

# Archived Information

A NATIONAL DIALOGUE:  
The Secretary of Education's Commission  
on the Future of Higher Education

## ISSUE PAPER

*Second in a series of Issue Papers released at the request of Chairman Charles Miller to inform the work of the Commission*

### Accountability/Assessment

Charles Miller & Geri Malandra

*Summary: The following material sets out many of the problems faced in higher education today, as well as some promising efforts in dealing with those problems. These problem statements provide a decision path by which the Commission in making its recommendations might deal with such problems, with a focus on "accountability."*

#### The Problems

Most Americans believe that higher education in the United States is the best in the world---and there is much to make us proud.

- More students attend postsecondary institutions now than ever before, and our students are increasingly diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.
- Students from many countries continue to compete for admission to undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs in our colleges and universities.

But, this belief and pride have led to a dangerous complacency about the real quality and impact of higher education.

- Our reputation as a world leader is in jeopardy of slipping and our higher education system is at great risk.
- Our successes are masking significant weaknesses in the quality and results of the college experience and in the information we have to guide any improvements.
- Higher education in this country is a mature sector that is not paying attention to internal problems and globally disruptive forces.
- If we do not forthrightly address these problems, our country will fall farther behind and risk losing the preeminent position that inspires pride and imitation.

There must be answers to the question posed by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in her inaugural remarks to the Commission, "what do we Americans expect from our shared investment in higher education?"

- Beyond lofty vision statements, parents need better answers to the question, "is this the right school for my student?"
- Policy makers and consumers need better information to answer the question "is our investment in higher education paying off---are we getting what we paid for?"

- The public should care about the higher education outcome of every student.

Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each year on postsecondary education by the federal government, by states, by parents, by students and by employers.

- The federal government and the higher education community have been partners in a commitment to very broad college access and choice among institutions for students, regardless of income, gender, race, religion, or geography.
- As a nation, the United States spends far more on higher education than other countries and the federal government contributes up to one-third of this total investment.

Despite this investment, the results are not merely disappointing---they are of grave concern.

- College costs are going up much faster than family income, but it seems as if there is no focus on productivity or efficiency.
- Among 30 member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States now ranks just seventh in the percentage of citizens who enter postsecondary education and then complete a bachelor degree or postgraduate program. Canada, Japan, Korea, Finland, Norway, and Sweden all have higher graduation rates than the United States.
- The United States is resting on the laurels of its most highly-ranked, world-class universities whose standing is based on research capabilities and some graduate programs, not on undergraduate education.
- While the percentage of students entering higher education has increased 20 percent in 20 years, the number graduating has only gone up three percent.
- A significant portion of students are graduating without the skills we should expect from a college degree.
- In the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) survey, less than one-third of college graduates could demonstrate an ability to read complex tests and make complicated inferences.
- In the NAAL survey, 25 percent of college graduates scored high enough to be deemed "proficient" from a literacy standpoint.
- And, most alarming given increased investment in higher education, these rates have actually declined over the past decade.
- In the National Survey of America's College Students (NSACS), the American Institutes for Research found this year that 20 percent of four-year degree holders and 30 percent of two-year degree holders have only basic quantitative literacy skills, like calculating the total on an office supply order.
- In the NSACS, more than 75 percent of students at two-year colleges and more than 50 percent at four-year colleges did not score at the proficient level of literacy, meaning they lack basic skills like summarizing arguments in a newspaper editorial.
- But, the literacy level was significantly higher for students who reported taking coursework that emphasized applying theories or concepts to practical problems.

There is a large and widening gap in higher education based on economic class.

- While there is some increasing diversity of enrollments, elitism is making access more difficult for the students who most need financial assistance to attend and complete college.
- Financial aid is not getting to the students who really need it.
- The least able affluent students have as good a chance of attending college as the poorest students with the highest grades.
- Just over 50% of college-qualified low-income high school graduates attend four-year colleges, compared with 83% of high-income graduates.
- Only 4% of college-qualified high-income graduates do not attend college at all while 22% of college-qualified low-income graduates do not attend college at all.
- Only 21% of college-qualified low income graduates complete bachelors degrees, compared with 62% of high-income graduates.
- For students in the lowest-income quartile (\$0-\$34,000) there has been a dramatic increase in college costs relative to family income, from 41% to 47%, and in unmet needs, from \$3,000 to over \$5,500.

Finishing college takes longer and the low completion rate is a clear failing.

- If we told parents that their children had only a fifty-fifty chance of earning their degree, how would they feel about their investment in college?
- Today, just over half of entering students will complete a degree within six years.
- The failure to complete college is a huge financial loss for the student and the larger community.
- Too many institutions have just assumed that getting students in the door is the most important thing, not what happens once they are there. Retention is not a focus.
- Many students are not prepared for college study and are already behind when they start: 40 percent of four-year college students and 63 percent of two-year students take at least one remedial course. Adequate preparation for college is essential and while it is the primary responsibility of the K-12 system, higher education bears responsibility also.

Employers assert that the college graduates they hire are not prepared for the workplace, lacking the new set of skills necessary for successful employment and continuous career development.

- The United States is not keeping pace with the demand for skilled labor. In 1970, the U.S. produced 50 percent of the world's science and engineering doctorates. Given current trends, by 2010 we will produce just 15 percent.
- American companies are seeking increasing numbers of employees abroad. Students in America are on the wrong side of a looming education and ambition gap.
- The economic demand for a better-prepared workforce has never been greater. The college education needed for the competitive, global environment in the future is about far more than specific, factual knowledge and traditional approaches. College education must address the capability and capacity to think and develop and continue to learn. It is essential to achieve a new set of skills for a new century, such as: problem solving, critical thinking, and written communication skills.

College standards are becoming diluted and there is a fuzziness about what faculty teach and what is expected from students.

- The rule of thumb is that students should spend about two hours of studying for each hour in class. But many students carrying a full course load report that they average only 13 hours of academic work outside the classroom and are still able to attain a B or better grade, which has become the new “average.”
- At Harvard in 1950, for example, about 15 percent of students got a B+ or better: today the average is nearly 70 percent.
- Although not universal, at some institutions and in some programs, grade inflation reflects a decline in course expectations for students. Students come to believe any work, not just high-quality work, is worthy of high grades.
- Ironically, while American students trail their counterparts in other industrialized countries, they still feel good about their educational achievements. Easily earned grades reinforce a misperception among students about the difference between mediocre and genuinely outstanding accomplishments.
- Thursday is becoming “the new Friday,” as students and faculty at many institutions arrange their schedules to avoid classes on Friday. At large public universities, classrooms sit empty on Fridays because as many as 50 percent fewer classes meet than on the busiest class days. Students may use their “free” Fridays to juggle jobs, internships, sports, and studying. But others use the time to recover from the Thursday night partying, which has become the norm on many campuses.

Today, most people must “take on faith” what college quality might be because there is a lack of reliable ways of documenting and assessing what students learn, and how their experiences compare among institutions.

- The information available about colleges---from financial aid to program quality to post-graduation results, is confusing to parents and students, at best, or simply unavailable.
- There is no solid, comparative evidence of how much students learn in college, or whether they learn more at one school than another.
- Accreditation, the primary quality control process for postsecondary education, does not provide useful information to the public. It focuses on inputs and on process, not the consumer.
- Higher education institutions and systems are focused inward and have a tendency to be unclear in communicating goals and outcomes to the public.
- There is a resistance to accountability and assessment, a fear of exposure and misinterpretation. Academics are afraid they will be blamed for variables (poverty, low SAT scores, poor high school performance) over which they have little control. Some also fear that accountability information won’t be used---that it will just be a waste of resources and time, simply adding to the piles of paper that are already produced for state and federal government bureaucracies.

Less than one-third of all colleges nationwide conduct comprehensive evaluations to find out whether they are achieving the purposes of their general education programs.

- There are no commonly-used tests or other assessments that determine how much undergraduates have learned during college.
- Tests that are used, of writing and literacy in math, statistics, and computer technology, suggest that the skills of many undergraduates only improve slightly while in college, and some get weaker. This may be why many companies offer training programs to new

- employees to teach them the basics of communication, problem solving, and analytic thinking.
- It is easier to track inputs and enrollment numbers than to track what happens to individual students.
  - Faculty and administrators are reluctant to look at results or make major changes because there is a lack of compelling pressure to improve undergraduate education and because they are isolated from reliable evidence of their students' progress beyond individual classes.
  - At some schools, undergraduate teaching may be perceived as almost incidental to the higher-prestige focus on research and work with graduate students.
  - Where four courses a semester was the standard teaching load for faculty at research universities forty years ago, teaching loads may be half that now to allow senior faculty more time for research. The slack is taken up by graduate students and part-time faculty: nationally, nearly half of college faculty is part-timers, up from only 22 percent in 1970.
  - College courses are not designed to foster critical thinking and problem solving which are hard to address with lecture formats and multiple-choice tests.

The focal point of some institutions is not on teaching and learning.

- Colleges are engaged in an "arms race" for high prestige and rankings to help recruit the most talented students.
- This competition does not focus on the quality of academic programs as much as on use of scholarships for merit rather than need; construction of luxurious residence halls, unions and recreational facilities; and manipulation of admissions processes to create the impression of high selectivity.
- Typically, faculty are not trained as teachers nor rewarded for teaching.
- Known techniques for effective teaching and learning are essentially ignored.

Faith in the quality of college outcomes masks a gaping information void, in that not much is known about a growing number of our students.

- The federal government currently collects a great deal of information from the higher education system, but unfortunately policy makers, universities, students, and taxpayers continue to lack key information to enable them to make informed decisions.
- More than half of postsecondary students attend more than one institution before they complete their degree. Because data systems are so limited, we do not know the outcomes and impact of the postsecondary experience on these students.
- There is very little information about the increasing numbers of part-time and transfer students.
- Yet, as higher education becomes even more a lifelong endeavor, the need is for more, not less, information about students who do not follow "traditional" educational pathways.
- What is clearly lacking is a consumer-oriented, nationwide system for comparative performance purposes, using standard formats, designed for two primary audiences: students (and parents) and policy makers.
- Private ranking systems, such as the *U.S. News and World Report "Best American Colleges,"* use a limited set of data which is not necessarily relevant for measuring institutional performance or providing the public with information needed to make critical decisions.

The information we do have is highly scattered and disaggregated.

- The federal government is part of the problem.
- There are around 60 different Web sites for federal financial aid and dozens of toll-free numbers.
- Vast amounts of data exist about college performance, but are largely designed for specialists to use.
- And, while progress is being made to collect accountability information at the state level, it is extremely uneven across the country.

There is an urgent need to get the most out of the national investment in higher education, but most of the policies are based on guesswork.

- No longer can policy be based on a “wait and see” and “hope for the best” approach.
- Sound information is needed at the local, state, and national level.
- Without sound data and an improved, more objective approach to accountability that addresses the outcomes of higher education, particularly outcomes for student learning, policy is uninformed.

There must be accountability for the educational quality of our institutions.

- There is a critical need for improved public information systems to measure and compare institutional performance and student learning in consumer-friendly formats, defining consumers broadly as students, families, taxpayers, policy makers and the general public.
- This means having and communicating complete, accurate, and relevant information about the important results of higher education.
- There can be no reluctance to examining quality and making changes.
- National leadership is needed to focus on these issues, but responsibility must be shared to ensure quality in higher education at the federal, state, and institutional level.

## Promising Efforts

Learning assessment and accountability systems.

- Many states are developing relevant state systems of accountability in order to measure the performance of public higher education institutions.
- In its recommendations about accountability in higher education, the State Higher Education Executive Officers group has endorsed a focus on learning assessment.
- The AAC&U has developed a unique and significant approach to accountability and learning assessment, discussed in two recent reports, “Our Students’ Best Work” (2004) and “Liberal Education Outcomes” (2005). This accountability model focuses on undergraduate liberal arts education and emphasizes learning outcomes. The primary purpose is to engage campuses in identifying the core elements of a quality liberal arts education experience and measuring students’ experience in achieving these goals – core learning and skills that anyone with a liberal arts degree should have.
- Business leaders emphasize emphatically the importance of learning assessment and shared responsibility for accountability. According to the Business Higher Education Forum, to be useful, assessment of learning must utilize multiple types aimed at different audiences. Assessment and accountability should be linked through P-16 collaboration;

student engagement; accreditation focus on learning outcomes; state accountability reports; and more robust federal data and research.

New approaches to measuring learning.

- An evaluation of new testing regimes provides evidence of a significant advancement in measuring student learning---especially the attainment of cognitive skills most needed in the future---critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communications.
- For students who take national tests like the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, and GMAT, a mechanism exists to validate their performance against reliable standards directed toward further graduate or professional study. But, for the large number of students who do not plan on additional study, institutions and students lack a rigorous and comparative way to assess undergraduate students' learning outcomes.
- Hundreds of public and private colleges and universities are currently using a variety of assessment exams, either purchased or self-designed, to monitor student progress and improve the learning experience. Momentum is beginning to increase, as some states use college-level learning assessment exams state-wide.
- The National Survey of Student Engagement involves hundreds of institutions in assessing the quality and value of students' experience in college. While it does not attempt to assess learning outcomes, and its results are not publicly distributed, use of the NSSE is helping to encourage a focus on the quality of the undergraduate experience, and the emergence of a national culture of evidence and assessment.
- New educational delivery models are being created, such as the Western Governors University which uses a variety of built-in assessment techniques to determine the achievement of certain skills being taught, rather than hours-in-a-seat. These new models are valid alternatives to the older models of teaching and learning. They may well prove to be superior for some teaching and learning objectives in terms of cost effectiveness and should be encouraged.
- The Commission has reviewed promising new developments in the area of student testing, which indicate a significant improvement in measuring student learning and related institutional performance. Three independent efforts show considerable promise:
  - A multi-year trial by the Rand Corporation, which included over 100 higher education institutions, led to the development of a test measuring key cognitive outcomes—critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and other skills. As a result of these efforts, a new entity called the Collegiate Learning Assessment has been formed by researchers involved and the tests will now be further developed and marketed widely.
  - The Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), replacing the Academic Profile in January 2006, has been developed by the Educational Testing Service to measure college-level reading, mathematics, writing, and critical thinking. This test is designed for colleges to assess their general education outcomes, so the results may be used to improve the quality of instruction and learning.
  - The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education developed a new program to assess student learning in five states, which has provided highly

promising results and which suggests expansion of such efforts would be clearly feasible.