

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education *Perspectives*

In September, the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education appointed one year earlier by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings presented what many commentators saw as a long-overdue analysis of the state of higher education in the United States. Not since 1983's *A Nation at Risk* had a government report on education been so anticipated, if not necessarily welcomed. The commission's findings and recommendations fall in four main areas: access, affordability, quality and accountability. Where the proposals go from here will depend in large part on the priorities of a new Democrat-controlled Congress.

Connection asked Secretary Spellings as well as Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D.-Mass.), the new chair of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, and other experts to comment on the commission's work, particularly as it relates to New England. (For a full copy of the report, visit: www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html)

Time for Action to Bolster Future of Higher Education

MARGARET SPELLINGS

Higher education in America had its origins in New England more than 350 years ago. Since then, America's colleges and universities have been the incubators of great ideas, birthplaces of great inventions and testing grounds of great individuals. For generations of New Englanders, meanwhile, a college education has provided the opportunity to fully embrace the American Dream. In recent decades, New England has led our nation with the highest percentage of citizens with bachelor's degrees. This has led to strong economic growth and high quality of life for the region.

Through the years, New England institutions have also built a strong partnership with the federal government in responding to challenges our nation has faced. More than 50 years ago, when the New England Board of Higher Education was established, America faced stiff competition from the Soviet Union in the academic fields of math and science as evidenced by the launch of Sputnik. In response, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 helped academia focus on math, science and modern languages. Within a decade, our country tripled the number of science and engineering Ph.Ds awarded annually. More importantly, our universities pioneered new research and development that improved the quality of life for our citizens and countless others worldwide.

The competition America faces today from around the world might not be as obvious as a satellite streaking through space. But in the past half-century, technological

advances have resulted in an ever-flattening world. Aging populations, a diminishing manufacturing sector and increased global competition from countries like India and China mean that a college education is more important than ever.

Over a year ago, I launched a bipartisan commission of business and education leaders to lead a robust national dialogue on the future of higher education. The commission's final report, *A Test of Leadership*, offers keen insights into the changes that must be made for us to provide wider opportunities for more Americans to pursue and earn college degrees. In September, in response to the commission's recommendations, I released my action plan to make college more accessible, affordable and accountable.

Accessibility. The No Child Left Behind Act has brought high standards and accountability to our elementary and middle schools, ensuring that our students are getting the fundamentals necessary for future academic success. When almost half of all freshmen in American colleges and universities must take at least one remedial course, however, it only makes sense that we expand these same principles of accountability to our high schools.

Parents rightly expect that high schools' curriculum standards be aligned with college-level expectations. Research has indicated that a student's exposure to a rigorous and challenging curriculum during high school leads to higher college attendance rates, better retention and faster completion. New England is leading the way in

increasing the rigor of high school, as evidenced by the efforts of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island—each the winner of a National Governors Association Honor States Grant to redesign high schools.

Affordability. As we work to increase accessibility, we should also consider ways to make college more affordable for all New Englanders. While the amount of Pell Grant aid available to low-income students has increased—from \$9.96 billion in 2001-02 to an estimated \$12.77 billion for 2006-2007—more needs to be done. States and institutions must do their part to support need-based financial aid. In New England, this effort varies widely. For example, one New England state contributes \$0.85 in need-based aid for every dollar of federal Pell Grants received, while a neighboring state's contribution is just \$0.11 on the federal dollar.

In addition, the financial aid process must be simpler for students and families. This fall, the Department of Education will commission an independent review of the entire financial aid system. This study will provide a roadmap for how to simplify student access to financial aid, notify students of their eligibility earlier, target available and new resources to the neediest students and reduce inflationary pressures on tuition. In the meantime, the department's Federal Student Aid office is identifying ways to partner with states and access initiatives like the New England Board of Higher Education's College Ready New England initiative to get information about financial aid eligibility in the hands of students and families when they are in middle school.

Accountability. Parents and students need comparative information about colleges. They deserve to know the answers to basic questions about actual tuition costs or

the likelihood of employment when they graduate. Over the years, residents of New England have invested billions of dollars in public and private colleges and universities. It's reasonable for taxpayers and students to know what they are getting in return for that money.

That's why I have called for the development of a voluntary, privacy-protected higher education information system. Two states in the New England region, Connecticut and Massachusetts, already have such a postsecondary system in place. In New England, more than any other region, the high mobility of students makes connectivity and comparability of these data systems important. Having accurate data can showcase institutions' good work to students and policymakers. It will also enable governing boards, presidents and faculty senates to make more informed decisions that will better serve their institutions and students.

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Shared Responsibility. The reactions to the commission's findings have already achieved one of my major objectives: to start a conversation in our country about the future of higher education. Now is the time for all key stakeholders to move into action, and I am encouraged by the leadership already demonstrated in New England. In late October 2006, Rhode Island Gov. Donald Carcieri announced a plan to increase need-based scholarships by \$20 million—nearly doubling the amount currently allocated. His plan would reward low-income students who perform well in high school and on state tests with scholarships to attend any public or private college in Rhode Island. The value of the grants would be based on the tuition at the University of Rhode Island. The plan also has provisions to award scholarships based on financial need for students to attend any school in the country.

This spring, the efforts of Rhode Island and other states will be highlighted in a national summit to be hosted by the Education Department. Leaders from higher education, government, business and philanthropic organizations will join us in developing an action plan with specific responsibilities for all stakeholders.

Government and higher education have a long tradition of working together to address the common challenges faced by our country. This partnership has produced historic changes that have benefited generations. We must build on that partnership and move forward to strengthen higher education for New England and all Americans. Together, we can ensure that the countless opportunities a college education provides are a reality for every American who chooses to pursue one.

Margaret Spellings is the U.S. secretary of education.

"Our yearlong examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led our nation to unwarranted complacency about its future."

"In this consumer-driven environment, students increasingly care little about the distinctions that sometimes preoccupy the academic establishment, from whether a college has for-profit or nonprofit status to whether its classes are offered online or in brick-and-mortar buildings. Instead, they care—as we do—about results."

"Substandard high school preparation is compounded by poor alignment between high schools and colleges, which often creates an 'expectations gap' between what colleges require and what high schools produce."

—A Test of Leadership, Commission on the Future of Higher Education