy, there's a lot of, a lot of people. I would say that a lot of the thinking that Michael Crow has given to higher education in his book, *The New American University*, is pretty powerful. It's pretty dense, but it's worth reading.

I've also been influenced very heavily by a guy named W. Edwards Deming, who was the father of total quality management – a management approach to long-term success through customer satisfaction and data driven, continuous improvement. I had an opportunity to have lunch with him one day, and as lunch is playing out and people are asking him questions, his first response to people's questions was: “How do you know? Did you measure it?” And that was incredibly powerful. So that's why I ask around the Department all the time: How do we know this? Are we measuring the right thing? I remember in law school one of the professors told us that you can't get the right answer unless you're asking the right question. Data gathering is really critical. We have lots of data around here, but it's gotta be the right data.

Q: According to your Wikipedia page – source of all mostly factual information on the Internet (*said cheekily*), you've lived in a bunch of states including NY, CT, TN, AZ, KY, and now DC. Do you have a favorite? Where would you choose to retire?

A: I love New York. I don't love the winters, but I learned how to ski, and so winter is pretty tolerable, most of it. But growing up in upstate New York—and I had a home for many years on the shores of Lake Champlain, which is the beautiful lake that separates New York and Vermont, up in the

mountains—it's tough to beat that. Kentucky is also fabulous, it is a wonderful state. It's not without its challenges, but the people are fabulous. There's great food and there's great music - I'm a big bluegrass music fan. Arizona is a pretty special place as well. I'll tell you, I didn't expect to enjoy living here in DC, and I've been pleasantly surprised. And I'm a baseball fan, so I'm learning to love the Nats, although I'm still a Yankees fan at heart. (*Assuming the Washington Nationals new title as World Series champs has affirmed King's love of the team!*)

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