

CHEA Presentation
Presidents and Accreditation: The Need for Leadership and the
Importance of Engagement
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Greetings!

While our topic this morning is Presidents and Accreditation, I suspect that I was asked to be part of this panel because I was one of only two sitting college presidents to be asked to serve on Secretary Margaret Spellings National Commission on the Future of Higher Education. I'd like to tell you about the whole Commission report which I believe has much to offer to higher education and our students and on the whole has been received in a relatively positive manner. But in light of our topic this morning, I will focus on what are some of the more controversial parts of the report—the parts on accountability and accreditation. Then I will tie that back to presidents and how I believe all of this relates to the role of presidents in the accreditation process.

As I indicated, probably the most controversial part of the Spellings report deals with the issue of accountability. The report pushes rather aggressively on the need for greater accountability and transparency about the outcomes of higher education. The private college organizations, in particular, have trouble with this part of the report. But I have to tell you that the Commissioners from private business (Boeing, IBM, Microsoft) were not particularly enamored of pleas from higher educators that you can't understand us, you can't measure what we do, the public doesn't have a right to know about our outcomes, etc.

Also, I have to confess that some of the national data that we looked at on higher education outcomes were pretty troubling. I don't like them much and you won't either, but I'm going to share them with you

anyway. We received a report of a national survey that found that 20 percent of those completing 4-year degrees and 30 percent of those earning two-year degrees are unable to estimate if their car has enough gasoline to get to the next gas station, a pretty fundamental skill with today's gas prices. More than half of students at four-year schools and more than 75 percent from two-year colleges lacked the skills to interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure, understand the arguments of newspaper editorials, compare credit card offers with different interest rates and annual fees, or summarize results of a survey about parental involvement in school.

We can say—not our fault—the public schools did it, but these are people to whom we've awarded our degrees. In effect we've given them our stamp of approval and I guess you just can't hide from this evidence by blaming someone else. We need to stare it in the face, seek to understand it in the context of our own institutions and do something about it.

There have been opinion pieces both supportive and critical of the Commission recommendations on measuring learning outcomes. One states that the Commission “unequivocally advances the notion that the business of colleges and universities... is best advanced by the disclosure of data allowing institutions to be compared to one another, particularly in measurements of student learning.” The article goes on to imply that student learning will be measured by a federal initiative of quantitative, standardized testing.¹

Let me make it clear that is not what the Commission report recommends. Rather, the report indicates that “higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality assessment data.” (Sounds like Middle States standard 14 to me) The report calls for **faculty** to be at the forefront of defining educational objectives for students, and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress to these goals. The role of the federal government is to provide incentives for states, higher education systems and institutions to develop outcome-based accountability systems. It is NOT the fed's role

¹ William G. Durden, President of Dickinson College. Inside Higher Education, 9/21/06

to develop a “one size fits all” measurement of student learning. As a matter of fact, Secretary Spellings has announced that her way of addressing this recommendation will be to develop a grant program for institutions and states that want to work to further efforts in assessment of student learning.

The report does call for a federal unit record system, which would enable colleges, students and others to access some very useful data. I am a proponent of unit record as are AASCU, NASULG, and AACC.

Why?

As a community college president, I have been frustrated that it is so difficult to get real information on transfer success and on the longer-term achievement of our students. In Maryland, because other data is not available, our accountability system gives credit to colleges only for transfers to and graduates of Maryland public institutions. Montgomery College has done some research, through use of the federal student loan clearinghouse financial aid database, which shows that our students transferred to universities or colleges in 46 states last year. But we can follow only those who are in that system and that’s not everybody. Also, we can’t analyze how issues of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, performance at our institution, etc. affect the progression of these students through the higher education system. We know very little about what happens to part-time students who “swirl” among different institutions and in and out of our own college. It is hard for me to improve my institution if I don’t have useful data that tells me how effective we are in helping different types of students to achieve their goals. The kinds of outcomes assessment that regional accreditors and others are calling for could be done so much more effectively if we could follow cohorts of students.

A comprehensive national cohort system would be very helpful in getting information that we need to do what we do even better. Certainly that is true for community colleges for whom the IPEDS data dramatically understate the achievements of our students. That said, we must assure that any national student database protects the privacy of

students. Period. Second, we must ensure that resources are available to individual institutions, especially to better our research and data collection efforts. Third, accountability programs must be built around “value-added” measures because the nature of students that we serve in different segments of higher education differs dramatically. So subject to the caveats above, I support the pilot “unit records” system that Secretary Spellings is calling for. I also support the Spellings Report’s call for “value-added” learning assessment. AACC, AASCU and NASULG also support it subject to certain parameters being met.

And now a few more words on assessment of learning outcomes and the relationship between accreditation and the Spellings recommendations. Let me say clearly, again that the Spellings Commission did not recommend a single standardized test. It did not recommend a “No Child Left Behind” approach to higher education. It did not recommend a federalization of higher education accreditation, although some proposed it. There is no doubt whatsoever, though, that the Commission took a strong position that assessment of student learning needs to be done appropriately, fairly and systematically across the country. Truthfully I don’t see the Commissions recommendations as deviating substantially from what is being asked for by regional accreditors in their student learning assessment standards. But truth be told, most of our institutions are wrestling with how to apply these standards. I spoke at the Middle States Association annual meeting a couple of months ago. There were more than 400 college faculty and administrators there who are engaged in various aspects and stages of accreditation. I asked two questions. First, “How many of you think you are where you need to be or where you’d like to be in the assessment of student learning outcomes?” Out of the 400 audience members, maybe a dozen hands went up. I have to admit that mine wasn’t one of them. When we are honest with ourselves as college leaders, I think we have to admit that there is not nearly enough learning-based assessment going on on most of our campuses. Then I asked, “How many of you get ‘push back’ at your campuses from faculty who don’t want to participate in assessment of learning efforts?” Almost every hand including mine went up. I see a lot of push back from faculty saying “I assess learning outcomes for my

students in the grades that I give them. There is no need for me to do more than that.” One of my colleagues from a university told me that the faculty of his Arts and Humanities division sent him a memo indicating that they refuse to participate in outcomes assessment. Perhaps there are faculty here today who feel that way. All I can say is based on my reading of the tea leaves, the public, elected officials, and hopefully accreditors are not going to accept that response from our colleges. Perhaps the federal impetus, if not implemented too heavily handedly, can help us to move more effectively forward with the assessment agenda. In her meeting with accreditors, Secretary Spellings said she would not require all colleges to use the same test to measure student learning and that one size fits all approaches are neither desirable nor feasible. She also said to those at the meeting, “We’re going to do it with you, not to you. This is absolutely a shared responsibility.” Time will tell whether this commitment will be fulfilled. I think the odds of the Education Department doing it with us are enhanced when we demonstrate active efforts to increase responsibility ourselves. The efforts of AACC, NASULG, and AASCU to define a set of accountability indicators for their types of institutions are helpful. The efforts of regional accreditors to get more vocal and systematic about the kind of learning assessment they are already requiring and intend to require is helpful. These efforts are not widely understood. And the efforts going on on some of our highly creative and energetic college campuses provide best practices for us to share and emulate.

A couple of other accrediting recommendations that I’m sure CHEA is paying attention to and that will be getting extensive debate as the accreditation discussion goes forward are the recommendations to make the process more transparent to the public and to include non-college public and private sector individuals on accrediting teams. What exactly is meant by transparent and the wisdom of broader-based accrediting teams will likely be debated for some time. If that’s the case, then I guess one of the goals of the Spellings Commission—to elevate the level of national debate on important public policies issues for higher education-- will have been met. Certainly if the number of requests that I have received to speak on the Spellings Commission is any indication,

interest is strong and opinions are diverse in some areas but remarkably unified in others.

And that leads to a final area of discussion. A question that I am getting frequently now is, “After the outcome of the election and the shift of power control in the Congress, does the Spellings report still matter?”

- Bi-partisan commission
- The access part of the report is likely to be very popular with Democrats
- Republican leadership actually killed the unit records discussion last time
- Vast array of reports all with dramatic consistency in conclusions and recommendations—National Conference of State Legislators, SHEEO report, National Center for Public Policy, Education Trust, etc. The weight of the evidence is certainly pointing in particular directions and I believe that we ignore the Spellings report at our peril. We need to be at the table and working to shape the results so that they will be appropriate for our types of institutions and will result in an improvement of quality of outcomes and offerings for our students.
- Secretary Spellings is going forward very vigorously with the recommendation as demonstrated by her convening of accreditors, her hiring of Undersecretary Sara Martinez Tucker, and her planning of a March summit to carry forward the Commission efforts.

In summary and getting to where accreditors and presidents need to fit into all of this, I would suggest that we need to listen more and defend less; those outside of higher education respect us more when they see we are openly examining strengths and weaknesses and undertaking systematic institutional improvement efforts. Let me give you an example from my sector: Community colleges. A strength: We know that we help many students in community colleges achieve against all odds. A weakness: But we also lose

many. I can give you a million reasons why that happens, but regardless, we're not doing enough and we need to do better. This to me is where presidents come in. We have to send the message in our institutions that we are intent on creating a "culture of evidence" that examines openly how well we are meeting the educational, social and economic needs of our communities and nation. We have to encourage the members of our campuses to look openly and honestly at data—to have what Bryon McClenney describes as "courageous conversations." We have to demonstrate by our behavior that we are not in the business of finding fault when we assess outcomes but rather are on a mission of encouraging continuous quality improvement in our results.

And we need the ongoing help of those of you in the accreditation community. We need for you not to capitulate or retreat in your demands that we increase our assessment efforts. We need for you not to be heavy-handed with those who seriously engage in assessment and find some outcomes that may be less than expectation so long as those institutions lay out clear plans for improvement. We need your help in ongoing training of our faculty and staff in assessment methodologies. And we need your help in identifying best practices that we can bring to our faculty and staff for consideration.

Lee Shulman of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching says it all and I quote, "We're too comfortable with our failures; we take them for granted. The good news is that we can do much better. We know a great deal today about how to organize our institutions and classrooms so that students not only stay but achieve at high levels. We need to ask much more of ourselves. Education is no place for modest ambitions."

I think the members of the Spellings Commission are encouraging all of us to raise our ambitions. I don't think they recognize how hard that might be given our often change-averse culture, but I understand the urgency with which they are encouraging us to go forward and expand

access and successful completion for our students. Our national economy and our future quality of life depend on it.