

## Academic Affairs and Student Development

### **A Critique of A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education**

As higher education enters a period of tremendous growth and change, it is more important than ever to have a national understanding of the mission, goals and accomplishments of the many institutions we support, and the academy in its entirety. Without achieving this before adjustments are made, American higher education will fall victim to much scrutiny and criticism, and our nation will be divided on one of our most important and prized possessions.

Fortunately, we have highly educated leaders at the helm of our institutions in America as well as effective national leadership focused on the United States education system as a whole. Their combined knowledge, experience and understanding of this nation's system of higher education is unique and immeasurable, resulting in a powerful team to guide academe during periods of insecurity. One group, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, has such members. In a charge led by the Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, this commission set out to evaluate the current state of higher education and recommend higher education reform in an effort to secure our position as a world leader in education. Their conclusion is clear, change is necessary and it's needed now. The report outlines the challenges that higher education will likely face in the coming decades and offers recommendations to secure our position in an increasingly globally aware society. However, despite the commission's efforts to

perform a comprehensive critique, it repeatedly fell short, repeatedly lacking both scope and focus.

From the beginning, **A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education** lacks the ability to define the broad goals of American postsecondary education, for both the academy and their students. In a broad generalization, the Commission's report calls for a national approach to higher education, where all colleges and universities find themselves on a level playing field, and where they strive to prepare students for the "workplace skills" that employers are seeking. In their eyes, institutions will adopt new missions and will become flexible enough to accommodate the many populations of students that seek postsecondary education. Likewise, students will have the freedom to move between these indistinguishable institutions through general education classes and flexible credit transferring, leading to more accountable practices and measurable outcomes by evaluating student gains via national exams. The commission believes the future of American higher education lies with the ability to reduce costs while still maintaining quality practices and developing relationships within the academy and across the secondary-postsecondary threshold. The commission calls on higher education administrators to make these changes, not national educational reform. The result is a crumbling foundation on which the commission continued to build their critique upon.

### **What is Learning?**

Perhaps the most troubling is the Commission's inability to construct appropriate goals for higher education, including a definition of learning and how that learning is approached. Rather than focusing on the means, the report's focus becomes the end, of

which “employer approved” seems to be prominent. Much like institution types have become indistinguishable, so too have skills and knowledge. The report calls for student outcomes to include workplace skills to accomplish tasks rather than placing an emphasis on critical thinking, interdisciplinary knowledge and the ability to solve a variety of problems. To many institutions, the contemporary goal of higher education has been to prepare students to be lifetime consumers *and* producers of knowledge rather than to simply teach skills. Barr and Tagg (1995) recognize that higher education has reconfigured their understanding of their institutional goals, moving from the belief that college provides instruction to a more modern view that it is an institution that produces learning. They continue, stating that “our dominant paradigm mistakes a means for an end. It takes the means or method – called “instruction” or “teaching” – and makes it the college’s end or purpose” (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Bowen (1999) agrees, stating, “education should be directed toward the growth of the whole person through the cultivation not only of the intellect and of practical competence but also of the affective dispositions, including the moral, religious, emotional and esthetic aspects of the personality.” Unfortunately, the Commission lacks the ability to comprehend a more broad “cultivation” of its students. Instead, they are calling on our nation’s wealth of institutions to provide the “just-in-time” education that employers are seeking, and nothing more.

### **A Disconnect Forces “One Size Fits All” Approach?**

The commission appropriately sees a disconnect between secondary education and higher education institutions. High schools around the country vary as greatly as higher education institutions. Many are struggling to provide students with the necessary

elementary background that enables success at the more advanced college level. Among other challenges, this failure comes from lack of resources, the diversity of the population of students, and the needs of the community in which it resides. With more frequency, high schools are graduating students who arrive to college in need of remedial academic preparation before they can begin advanced coursework, forcing monetary spending on topics that should have been previously mastered. As with higher education, the problems that face secondary schools are more than often societal, not educational. Impoverished communities lack an emphasis on the importance of education. Family trends develop in which employment becomes more important than academic excellence in high school, even if a diploma is awarded. This becomes cyclical, and schools become forgotten about. Our nation has developed a wealth of institutions to allow students of all backgrounds, regardless of ability, the option of postsecondary education. This variety allows the introductory coursework, which should have previously been mastered, to be provided elsewhere. The remedial classes that are offered on college and university campuses are necessary and justified because of a lack of accountability at the secondary level. We cannot rid ourselves of this coursework without shutting the door on a population of students who need that help, and who want that help.

To ensure the lack of accountability that ails secondary education does not become an education epidemic across the country, the Commission points towards national accountability at the postsecondary level. A plan to initiate more flexible credit transfer between institutions has been recommended, resulting in students across the nation (and institution type) following static syllabi to learn skills and facts regardless of why they are enrolled in that class. Engineers and future educators would learn calculus

and physics concepts in the same way, even though they will use that information much differently in the future. Ideologically, students should have freedom to move between institutions without repeating coursework and suffering from that extravagant financial burden, but likely there is a more appropriate solution than forming a national curriculum.

### **Financial Rewards: Putting the Cart Before the Horse**

The media often picks up stories regarding higher education's skyrocketing costs rather than the value provided by the experience. Due in part to inconsistent state funding and by the demand for more resources on campus, the price of postsecondary education is increasing and students are being forced to foot more of the bill. As the Commission points out, this trend is likely to continue without reform, but that reform is needed at the state-level. State funding for higher education is as dramatic as a rollercoaster ride, increasing during economic stability and decreasing during economic hardship. The commission recommends more accountable, effective and productive measures of higher education to "prove" to state policy makers the benefits of their institutions. Unfortunately, this logic is skewed; institutions cannot produce top-notch results without consistent, top-notch support. The innovative measures of higher education are cut during economic hardship and forcing administrators to rebuild when those funds become available again. Until state officials become more educated about how their decisions affect the postsecondary education of each student in their state, they cannot make inappropriate demands for more security.

Likewise, the commission recommends federal and state awards be granted to institutions supporting technological and pedagogical innovation. Although they ensure

awards will only be granted when quality remains, the reality is that institutions will hire more part time instructors and college will become four years of videos, online dialogue, and mixed mode instruction. These financial carrots threaten postsecondary education in its current form.

### **Who Needs a Reputation, When You Can Rank!**

There is a large contingent of college and university administrators who would love to see institutional rankings disappear. After all, those who top **U.S. News and World Report** rankings are often brand name institutions, who we trust provide quality education given their century long experience doing so. We have no basis for this assumption, and in reality we cannot say with confidence that the prestigious outcomes of these students are due to the superior knowledge they received and not the institutional name they carry with them on their diploma and resume. At the urge of the commission, institutions should be evaluated on their performance, rather than their reputation. To combat this, the commission recommends developing a national database of higher education institutions to provide accurate information. This user-friendly, impartial database would likely be successful in securing information on the thousands of institutions in this country. In its best form, students could search for institutions with specific academic program and co curricular activities in specific geographic location with ease. Parents may find this helpful to compare cost of attendance, average financial aid packages and available institutional scholarships or grants. However, the commission also hopes to include information on institutional performance and learning outcomes to make the database useful for policy makers as well. They hope to create this comprehensive, one-stop-shop to “weigh and rank comparative institutional

performance” (U.S. Department of Education). The database may not rank institutions using the same methodology as many of the commercialized systems, but will likely produce similar results, reinforcing a hierarchy of name brand institutions.

### **A Test That Proves Students are Learning!**

The recommendations for higher education reform put forth by the Commission thus far have emphasized standardization and accountability between institutions and across the nation. Continuing along this trend, the Commission introduces testing to ensure students are prepared to become successful college students, and then again knowledgeable and productive employees. Although examinations are typically used to evaluate students learning during specific coursework, many argue it is not an appropriate means of measuring high school or college outcomes. Student development includes much more than is mastery of skills through problem sets, three paragraph essays and laboratory work. While these concepts can be tested, other areas cannot. Often, knowing that a course will culminate with an evaluative exam leads to faculty teaching to produce exceptional results and students learning facts and figures rather than consuming knowledge only to reinterpret and create self-meaning and perhaps new knowledge with that information. Learning styles and strategies will also suffocate as a result of introducing standardized evaluations. Lewin’s concept of individual force field analysis may lie as a perfect example. The influences that push individuals toward a goal must outweigh those factors that deter accomplishing the goal. In challenging coursework, students will allow approving test scores to be what pushes students toward accomplishment, rather than self-authorship or other learning outcomes and knowledge benefits. Similarly, Vygotsky’s zones of proximal development will suffer. Rather than

forming the scaffolding that enable students to bridge knowledge, instructors will place miniscule challenges in front of students to make their successes easier.

### **Who is Teaching?**

It is clear that the Commission hopes to form an academy that ensures students will “learn” during their undergraduate experience and become successful after that time, regardless of what that really means. However, the report lacks significant and necessary attention on those who coordinate that effort. In fact, faculty are hardly mentioned throughout the report. If we demand institutional changes, and look for reform and progress from our institutions, many of these changes must begin with an emphasis on classroom instruction and faculty development. With the recommendations for more innovative pedagogy and use of technology, the Commission focused heavily on distance learning tutorials and support, regarding it as an active method of learning for students and a reduction in class preparation for instructors, rather than recognizing this technology actually distanced students and faculty. While this method may create opportunity for less financial spending, more standardized curriculum and use of technology, it does not guarantee quality and hardly recognizes that learning does not occur through osmosis. Instead, it requires effort from the expert to put prepare lessons, interpret experiences and provide meaning, even in a distance learning setting.

**A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education** provides commentary on a tremendously important part of American society. Through its findings and recommendations of higher education through many lenses, including value, accessibility, cost, affordability, accountability and innovation, it emphasizes institutional, state and federal changes to academe. The Commission set out to transform



the academy, to protect students and families from financial burden and to secure economic success in the United States throughout the coming centuries. Unfortunately, the recommendations lacked an understanding of the complexity of our current system and a general understanding of what higher education in the United States should look like after these changes. Emphasis was inappropriately placed, looking to form teaching-learning environments to feed the global marketplace rather than cure students desire to learn and prepare them to become educated and engaged citizens. Altbach (2004) emphasizes, “Striving for excellence is not a bad thing, and competition may spark improvement. Yet a sense of realism and sensitivity to the public good must also factor into the equation.”

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings charged this commission with a dense and significant task. The Commission’s report highlights many of the challenges that face higher education today and in the near future and provides recommendations to combat these issues rather than wait for their arrival. However, using a critical eye, the report highlights many societal issues that have manifested themselves in higher education, beginning with the lack of a widely accepted understanding of higher education and what it provides. As these challenges become more visible, it needs to become the responsibility of many parties within *and* surrounding higher education to work towards a solution. A coordinated effort is needed to ensure the success of American higher education and to secure it’s place among the top global educational opportunities.

### Works Referenced

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