

Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission

*The Message, the Messenger, and the
Dynamics of Change in Higher Education*

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We also want to thank the 36 individuals who took time from their busy schedules to talk with us and to provide the foundation for this report. Because of their participation, this manuscript is informed by the insights and observations of leaders who bring an incredible richness of personal, occupational, organizational, and sectoral experiences to their views on the Spellings Commission and its consequences. In each case, these individuals shared their views with us on conditions of anonymity which we have sought to carefully preserve. Additionally, this work draws on analysis of electronic and print media documents, published opinions, and news stories.

The project also benefits, we believe, from the background and knowledge of members of the study team, which includes individuals with higher education administrative and academic experience, as well as research expertise in the areas of communication and organizational change. What emerges from this blend is a rather unique document. It is at once a journalistic story, a history, a policy analysis, a social science research report, and a case study. We hope readers agree that it is enriched from this mix and that the whole is more than a simple sum of its parts.

We also want to offer a note of appreciation to our colleagues at Rutgers and Penn State Universities for their advice and counsel, and especially to our colleagues in the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, and the Office of Federal Relations at Rutgers, and the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at Penn State. We also want to acknowledge the U.S. Department of Education for assistance in data and document-gathering. Very special thanks to Carol S. Goldin of Rutgers for her many editorial contributions.

While the authors bear ultimate responsibility for the form and content of this work, we want to be clear in expressing our sincere appreciation to NACUBO, our study participants, and all who have shared their perspectives on the Commission and its work with us over these past months. We are most grateful for your help with a project we hope and believe will have value for all of us.

Executive Summary

It is time to examine how we can get the most out of our national investment in higher education. We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation's needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.

On September 19, 2005, with these words U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced the formation of a Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Over the next two years, the Commission's activities were comprehensively reported and widely debated in the media, and vigorous discussions of the Commission continue. The high visibility of the process and the sometimes acrimonious public debates about its recommendations have fueled a good deal of interest within the academy and beyond. The Commission's Report and responses to it have also generated important questions about the dynamics of change in higher education. *Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission* provides a review and analysis of the Commission's activities, the outcome of its work, and the impact of its recommendations, and considers the lessons learned from this process for advancing theory and practice in planning, communication, and change in higher education.

This publication takes the form of a case study. Information for the analysis comes primarily from three sources: 1) a broad review of print and electronic media articles, reports, statements, press releases, and commentaries published by the Commission, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department), national higher education associations, and accrediting associations discussing the Spellings Commission and its work; 2) interviews with 36 individuals selected because of their leadership roles and perspectives; and 3) a content analysis of 1,363 core articles and responses published in higher education outlets, journals, and

online sites. Those interviewed include Commission members, U.S. Department of Education senior staff, higher education association and accrediting agency leaders, senior college and university executive officers, and key individuals from higher education media.

The case study begins with a description of the formation and membership of the Commission, an overview of its work for the first year, and a summary of the Commission's Report and recommendations. Soon after its publication, the Report was recast as a "plan for action." Using information from interviews with individuals in different sectors of the higher education community and from published sources, the study analyzes reactions to the Report and its call to action, focusing on issues of both substance and tone.

Building on this particular case, this study considers broader questions of impact and puts forward a model of the dynamics of planned change. The study explores a number of "lessons learned" and discusses possible alternate ways of responding to the Report by the academy. The study uses these analyses to elucidate some broader higher education issues related to jurisdiction, autonomy, criticism, communication, and leadership challenges. This report also considers ways in which the Commission and Department of Education might have enhanced the effectiveness of their efforts.

This volume concludes with an appendix that provides background materials, including a list of Commission members and their affiliations, Commission charter, fact sheet for action plan, list of issue papers, list of organizations and institutions that provided information to the Commission, and the Commission's Preliminary Action Analysis—Updated January 2008.

INTRODUCTION

In announcing the formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Secretary Spellings charged the Commission with "developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future."

The 19-member Commission met nine times over the next year and solicited input from representatives from across the higher education community and the general public, sponsored studies to gather information on key topics, and provided opportunities for input from the general public. The Commission's final Report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, was released in September 2006.

The Commission offered broad recommendations for improving student academic preparation; making financial aid more accessible and the financial aid system simpler; creating and sustaining a “robust culture of accountability and transparency” for higher education; enhancing continuous innovation and quality improvement in colleges and universities; targeting federal investments to areas critical to America’s global competitiveness; and developing a strategy to encourage lifelong learning.

The work of the Commission, the drafts and the final version of its Report, and various follow-up activities by the Department of Education were covered extensively in the higher education media, and have been the topic of considerable dialogue within the higher education community at the national, state, and campus levels.

Given the high level of visibility of the Report and the many subsequent responses, conferences, and conversations, this case study addresses the following basic issues:

- How has the Commission’s work been perceived by key constituencies within the higher education community, and more generally?
- How do the various constituencies value the themes and specific recommendations advanced by the Commission?
- What is it about the work of the Commission and its Report that has stimulated such vigorous and continuing reaction?
- How have groups within the higher education community—national associations, accrediting agencies, and institutions—responded during the months following the release of the Report?
- Will the work of the Commission, and the reactions and responses to it, result in significant and lasting change?

While the influence of any government-sponsored commission is limited and closely tied to the tenure of policy leaders, the Spellings Commission raised critical issues that are well established as important topics for the present and for some time to come. Therefore it is useful to identify the enduring themes and issues arising from its work. Furthermore, by analyzing this single initiative, the authors seek to develop more generalized insights about the dynamics of organizational and sector change that may be abstracted for use in other contexts. A thorough understanding of the dynamics of the Commission’s work and a systematic analysis of its impact will also help inform future planning initiatives and reform efforts.

The study identifies six major issues:

1. Is there a higher education “system”?

2. Did matters of jurisdiction and style override issues of substance?
3. Are autonomy and locus of control the fundamental issues at stake?
4. Do we embrace criticism of our own purposes and institutions as we advocate its importance for others?
5. Should we expect the highest standards of discourse where higher education is involved?
6. What, precisely, are the leadership challenges and solutions facing the higher education community at large?

The research report provides a perspective on each of the issues that should prove useful to the practice and study of change in higher education.

THE COMMISSION: FORMATION AND LAUNCH

To assure a broad-based dialogue, the Department envisioned a Commission composed of individuals who would represent a variety of key constituencies and relevant perspectives on higher education. The panel included former and current public and private college presidents; former elected officials; representatives of Fortune 500 corporations and the financial services industry, for-profit education companies and nonprofit education foundations and associations; and distinguished scholars.

In addressing its charge, the Commission undertook an extensive review of documents from approximately 175 organizations, agencies, and institutions, including white papers, opinion pieces, and research reports of past blue-ribbon commissions. In addition, the Chair commissioned issues papers and testimony on diverse topics, including complexity and inconsistency in financial aid programs, accreditation reform, accountability and consumer information, federal regulation of higher education, and quality assurance in higher education.

The U.S. Department of Education's Web site was a primary communication channel for conveying information about the Commission's formation and the conduct of its research and deliberations.

THE REPORT—THE DOCUMENT AND ITS DISSEMINATION

To address what it termed “urgent reform needs,” the Commission in its final report offered six broad recommendations:

1. Student academic preparation should be improved and financial aid made available so that more students are able to access and afford a quality higher education.
2. The entire student financial aid system should be simplified, restructured and provided with incentives to better manage costs and measure performance.
3. A “robust culture of accountability and transparency” should be cultivated throughout the higher education system, aided by new systems of data measurement and a publicly available information database with comparable college information. There should also be a greater focus on student learning and development of a more outcome-focused accreditation system.
4. Colleges and universities should embrace continuous innovation and quality improvement.
5. Federal investments should be targeted to areas critical to America’s global competitiveness, such as math, science, and foreign languages.
6. A strategy for lifelong learning should be developed to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of a college education to every American’s future.

The Department of Education issued the Report along with a message indicating that the Secretary of Education would be considering these and other proposals and would prepare an “action plan for the future of higher education” to be formally released on September 26, 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The plan would “outline a course forward as we begin our work together towards solutions that will best meet the needs of all consumers of the system—educators, institutions, taxpayers, parents, and students.” The Commission’s findings were to result in an action plan, not merely a blue ribbon report.

THE AFTERMATH—REACTIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Higher Education Responds

As with the formation and launch of the Commission, the U.S. Department of Education's Web site was the primary channel used for distributing the Report. The site also provided a convenient point of access to the full range of related information that had been generated from speeches, press releases, issue papers, and other supporting documents.

The involvement of many individuals from the higher education community facilitated the rapid diffusion of information about the Report through personal and professional networks. In addition to the Web site, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* were key channels for disseminating news. Other public and professional media also published articles and letters on the initiative and reactions to it. In subsequent weeks and months, information about the Commission and Report was disseminated to a progressively larger number of individuals within the higher education community. The Department of Education reports that from 2005 through February 2008, there were more than 190,000 visits to the Spellings Commission Web site and roughly 95,000 downloads of the Commission draft and final reports. (See Appendix.)

The Report highlighted the distinguished tradition and the continuing contributions of U.S. colleges and universities to teaching and learning, research, and outreach. As a result, it could be seen as providing precisely the kind of national attention that many within higher education felt was clearly needed. Troubling declines in public support—financial and sometimes attitudinal—had been the topic of discussions throughout the higher education community.

The issues and challenges identified by the Commission were not unfamiliar ones. The importance of a commitment to higher education quality, increased accountability, greater transparency, heightened attention to institutional performance and learning outcomes assessment, refined approaches to financing and financial aid, improved access and transferability, an intensified commitment to continuous improvement and innovation, and overcoming complacency and resistance to change—were familiar ones to members of the higher education community. All of these ideas had been the subject of numerous books, articles, task forces, commissions, and conference panels and presentations within the academy in recent years.

Indeed, as this study documents, most higher education leaders saw the recommendations of the Commission as generally positive and quite significant to the future of higher education.

Emphasis and Interpretation

The Report did indeed bring focus and attention to higher education, trumpeted its accomplishments and value, and reaffirmed many of the challenges and needs already identified as priorities. But the initial reaction from the higher education community did not focus on these positives. Instead, almost from the moment of its release, responses to the Report targeted areas of concern and disagreement. As a consequence, there was little opportunity for the higher education community to leverage the accolades or develop a shared agenda for addressing needs and priorities.

The intention of the Commission may well have been to offer a reflective analysis of a national problem and a thoughtful and mobilizing call to collaborative action. But, in spite of its laudatory comments and efforts to describe the problems as shared challenges, many—if not most—within the higher education community regarded the Report as an attack on U.S. colleges and universities.

Initial and subsequent reactions from the higher education community in general, and specifically from the individuals interviewed for this study, generally supported this interpretation. Study participants noted that overall, the Commission's work was perceived unfavorably—with cynicism and annoyance—by many, if not most, within the higher education community.

But all sectors did not respond identically to these events. Based on personal interviews, the study describes differing perspectives of those associated with higher education, including administrators, board members, alumni, presidents, students, members of Congress, representatives of state governments, members of the business community, and the media. According to those interviewed, the harshest reaction came from the Washington-based higher education organizations; the responses from the six presidential associations and various other associations and agencies were characterized as “considerably more negative than in other parts of the higher education community”—ranging from “skeptical” to “openly hostile.”

Media coverage of the Commission and its work was quite substantial. The authors of this study identified, categorized, and analyzed 1,363 online or paper articles and responses published from September 5, 2005, to September 7, 2007. They concluded that the majority of articles and responses were “persuasive” in nature, generally displaying positions critical of the Commission. Over a quarter of the responses/comments to articles did not comment directly on the Commission's work or process, but focused on critiques of other responses and comments.

Substance and Tone

The initial critique of the Report within higher education focused on both *substance* and *tone*. From the perspective of substance, any initial enthusiasm about the Report's praise of higher education dissipated quickly among most higher education readers when more specific details were considered.

The higher education community seemed to reach a consensus that the Report offered too much of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the challenges identified, and did not take into account or value the diversity of missions within the community. National associations, accrediting agencies, and institutional leaders were particularly concerned about this approach to the complexities of assessment. The Commission Report and Department statements suggested that *outcomes* should receive greater emphasis—that assessment should shift from a primary emphasis on reputation, input, and resource measures to a focus on measures of performance, impact, and outcomes. Higher education leaders expressed fear that if a single approach were put in place, standardized methods and measures would be applied across all types of higher education institutions without regard to their differences, especially differences associated with mission. Further, they feared that simplistic and potentially damaging comparisons would be broadly publicized, in the name of transparency. These reactions were immediate and intense, and served to galvanize resistance to the Commission, the Report, and the Department of Education.

Interpretations differ as to whether fears over the one-size-fits-all approach were justified or not, and whether such fears arose at least partially as a consequence of planned communication efforts by some organizations within the higher education community, designed to intensify resistance. Whether by design or default, concerns about a one-size-fits-all approach had important consequences. One interviewee noted: "At least in my perception of the higher education community—that's probably the most contentious issue."

Furthermore, there was a general resistance to what many higher education leaders believed was an overly harsh critique of the current state of higher education. They expressed opinions in public media and association Web sites that the gap between the present and desired state of higher education is not as wide as the Commission implied in its Report. Many indicated that the Commission saw itself chronicling a crisis, when, in fact, the concerns it voiced were not particularly new, were being addressed, and were not a cause for alarm or panic. This created yet another source of friction and resistance between the Commission and the higher education community.

The study documents differing perspectives on priorities and methods addressed in the Commission's Report, noting that most of the recommendations were not viewed as especially controversial or innovative. The study provides a close look at how different segments of the higher education community responded to each of the Commission's recommendations.

Most of the recommendations are sufficiently general that they enjoy a considerably broad level of support—in the abstract. For example, there has been widespread agreement about the need to address improving academic preparation, removing barriers, and increasing student aid. Similarly, there has been support for restructuring the financial aid system and improving measurement and management of costs and institutional productivity, and promoting a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement in pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning. Most agreed that it is very important to develop a national strategy for lifelong learning. Finally, there was strong support for increases in federal investment in attracting the best students to strategic areas, critical to global leadership and competitiveness, specifically, to science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions.

The recommendation that generated the most controversy concerns assessment: “creating a robust culture of measurement, accountability, and transparency.” This recommendation fostered considerable discussion—in published documents and in interviews for this study—about a potentially enlarged role of accrediting agencies and an intensified focus on institutional and learning assessment goals and outcomes, the need for clearer communication of such indicators to the public, the value of developing more standardized approaches for reporting, and the importance of increasing attention to the assessment of institutional effectiveness in terms of productivity, efficiency, and cost effectiveness.

In addition to issues of substance, there were also reactions to what might best be termed tone. An early draft, released in June 2006, had considerably harsher language than the final version. Largely the work of a commissioned writer, the document became public before it had been reviewed and edited by most of the Commission members. The Department of Education reported that the distribution of this early draft was accidental—that the draft was being reviewed by some members and was inadvertently released. Because the accidentally-released draft was quite widely circulated through informal e-mail and other channels, the Department decided to post that version on its Web site.

Reactions to the early release were mixed. Though most of those interviewed believed that the early release of a harsh first draft was accidental rather than strategic, there was agreement that the tone certainly contributed to negativity among

those in the higher education community who had been following the activity of the Commission—and that included many of the higher education associations and agencies.

The final Report retained its use of what was regarded by most as very direct and forceful language in discussing the challenges, the perceived problem of complacency, and the assumed need for reform. Secretary Margaret Spellings and Commission Chair Charles Miller made similarly strong public statements. Those interviewed were in general agreement that the language of the Report and the approach, style, and critical comments made by Spellings and Miller were significant factors in heightening both the visibility and intensity of reaction to the Report. Others noted that the public postures and communication styles of the Secretary and the Chair contributed to the climate of resistance within higher education. It should be noted, however, that not everyone felt these strong pronouncements were inappropriate. A number felt that the Report's hard-hitting rhetoric, personal examples, and no-nonsense style were exactly what were needed to create a "wake up call."

In addition to reactions based on the substance and tone of the Report, decisions by Commission members to endorse—or fail to endorse—the final draft were also a factor in reactions to the Report. Controversy was heightened by the knowledge that while the final version carried the signed endorsement of the Commission, one member, David Ward, president of the American Council on Education (ACE)—representing the association with the most global and inclusive perspective on the higher education system as a whole—decided he could not endorse, nor sign, the Report.

Context

The context in which the work of the Commission was undertaken and played out also contributed to the array of reactions to the Report. There were concerns about the political party in power, perceptions of the Bush administration, and perspectives on the controversial "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) program. Some expressed fear that the Report endorsed a version of the NCLB program for higher education. Common themes of accountability, assessment, and transparency, coupled with the inclusion of the NCLB logo along with the Department of Education seal on the header of the official announcement of the Spellings Commission, made this conceptual linkage predictable.

Other factors, more comprehensively discussed in the case study, include concerns about loss of autonomy, anxieties about increased government intervention, and the potential impact of the Report on the Higher Education Act reauthorization legislation underway on Capitol Hill.

AUTONOMY VS. ACCOUNTABILITY

The case study notes that the issue of autonomy was the most critical factor in stimulating the intensity of initial and subsequent reactions to the Commission and Report. This concern centers on the question of who has the responsibility and the right to criticize, recommend, and/or initiate change within higher education. As study participants noted in different ways, self-determination and autonomy are among the most treasured values at all levels within higher education, and viewed as essential to the success that U.S. colleges and universities have enjoyed.

The perceived threats to autonomy were exacerbated by a seemingly widespread belief within the higher education community that enhanced systems of accountability would inevitably lead to diminished autonomy. Some, however, believed it would be possible to be accountable and transparent, while maintaining autonomy. Recommendations that are perceived to threaten the autonomy of higher education strike at the heart and soul of the academy. Particularly if a perceived threat to that principle comes from outside the academy, and if it appears that the outsiders may have the power to enforce change, vigorous resistance is a predictable response. For many leaders in the higher education community, this has been precisely the situation created by the Spellings Commission.

The Report Becomes a Plan for Action

A number of individuals interviewed in connection with this study said they believed that the initial goal within the higher education organizations and agencies in Washington was to minimize the attention given to the Commission deliberations. From a strategic perspective, the thinking was that the more the higher education community responded, the more visibility the Commission's work would receive. However, with the level of public attention generated by the release of the Report, it became apparent that this strategy would not be effective. It became clear that not only would the Report continue to attract considerable attention, but also that the Department of Education envisioned the Spellings Report as a component of a broader agenda for change.

Legislative Activity: Positions Harden

The national higher education associations and agencies, with the support of many college and university leaders around the country, sought to moderate, modify, and ideally stall the Department's and Secretary's agenda for change—which was increasingly depicted as “a one-size-fits-all” federalized program for higher education.

One of the clearest examples of legislative countermeasures came in the form of a widely circulated statement from Senator and former Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander on May 24, 2007. Senator Alexander made a strong appeal that higher education, rather than the Department of Education, should take responsibility for improvement. And Senator Edward Kennedy on behalf of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, urged the Department to refrain from proposing new regulations on accreditation until after Congress reauthorized the Higher Education Act.

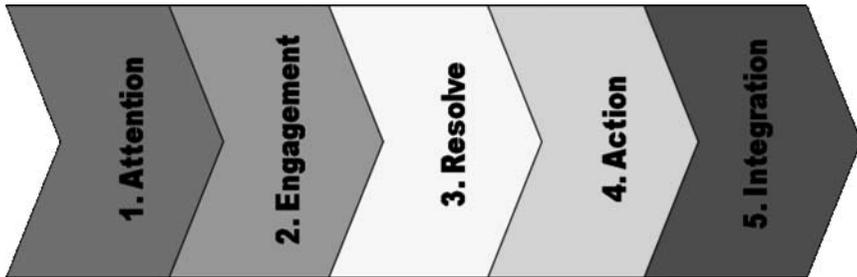
THE DYNAMICS OF PLANNED CHANGE

What impact has the Commission and its work had? This study takes a close look at this question from several perspectives. To a large extent, the answer depends on how one thinks about the concept of “impact.” Most interviewees believe that the work of the Commission and the Report have had a significant impact, but they differ in their perspectives of what the impact actually is and whether the impact will ultimately be positive or negative. A Department of Education member observed that the community realized that “this may be the last chance they have to get in front of this ... if they don’t figure it out now someone is going to figure it out for them.” Others noted that many of the issues cited in the Commission’s Report have been discussed for a long time, and efforts to solve problems were underway before the establishment of the Commission.

In addition to documenting these perspectives, this case study analyzes impact by considering these issues within the larger context of organizational change theory. Planned change efforts proceed through a predictable set of stages, depicted below. In assessing impact, this case study describes *attention, engagement, resolve, action, and integration* and evaluates the extent to which the responses to the Commission’s work meet the criteria for each stage. Successful change requires completion of each phase—and change agents seek to bring their initiatives to the final stage of long-term integration.

The authors argue that this model is useful for assessing the impact of the Spellings Commission and that it helps to clarify and organize differing definitions of impact. The framework also helps explain some of the underlying reasons for the resistance and redirection that has occurred in this case. Each stage is comprehensively discussed in the full research report; the analysis is briefly described here.

Figure 1: Stages of Organizational Change



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*. Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2008 (in press).

Attention. Viewed from any of a number of perspectives, and considering various source of evidence, the Spellings initiative and subsequent activities by the Department of Education have had substantial success in directing attention to a number of the issues and challenges facing higher education.

Engagement. Assessing the influence of the Spellings initiative as it relates to engagement is more complex. Commission members and study participants from the Department of Education acknowledged that they wished they had been more successful in their efforts to foster engagement—particularly with the faculty and constituencies outside Washington. Others agree that broader involvement and engagement of the higher education community would likely have improved the reception of the Report and of follow-up efforts by the Department.

Attention and engagement are inextricably linked; while gaining attention is a first and critical step in the change process, the strategies used to do this may have a lasting impact and consequence, well beyond their original purpose. The manner in which attention is gained can facilitate and motivate engagement, or can become an impediment to the dialogue, trust, and negotiation considered to be essential for engagement. Elements of the substance and tone of the Report, and the process through which it was released, ratified, and communicated, were perceived to convey a degree of disrespect for the academy's traditions, culture, and values. Similarly, the "leaked drafts" and hard-hitting critique, which increased attention by the higher education community, also seem to have antagonized, heightened defensiveness, and intensified mistrust and resistance, making engagement all the

more difficult. It must be acknowledged, however, that the adversarial climate that surfaced during and after the work of the Commission, no doubt has origins that precede the Commission, and to some extent may well be inherent in the cultural relationship between higher education and any governmental agency.

Resolve. The resolve stage focuses on efforts to secure commitment to the problem as defined, and help to identify steps needed to work toward solutions. One possible outcome could be a resolve to disengage. But in this instance, the outcome has been greater engagement. Based on the research reported here, it seems clear that the Commission and Report have become the impetus for a number of new and energized discussions and planning efforts taking place within the higher education community. The serious consideration of diverse voluntary initiatives—in line with Commission priorities—provides evidence of some level of affirmation by higher education associations and colleges and universities. At the same time, study participants indicate that commitment at the ground level is uneven. Such buy-in is a critical component of resolve and the subsequent stages of institutional change.

Action. This stage considers progress towards identified goals. The case study documents what may be described as “common ground,” which signals a resolve that is being translated into actions of various kinds. The magnitude of this common ground can be seen in the completion of a number of initiatives that were undertaken voluntarily by associations and agencies. It is also evidenced by the number of institutions that have adopted or adapted these or similar institution-generated initiatives at the local level.

Integration. This stage refers to institutionalizing change, so that reforms become a permanent part of policy and practice. In this regard, it is useful to differentiate between short- and long-term impact. While we can look at some of the immediate repercussions of the Commission’s Report, it is premature to make any definitive determination about its influence. Participants in the study were asked to speculate about the extent to which the influences of the Spellings Commission would translate into lasting change. Interviewees generally expressed the view that the Commission’s work will ultimately result in lasting change, and most stated that the changes would be positive.

The understanding of planned organizational change elucidated through this example can be generalized to help clarify and improve other planning and change initiatives within higher education and beyond.

The Outcome

There is little doubt that the Commission, its work, and subsequent activities based upon that foundation, attracted the attention of a substantial segment of the higher education community, fostered a visible and vigorous national conversation on the challenges and needs of higher education, and motivated or intensified commitments to a number of voluntary actions that can be seen as direct responses to the themes of the Report.

Viewed from the perspective of the Commission and the Department of Education, the impact of the Commission and the effectiveness of the initiative overall can be seen most clearly in: 1) the attention it afforded to the issues and themes addressed in the Report and follow-up activities; 2) the dialogue that has been stimulated by these efforts; and 3) the numerous voluntary improvement projects and programs that have been energized and inspired during this period. However, the effort has had considerably less impact and success in fostering the kind of mutual respect, constructive collaboration, and engaged partnering that seems necessary to unite the higher education community, Congress, and the Department in the joint pursuit of a common agenda.

Much of the higher education community has taken considerable pleasure in its success at resisting externally mandated and imposed regulations and in initiating voluntary efforts to respond to some of the most critical pressures points identified by the Commission. But as study participants note, through its response the higher education community has been less successful in effectively telling the “higher education story” to the public at large, in presenting a unified response to the issues and themes of the Report, and in easing disquiet among many external constituencies about higher education’s presumed insularity and indifference to concerns of the day.

LESSONS THAT COULD BE LEARNED

Nearly all of those interviewed, across various roles and perspectives, believe that the higher education community could have responded more effectively than it did to the Commission and the Report—before, during, and after its release. Many expressed regret that the community had interpreted the issues raised by the Spellings’ initiative more as problems than as opportunities, had appeared defensive and reinforced images that the academy is resistant to change, failed to use the situation as a platform for effectively telling higher education’s story, acted

reactively rather than proactively, and missed opportunities to provide needed leadership. The case study examines these issues in detail and provides compelling evidence that higher education might have benefited with a different approach. By avoiding defensiveness and the appearance of being resistant to change, higher education might have been more effective in getting across the values and goals that it deems important and that it believed were threatened by the Department's initiative. With a more proactive stance and better coordinated leadership, the higher education community might have mounted a clearer case for its own priorities.

Those interviewed also suggested ways that the Commission and the Department of Education might have delivered its messages more effectively. They noted that the Commission could have been more broadly representative, provided a clearer rationale for its existence and its recommendations, could have communicated in a more collegial manner with clearer signals, and could have more broadly and effectively engaged the higher education community in the dialogue. The case study examines these assertions in detail. With a broader engagement and a different communication strategy, the Commission might have been better able to put its concerns before the public and the higher education community in a manner that would generate interest rather than defensiveness and that would have avoided at least some of the anger and push back that garnered so much attention in the media. A more collegial communication process may have elucidated the many areas in which the Commission and the Department shared goals for reform with the higher education community. With a recognition of these shared goals, cooperative initiatives to improve higher education were—and still are—feasible.

Going beyond this particular case study, this study raises broader issues about the higher education system, about posturing and politics, about criticism, standards, and leadership. The case study itself illustrates the importance of jurisdictional issues—at the bottom of the controversy lies the fundamental issue of the right to criticize and initiate change. Key considerations are briefly considered below.

One of the recurring themes in the comments of interviewees at all levels is that more effective leadership approaches are needed within higher education to inspire collaborative rather than confrontational politics in the face of challenges, and ultimately to unite voices on behalf of higher education. More generally, effective leadership at all levels could help ensure that higher education's perspective is more effectively understood and appreciated by its many external constituencies.

External advocacy and cogent explication of critical issues are key challenges for higher education. But, there is also a need for new leadership to enhance communication and interaction among components within the higher education community. With new approaches to higher education leadership, the roles individuals

play within our systems and institutions—from academics to student life and administration—could be more effectively integrated to better serve operational, financial, and communication challenges faced by institutions and the higher education community at large.

A number of those interviewed suggested that the Commission would have been more effective if it had identified a few key issues around which there was agreement, such as the need for improvement in the awarding of financial aid, and then had built on that common ground. Identifying common interests is a concept that appears often in the organizational change literature. A strategy of principled negotiation could then move the discussion from divergent positions to areas of common interests. This is one of several available strategies that might have been useful. The need to separate the people from the problem is another widely understood principle of negotiation. This allows those involved to get away from over identification with a person's style and get to the issues under discussion.

Specific comments from study participants point to the need for articulate, inclusive, proactive leaders—leaders who promote the highest standards of discourse and substantive dialogue—for clarifying needs and directions, for fostering more genuine and productive engagement, for encouraging more holistic conceptualizations of higher education, for delivering difficult messages to those who may prefer not to receive them, and ultimately for more effectively advancing the collaborate pursuit of shared purposes.

What general lessons about the dynamics of change within higher education can be derived from this case? An analysis of comments by study participants indicates that in addition to *stages*, there are a number of *themes* that are vital across the various phases of the change process, among them *leadership*, *communication*, *culture*, *assessment*, and *planning*. Extensive comments by study participants elucidate these ideas in the case study.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The study concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion of how the analysis of the work of the Commission can inform our planning as we go forward:

- The Report and the recommendations are viewed differently by the different sectors in higher education.
- Within each sector, there were considerable variations among presidents, chancellors, academic officers, and business officers as to how the work of the Commission and the final Report is viewed.

Figure 2: Cross-Cutting Themes in the Dynamics of Change



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*. Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2008 (in press).

- There was general agreement that it is important to separate the issues identified from the politics surrounding the Report.
- The strong language of the Report, the sharp edge, and the high political visibility were off-putting to many in the higher education community. These things did, however, gain the attention of the community—in spite of, or more likely, because of—its directness.
- The primarily positive value of the Report is that it put higher education on the national agenda and with thoughtful responses, this could be used to great advantage.
- The Report was viewed—by all parties—as something more than simply a document for reflection; it was rather a call to action. This factor, along with the potential threat of government intervention, contributed significantly to the intensity of reactions from the higher education community.
- A number of associations and agencies undertook an aggressive and organized effort to clarify misunderstandings and to advocate for the higher education community—efforts which were seen as “effective” in blocking Department action, but perhaps less so in enhancing the understanding and appreciation of the higher education community at large among other constituencies.

- Many individuals indicated that their institutions were already addressing some of the initiatives raised in the Report and believed that they perhaps, had not done a good job communicating the progress being made in these areas.
- The Spellings Report may have filled a vacuum created by unaddressed concerns about the costs of higher education, the value added, and higher education's ineffectiveness representing itself as a public good to the public.
- The higher education community would have done well to treat the Commission and Report as a set of opportunities, and to embrace the issues and create meaningful responses, rather than to respond to these primarily as problems. The opportunity to reengage and create collaborative networks and partnerships across higher education and with state and federal agencies is not lost. The creation of these ties continues to be critically important.
- The Commission would have been more effective if it had made a clearer case for the need for educational reform, if its communication style had been more collegial, and if it had it been more successful in creating alliances with the higher education community to promote common values and goals.

Those who served on the Commission—leaders from the Department of Education, the higher education associations and accrediting agencies, colleges and universities—and all those who read and reacted in one way or another, understand both the accomplishments of and opportunities for improvement within higher education. The challenge for those seeking to advance the purposes of higher education is one of balance. Should the focus be on the many attributes, accomplishments, and achievements of the U.S. higher education community in the hope of broadening public understanding and much needed support? Or, should the emphasis be on improvement needs, gaps, weaknesses, and challenges, in order to stimulate and mobilize the talent and resources to accelerate progress?

The Spellings Commission adopted a style and approach that primarily emphasized challenges, needs, gaps, and potential areas for improvement. The gains and risks associated with this approach were predictable, and both have been realized in some measure. The final outcome will be determined over time and it may well be years before we can ascertain the extent to which the Commission had a positive or negative impact on higher education.

In looking back to draw lessons from this high profile initiative for education reform, we are also mindful of the need to look forward. As the Commission made clear, colleges and universities address economic and professional needs and provide benefits—for individuals and for the nation—that are critically important for all of us. They also strive to make vital contributions through enhancing the quality of students' personal lives, relationships, and communities; promoting civic engagement, ethical behavior, social responsibility, interpersonal competence, and intercultural appreciation; developing leadership and communication skills; enhancing aesthetic appreciation, media and information literacy, political participation, and critical analysis of contemporary issues; and building the many important understandings, capabilities, and lifelong commitments that benefit all of us.

The communication challenge here is of vital importance. There is a continuing and compelling need to create and capitalize on opportunities for telling the higher education story effectively—to thoughtfully explain its contributions to economic, professional, and personal development through teaching, research and discovery, outreach, and public service. To be effective, the story must be told in a manner that takes cognizance of the needs, perspectives, and sensitivities of the various constituencies whose understanding and appreciation of the multiple facets of the academy's work is critical.

As the analysis presented in this study so clearly underscores, leadership at all levels is essential to the realization of these goals. There are vital and continuing leadership challenges related to identifying, promoting, and leveraging innovations and effective practices; identifying new initiatives where common challenges can be proactively and cooperatively addressed; seeking new opportunities for collaboration between higher education and governmental agencies and offices; and developing collective public voices to span and unite the various types of institutions, associations, and agencies that define higher education in America.

Timeline of Key Events

September 19, 2005	U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings forms the Commission on the Future of Higher Education and charges it with developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education.
June 2006	Early draft of Commission Report is released.
Early September 2006	Prepublication Commission Report is released.
September 19, 2006	Spellings Commission Report, <i>A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education</i> , is published.
September 19, 2006	Department of Education issues first official statement upon release of Report.
September 22, 2006	Department of Education releases statement that Secretary Spellings would announce an action plan for the future of higher education; Secretary Spellings and Commission Chair Miller hold press conference at the National Press Club.

November 2006	Secretary Spellings convenes an Accreditation Forum with 60 representatives of accrediting agencies, colleges, universities, state leaders, private sector, and higher education organization.
September to December 2006	Professional education associations and college and university presidents issue statements about the Report.
Late fall 2006	Work begins on the formation of the Voluntary System of Accountability, a joint project of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. More than 70 institutions create VSA to help universities demonstrate accountability and stewardship. By April 2008, more than 235 institutions join the VSA network.
Spring 2007 to Spring 2008	Commission sponsors public events, including summits, town hall meetings, and Secretary's College Tour.
May 25, 2007	Senator Lamar Alexander issues statement warning of the dangers of federal control of higher education and urging higher education to take responsibility for its own improvement.
May 2007	Members of the Association of American Universities Data Exchange agree to collect and release information about undergraduate student performance and costs.

June 15, 2007	Senator Edward Kennedy, on behalf of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, issues letter urging the Department to refrain from proposing new regulations on accreditation until the Higher Education Act is reauthorized.
July 2007	U.S. Senate passes S1642, Higher Education Act reauthorization bill.
October 2007	FIPSE awards \$2.45 million to Association of American Colleges and Universities, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges for collection, reporting, and use of data to improve instruction and outcomes.
November 2007	The VSA launches “College Portrait,” a generic Web page template that colleges and universities can utilize to provide various types of information to the public.
Late 2007	The University and College Accountability Network, a project of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities signs up 600 private institutions to participate in the project to present uniform information about their colleges and universities.
January 2008	The AAC&U and CHEA issue “Principles for Student Learning and Accountability,” as a framework for accountability and to help higher education institutions assess its contributions to “our democracy as well as our economy.”

February 2008	National Consortium for Continuous Improvement (NCCI) recognizes first winners of its “Leveraging Excellence Award Program,” for effective academic and administrative initiatives that have been actively leveraged for impact beyond one department, campus, or institution.
February 2008	U.S. House of Representatives passes HR 4137, Higher Education Act reauthorization bill.
Spring 2008	House and Senate are in “conference committee” to work out the differences between their two versions of a reauthorized Higher Education Act.

Research Report

INTRODUCTION

On September 19, 2005, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings¹ announced the formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, charged with “developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America’s diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country’s future.”²

The 19-member Commission³ met nine times in the subsequent 12 months. During this period, in addition to extensive dialogue among members, the Commission solicited input from representatives throughout the higher education community and the general public, sponsored studies to gather information on key topics, and provided opportunities for input from the general public. These efforts culminated in the publication of a 55-page report entitled, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, which was released in September 2006.⁴

While acknowledging the traditional preeminence of U.S. higher education, the Report raised concerns about the risks of complacency.

As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the unfulfilled promise that remains. 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.

It is time to be frank. Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U.S. higher education, we have found much to applaud, but also much that requires urgent reform. ...

The Commission offered six broad recommendations:

1. Student academic preparation should be improved and financial aid made available so that more students are able to access and afford a quality higher education.
2. The entire student financial aid system should be simplified, restructured, and provided with incentives to better manage costs and measure performance.
3. A “robust culture of accountability and transparency” should be cultivated throughout the higher education system, aided by new systems of data measurement and a publicly available information database with comparable college information. There should also be a greater focus on student learning and development of a more outcome-focused accreditation system.
4. Colleges and universities should embrace continuous innovation and quality improvement.
5. Federal investments should be targeted to areas critical to America’s global competitiveness, such as math, science, and foreign languages.
6. A strategy for lifelong learning should be developed to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of a college education to every American’s future.⁵

Each recommendation was accompanied by extensive discussion, supporting documentation and suggestions for action. The higher education media⁶ covered extensively the work of the Commission, the Report, and various follow-up activities by the Department of Education. At the same time, the higher education community at the national, state, and campus levels engaged in considerable dialogue.

Important Questions

Nearly two years after its release, the Report continues to attract interest and attention in media, conferences, and conversations within the higher education community. There have been a number of task forces and commissions on higher education in recent times, but none has garnered this level of attention. Because of the importance of the issues raised in the Report, and the level of interest generated

by the activities of the Commission and the Department, this case is of importance from operational, policy, and scholarly points of view:

- How has the Commission's work been perceived by key constituencies within the higher education community, and more generally?
- How do the various constituencies value the themes and specific recommendations advanced by the Commission?
- What is it about the work of the Commission and its Report that has stimulated such vigorous and continuing reaction?
- How have groups within the higher education community—national associations, accrediting agencies, and institutions—responded during the months following the release of the Report?
- Will the work of the Commission, and the reactions and responses to it, result in significant and lasting change?

Answers to these questions, an identification of enduring themes and issues arising from the work of the Commission, and an appreciation of the process by which these issues have been brought into the limelight through this effort are important for several reasons. While the tenure and influence of this Commission, and of current Department of Education policy leaders and their educational philosophies are limited, the issues raised by the Commission are likely to be of interest for some time to come. A better understanding of the dynamics of the Commission's work and of the tensions within different higher education constituencies, as well as a systematic analysis of the impact of the Commission, can contribute to policy formation and communication well into the future.

Additionally, this analysis can be helpful in developing more generalized insights:

- What lessons can be learned from this case about the dynamics of change within higher education?
- Can these lessons form the basis of a set of change principles that can be useful in other contexts and at other levels within higher education?
- Will lessons from this case have applicability for understanding the dynamics of change in other organizational or inter-institutional change settings?

This understanding can be of practical significance for national higher education association and accreditation leaders, as well as for academic and business leaders within colleges and universities. This knowledge will also contribute more generally to efforts to study the nature of change within higher education and within other institutional settings.

This Study

The purpose of this research project is to provide a review and analysis of the activities and consequences of the Spellings Commission and its recommendations. Information for the analysis comes primarily from three sources: 1) a review and evaluation of public communication about the Commission's work and reports; 2) interviews with a cross-section of knowledgeable leaders with varying perspectives on the case; and 3) a content analysis of core articles and responses published on paper and electronically.

Based on the analysis, this report describes the Commission's activities, goals, and approaches, and summarizes perceptions of its importance and short- and longer-term impact from multiple perspectives. Further, it seeks to provide insights into principles of change within higher education, and to identify practices that may be useful to leaders in their efforts to disseminate information, garner attention, heighten dialogue, prompt action, and more generally, to effectively engage audiences with varying levels of interest and enthusiasm in the consideration of new ideas and directions.

As noted above, an effort is also made to examine the work of the Spellings Commission in a broader context, one that considers general questions about the nature and dynamics of change within higher education and in other institutional settings. These are also topics that are important in the professional and academic literature addressing issues related to sector, institutional, and organizational change. It is hoped that the analysis of this case will contribute to knowledge in these areas, and will also provide the foundation for further, long-term studies of the impact of the Spellings Commission and similar initiatives.

DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

This research study has three major elements.

1. An informal review of a cross section of higher education print and electronic media articles appearing in higher education public media, in combination with reports, statements, press releases, and commentaries published by the Commission, the Department of Education, national higher education associations, and accrediting associations between September 2005 through March 2008. Those documents and the material they contain provide the basis for constructing the descriptive account of the Commission, its charter, its composition,

and its work. These documents also provide attributed statements and quotes from the Secretary, the Commission Chair, Commission members, and others in the higher education community. All quotes attributed by name to specific individuals that are included in this study are derived from these published documents.

2. Structured interviews with 36 purposefully selected leaders broadly representative of the Spellings Commission, the Department of Education, and higher education institutions and media.⁷ This group includes senior leaders from major higher education organizations and accrediting agencies; institutional, academic, and administrative and finance executives from a cross section of systems, universities, and colleges;⁸ and senior reporters/editors from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* who were key figures in covering the work of the Commission and related activities. The group consisted of four members of the Spellings Commission; two senior leaders from the Department of Education; four higher education association presidents; presidents or executive directors of three accrediting associations; presidents or chancellors of two public university systems, three liberal arts colleges, and one community college; and three chief academic officers, fourteen chief business and administrative officers, and two senior journalists from higher education media who had primary responsibility for covering the Spellings Commission. (Two members of the Commission were also representatives of other interviewee groups listed.)

All of the individuals invited to participate in this study accepted our invitations. The interviews consisted of a series of closed- and opened-ended questions and each lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Interviews were conducted by two of the lead authors of this report over a period of five months, roughly one year following the release of the Spellings Commission Report. Interviewees were informed that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and not reported in a way that would reveal their identities. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed and edited in a manner that preserved anonymity and confidentiality.

3. Systematic sampling and content analysis of 1,363 core articles and responses published online and/or in paper form between September 5, 2005, and September 7, 2007.⁹ The Report presents results from

a review and content analysis of articles and responses to articles published by higher education media. Criteria used to select relevant articles/responses for this study are as follows:

- Core articles were selected from the list of publications if the title, abstract, or content of the article indicated a commentary on the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, reaction to the Spellings Commission, and/or a follow-up discussion of the Commission's work.
- Articles were selected if the title of the article indicated a commentary on the Spellings Commission, reactions/responses related to the commission, and follow-up discussion as a result of the Commission's work.¹⁰
- After core articles were selected, all published responses to selected articles were also analyzed following accepted practices to ensure validity and reliability.

THE COMMISSION—FORMATION AND LAUNCH

The formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education followed a series of roundtables on higher education hosted by the Department of Education in Washington and Colorado. Based on those meetings, Secretary Spellings concluded that there was a need for national leadership on the issues facing higher education, and the Commission was seen as a vehicle to help address this need.¹¹

Composition of the Commission

To assure a broad-based dialogue, the Department envisioned a Commission composed of individuals who would represent a variety of key constituencies and relevant perspectives on higher education. It was assumed that individual members would speak for the groups they represented.¹² Specifically, the formal documents called for the Commission to include former and current public and private college presidents, representatives of Fortune 500 corporations, the financial services industry, for-profit education companies, nonprofit education foundations, higher education researchers, and other representatives the Secretary deemed appropriate including former elected officials.¹³ Ultimately, 19 individuals were appointed to the Commission.¹⁴ The Charter of the Commission called for the Secretary to appoint one or more chairpersons from among the members, and Charles Miller, former Chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas System, was appointed.

Meetings and Activities

According to the charter, a minimum of three meetings were to be held in different parts of the country during the course of the Commission deliberations, and these meetings were to be open to the public except as determined otherwise by the Secretary in accordance with statutes governing federal advisory committees.¹⁵ In actuality, over the course of the Commission's work, a total of nine meetings including public hearings were held—in Washington, Nashville, San Diego, Seattle, Boston, and Indianapolis.

Secretary Spellings broadly charged the Commission with developing what was characterized as a “comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America’s diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country’s future.” Speaking at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte on the day she announced the formation of the Commission, Spellings described the challenge this way:

It is time to examine how we can get the most out of our national investment in higher education. We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation’s needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.

She asked the Commission to engage students and families, policymakers, business leaders, and the academic community in a national discussion about higher education, in general, and in particular, to consider such questions as:

- What skills will students need to succeed in the 21st century?
- How can we make sure America stays the world’s leader in academic research?
- How can we make sure opportunities for quality higher education and the best jobs are open to all students?

In that speech, Secretary Spellings further noted that,

... the achievement gap is closing and test scores are rising among our nation’s younger students, due largely to the high standards and accountability measures called for by the No Child Left Behind Act. More and more students are going to graduate ready for the challenges of college ... and we must make sure our higher education system is accessible and affordable for all these students.¹⁶

“The message here is simple,” she commented,

in today’s global economy, the best jobs go to the most skilled and most motivated workers. Around 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require at least some postsecondary education. That means a college education is more important than ever....

The good news is that we still have the finest system of higher education in the world. But we’re at a crossroads. The world is catching up. In 1970, America produced more than 50 percent of the world’s science and engineering doctorates. But if current trends continue, by 2010, we will produce only around 15 percent.

As taxpayers, we all have a stake in the higher education system. Most people don’t realize that federal dollars make up about one-third of our nation’s total annual investment in higher education....

... unlike K–12 education, we don’t ask a lot of questions about what we’re getting for our investment in higher education. And as a result, we’re missing some valuable information to help guide policy to ensure that our system remains the finest in the world. And parents have a tough time getting answers about the way it all works.

A few weeks ago, I dropped my oldest daughter off at college to begin her freshman year.... I found plenty of information on dining hall food, intramural sports, and campus architecture. I learned at one school that you can attend a Jimmy Buffet Bash and a toga party all in one year. Who knew?

... I didn’t find much information on what courses to take, how long it takes the average student to graduate, and whether it’s a better deal to graduate from a less-expensive state school in six years or a private school in four. I learned just how confusing the college process can be for parents....

The federal government is part of the problem, too. We have around 60 different Web sites for federal financial aid and dozens of different toll-free phone numbers. We’re working on a plan to streamline the process....

Parents need better information. And so do policymakers. It's hard to make good policy without sound data on what's working well and what needs to work better.

We all have a part to play at the federal, state, community, and private levels. I'm not advocating a bigger role for the federal government, but it's time to examine how we can get the most out of our national investment. We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation's needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.

That's why today I'm announcing the formation of a new commission.... The goal is to launch a national discussion on the future of higher education and how we can ensure our system remains the best in the world and provides more opportunities for all Americans.

In recent years, there have been many good studies and recommendations on different aspects of higher education.... It's time to review this work and take stock of where we stand. We must have a plan for moving forward. We must develop a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education....¹⁷

A number of issues that were to be considered by the Spellings Commission had been of growing concern within Washington. The 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965, for example, called for a study of transfer policies, and established a committee to review and advise on accreditation standards and practices.¹⁸ It also called for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to conduct a study of expenditures by institutions and prices paid for a college education by students and their families.¹⁹ Given this context, it was not surprising that there appeared to be bipartisan support for the launch of the Spellings initiative, and Senator Edward Kennedy released the following statement on September 19, 2005:

I applaud the Secretary's effort to look at the long-term strengths and weaknesses of our postsecondary system. More than ever, our colleges and universities are vital to our ability to meet the new and dynamic challenges of our time. We need to ensure that every student has the ability to go to college and that they graduate ready for the jobs of the 21st century.²⁰

To address its charge, the Commission undertook an extensive review of documents from a variety of sources including white papers, opinion pieces, and research reports of past blue-ribbon commissions. Information was solicited and received from approximately 175 organizations, agencies, and institutions.²¹

As a part of the information-gathering process, Chairman Charles Miller commissioned 15 issue papers on topics that were considered central to the deliberations. These papers covered a range of themes including: eliminating complexity and inconsistency in financial aid programs, the need for accreditation reform, accountability and consumer information, federal regulation of higher education, and assuring quality in higher education.²² As described in the Report, these issue papers were prepared “by various experts and their purpose was to spark a national dialogue, educate the public, generate debate, and inform the work of the Commission surrounding key postsecondary issues.” The Commission was careful to point out that the issue papers did not necessarily represent the opinions of Commissioners or the Department of Education, and were not formal recommendations.²³ In addition, the Department of Education hosted a number of events, for instance a roundtable discussion with accrediting agencies and state higher education leadership, to identify the major challenges facing accreditation in carrying out its mission of promoting and assuring quality in higher education.

Communication about the Commission

The U.S. Department of Education’s Web site²⁴ was a primary communication channel for conveying information about the formation of the Commission and the conduct of its research and deliberations.²⁵ Public and professional electronic and print media also devoted considerable attention to the initiative.

THE REPORT—THE DOCUMENT AND ITS DISSEMINATION

In September 2006 the Department released a prepublication version of the Commission report, followed shortly thereafter by the release of the final report. The “Preamble” of the Report entitled, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, began in this way:

Three hundred and seventy years after the first college in our fledgling nation was established... higher education in the United States has become one of our greatest success stories.... Whether America’s colleges and universities are measured by their sheer number and variety, by the increasingly open access

so many citizens enjoy to their campuses, by their crucial role in advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research discoveries, or by the new forms of teaching and learning that they have pioneered to meet students' changing needs, these postsecondary institutions have accomplished much of which they and the nation can be proud.

Despite these achievements, however, this Commission believes U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways. As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the unfulfilled promise that remains. 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.

It is time to be frank. Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U.S. higher education, we have found much to applaud, but also much that requires urgent reform....

To be sure, at first glance most Americans don't see colleges and universities as a trouble spot in our educational system.... For a long time, we educated more people to higher levels than any other nation.

We remained so far ahead of our competitors for so long, however, that we began to take our postsecondary superiority for granted. The results of this inattention, though little known to many of our fellow citizens, are sobering. We may still have more than our share of the world's best universities. But a lot of other countries have followed our lead, and **they are now educating more of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are.** Worse, they are passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever.²⁶

To address the "urgent reform" needs that were identified, six broad recommendations were offered by the Commission:

Every student in the nation should have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. We recommend, therefore, that

the U.S. commit to an unprecedented effort to expand higher education access and success by improving student preparation and persistence, addressing non academic barriers, and providing significant increases in aid to low-income students.

To address the escalating cost of a college education and the fiscal realities affecting government's ability to finance higher education in the long run, we recommend that the entire student financial aid system be restructured and new incentives put in place to improve the measurement and management of costs and institutional productivity.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance. We urge the creation of a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education. Every one of our goals, from improving access and affordability to enhancing quality and innovation, will be more easily achieved if higher education institutions embrace and implement serious accountability measures. We recommend the creation of a consumer-friendly information database on higher education with useful, reliable information on institutions, coupled with a search engine to enable students, parents, policymakers, and others to weigh and rank comparative institutional performance.

With too few exceptions, higher education has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing needs of a knowledge economy. We recommend that America's colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning, particularly in the area of science and mathematical literacy.

America must ensure that our citizens have access to high quality and affordable educational, learning, and training opportunities throughout their lives. We recommend the development of a national strategy for lifelong learning that helps all citizens understand the importance of preparing for and participating in higher education throughout their lives.

The United States must ensure the capacity of its universities to achieve global leadership in key strategic areas such as science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions. We recommend increased federal investment in areas critical to our nation's global competitiveness and a renewed commitment to attract the best and brightest minds from across the nation and around the world to lead the next wave of American innovation.²⁷

Official Statement by the Department of Education

The Department of Education issued its first official statement upon receipt of the Commission Report on September 19, 2006,²⁸ and on the same day a summary of the Commission's findings was issued by the Department in a separate statement:

Over the past year, the Commission—comprised of public officials, researchers, and leaders from the academic and business community—held a series of public meetings and hearings across the country, engaging Americans from all walks of life in a robust national dialogue.

The Commission's Final Report determined that while America's colleges and universities have much to be proud of, they are not well-prepared for the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population and a competitive global economy. Our system of higher education has become dangerously complacent despite the fact that, in the Commission's words, "Other countries are passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever."²⁹

The release reiterated the following additional points from the Commission Report:

College access, particularly for low-income and minority students, is limited by inadequate academic preparation, a lack of information, and persistent financial barriers;

The current financial aid system is confusing, complex, and inefficient, and is therefore frequently unable to direct aid to the students who need it most; and

There is a shortage of clear, comprehensive, and accessible information about the colleges and universities themselves, including comparative data about cost and performance.

Too many Americans just aren't getting the education that they need. There are disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates.³⁰

The statement included a brief listing of the six recommendations, and indicated that the Secretary of Education would be considering these and other proposals and would prepare an "action plan for the future of higher education" to be formally released on September 26, 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The forthcoming plan, the release indicated, would "outline a course forward as we begin our work together towards solutions that will best meet the needs of all consumers of the system—educators, institutions, taxpayers, parents, and students."³¹

Dissemination of the Report and Related Information

As with the formation and launch of the Commission, the U.S. Department of Education's Web site³² was the primary channel for distributing the Report. The site also provided a convenient point of access to the full range of Commission- and Report-related information that had been generated from speeches, press releases, and other supporting documents.

Those who had been following the work of the Commission were very familiar with this Web site, where a variety of materials, including the text of the issue papers, had been posted throughout the year. The involvement of many individuals from the higher education community during the preceding year facilitated the rapid diffusion of information about the Report through their own personal and professional networks. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* were the most visible formal channels for disseminating news of the Report. Other public and professional electronic and print media also devoted attention to the initiative. In addition to formal channels of communication, the informal network of e-mails, attachments, and Web sites were then, and have continued to be, extremely significant in the diffusion process.

As knowledge of the Report spread, the Department and its Web site was increasingly significant as a source for archived information for those who were seeking to better understand the history of events associated with the Commission. As of January 2008, the Department of Education had distributed more than 12,000

copies of the Report to a wide array of stakeholder groups, including states, institutions, governing boards, associations, students, and parents. More than 7,000 copies were mailed to U.S. college presidents in September 2006. Another 4,000 copies were requested through *EdPubs* for individual use, and more than 1,000 copies were distributed to participants at the national and regional higher education summits and town hall meetings held throughout 2007.³³ According to Department of Education records, there were nearly 75,000 visits to the Spellings Commission Web site in 2006 and more than 95,000 in 2007. There were approximately 36,000 downloads of the Commission draft and final Commission Reports on the Web in 2006, and 53,000 in 2007.³⁴ Clearly, the availability of Internet-based communication channels is a factor that helps to explain the high level of initial and sustained interest in the Commission, its Report, and its work.

AFTERMATH—REACTIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Predictably, news of the release of the Report spread from those most closely involved with the work of the Commission to those who were interested but not involved. In subsequent weeks and months information about the Commission and Report was disseminated to a progressively larger number of individuals within the higher education community. Among those interviewed in the study, there was a general sense that members of higher education associations and agency leaders, as well as higher education academic and business leaders, became aware of the Commission, and its work early on; others, including board members, faculty, students, and alumni were much less knowledgeable.

Report Recommendations and Comments by Study Participants

Those who came to the Report without a particular point of view found its opening paragraphs quite reassuring because of their strong reaffirmation of the value and importance of U.S. higher education:

Higher education in the United States has become one of our greatest success stories. Whether America's colleges and universities are measured by their sheer number and variety, by the increasingly open access so many citizens enjoy to their campuses, by their crucial role in advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research discoveries, or by the new forms of teaching and learning that they have pioneered to meet students' changing needs, these postsecondary institutions have accomplished much of which they and the nation can be proud.³⁵

In highlighting the distinguished tradition and the continuing contributions of U.S. colleges and universities to teaching and learning, research, and outreach, the Report could be seen as providing precisely the kind of national attention that many within higher education felt has been sorely needed. Troubling declines in public support—financial and sometimes attitudinal—had been the topic of discussions throughout the higher education community—particularly as they affect public institutions. As Katharine Lyall and Kathleen Sell noted,

Whether measured by real (inflation-adjusted) state appropriations per student, by the share of state budgets spent on higher education, or by the investment per \$1,000 of state income devoted to higher education, state investment in public higher education has been shrinking for more than a decade.

Public institutions enroll 77 percent of all American college students. In the 1980s roughly 50 percent of their operating support came from taxpayers, while in the current period, that number has dropped about 30 percent on average—to a low of 10 percent at some prominent state universities.³⁶

Indeed, it was the lack of national attention to the accomplishments and also the needs of higher education that led the American Council on Education (ACE) to initiate its “Solutions for Our Future” campaign (www.solutionsforourfuture.org). On March 14, 2006, ACE, with support from its corporate partners, launched what was described as a “first-of-its-kind” campaign to publicize the benefits of higher education to society and to address three primary goals: 1) increase awareness of the public benefits of higher education; 2) enable every campus to do its part in meeting the nation’s needs for higher education; and 3) make higher education a public policy priority.³⁷

Other elements of the Commission’s Report also seemed to resonate with the agenda of concerns within higher education. Even the most basic issues and challenges identified by the Commission—the importance of a commitment to higher education quality, increased accountability, greater transparency, heightened attention to institutional performance and learning outcomes assessment, refined approaches to financing and financial aid, improved access and transferability, an intensified commitment to continuous improvement and innovation, and the need to overcome complacency and resistance to change—were not new ones to the higher education community. All have been themes of numerous books, articles, task forces, commissions, and conference panels and presentations within the academy in recent years.³⁸

While the themes were not new ones, neither were they regarded as unimportant. Indeed, the general sense among all of those interviewed was that the Commission, the Report, and the recommendations were quite significant to the future of higher education. As might be expected, however, a variety of perspectives and points of view on this issue were expressed during the interviews.

Most of those interviewed who represent the perspective of the Commission and the Department were very positive in their assessment of the significance of the Commission, its work, and the Report for the future of higher education. One Commission member explained it this way, “I’d say on a relative basis [of] what a commission like this can do.... I’d have to give [this one] a high score.” Said another Commissioner, “I think it’s extremely important,” because it prompted “a conversation that this country really needs—not just for the citizenry, but for our economy.” Offering a qualified endorsement, another Commissioner said, “It’s been very influential, but in a rhetorical way [rather] than a pragmatic way.” However, another Commissioner expressed a very different view, “I don’t think the Report itself is significant at all. I don’t think people are reading it. We might have been very close to producing a really... interesting, important result, [but that didn’t happen].”

Those who look at the work of the Commission from the perspective of the higher education associations and accrediting agencies had quite similar assessments. One person noted,

I think it’s been very significant ... but ... I don’t think it’s changed the enterprise overnight. I do think that it’s had, at least to date, [a] major impact on the conversation and what people are doing ... This is the single most significant look at higher education ... in 20-something years.

Said another, “I [consider the initiative to be] very significant, but not everyone agrees with me.” While a number of other association and agency leaders *do* agree, there were also several individuals in this group who consider it to be only moderately—and one who considers it to be minimally—significant.

Among institutional leaders, the perceptions were mixed. One system executive remarked,

[The Report] ... provokes—and ‘provokes’ may be the right word—an important conversation about how we should improve higher education It’s caused all of the national groups to give some thought to [a number of important issues for higher education], and I think it reflects the great concerns that we have in the

country, about higher education, about access, affordability, and I think all of us need to find ways to address... these issues.

Commented one chief academic officer,

I think this has the potential for really changing the landscape of higher education in this country.... We don't know where it is going, but it reflects an attitude that is very pervasive—and is not going away—about the perceived lack of accountability for higher education and... we're going to have to deal with this... I see this in Washington, but also in [the state capitals].

A chief business officer, who sees the Report as very significant explained that

[It is]... a symptom. It doesn't stand alone. It follows a series of examples of the uneasy partnership between the federal government... society and higher education which is troubling.... What it reflects is a less-than-complete level of confidence in what we do and how we do it, and we should figure out how to respond.... The [Commission] used the terms 'transparency' and 'accountability' almost interchangeably. At least on the transparency side of it... we do a [very poor] job. That's hurting us because we think we have a good story to tell.

Said another, "I would [consider it to be] very significant if the community is able to implement some of [the recommendations]."

Another who considers the initiative to be moderately significant noted,

I don't know how important the Report will be actually in terms of public policy.... It seemed like there was tremendous flurry initially.... [but then activity seems to have dissipated] a little bit... and... we are towards the end of the Bush administration, so I don't know whether it is going to be transformational [for] higher education.

Several others expressed the view that the issue of significance comes down to how it is embraced by the higher education community and the government.

Interviewees from higher education media who have been close to the work of the Commission were mixed in their assessment of the significance of the initiative, observing in one case that it may be five years before it is possible to meaningfully address this issue.

Most of the study participants also believe the general themes identified in the Commission's six recommendations address areas that are important to the future of higher education, but many also noted that there is a good deal of controversy and disagreement about the way in which they should be addressed. Commented one Commissioner,

We tried to talk about the future, and to look for the leverage points that would change the current system so we didn't have as many specific detailed recommendations as some people would have liked.... Everybody said focus on a limited number of problems. That's what we agreed on early... that we should focus on a limited number of important problems and come up with solutions.

Another Commissioner also offered a general comment,

They're all very important... I'm very concerned about the number of high school graduates that aren't ready for college. I'm very concerned about the new dynamic of the 15–18 year old population. I'm very concerned that we don't have the ability to enroll more working adults into some kind of experience that gets them into their first credential.

And a third Commissioner noted,

The recommendations have never been treated as recommendations.... We never got them down to where they took bite.... These are generalized goals that are very hard to say aren't good goals. I wanted us to pick two or three major things and go forth. Instead, we got six goals [at] 50,000 ft.

The following sections list each of the six recommendations and provide a summary of the comments made about each by study participants.

1. *Improve preparation, address non-academic barriers, and provide significant increases in aid to low-income students.*

This recommendation was seen as very important for the future of higher education by virtually all study participants. One higher education association/accrediting agency member called it “the most significant issue” of the six, and one of the institutional leaders called it “cru-

cial.” Another institutional leader felt it was important to overcome the disadvantages faced by lower-income families. A chief business officer said it was “absolutely [number] one.” Another chief business officer added that “getting them into the door and ... hooked on the concept of higher education is more important ... even more important than increases in aid is letting low income students know what the options are for financing their education.” Expressing some pessimism about this goal, one study respondent noted, “it was important, but it wasn’t realistic ... everybody’s been trying to do it anyway.”

2. *Restructure the student financial aid system, and improve the measurement and management of costs and institutional productivity.*

With only a few exceptions, this recommendation was also seen as very important for the future of higher education. Interestingly, however, two college presidents said it was not particularly important in their view. One Commission member called it “the most important thing.” Even so, there were a few chief business and chief academic officers who, while giving the recommendation an overall rating of very important, separated out the issue of measurement and management of costs and deemed it “not important.” One said, “I’ve got to separate that into two questions. Restructuring the financial aid system, I consider to be [extremely important] ... improving measurement, management costs and institutional productivity [is relatively unimportant].” An institution leader focused on the problem with measuring costs, saying on “any kind of productivity measure ... the community college is ... the lowest cost and ... the most efficient and ... serves the most people ... Harvard or Princeton [spends] five times as much ... [They provide] incredible support for faculty and for students on a per capita basis ... but it’s all appropriate in their version of what they’re trying to do.” Another respondent said, “colleges seem not to be price sensitive at all ... and ... there’s no elasticity in tuition. It just seems to go up and up. So everyone thinks you’ve got to talk about accountability and cost.” The chief business officers interviewed had strong feelings about this recommendation and the issues surrounding it. One said it was “very important” and talked about student decision-making. For students, “the bureaucratic complexity of financial aid and the steps that are required make it almost impossible ... often they arrive without the ability to pay for their first semester or they have to defer a semester ...

a lot of them lose momentum and they give up. It also is a problem for adult students who typically register very late and... their ability to access financial aid the way it's currently structured makes it difficult." Another talked about the importance of simplifying the FAFSA form. A third chief business officer said that "restructuring the financial aid system ties directly to the aid to the low income students... measurement and management of costs could easily become the first issue that is addressed because it's one of those popular issues [for] politicians."

3. *Create a robust culture of measurement, accountability, and transparency throughout higher education.*

Almost all of those interviewed saw this as a very important recommendation, but one where the adage the "devil is in the details" is very applicable. A Commission/Department of Education member said simply, "unless you have some sort of accountability system—a transparency—you won't know if the other things are working." One higher education association/accrediting agency member articulated a point made by several people, "everybody thinks that's a good idea, but nobody knows how to do it." Another higher education association member seemed to confirm this perspective by saying, "finding ways to document curriculum is truly transformational [is important, but it's difficult].... One faculty member commented to me, '... you won't know if [a] liberal arts education has transformed the lives of these students until 30–40 years out.' And I said... 'that may in fact be true, but the reality is... parents who are going to be paying money to send their kids to these colleges and the students themselves don't want to wait 30 or 40 years.'" A chief business officer suggested that "what's interesting is that there are a lot... of students who don't make their decisions based on the measurement and accountability and transparency of the institutions that they are looking at... measurement and accountability and transparency would not have affected their choice about where to come to school."

4. *Promote a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement in pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning.*

This recommendation received high marks from the Commission and Department of Education members, as well as the chief academic and chief business officers. A chief business officer said it was very

important because “when you do this for... students they get a better education, they’re better prepared to enter the workforce, they’re more competitive, they’re more attractive to employers... in some cases it just makes a difference between... students dropping out and a student persisting.” The institutional leaders and higher education association/accrediting agency members offered more divergent views. One institutional leader said, “I suspect a lot of my colleagues would not give it that high of a mark. I think you’ve got to have a special culture for a president and faculty to talk about innovation and creativity.” A theme that appeared across many of the groups was, as one institutional leader put it, that “those things are happening in higher education and will continue to happen. I’m not sure we’ll be able to tie it back to the Spellings Commission.” One higher education association member said it was “very important” but “universities are doing that all the time and it’s a failure to recognize that it’s going on... I don’t attribute it to the Report.” A chief business officer said, “the thought that that’s not happening and won’t happen unless you develop some standardized test is absurd.”

5. *Develop a national strategy for lifelong learning to help citizens understand the importance of preparing for and participating in higher education throughout their lives.*

There were mixed reactions to this recommendation. The chief business officers, chief academic officers, and media representatives thought it was quite important, but the other groups had a variety of opinions. One Commission/Department of Education member said that a national strategy is “not the real issue... the bigger issue is how do we align all these programs and resources and make it transparent so that adults can maneuver the system... the system is too complex for them.” One institutional leader said, “it’s already happening... adults are now... more than half the enrollment in the country. The marketplace is responding... I don’t think the federal government needs to tell us that we need to offer lifelong learning opportunities.” A chief business officer said, “it’s very important [but] I’m not sure it’s as important to the public as maybe it should be and I don’t see that changing.”

6. *Increase federal investment in and efforts to attract the best minds to strategic areas that are critical to our nation's global leadership and competitiveness, such as science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions.*

This recommendation was perceived to be very important by the chief business officers and chief academic officers, by the majority of the institutional leaders, and by all but one of the higher education association/accrediting agency members. The Commission and Department of Education members perceive it to be of considerable importance. There were some comments on the role of the Commission in this discussion. The higher education representative who said the recommendation was not important said, “we’re all... working on continuous innovation, we’re working on lifelong learning, and we’re clearly working on the STEM area” and that the Commission didn’t cause that to happen. But a chief business officer said, “achieving this is critical. My hope is that the Spellings Commission report can really help that get some traction.” An institutional leader suggested that “we ought to be preparing the best minds... that’s where I would spend my money... to spend... a billion dollars on math and science education to develop more advance science teachers, and more engineers and more technicians.” A chief business officer said, “it’s very good but we’re going about it in the wrong way... when you can make more money coming out of college... as a... personal trainer than you can as a beginning engineer there’s something wrong. Well, how... are we going to get the best mind[s] into it if that’s what the outcome is?... We have to change the culture...”

Emphasis and Interpretation

While the Report did indeed bring focus and attention to higher education, trumpeted its accomplishments and value, and reaffirmed many of the challenges and needs already identified as priorities, little of the initial reaction from the higher education community focused on these facets of the Report. Rather, almost from the moment of its release, responses to the Report targeted areas of concern and disagreement. As a consequence, the higher education community largely missed whatever initial opportunities there may have been to leverage the accolades or elements of a shared agenda of needs and priorities based on the Report.³⁹

The intention of the Commission may well have been to offer a reflective analysis of a national problem and a thoughtful and mobilizing call to collaborative action. In the words of Secretary Spelling, “We all have a part to play at the federal, state, community, and private levels.... We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation’s needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.”⁴⁰ In spite of the laudatory comments in the Report, and efforts to describe the problems that were identified within it as shared challenges, many—if not most—within the higher education community regarded it as an attack on U.S. colleges and universities. It seemed clear from initial reactions from the higher education community that the Commission’s intended interpretation and the goal of a collaborative response were improbable outcomes.

These observations were borne out in responses from study participants, who acknowledged that overall, the Commission’s work was perceived unfavorably—with cynicism and annoyance—by many but not all within the higher education community. It appears that the harshest reaction came from the Washington-based higher education organizations, where the responses from the six presidential associations and various other associations and agencies were characterized by those interviewed as being “considerably more negative than in other parts of the higher education community”—and ranging from “skeptical” to “openly hostile.” In the words of one higher education association leader, “I’d say for the most part, [the Commission] is viewed pretty negatively. I think the community, in general, believes that the Commission was not able to offer recommendations that reflected [higher education’s]... point of view.” Another leader from a higher education association commented, “I think folks [believe] the Commission was created with a bias, was carried out with a bias, and thus the recommendations of the Commission are not on sound footing.”

Interestingly, one Commissioner commented,

[We heard] much more encouraging responses... in private conversations.... I don’t think the people in Washington necessarily represent the views of many of their members. I think they claim to, they want to. But I think they’re there to create the level of anxiety that they create in order to justify their own existence....

Many other interviewees also expressed the view that the response in Washington has been far more negative than elsewhere. For example, reactions were perceived to be less extreme and more balanced among college, university,

and system leaders—depending to some extent on institution type. Unique personal perspectives of the individuals involved also accounted for differences. While both campus academic and business leaders had a similar range of views, perceptions were seen as being generally more negative on the “academic side.” One chief academic officer described the reaction of the higher education community as ranging “from apathy to annoyance.” Some of those interviewed did acknowledge that embedded amidst some of the negative reactions there is also the awareness that elements of the Report address what are believed to be important themes.

Reactions of Key Constituencies

Study participants were asked for their perceptions as to how various key constituencies within the higher education community have reacted to the Commission and Report. A summary of their views is provided in the following section.

Faculty. The perception of the overwhelming majority of study participants is that faculty members are largely unaware of the Report, but that those who have become familiar with it have quite a negative reaction. Commissioners who participated in the study believe that faculty members, in general, have been quite negative in their reaction. One Commissioner explained that this may be the result, at least in part, of not having had more faculty members directly involved in the work of the group. The Commissioner believes that as faculty members learn more about the concerns being voiced by various constituencies, they become increasingly attentive to the issues raised by the Report. Another Commissioner echoed this sentiment, “the issue with the faculty probably more than anything else is that they were not engaged on the front end.... Their concerns about their lack of involvement were justified.” A third Commissioner expressed the view that faculty members generally “don’t know about it.... It’s not on their radar screen other than programs in education.” Interviewees from the Department of Education also perceived the initial faculty reaction as quite negative, due largely to the fact that they weren’t involved directly in the work of the Commission.

The overwhelming majority of leaders from higher education associations shared the view that faculty reaction has been negative. A number of others, however, said that faculty don’t know much about the initiative,

I think most faculty don’t know what in the world was going on. And that’s not a criticism of them, but as I travel and I make speeches and all this... not very many faculty [are] clued into this. They... [see] it as something that was going on in Washington, and a lot of things go on in Washington, and so what?

One chief academic officer expresses it this way, “I think the faculty are not sufficiently... aware of Spellings. They have a kind of superficial awareness of what’s going on... but they’re not well educated and they don’t have a sense of how potentially intrusive [it might be] ...” One chief business officer observed,

I think faculty are... a little more cynical about this than other groups are... I’m not sure that accountability and change are always things that a lot of faculty have comfort with.... Obviously that’s a generalization [but]... the group on our campus that has probably been the least receptive or the least interested has been the faculty.

Several campus leaders—particularly chief business officers—said they don’t know how faculty have reacted. Another study participant thought that faculty members were the most negative group, but “that is... in part, for some legitimate reasons. I think the Commission largely ignored the role of faculty. To the extent it addressed the role of faculty at all it was often from a critical perspective.”

Administrators. In characterizing the reactions of higher education administrators, interviewees offered varied assessments, but generally believe that this group has reacted more positively than faculty. One study participant commented, “There are pockets [of administrators] where we have tremendous advocates... [because] many, I think are... trying to do innovative things within their own systems whether it’s the chancellor with several institutions or the president.” Another said, “That’s the group that I characterized as being first in dread, then cautious, and then realizing it didn’t matter.” A third commented, “I think... most administrators... felt it was a threat to the historic relationship between government and higher education.” Commented one senior academic administrator, “Most administrators that I know on the academic side are pretty well aware and have a great deal of concern.” Another interviewee responded, “Administrators were more clued in, but for the most part have it compartmentalized as a Washington issue [that might or might not affect them.] You know, there’s always a lot of hot air that comes out of Washington. Here’s another commission, big deal. Is anything really going to happen here?”

One business officer commented on the differences between the response of an academic leader and the business leadership on campus:

Well, I’ve had discussions about this with our provost. We are at very different ends of the scale [in our reactions]. I would think that... [the more one’s role involves academic administration] the less positive [their view] is. But then on the side of those that aren’t academic, I would think [reactions are] very positive.

But, not all business officers share this view. One said,

My experience with administrators, broadly defined, is people don't like the tone, they don't like the 'federalization thing,' efforts to provide assurances [by the Department] notwithstanding. If you start unilaterally declaring stuff, that is federalization, no matter what words you want to use... how we use the vocabulary has a huge effect on how... [messages] affect us.

Another chief business officer sees the initial response as being quite negative among administrative colleagues, "Those that have noticed it... with a knee jerk reaction... [have reacted] unfavorably."

Boards. Study participants were mixed in their views about how boards reacted to the Report. Some believe that boards are generally positive, some feel boards may be disinterested, and some indicate they have no clear sense one way or another. One Commissioner notes that it depends greatly on whether the boards are of public or private institutions, with boards of public institutions being more positive in their reaction than those of privates. "[Boards of public institutions] are not selected to necessarily represent the institution, where boards of 'privates' may see the Report as having the potential to undermine their own authority." Leaders from higher education associations and agencies also have a similar range of perceptions regarding Board responses, and a similar sense that awareness of the Report among boards may be limited. Notes one individual, "[Some boards are...] struggling with ways to improve the reaction of the academy, and I think they've found some things [in the Report] to be positive about." Another person commented, "I think Board members who were interested in participating at a national level... were familiar with it. I'd say they started being very negative, progressed to having a more neutral view, and ultimately have ended up with a favorable perception."

College and university leaders differ in their perceptions of board levels of knowledge, interest, and reaction to the Report. Some see boards as more positive than other constituencies. "[Boards are] probably going to be... sympathetic." Several administrators described using the Report to engage their boards. A president described board reactions, "My board is very involved because I got them involved..." A chief business officer commented,

We talked about this with our [community college] board a bit... [and] I think that it resonated very well [with them]. [The Report] emphasized their growing [concerns about] accountability... the price of education and access and all those issues. So... at least from my limited perspective it received a very positive reaction.

Another explained,

One of the things [our new president] wants to change is getting the board to be looking outward—to see our institution in a national higher education context, not just as a single [unique] institution. We [invited a Commission member to campus to] open the session with our board by talking about the Commission and the Report. [At the end of the process, we have a board that is] pretty negative about the [tone of the] report, but more ‘nuancedly’ positive about the content.

Alumni. Nearly all of those interviewed conjectured that alumni had little awareness of the Commission. As one association leader said,

To the extent that alumni were aware of it [is] largely because they were made aware of it by their presidents... talking at commencement, or because they were themselves in some ideological camp that caused them to take special note of it... largely a conservative camp.

Students, parents, and the public at large. Commissioners, Department staff, higher education association and agency leaders, as well as campus leaders had a variety of views about the level of student interest and the nature of their reactions. Most indicated that they believed students and parents were largely unaware of the Commission, but not of the issues that were addressed. One Commissioner said, “[The Commission] met with parents and students the day before [each Commission meeting]. They were so relieved to know someone was working their agenda for them. But I don’t think we’ve made our recommendations matter to the American public.” Campus leaders share this perspective, but note that the central themes of the Report clearly resonate with students and parents. As one noted,

I don’t know that very many students, at least on our campus would have read it. However, I think the issues that it raised particularly those dealing with financial aid and price... were very important [to them] and to the extent that they were aware of the Report, I think [they would have] a very positive reaction. I think it sounds right from the student perspective....

Another chief executive expressed this in somewhat stronger terms,

I think members of the public are the ones that really feel these issues. I think there's great concern about the issues that the Spellings Commission [raises] on the part of parents and students and the public and I think it's real and I feel it in [our state].... The Spellings Commission issues are the same issues that sophisticated parents and public officials are [concerned about].

Most interviewees perceive that members of the public at large have little awareness of, or reaction to, the Commission or the Report. As one member of the Commission commented, "I would say that we haven't made our case yet to the American public." Another noted, "These are the issues that the public at large are talking about. Maybe not so much the Spellings Commission but these are the things that are really bubbling up." Several association and agency leaders believe there to be some awareness in the general public. Most university leaders shared the view that there was little public awareness, but several business officers expressed the view that "those that are familiar with the Commission want to see the accountability and all the measures." Another business officer commented, "I think they've embraced it positively."

Congress. There is little disagreement among those interviewed that members of Congress are well aware of the Report, but characterizing their response is not simple. Some Commissioners and members of the Department of Education have very positive views of the Congressional response. As one said,

Behind the scenes Congress is really behind us and wanting us to continue.... Many members have been very supportive. These are their issues.... If you look historically at what Congress has tried to do in the past [their efforts have had] common themes: increased transparency, increased accountability, increasing the amount of funds for the needy students which were very common themes for the Secretary and the Commission. These are issues that are important to them... while publicly it might not look that way."

A similar view was provided by a Commissioner who noted, "I think that many applaud that we are looking at [these issues]." Another Commissioner expressed a different view,

I think [Congress] ... was very angry about [how the] Secretary [tried] to greatly enhance the government's role in the relationship [between higher education and the federal government.] I think they, too, were worried about the [way the Secretary was trying to change the] relationship.

Leaders from higher education associations and agencies see mixed reactions. One study participant observed, "it is hard to say if you look at Congress as a whole. If you look at [certain individuals the response is] probably... favorable." Another interviewee commented, "I think that Congress has been really positive to the Report. They haven't adopted all of its recommendations, but the folks that we work with think they're seeing the right direction." And yet others see a Congressional response suggesting that [the Secretary] "is trouncing on territory they thought was theirs. Part of it is turf and part is perspective." One senior leader put it this way, "I think my view from people I talk to is Congress agrees with these important issues." Another study participant commented,

I think ... all of us in higher education have heard a lot about ... [legislators who] ... feel we're not sufficiently accountable. You hear it from general assemblies, you hear it from Congress. It's on both expenditures and on the quality of what we actually do. We don't measure it. We don't report it. So I think all of that was in the air and was building, and so the Commission got formed.... At least some people... realized that we've reached the point now where we've got to do something....

A senior business officer said,

You know it's... interesting.... You would think from the behaviors that they are actually... [annoyed], questioning whether the Secretary has the right to push the agenda. [They seemed annoyed at the] 'how' and the 'who.' [On the other hand... I think there's certainly a lot of Congressional enthusiasm for the [directions being advocated].

Echoing some of the same sentiment, a business officer said, "I think they do look at it positively as getting better accountability...." A similar set of themes was expressed by an interviewee who has been paying close attention to the Congressional response to the Report. "I think Congress is probably fairly favor-

able—even the Democrats.... I think there’s a decent amount of continuity of thought between what the Commission talked about doing and what Congress’ inclinations are.”

State governments. Many of the study participants believe that there is considerable interest within state government. As one Commissioner explained,

State governments at a much smaller level have to deal with the same issues we’re dealing with [nationally]. They’re having to establish accountability measures linked to their public priorities. They’re concerned about taxpayer dollars and they’re concerned about quality and educating their citizenry. It is on a smaller scale the same set of issues. So they’ve been very supportive.

Several Commissioners and members of the Department of Education expressed the view that state governments have been interested and generally supportive of the themes of the Report. But two Commissioners expressed an alternative view, that state governments have little interest. As one said, “I don’t think they’re [taking much note of the Report] because... the document had nothing to say about state government relationships. I think we’ve had very little evidence of interest in state governments.” Several association leaders noted that state governments are very interested in the themes and directions of the Commission’s work because they provide a much greater portion of the support for higher education than does the federal government: “they’re a little concerned about the control issue.... so the issue of control is largely one of the factors that’s influencing the impact of the Report with this group.”

While several college and university administrators were uncertain about the level of attention and nature of response of state governments to the Commission and the Report themselves, most believe a good deal of attention has been devoted to the *issues* addressed by the Commission and the Report. One study participant noted,

... our... state offices... know what’s going on in Washington [and there is a] kind of parallelism [in their interest in] accountability... access and control and all of those things—oversight.... They almost never refer to it through the Spellings. I think it’s just they’re trying to put their own stamp on it... [but]... the themes very clearly resonate with them.

Business community. While interviewees differ in the extent to which they have broad and direct personal evidence, there is a shared sense that the business community supports many of the issues addressed by the Spellings Commission. Among those representatives from the business community who served on the Commission, the response to the directions of the Report was very positive. Commented one Commissioner,

Those that are at the table are highly supportive. And actually it was the business community more than anybody that pushed for the very strong tone that the Commission used. Many of those business leaders had been involved in other reports such as *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, and others and felt the only way to send a ‘wake-up’ call was through a very strong ‘in-your-face’ message.

Leaders from higher education associations and agencies also see the business community’s reaction to the Spellings initiative as favorable. Most campus leaders who have an opinion, believe the business community’s response is positive—and this is of some concern from the perspective of higher education: As one chief academic officer commented,

I only get that through board members who come from a business side, and they... [often have only a] superficial understanding of [the issues, and so the Report resonates with them] until you explain to them the kind of nuances and particular risks that it represents.

A number of other study participants said they really didn’t have any perception of how the business community might be reacting to the Spellings initiative.

Media. The media are generally viewed as neutral, but because they often focus on controversy, they tend to give visibility to particular issues that encourage (according to some interviewees) or undermine (according to others) support for the directions being advocated by the Commission. One Commissioner said, “I think the Commission chair and [the media] have had a wonderful love fest because he’s controversial, not [so much] because of what he says, but because he makes statements about higher education that are inflammatory. I think they love it for headlines.” Another interviewee—looking at the situation from the point of view of the Department of Education—voiced a similar concern, but with a different view of those whose purposes have been served,

You know maybe the answer is the media [like to] point up the controversy.... And I don't get why this is so controversial. I really don't. [While the Department] is certainly interested in accountability, [we have] no interest in federalizing K-12 and going for national standards [we have] even less desire to do that for higher ed. So [I don't understand why the Secretary's] efforts on the Commission, her action plan and... even negotiated rule-making [were] viewed [with such] suspicion.... It bothers me.

Others from the Commission and Department indicated that they had not thought much about the issue, but noted one, "I don't know that the media has ever been really supportive, but.... I think they have provided this effort a great deal of coverage" Said another, "Other than the higher educational media I'd say there's no reaction." One higher education association leader made the same point, "... *Inside Higher Ed* and the *Chronicle*—[have covered the initiative extensively] ... and "they have given a balanced view of it. Other than [these publications], I don't know that the topic has received much visibility." Said another, "I think they've done a good job." The general sense among campus administrators is that the media coverage has been quite balanced. One chief academic officer noted, "[... from what I see]... it has been very good... and fair."

The comments from journalists were interesting:

To the extent you talk about media's opinion... I think the reporting was what you'd expect It focused on some of the more exaggerated and extreme recommendations. [Media tended to] respond to Charles Miller's every word.... But... if you talk about the media's view of the Commission, I'm guessing the editorials have run pretty positively towards acknowledging there are problems.... [One problem is that while journalists] don't always look for the loudest voices, that's certainly the default. And so, too often [the media] ended up [concentrating on] the chatter [between two members of the Commission who voice very different viewpoints, in this case, Charles Miller and David Ward] ... and the media are drawn to the conflict...

Media Content Analysis

For the analysis of higher education and public media coverage of the Spellings Commission and Report, we identified and analyzed a total of 1,363 online paper core articles and responses, published between September 5, 2005, and September 7, 2007.⁴¹

As Table 1 indicates, we characterized the majority (56 percent) of the articles and responses as “persuasive,” and most of these took positions opposing the Commission. Slightly more than half of the articles and responses analyzed included a focus on the “merits of the proposal” and discussed whether the ideas and proposals of Spellings were on target and should be embraced further. (See Table 2.) “Jurisdictional” themes—articles and responses that focused on whether the government has the authority and/or should undertake some aspects of what Spellings is proposing—representing the second largest category. These themes were present in slightly more than 13 percent of the articles and responses we analyzed. Over a quarter of the responses/comments to articles did not directly comment on the Commission’s work or process, but focused on a critique of other responses and comments.

Substance and Tone

The initial critique of the Report within higher education focused on both substance and tone. From the perspective of *substance*, any initial enthusiasm about the Report’s praise of higher education dissipated quickly among most higher education readers when more specific details were considered.

In particular, representatives of the national higher education associations and accrediting agencies generally felt the reaction in their associations was somewhat unfavorable. At the same time, there was variation with some who saw the Report as very unfavorable and others who saw it as very favorable. One person, whose organization’s reaction was “pretty critical” said, “I would probably say that we have endorsed the recommendations and ignored the Report.” Others talked about trying to educate the Commission about the challenges and the need for additional flexibility. Several of the associations indicated that they had prepared some kind of formal written response, either as a letter to their members, a letter to the Commission, a resolution by their board of directors, or as written testimony for the regional hearings that followed the release of the Report. Some of these responses were made available on association Web sites.

The institutional leaders interviewed also described varied, though generally more favorable responses. Many indicated that they were already in the process of developing the types of measures discussed by the Commission. One spoke about

Table 1: Focus of the Article / Response

Focus of Article	Percent of Data
Primarily descriptive	9.0%
Primarily persuasive supporting Commission	19.7%
Primarily persuasive questioning or refuting Commission	36.3%
Balanced persuasion pointing to positives on various “sides” of issue	6.2%
N/A to Commission (e.g., remarks directed to another response regarding tone or grammar etc.)	28.8%

Table 2: Persuasive Themes

Theme	Percent of Cases
Merits of proposal	51.0%
Credibility/experience/expertise of Spellings Commission	7.8%
Motives—discussion of Spellings Commission motives	5.9%
Jurisdictional—discussion of government authority	13.3%
Truth of facts—i.e., accuracy of Spellings data/information	3.2%
Critique of logic— i.e., correct interpretation of data	5.6%
Process of Commission — i.e., good, useful, fair process followed	.4%
Future directions—what ought to be steps going forward	2.7%
Call for action to resist Spellings	.4%
Call for action to implement Spellings	.4%

using the recommendations to push forward on assessment by saying, “my mantra has been... motivating our faculty to develop these approaches to documenting, providing evidence about our student learning outcomes... or else the government will do it for us.”

Most of the chief business and administrative officers interviewed indicated that the reaction was neither very negative nor very positive. The remainder was fairly evenly divided between somewhat favorable and somewhat unfavorable. Similar to the comments made by institutional leaders, several indicated that they already have assessment efforts in progress. One said,

We’ve acknowledged that there are some good recommendations... we have already got initiatives underway, so [it] reinforce[d] those things to have us do more and faster. But at the same time I think we’ve pointed out that there are some areas that we’re *not* comfortable with.

One chief business officer noted, “we have had discussions at the president’s executive committee at staff meetings but no real examination of the Spellings Commission,” while another said, “we talked about it in public places, stakeholder groups.” None of the chief business and administrative officers interviewed indicated that their institutions had issued a formal response, except through their associations.

In making sense of the varying reactions to the substance of the Report, the adage “the devil is in the details” seems to apply. That is, it was at the level of detail that any shared perspective on merit and implications of the Report began to fade away.

The Higher Education System

The Commission had made an effort to broadly address the issues of higher education—which it viewed as a system. At this global level of analysis, concerns about the economic and current workforce needs, an educated citizenry, and how higher education can best continue to meet our nation’s needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century are logically of great concern.⁴² Indeed, a number of these same issues had been highlighted in other reports such as *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* (2007)⁴³, *A Nation at Risk* (1984⁴⁴); and the publications of the Kellogg Commission (1996-2001⁴⁵), and the Washington-based higher education presidential associations acknowledged the importance of many of these issues in their joint response to the Report, issued on September 21, 2006.⁴⁶

While there was general acknowledgement of the relevance and significance of the broadest themes presented in the Report, in many of the formal statements by national higher education associations, and even more so in informal communication, much of the emphasis was placed on the areas of disagreement. The critique typically addressed issues that were less global, system-level issues, highlighting instead matters of concern to specific segments and types of institutions. For example, the American Association of Universities, a group of distinguished public and private research universities, noted that the Commission Report focused almost exclusively on undergraduate education, devoting very little attention to the importance and challenges of research universities.⁴⁷ The Association of American Colleges and Universities, dedicated to advancing liberal education, expressed regret that the Report “focuses almost exclusively on workforce preparation, narrowly defined.”⁴⁸ In a parallel manner, the formal response of the American Association of Community Colleges expresses disappointment that the Commission report “does not adequately address the critical role of state and local funding—which provides the majority of the revenue to support community colleges”—and the “sustained exploitation of students by [the] proprietary school sector.”⁴⁹

Accrediting associations expressed concern that their accreditation models, standards, and approaches were not fully understood nor fairly represented, and suggested that the proposed changes could have deleterious consequences. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) devoted much of its response to what it asserted to be unfair “attacks on faculty and their work,” noting that references to “faculty appear only once... as a bullet under the heading that includes the recommendation that ‘higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance.’”⁵⁰ The National Education Association emphasized the need for more state and federal funding,⁵¹ while the American Federation of Teachers⁵² conveyed its “disappointment” at the incompleteness of the Report for failing to acknowledge the academic staffing crisis and decline in state funding.

Thus, as specifics of the Report were examined by various higher education segments, there was growing agreement that the Report failed to give full attention to the issues, needs, and accomplishments of the specific segments in the higher education “system.” Each type of association, agency, and institution, however, had its own perspective on what was left out, overlooked, under- or over-stated, already being addressed, or not applying to their particular component of the higher education system given its distinct and unique character, mission, or purpose.

“One-Size-Fits-All”

As implied in previous comments, what began to emerge as a general consensus within the higher education community—perhaps the only one—was that the Report offered too much of a “one-size-fits-all” approach. For example, the national associations, accrediting agencies, and institutional leaders were particularly concerned with the issues of assessment. As articulated by one study respondent, “The most worrisome aspect of this is the presentation of it as if one-size-fits all.”

The Commission Report and Department statements suggested that *outcomes* should receive greater emphasis in the assessment process—that assessment should shift from a primary emphasis on reputational, input, and resource measures to focus instead on measures of performance, results, and resource utilization and impact. Fear was expressed that what was being advocated was a single approach, standardized methods and measures that would be applied across all types of higher education institutions regardless of the mission, and results that would be broadly publicized—“transparent, without regard to inter-institutional differences.”

From the perspective of higher education, there was much to dislike and criticize about such an implication. Reactions to this scenario were immediate and intense, and served to galvanize resistance to the Commission, the Report, and the Department. As described in the response of the Washington-based presidential associations, it is the responsibility of each of their member institutions to “tackle the... issues [raised by the Spellings Commission] individually based on... [its own] mission and educational objectives,” recognizing that “decentralization... is the hallmark of American higher education...”⁵³ As one higher education association leader in the study put it, “I think obviously [the reaction to]... one-size-fits all was very strong... because many of [the] community college members were just as upset as some of the private small colleges.... [This also reinforced] feelings of different institutions that their... niche position was not well understood.” A chief business officer summed it up by saying, “Or, to put it the other way around, [the problem I see is] the lack of appreciation for the value of the diversity of higher education.”

Many seemed to interpret the Commission recommendations as implying that student learning would necessarily be measured through a federal initiative involving quantitative, standardized testing. This interpretation is exemplified in a forceful statement by William G. Durden, president of Dickinson College, issued shortly after the release of the Report.⁵⁴ It is also seen from a faculty perspective, expressed by members of a panel on assessment at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. As one panelist articulated, “I know when I do a good job and I know when I do a bad job. Why do we need to quan-

tify everything?” Another commented, “I’m a skeptic of mandated programs for assessment”⁵⁵

Indeed, the need for greater attention to outcomes, comparative analysis, accountability, public transparency, accreditor oversight, and coordination and integration of this information had been themes in the Commission’s solicited issue papers, the final Report itself, public statements about the Report, and later in language proposed by the Department in discussions of the role and regulations associated with accrediting. Noted one study participant, “I think people were concerned that every institution would be held to the same standards. Anytime you have standards for all institutions to follow, it’s really difficult given different missions.”

Interpretations differ as to whether fears over the one-size-fits-all issue were justified or not, and if such fears arose naturally, or at least partially, as a consequence of planned communication efforts by some organizations within the higher education community designed to intensify resistance from that community. An interviewee from the Department of Education said, “... even though this was not [a] fact-based [concern], it created fear... If you look at... all these alert letters [sent out by] the associations... to their members, [you would conclude that] this was a ‘very calculated strategy.’”

The presumed goal was to create anxiety about the issue, the work of the Commission, the Report, and more generally to the Department’s intentions. Whether by design or default, concerns about a one-size-fits-all approach had great consequence in the minds of most of those interviewed in the study. One interviewee noted, “At least in my perception of the higher education community – that’s probably the most contentious issue.”

Public and media-based statements by the Secretary, the Department, and some Commissioners were intended to offer reassurances that a “one-size-fits-all” model was not being proposed. However, these seemed to have negligible impact on reactions and public rhetoric within higher education, as dialogue about learning outcomes assessment and the possibility of comparisons of outcomes of various kinds across institutions exacerbated tensions.

How Big the Gap; How Great the Urgency

Based on the commentary in public media and association Web sites, it appeared that higher education generally viewed the gap between the present and desired state of affairs to be much less substantial than that implied by the Commission, creating another source of friction and resistance to the Commission and its Report. The sense in many of these documents is that the Commission failed to

fully capture and acknowledge the many areas where innovation and progress are apparent. Richard Ekman, president of The Council of Independent Colleges put it this way, “The Commission report rarely capitalizes on the significant progress already being made by the voluntary actions of colleges and universities, individually and together, on many of the issues that the Commission thinks are most problematic.” Ekman goes on to enumerate a number of the issues on which he believes significant progress was not acknowledged by the Commission, including access, financial aid, cost controls, productivity, accountability, transparency, institutional effectiveness, and innovation.⁵⁶

Many of the individuals interviewed believed that the Commission saw itself as chronicling a crisis, when, in fact, from the perspective of those within the higher education community, the concerns voiced were not particularly new, nor was there any particular reason for alarm or panic. This point of view was articulated quite clearly in statements from the Washington presidential associations, as for example, from the American Council on Education, which noted,

The assumption underlying the recommendations ... is the need for change.... We agree that there is a need for change. This is not new. It is important to note that reassessment and change is a continuing process in American higher education. Many of our [leaders/institutions] are already working on the challenges facing higher education in a careful and systematic way.

ACE made a similar point in comments about accreditation: “All accreditors now make student learning outcome a central component in the accreditation reviews, and this will continue.”⁵⁷

Reactions to Report Recommendations

Many of those interviewed in the study indicated that specific changes proposed in, or inferred from, the Commission Report were controversial.

Giving more attention to assessing learning outcomes. People interviewed in every category, almost without exception, felt that increasing attention to learning outcomes was very important, with one institutional leader calling it “the most required element at the end of the day.” However, what form these should take—and whether the Spellings Commission, Department of Education, or accrediting agencies should be involved in the process—was a matter of contention. One higher education association/accrediting agency representative who called it less important said, “I do think we assess learning outcomes... we give grades. Obviously [it] is important. To suggest that the assessing of learning outcomes as

inferred from the Spelling Commission is very important is a different matter.” A chief academic officer said, “if we do it voluntarily then it’ll be okay... but... [the Commission] could have gotten a group of people together and maybe come up with something really innovative and creative and gotten all of higher education ... to say [it’s a] great idea.”

There was also a question of the role the accreditors played in the debate on learning outcomes. One chief academic officer said, “the accreditors are basically fighting for their lives. ... they would be very happy with some kind of overlay or national system because it takes the onus off of them and they just say that’s what it is, you have to do it, and that’s part of accreditation.”

Changing the system of financial aid. Those interviewed noted the importance of improvements in financial aid. In response to a question of whether the Commission had actually made any change in the system, one Commissioner acknowledged that “at one point, we got really close... [but] we never tackled any of the tough issues,” noting that a colleague suggested, “why don’t we just scrap federal aid and give every sixth grader in America a 529 account or \$10,000 that they can only spend if they stay in school and go to college.” Another possibility was “a three year (baccalaureate).” One of the higher education association/accrediting agency representatives indicated that “the emphasis on need-based aid and the criticism of merit-based aid that the Report has provided is defensible and important.” Presidents and chief academic officers also saw this as an important issue, as did the majority of the chief business officers.

Developing external measures and/or peer comparisons to assess the effectiveness of learning outcomes. While the majority of respondents saw the topic of external measures and peer comparisons as important, there was a range of opinions. The Commission and Department of Education members perceived this to be moderately important. One said, “that will come over time.” The institution leaders saw it as more important than did the higher education association/accrediting agency representatives. One president was comfortable with things like external benchmarking which are “part of Baldrige.” A chief academic officer who perceived it to be of less importance did so “because I don’t think they’re ever going to be able to do it decently.” One chief business/administrative officer commented that it was important to pay considerable attention to external measures and peer comparisons, “not because it’s really important but because we’re going to be asked to do it. So it’s an important issue we’ll have to grapple with, but I think [from a] societal [...point of view] it’s not all that important.” Another chief business officer said that “giving attention to assessing learning outcomes [was important but] peer comparisons and external measures are more important.”

Developing external measures and/or peer comparisons to assess institutional effectiveness. Presidents and chief business officers considered this to be an important agenda item, while the others had varied ratings, which tended to be lower overall. A number of those who responded had concerns about the implication of this recommendation, and how it might be implemented. One Commission/Department of Education member suggested, “that has to evolve once they start assessing learning outcomes.” One higher education association member pointed out that there are “a lot of peer comparisons... from the national research council rankings... comparison invariably leads to people taking a look at themselves and deciding to make improvements.” One of the presidents noted that this goes back to the “concerns [about] one-size-fits-all... We’re working from a variety of measures in how to assess our effectiveness. And I don’t want anybody else telling us how to do that.” Similarly, another president pointed out that

People’s missions and approaches are different... we have a consortium of... colleges that share all of our data. And we produce a report so we can see where we are [but] it’s a confidential report that only the [participants] get. But... Spellings... is going to make it all public and that’s where you’re going to see some of the problems.

A chief business officer noted, “I think that’s going to be more important to either building or sustaining credibility with constituents.”

Clarifying institutional, general education, and major/programs teaching/learning goals. This item received high marks from the Commission/Department of Education members, while with other groups, ratings were lower and more varied. One Commission member called it “our biggest problem. We don’t have a common understanding of what all of these pieces are.” One chief business officer who saw it as very important said, “you can’t do learning outcomes [assessment] if you don’t have the goals.”

Enlarging the scope of accrediting agencies and the accrediting process to include more attention to institutional and learning assessment and outcomes. The issue of the appropriate scope of the accrediting agencies was considered very important by the institutional leaders, but the opinions of other study participant groups pointed to mixed views of the accrediting agencies, the accrediting process, and the appropriateness and value of greater attention to learning outcomes assessment. One Commission/Department of Education member said,

I don't know that I want to enlarge the scope of the regional accrediting agencies solely. But I do think the accrediting process ... need[s] to include more attention to [institutional and learning assessment]... I'm very concerned about role clarity across the different types of accrediting agencies.

Another said, "I don't think we need to give them more responsibility. Our issue is that they just need to be doing what they're supposed to be doing. This is not a new thing." A higher education association member said that it was important "so long as that's generated by the accrediting agencies and not the federal government." One of the presidents who had served on many accrediting teams said, "the fact [that] we look at ourselves makes it suspect and I think on these accrediting teams we ought to have some outside people... I think accrediting, as it is now, is going to have to have some changes." Another said, "I think there should be more accountability of whether students are learning anything when people are paying to learn something." A chief academic officer who saw it as important said, "I don't know that enlarging the scope is necessarily the solution." Another noted, "the accrediting agencies are really feeling the squeeze because they need to be able to be a positive professional force for universities to improve." One chief business/administrative officer suggested that accreditation is a "good old boy network... if you had four CEOs from business come in, I don't think they would have said the same thing [as another college officer doing accreditation] ... Throw the whole damn thing out and start over." Another said, "I'm not sure you need to enlarge the scope. They've already got... standards on institutional assessment and a whole standard on student outcomes assessment."

More clearly communicating indicators of institutional and learning outcome performance to present and prospective students, parents, and the public. Nearly everyone interviewed saw this item as important; most perceived it as very important. A Commission/Department of Education member said that providing information needed by students and parents was "a big part of making informed decisions." A higher education association/accrediting agency member described it as "part of the transparency, which is important." One president who described it as very important, noted that, "we have to tell the story on that." But a chief business officer, who gave it a lower rating, called it "dangerous because it's hard to understand." A Commission member voiced a different perspective by saying, "first we have to get the public interested in higher education. Then we'll get them to be smart consumers." Different groups discussed in different ways the question

of whether the existence of indicators implied that they would be used to compare institutions. A higher education association member who felt it was an important factor also said that it “raises the comparability issues ... it may not be ... perfectly achievable.” A chief business officer said, “it’s [about] clearly communicating, but it needs some comparability as well.”

Developing more standardized approaches to data reporting for colleges and universities. This item was considered less important than many other issues, especially by Commission and Department of Education members and chief academic officers. The higher education association and accrediting agency members and chief business officers generally rated it as important, with some calling it very important, but the overall ratings were somewhat lower than previous items. A chief academic officer who ranked it as not important said that it isn’t “necessarily... going to lead to advancing excellence in higher education.” One Commission/Department of Education member said it’s “not important. We don’t need standardized.... I don’t want standardized assessments.” A higher education association/accrediting agency member called it “worth consideration.” While one higher education association member said, “there is a lot of standardized data reporting to the extent that data is available,” another noted, “the information that’s available to parents and others is not necessarily information that they’re asking for.” When the comparability issue was raised again, one person noted, “people are able to interpret information within [a] context and I think that that’s the best we can hope for.” There was concern about how the data would be used to compare institutions. A chief academic officer called it important, but was concerned about “standardized approaches... it’s not a-one size-fits-all.” A chief business officer said the issue was not getting standardized data, “but more understandable information to be gleaned from the massive amounts of data that’s already reported.” Another chief business officer expressed skepticism about “the universities complying with the standardized approach.”

Standardizing approaches used by colleges and universities relative to the transfer of credit. Compared to a number of other issues, standardizing the transfer of credit was not considered to be as important by Commission and Department of Education members, chief academic officers, or by most higher education association/accrediting agency members. The institutional leaders gave it the highest rankings, and the majority of the chief business officers saw it as of considerable importance. The most polarized reactions reflect differences of opinion regarding the transferability of credits from institution to institution. One Commission/Department of Education member said, “[I] struggle with that one. Some would

say that it's a standardized approach to say don't look at the source of the accrediting institution ... it should be transparent. I don't know that it should be standard." Another noted, "the Commission wanted to do that in a way that would be completely insensitive to the institution's judgment."

A higher education association/accrediting agency member made the point that,

If a standardized approach to transfer credit... means that transfer credits should be counted by all institutions in the same way, then I'd say no that's not important... that takes too much away... I don't think we do it all that badly right now. I think each individual institution and program evaluates the transcript of the student coming in and decides which credits are given general graduation credits and which credits are given toward a major and they do it to some extent on their knowledge of the institution [from which a student is transferring].

The person interviewed suggested that "this [issue is being raised by] the for-profit [institutions]. And there probably is something of a bias against granting automatic credit to the for-profit institutions." Another suggested that by considering all college courses as equal regardless of the source institution, "it turns higher education into a commodity and does not serve the country well." A similar comment was that "the autonomy of institutions to determine what their policies are going to be on accepting credit for students is important... I don't think that the approaches should be standardized in such a way that everyone should have to accept everyone else's credits." Some of the presidents suggested that the real question was about transfer credits from community colleges to four-year colleges. A chief business officer who felt it was very important spoke of the way this impacts community colleges, "I know a lot of students suffered when they got to four-year schools and their credits didn't transfer... so that was a waste for them to have even taken the course if it doesn't transfer." Another said, "I just can't imagine telling a research university it has to take [courses from] a junior college." A different approach was taken by a chief business officer who suggested, "we should set a standard for what the first year of college ought to be... what is the base understanding you want the student to have when they come out of their freshman year. Regardless of what their major would be, regardless of where they are.... Then you'd take care of the transfer problem." Another chief business officer saw timing as the problem by saying, "that's very important. I've heard of students transferring to our institution and it takes months after they get there to find out which of their

credits are transferring. And that's pathetic." A very different approach was taken by a chief business officer who said "that's very important ... politically... we're getting killed by the anecdotes that people hear second and third hand which in most cases aren't true. So I think it's important to just take that off the agenda."

Devoting additional attention to assessing and improving the efficiency and cost effectiveness of college and university operations. This issue was of considerable importance almost across the board. Two higher education association/accrediting agency members suggested that colleges were already operating with high efficiency. An institution leader who said it was very important stated simply, "we're not going to get more money from the states if we don't." A chief business administrator said,

Much more of that goes on than anybody gives colleges and universities credit for [but an area of concern is that] somebody else will impose his or her definition of efficiency on us without really understanding what we're trying to do. And whether that's Charles Miller or Margaret Spellings or somebody else that's a real worry. The answer for us is just get out in front and be better at it than they would.

Language and Style... and Release of a Working Draft

In addition to issues of substance, there were also reactions to what might best be termed, *tone*. The June 2006 release of an early draft, containing considerably harsher language than the final version, was a significant factor in this regard.

The first draft was largely the work of a commissioned writer. As one Commissioner explained,

An outstanding journalist was hired to prepare a draft of the document. He was given only one set of instructions, 'Look carefully at all our [Commission] dialogue and the issue papers. Don't pull any punches in writing your draft.' Those were his instructions. He wrote all that strong language. It wasn't all original. He took it from other things. He wasn't told to write it in a mean spirit. He wrote it the way he wrote it.

Before the draft had been reviewed and edited by most of the Commission members, it became public. The Department reported that the distribution of an early draft was accidental—that the draft was being reviewed by some members and was inadvertently released. And then the Department decided that because

the accidentally released draft was widely circulated through informal e-mail and other channels, the most appropriate action would be to post that version on the Department's Web site.

Commission Chairman Miller, in an e-mail that accompanied the document's release, called it a "very rough" draft. Like the final version, the early draft opened by heralding the many accomplishments of higher education, and acknowledging the international leadership role that U.S. colleges and universities have traditionally played. But some Commission members and others perceived that the language used in what followed was quite harsh and alarmist. For instance, one line in the "Preamble" read: "Our year-long examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led it to unseemly complacency about the future." The draft also described higher education as "risk-averse, frequently self-satisfied, and unduly expensive."⁵⁸

There were a variety of reactions to fact, substance, and tone of the release of the early draft. In a *Chronicle* interview, Commission Member and American Council on Education President David Ward described the impact that the document had for him in this way:

Although I'm not sure whether it was intended to be as negative as it was, it certainly was received that way by many of my members. It created a sense of distrust. That was a problem for me. I never anticipated that the first draft would be quite so negative. I was blindsided, to tell you the truth. I didn't see it until it was all done. And so, in some ways, had that not been the case or had those dialogues been perhaps just oral and not written, I think that would have been easier. That was what created the situation where many of my members, who certainly weren't telling me how to vote, but were telling me how they felt, created a reserve on my part from then on....⁵⁹

Though most of those interviewed believed that the early release of a harsh first draft was accidental rather than strategic, there was agreement that the tone certainly contributed to negativity among those in the higher education community who had been following the activity of the Commission—and that included many of the higher education associations and agencies.

The second draft, edited to incorporate the suggestions of Commission members, had softened language. Gone were characterizations that colleges and universities faced "grave" problems, references to grade inflation, and discussion of the need for a "national" approach to higher education accreditation. In their

place were laudatory references to “treasured national assets” and an acknowledgement that U.S. higher education was “the very best system in the world.”⁶⁰ Further revisions in tone were apparent in the third revision. What had been described as “unseemly complacency” was revised to read as “unwarranted complacency.” What had been characterized as “glaring deficiencies” was now described as “unfulfilled promise.”⁶¹

Though the rhetoric of the preliminary and final published versions was softened, the Report retained its use of what was regarded by most as direct and forceful language in discussing the challenges, the perceived problem of complacency, and the assumed need for reform. The same could be said for public statements about the Report made by Secretary Spellings and Commission Chair Miller.

Among those interviewed there was general agreement that the language of the Report and the approach, style, and critical comments made by Secretary Spellings and Chairman Miller were significant factors in heightening both the visibility and intensity of the reaction to the Report.

One president who participated in the study attributed considerable negative impact to the style of “the two personalities at the helm, namely Margaret Spellings and Charles Miller.” In the president’s view, their style got in the way of people being able to step back and say, “these recommendations aren’t bad at all, these are the same kinds of things that we’re [also] talking about.... [Charles] Miller has this kind of in-your-face style, and that was very negative, from at least in my perspective, from the very beginning. So in a sense, by having someone like that... at the helm did not really make it possible for people on both sides—on all sides—to take a thoughtful, objective, rational approach to... receiving the initial recommendations... from the Commission because they automatically jumped to the conclusion that... [the recommendations] were tainted because of the temper that he was conveying.”

Other study participants agreed that the public postures and communication styles of the Secretary and Chairman contributed to the climate of resistance within higher education. One higher education association leader said,

I actually think the tone hurt the impact. It’s provided a distraction. It’s given people a whole set of things to be [angry] about that actually takes them off of the core message. And I do think a report capturing so much of the things the public cares about and is worried about, presented in a way that wouldn’t have had so many 2 x 4s, would have been more impactful.

The following comments by Secretary Spellings were mentioned as one example of the harsh language:

But unlike K–12 education, we don't ask a lot of questions about what we're getting for our investment in higher education. And as a result, we're missing some valuable information to help guide policy to ensure that our system remains the finest in the world. And parents have a tough time getting answers about the way it all works.

A few weeks ago, I dropped my oldest daughter off at college to begin her freshman year. I miss her a whole lot—though I am enjoying having some hot water for my morning shower again. Unloading the car was the last step in a long college process, which started with me thumbing through college guides at Barnes & Noble.

I found plenty of information on dining hall food, intramural sports, and campus architecture. I learned at one school that you can attend a Jimmy Buffet Bash and a toga party all in one year. Who knew?

I even found one book called *Schools that Rock* with good tips on which schools have the best music. But I didn't find a book on "schools that engineer" or a book on "schools that prepare you for the future." And I didn't find much information on what courses to take, how long it takes the average student to graduate, and whether it's a better deal to graduate from a less-expensive state school in six years or a private school in four. I learned just how confusing the college process can be for parents. And I'm the secretary of education!⁶²

While these and similar comments may have been intended to create a rapport and personal connection with parents whom she believed face situations similar to her own, as well as to members of the general public, they could also be interpreted as harsh and condescending criticism of colleges and universities. Indeed, many of those from higher education who were interviewed said they thought that the Secretary's approach, style, and comments had contributed to the creation of an adversarial climate. One interviewee commented, "Her intentions were good... [but] she had a little bit of edge... an academic would have said the same thing

but a little differently.” Another remarked, “She used examples that would resonate with students and parents ... but she could have used examples [about] the need for accountability, the economic impact of greater accountability in higher education, [that] might have resonated better with ... higher education professionals, a lot of association folks, [and] accrediting agencies.” Yet another said, “her remarks during the press conference or the presentation of the final report ... could be considered inflammatory.”

Some others from higher education, the Commission, and Department, felt, however, that the hard-hitting rhetoric, personal examples, and no-nonsense style were exactly what was needed to create a “wake up call.” Reflecting this view, one informant said, “She was really lamenting over the state of preparation and admission generally, rather than any thought that colleges and universities had done something wrong.” Said another advocate, “[she had] tremendous impact [and it was] important that she stay as tough as she has been ... she’d been on point on message and ... she stayed the course.” Another study participant characterized her style and approach as “very measured and very careful, being clear about criticisms or concerns, but immediately focusing all that on we need to move forward ... she was able to ... separate herself from the more negative reaction to the Commission itself.”

Nearly all study participants also thought the style, approach, and comments of Charles Miller influenced reactions to the work of the Commission. One called him “enormously significant ... a lightning rod.” Another said, “he probably has contributed more to the negative reaction than Spellings has.” Another expressed the opposite view: “I thought he did ... a fairly good job ... it was a fairly reasoned approach.” And in commenting on the role Charles Miller has played in national forums, one president said, “I’ve heard ... [Charles Miller] speak three times—pretty impressive guy ... I think Charles Miller handled himself very well at all the national meetings where I talked with him and played a major, major positive role in encouraging the conversation.”

There is one additional point about the influence of language and style that is worth mentioning. The early comments and releases from the Department of Education in launching the Commission asserted that the Commission was being initiated because there was a “real need for national leadership on this issue.”⁶³ Secretary Spellings acknowledged that no one group was to blame for the challenges besetting higher education and that all parties needed to work together to address the challenges facing higher education. But her speech contained an implication that higher education has been unable to provide, for itself, the kind of leadership that is needed—an apparent criticism of the institutions, associations, accreditors, perhaps the very nature of intellectual leadership within the higher educa-

tion community. No doubt this inference was an unsettling message for the higher education community, in general, and particularly to those individuals and organizations who perceive themselves to be responsible for providing such leadership.

The Withheld Endorsement

In addition to reactions based on the substance and tone of the Report, decisions by Commission members to endorse—or fail to endorse—the final draft were also a factor in reactions to the Report. The final version carried the signed endorsement of the Commission, but one member, the president of the American Council on Education (ACE)—representing what is the association with the most global and inclusive perspective on the higher education system as a whole—decided he could not endorse, nor sign, the Report. David Ward explained his decision,

I was sort of in a different role [than other higher education leaders on the Commission]... they voted with those who agreed to sign on to the Report with certain reservations that they presented orally.

They're all, in a sense, individuals. They were able to assuage whatever anxieties they had in relation to their generally very positive feelings about it easier than somebody running an association. That was really the difference.... I didn't oppose the Report; I just simply said I couldn't sign it. There were significant areas that I supported. But in my case, I needed to be on the record in some formal way about those areas that gave me some disquiet. I don't think other people on the commission needed to hold themselves to such a high standard. I consider [my negative vote to suggest] a qualified support of a substantial part of it, but there were some significant, important areas that I just couldn't sign on to.... I certainly think that I made my position very clear in the news conference following the discussion of the final report. I said the one downside of what I'm doing would be people would misrepresent this position as being sort of standing in the schoolhouse door against reform, and that's not what I intend....⁶⁴

Those interviewed for this study varied in their opinions as to the wisdom and consequences of this decision. Some commented that it was important—and true to the highest values and principles of higher education—that every individual Commission member be candid and forthright with his or her views, and vote

their own conscience. Others recognized that Ward saw himself as acting on behalf of ACE and its constituents, and that that was a major factor guiding his decision. Commented one interviewee, “David Ward did not sign... my reaction was [that] his response and explanation [as to] why was fairly well done.” Another said, “I think it was probably, in the big scheme of things, helpful, because it did indicate that there were different points of view.”

A number of other interviewees expressed the alternative view that, despite the good intentions and rationale, the withheld signature further contributed to a defensive and counterproductive framing and response by the higher education community, thereby decreasing the possibility of a constructive response or collaborative follow up. One senior leader from higher education commented, “To some degree [the lack of the ACE endorsement created] a vacuum [that]... was filled by people outside of higher education or by individual parts of higher education.” Still others believed the action had negligible impact one way or another, since other respected and highly regarded representatives of higher education did endorse the Report.

There are a variety of opinions about the impact—or lack thereof—of the decision by the ACE president to withhold his signature and endorsement of the Report, and also a variety of perceptions as to how this decision—and statements about it—may be viewed as part of a larger set of issues related to higher education’s response to the Report.

Context

The context in which the work of the Commission was undertaken and played out also contributed to the array of reactions to the Report. In particular, there were important concerns about the political party in power, perceptions of the Bush administration, and perspectives on the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) program.

There was a strong, shared view that perceptions about NCLB were quite significant. In some quarters, for example, there were anxieties growing out of a fear that the Report suggested a higher education version of the controversial program. While this linkage may not have been intended by the Department of Education, the high level of visibility of both initiatives, and the common themes of accountability, assessment, and transparency made this conceptual linkage quite predictable. One person interviewed noted, “particularly with the call for some kind of standardized measure of student outcomes, the sense that this was NCLB for higher education created a fairly negative impact.” Several pointed to “common core values in both places.” Another described the issue by saying, “I’m not sure that people believe the NCLB has really had a significant impact... whether or

not that program is working as well [which leads to the question of] ‘is this going to be just another initiative like that?’ That has been particularly important on the part of the faculty members.” The inclusion of the NCLB logo along with the Department of Education seal on the header of the official announcement of the Spellings Commission may also have contributed to a perceived linkage within the higher education community.

Other factors which study participants believe were particularly significant influences in responses to the Commission and its work were concerns about a potential loss of autonomy for higher education, the belief that the Report called for a standardized “one-size-fits-all” approach, and anxieties about increased government intervention.

Additional factors that have been mentioned as potential influences—the composition of the Commission, facts and data considered in making its recommendations, the manner in which the Report was disseminated and publicized, the approach and styles utilized by higher education national and regional associations, the approach and style of institutional and campus leaders, and the belief that the issues discussed by the Spellings Commission were already being addressed by the higher education community—were seen as less important and less universal influences within the higher education community.

Study respondents considered that the publicity given to the Commission by the Internet and electronic and print media—particularly *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—was another influential factor, although there were differences of opinion as to the direction of that impact. As a chief business officer noted,

What’s so different now... is the ability to almost instantly [get information] If you don’t understand terminology, the references ... click your way back. To me that has really made it easier for people to think about the issues much more intensely than they might have a few years ago. I remember when some of the big reports came out in the 80s. You just didn’t have the resources to deconstruct what it’s all about I also think it’s allowed ... people to react quickly.

Other factors that individual study participants mentioned as significant influences include opportune timing, expeditious work by the Department and Commission, Department leadership, an absence of early consultation and perceptions of a hidden agenda, failure to understand the higher education culture, insufficient involvement of the Washington-based higher education associations,

misconstruing and misusing research findings, conflicting views of higher education as a public vs. private good, fears of funding cuts, charges of complacency, the critique of student loan policies and practices, failure to make a compelling case for change, and cultural and political differences in approach. A final influence that deserves mention is that the Spellings Commission initiative was begun with the discussions of the Higher Education Act reauthorization legislation already underway on Capitol Hill. This timing raised questions for some, and for others contributed to a climate of suspicion about the Department's intentions.

Accountability vs. Autonomy

The issue of autonomy was the most critical factor in stimulating the intensity of initial and subsequent reactions to the Commission and Report. This concern centers on the question of who has the responsibility and the right to criticize, recommend, and/or instigate change within higher education. As study participants noted in different ways, self-determination and autonomy are among the most treasured values at all levels within higher education, and viewed as essential to the success that U.S. colleges and universities have enjoyed.

The perceived threats to autonomy were exacerbated by a seemingly widespread belief within the higher education community that enhanced systems of accountability would create a "slippery slope" that that would inevitably lead to diminished autonomy.

The Association of American Universities (AAU) president, Robert Berdahl, articulated this perspective clearly in a succinct message to presidents and chancellors of institutions who are members of the AAU at the point in time where legislative action was being considered:

The great diversity of missions and types of colleges and universities in our nation (private, public, religious-based, vocational, etc.) and the success of the American system of higher education is due in significant part to the principle of academic autonomy. Academic autonomy confers on institutions the ability and responsibility to determine the content of their curriculum and to set standards for student learning. The federal government and accrediting agencies should not impinge upon academic autonomy or be responsible in any way for determining curriculum or setting standards for student learning.⁶⁵

Recommendations that are perceived to threaten the autonomy of higher education strike at the heart and soul of the academy. Particularly if a perceived threat to that principle comes from outside the academy, and if it appears that advocates for reform may have the power to enforce change, vigorous resistance is a predictable response. For many leaders in the higher education community, this has been precisely the situation created by the Spellings Commission. Despite assurances by Secretary Spellings, such as “I’m not advocating a bigger role for the federal government,”⁶⁶ much of the reaction and rhetoric from higher education were driven by concerns for the autonomy of the academy.

Those who participated in the study shared the view that fears of increased government intervention and concerns about the potential loss of autonomy for higher education were the most critical factors in explaining early and continuing negative reactions to the work of the Commission. Ideas that were believed to have the potential of bringing with them externally imposed, standardized one-size-fits-all approaches to assessing performance generated the strongest concerns.

The Report Becomes a Plan for Action

A number of individuals interviewed in connection with this study said they believed that the higher education community in Washington initially sought to minimize the attention given to the Commission deliberations. The thought—perhaps better described as, the *hope*—was that the initiative would attract little attention, and, therefore, would result in little follow up or follow through. From a strategic perspective, higher education leaders thought that the more the higher education community responded, the more visibility the Commission’s work would receive. But the initial publicity and the release of the June 2006 draft—and the flurry of public attention it garnered—made it apparent that this strategy would not be effective.

When asked what he thought the Bush administration and Congress were going to do with the Report, ACE President David Ward responded,

Well, that’s the problem. To tell you the truth, I wish I knew... I do think that Margaret Spellings is somebody who has a very... pragmatic, common-sense view of the world. After all, having a daughter as a freshman in college does get your attention as a parent. So it wouldn’t surprise me if she tried to develop an agenda... I think that Margaret Spellings really had an interest in trying to see how to develop an agenda [for change]. That’s what this was about.⁶⁷

Soon after the release of the Report it became obvious that, indeed, the Department of Education viewed the Spelling's initiative as something more than just a report. Rather, the Department saw it as part of an agenda for change, as Ward had predicted.

Details of the Plan

On September 22, 2006, the Department released a statement that Secretary Spellings would soon announce an "action plan on the future of higher education." On September 26th, Secretary Spellings and Commission Chairman Charles Miller held a press conference at the National Press Club and described the plan that would include a focus on "affordability, accessibility, and consumer-friendly recommendations." Information on the plan was provided in a formal release and via a live Web cast.⁶⁸ A fact sheet and press release summarizing the plan for change were also provided on the Department's Web site.⁶⁹ The press release described the plan in this way:

Today, Secretary Spellings announces an Action Plan designed to improve higher education's performance and our ability to measure that performance. The proposals will make higher education more accessible, affordable, and accountable to students, parents, business leaders, and taxpayers.

(See "Fact Sheet" in Appendix for an outline of details of the plan and its connections to elements in the Commission Report.)

Implementing the Plan

There was initial bipartisan support for the general directions outlined in the plan. Senator Edward Kennedy commented,

Last week, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings laid out a promising agenda to keep our colleges and universities strong in this demanding age. As she rightly noted in her comments on the Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, American's public and private institutions of higher education are the envy of the world.

But as we work to deal with the immense challenges of this rapidly changing time, it's vital for our colleges and universities—

fine as they now are—to be open to change, and Congress, the Department of Education, and the higher education community will need to work well together to find the way forward.⁷⁰

Moving forward, the Department undertook a number of initiatives to operationalize the plan. These included hosting national and regional public and invitational meetings. Previously scheduled negotiated rulemaking panels and the activities of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) also emerged as important elements in the reform effort.⁷¹

National and regional events. In the months following the publication of the Report, Secretary Spellings sponsored a number of national and regional events to heighten the visibility of the Report and to discuss implications and next steps.⁷²

One of these was an “Accreditation Forum” in November 2006, which included 60 representatives from accrediting agencies, colleges, universities, state leadership, private sector, and higher education organizations to discuss the Commission’s recommendations for making student learning outcomes the core priority for accreditation.

Other events included national “Summits” and “Town Hall Meetings” in Spring 2007 in Kansas City, Seattle, Phoenix, Boston, Atlanta, and the “Under Secretary’s College Tour” in the Fall 2007 through Spring 2008.⁷³

Negotiated rulemaking. By the end of August 2006, the Department also announced plans to draft rules to implement changes to the current Higher Education Act reauthorization legislation. An announcement in the *Federal Register* indicated that the negotiated rulemaking process—designed and normally used for determining how best to implement changes mandated by the passage of specific laws—might also consider changes in accreditation. The Department’s first two negotiated rulemaking efforts addressed budgetary issues; the next two were to have a broader purview—one looking at Title IV student aid programs and the other at accreditation-related issues.⁷⁴

This rulemaking session with a focus on accreditation issues became the object of particular attention, because it addressed topics that were among the most contentious of the Report. In addition, the session was controversial because there were questions about the appropriateness and legitimacy of this venue, the method used for considering these issues,⁷⁵ and the representativeness of the group appointed by the Department for this purpose. The group met first in February 2007 and subsequently in March, April, May, and June. Topics under review included legal support for accreditors in upholding their decisions, the extent to which changes in institutional structure or ownership are covered by existing accredita-

tion, how institutions should be monitored between 10-year accreditation reviews, the relationship of input and resource standards to student achievement, criteria and methods for assessing student achievement, consideration of mission in the application of accrediting standards, transfer of credit and acceptance of credentials, the standards and processes by which accrediting agencies are reviewed and recognized by the Department, and provision of information to the public.⁷⁶

The negotiated rulemaking sessions were marked by vigorous discussions, with apparent adversarial relations and mistrust between the Department and higher education associations and accrediting agencies. And in some cases, mistrust among the higher education groups added to the tension.⁷⁷ Doug Lederman provided running commentary on each day's events in *Inside Higher Ed*;⁷⁸ the headline for Day One was, "Fault Lines on Accreditation." As Lederman characterized it,

Technically, not a lot happened on Wednesday, as the U.S. Education Department kicked off the process by which it will consider changing federal rules that govern higher education accreditation. In fact, the only real agenda item that got done was, well, approving an agenda for the three-day meeting.... But despite the relative lack of concrete action, the opening day of the much anticipated (and in some quarters dreaded) process of "negotiated rulemaking," as it is called, offered a preview of battles that are to come....

...the primary tension... was the same one some college officials (and members of Congress) have been raising ever since the department announced last fall that it planned to review federal rules on accreditation: whether the Education Department has the legal authority to seek changes in those rules to try to accomplish many of the recommendations of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education.⁷⁹

In the view of several interviewees, the decision by the Department to undertake rulemaking was a clear message to higher education. As one leader from a higher education association commented, that move "... made it very clear that they did not have confidence in the community to take action in a timely way." That message, combined with the intensified adversarial relationships and mistrust and the ongoing questions about whether the Department had the jurisdiction to promote changes in accreditation through negotiated rulemaking, led to a stalemate and the session of the negotiated rulemaking group ended in a standoff.

The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). NACIQI, the federally-appointed group responsible for providing review, oversight, and official recognition of the national and regional accrediting organizations, and advising the Secretary, was a third force in carrying forth the Commission's agenda. While the actions of this group have always been of keen importance to accrediting organizations, the higher education community and public at large have seldom taken much notice of this group's activities. Subsequent to the release of the Spellings Commission, however, as NACIQI began to intensify its review of accreditors' practices relative to the assessment of institutional and learning outcomes and other controversial areas, the group's work began to draw much greater attention.⁸⁰

One interviewee who had participated in the negotiated rulemaking recalled that the Department indicated that one of the primary reasons for initiating that process "was to try to bring clarity to those regulations [that serve to guide NACIQI] and I negotiated on that foundation." Adding to the controversy was the perception by some that NACIQI seemed to be applying standards in its evaluation of accrediting agencies prior to their having been formally clarified and ratified through negotiated rulemaking or other officially sanctioned approval mechanisms. Ongoing concerns about NACIQI's mission, scope of responsibilities, goals, and the extent to which its positions were reflective of the philosophies—even the dictates—of the Department fueled, and continues to fuel, controversy.⁸¹

Organized Resistance to Department Efforts

Efforts by the Department to use the Report as the basis for a plan of action led to intensified communication and advocacy activities within the higher education community.

The higher education association and accrediting agency members interviewed were unanimous in saying that they had initiated or actively participated in such efforts; only a few of the interviewees from the other groups indicated that they had taken any similar action. Lobbying was one approach; this took place, as one individual said "within the department with Chairman Miller, within the Senate, within the House, everywhere... active lobbying. Advocacy is probably a better word." Another member of a higher education organization described the group's efforts as "extremely active... we worked with a number of the staff people with regard to accreditation issues. We testified. We were involved in the (Department of Education's) Accreditation Forum... we were involved in The Summit. We were involved in the regional hearings. We were part of negotiated rulemaking." One described lobbying efforts as supporting the recommendations

while at the same time opposing “the approach of negotiated rulemaking.” Another approach involved encouraging congressional involvement. A member of an association said that the group encouraged “congressional opposition” to the mandatory measurement of learning outcomes, and felt they “had a lot to do with urging [senators] to write letters [to resist the Department efforts].” These groups also communicated with their members. One person interviewed described writing “to our members to tell them where the problem areas were, and to solicit their views.” One agency member described the presentation of the “paper about the voluntary system of accountability” after the “final report [which] ... called for voluntary efforts to measure learning outcomes instead of mandatory ones We think ... we had some effect on moving that away from a mandatory to a voluntary recommendation.” Such efforts also provided the higher education associations/accrediting agencies with what one member described as “an opportunity to strengthen our leadership role with the community... we were part of a larger higher education association world....”

Association and agency statements were published on Web sites and widely circulated—and recirculated—within the higher education community. These and other communication efforts by the higher education associations were coordinated and well-orchestrated, and stressed themes and “talking points” that tapped into—and contributed to—growing concerns about external control and threats to autonomy and mission differentiation.

One example is an e-mail widely circulated and posted by the Council on Higher Education Web site which said, in part,

Now is the time for you to contact your Senators or Representative about this issue. We believe that the [Department of Education’s] proposed rules [in the Negotiated Rulemaking] are likely to result in a number of undesirable consequences for institutions and accreditors. The proposed rules will:

- Establish the federal advisory committee (the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity) as a “Ministry of Quality” with comprehensive authority to judge academic programs and disciplines on individual campuses throughout the country.
- Position accrediting organizations as government contractors tasked with imposing government standards of quality.
- Insist on a “one size fits all” bureaucratic approach to quality that ignores the diverse missions of institutions and

sets the tangible benefits of a collegiate experience as the primary indicator of higher education effectiveness.

- Constitute an unprecedented federal usurpation of authority to make academic judgments—heretofore the province of colleges and universities.”⁸²

Explained one study participant, although there was no “planning that said we had to mount a large campaign” [higher education associations] responded by developing and distributing “a common communication that members could use as they see fit. There were five probably distilled talking points.” Institutions were urged “to weigh in with your regional accreditor” and efforts were also made to disseminate these messages to members of Congress.

Communiqués criticized the Department’s plans, characterizing them as steps toward “the federalization of higher education” and, ultimately, oversight by a “ministry of higher education.” The criticism focused on the issue of learning outcomes assessment and the concern that a “one size-fits-all” testing program would result. Such a program, with “bright line” indicators, would fail—it was alleged—to take account of the different missions of the wide variety of higher education institutions in the country and would foster inappropriate comparisons.

It was uncertain whether the mandate and regulations that were predicted would come directly from the Department or through the accrediting agencies. This, in itself, was a topic of consternation. Higher education associations, institutional leaders, and most national and regional accrediting organizations resisted the idea of broadened oversight from any source—the government or accrediting agencies.⁸³

Another illustration is a statement of position distributed by New England colleges and universities in advance of the regional higher education summit in Boston, quoted in part below:

The proposals, which are being advanced by the Department of Education, would replace today’s accreditation model, which employs peer review to achieve continuous quality improvement with a rigid federal regulatory model focusing on standardized outcome measures determined by the Department of Education. The measures of academic performance are being developed without any real input from or recognition of the tremendously diverse institutions and student bodies, which are the hallmark of higher education in New England and throughout the country.⁸⁴

The interpretations described above were not taken from statements by the Commission, comments by the Secretary, or documents released by the Department, but it is understandable how such inferences could be drawn from the swirl of dialogue, e-mail traffic within higher education, Washington advocacy efforts, and the commentary in the higher education media—particularly for those who were not intimately acquainted with the Report or the events as they were unfolding.

On various occasions members of the Department and a number of Commissioners cautioned against suspicious interpretations of their motives, and overreactions to the recommendations in the Report. Secretary Spellings, in comments at the semiannual meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) in December 2007, asserted,

Let me repeat: no one-size-fits-all measures. No standardized tests. All I ask is that institutions be more clear about the benefits they offer to students. Through the accrediting process, we can help bring this about.⁸⁵

Charlene Nunley, a Spellings Commissioner expanded on this point,

Let me make it clear... the Report indicates that “*higher education institutions* should measure student learning using quality assessment data. 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 to develop a “one size fits all” measure 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.⁸⁶

For the most part, such messages were overlooked, or dismissed as misinformed or unnuanced interpretations of the Report and the motives of the Department, and more generally caught up in a growing spiral of polarization and mistrust. As David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities said,

While the Commission has steered away from specific language about a single test to measure students' performance, we are concerned that the Commission's rationale for outcomes information gives the impression that it is possible to compare one institution with all others. A drive for such comparisons will inevitably lead to the attempt to adopt a single test.⁸⁷

Heightening Tensions

Although the timing of events was, in part, coincidental, the Department's initiation of negotiated rulemaking on accreditation, and the activities of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI),⁸⁸ represented the first opportunities to see how the Department's understanding of the Commission recommendations would be translated into action. For many in the higher education community, the proposed regulations and the NACIQI actions validated some of their worst fears.

Of particular concern for a majority of higher education members of the rulemaking group was the language related to assessment and transparency. The proposals about learning outcomes—what they should look like, how they should be established and used, and whose responsibility it would be for overseeing their implementation—became particularly contentious as the negotiations progressed. The increased responsibility that could be placed upon accrediting agencies was a major point of contention.⁸⁹

Over the course of the deliberations, the Department's positions on a number of these issues were softened in the face of cogent arguments and persuasive opposition from members of the rulemaking group and from the higher education community at large. Representatives from regional accrediting associations engaged in efforts to develop compromise language that they believed would assuage concerns about one-size-fits-all solutions and externally-imposed learning outcomes models or criteria, but those efforts were actively resisted by most Washington-based associations and agencies, and a number of college and university presidents.

In the final Department proposals, there was a general shift away from the idea of requiring accrediting agencies to set and monitor learning standards and outcomes, in favor of the position that accreditors should be responsible for assuring that institutions and programs themselves set goals, monitored outcomes, communicated results, and use this information for self-monitoring and improvement.

Concerns remained, however, about the details about how this framework would be applied, and about the increased level of resources that would be needed for accreditors and institutions to implement and oversee the proposed mechanisms.

Robert Berdahl, speaking on behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU) offered this commentary, reflecting the concerns of many of the national associations and agencies, as well as of campus leaders,

[To] permit accrediting agencies to set the standards for student learning... [would be] *unacceptable* because they would make accrediting agencies agents of the federal government. The Department of Education is responsible for recognizing accrediting agencies. If federal law were to state that accreditors set standards for institutions, then the federal government—not the accrediting agencies—would ultimately set the standards.

Universities and colleges greatly value the higher education accreditation system and the vital role accrediting agencies play in assisting institutions in identifying appropriate student learning standards and measures for ascertaining whether those standards have been met.

It is not the role of accrediting agencies to set standards for student learning. Rather their role is to work with institutions to assure that the standards that are set for each institution are appropriately high and consistent with the institution's mission; that accreditation reviews define the means by which institutions work to continuously improve the education they deliver; and that institutions are judged by their success in improving their ability to carry out their self-defined missions...⁹⁰

The awareness that NACIQI was the group vested with responsibility for the formal review and recognition of accrediting agencies also contributed to resistance from higher education. To some, it appeared that NACIQI had already begun to apply some of the more contentious provisions of the Department's proposed rules in its evaluation of accrediting agencies—prior to their clarification and ratification through the negotiated rulemaking process. Questions arose as to whether such actions by NACIQI were independent actions by the group or were being encouraged by the Department.

Cynthia Davenport, executive director of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, an umbrella organization with a membership of accrediting agencies representing 50 professions and responsible for accrediting more than 10,000 education programs nationally, offered the following in a letter to Secretary Spellings about NACIQI,

[The Department] outlined four “Cs” that set a context for discussions your office is having about accreditation—clear, common, consistent, and comparable. If you believe accreditors are to have regard for these ‘Cs’ in their interactions with their accredited programs or institutions, it only seems right that accrediting organizations should be treated in a similar manner.... each of these ‘Cs’ was violated at the December 2006 meeting by members of NACIQI, by staff of the Department, or by both. We saw inconsistent and unclear recommendations by staff; inconsistent actions by NACIQI; new and different interpretations of long-standing recognition⁹¹ requirements; arbitrary imposition of new mandates; extensive discussion of issues that are outside the scope of the recognition criteria and a general lack of courtesy and respect.”⁹²

In hopes of overcoming impediments to developing a compromise, the Department convened a fourth session of negotiated rulemaking, a highly unusual practice. Despite this effort and written and personal assurances to the negotiated rulemaking team by Department leaders, the climate of mistrust and concerns about the “slippery slope”—the ultimate implications of what was being proposed—continued to thwart meaningful dialogue and progress. Predictable ambiguities, combined with the adversarial relationships and mistrust that had been intensified through this period, and ongoing concerns about the potential loss of autonomy for individual institutions stalled progress. In the end, this led to what is termed an “impasse,” which essentially means that no consensus was reached. Given the provisions of the negotiated rulemaking model, this left the Department with the option of moving ahead to make regulations unilaterally.⁹³

Voluntary Initiatives

Amidst the swirl of debate, a number of interesting developments aimed at voluntarily addressing various themes of the Commission Report were underway. Among these were new and reenergized initiatives by associations. For example, the six presidential higher education associations in the U.S. and other associations, agencies, and institutions encouraged or themselves undertook voluntary efforts on a variety of fronts.⁹⁴

In August 2006, ACE President David Ward reported that the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges had already begun to move forward to address accountability issues.

I think that all of us would like to see higher education move ahead of what you might call legislative or even executive efforts in that direction. It would be far better for us to address that issue ourselves and with our members without waiting, and then perhaps any dialogue that would occur would at least see higher education trying to run ahead of efforts by others to do something about that.⁹⁵

In some cases, voluntary efforts that had been underway previously and were energized, intensified, or amplified. In other cases, new initiatives were undertaken, several with support from the Department of Education. The Secretary's action plan proposed to explore incentives for states and institutions that collect and report student learning outcome data. In October 2007, the Department awarded a \$2.45 million FIPSE Grant to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) to support efforts for the collection, reporting, and use of data to improve instruction and outcomes.

Efforts to address issues of accountability, assessment, and transparency in institutional and learning outcomes assessment were among the most notable means of demonstrating that higher education was able to generate reform from within. The earliest and most visible of these were initiatives to review accreditation practices, the implementation of NASULGC's Voluntary System of Assessment (VSA), NAICU's University and College Accountability Network (UCAN), and AAU's New Data Collection Recommendations. The Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's "Student Learning and Accountability Principles," the National Association of College and University Business Officers' (NACUBO) Innovation Award, and the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education's (NCCI) Leverage Excellence Award are other notable examples.

Accrediting Improvements. During this period the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and programmatic and regional accreditation associations brought renewed reflection to the process of reviewing and improving the accreditation process. The accrediting community developed active responses to the Commission's criticism of the present system. As David Ward said, "There were ... suggestions [that] accreditation ... could be handled in a nongovernmental way. So I think there ought to be some preemptive action in those areas where we value what you might call self-generated reform. We need to prove that we can generate reform ourselves without necessarily having it put upon us."⁹⁶ Consistent with

this goal, many accrediting associations hosted panels, programs, and workshops focused on the Spellings Commission and on issues of assessment, transparency, and improvement; as well as on particular topics such as accreditation standards and documentation necessary for evidence of compliance, requirements of the self-study process, and the preparation of external review teams—and these efforts continue.

Voluntary System of Assessment—VSA. One of the most visible initiatives to emerge during this period is VSA—the Voluntary System of Accountability developed for four-year public colleges and universities. Work on VSA began in late fall 2006, through a partnership between the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AACSU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). More than 70 institutions created VSA to help universities demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public; measure educational outcomes to identify effective educational practices; and assemble information that is accessible, understandable, and comparable. As of April 2008, 236 institutions have joined the VSA network.

The VSA Web site (<http://www.voluntarysystem.org/>) provides an approach to assessment within its member institutions, and responds more fully than any other initiative to date to the calls for national, standardized measures and comparisons relative to institutional performance and learning outcomes. The “College Portrait” framework provides a generic Web page template that colleges and universities can utilize to provide various types of information to the public. The specifics include a standardized list of demographic information that provides a profile of the institution, and also includes a series of recommended measures and measurement tools.

NAICU’s University and College Accountability Network—UCAN. The UCAN project (<http://www.ucan-network.org/>) grew out of activities initiated by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) with the goal of presenting uniform information that would be helpful to external constituencies in their efforts to compare private colleges and universities.⁹⁷ It is similar to the VSA effort in terms of its inclusion of basic profile information such as an institution’s mission; the number of applicants, admitted and enrolled students; student SAT or ACT scores where applicable; full-time, part-time, and transfer enrollment numbers; male/female percentages at the undergraduate level; the percentage of in-state, out-of-state, and international students; statistics on race and ethnic background; retention rates; time to degree; numbers of students graduating and their majors; student-faculty ratio and statistics on the use of teaching assistants and adjunct faculty; the percentage of faculty at the institution with the highest degree in their field; costs; and other institutional information.

By the end of 2007, more than 600 private institutions had signed up to participate.⁹⁸ The model has drawn broad interest as a means of making comparable institutional information available to consumers, and it has been proposed that the Department of Education adopt the framework as a way of making information available through its Web site.⁹⁹

American Association of Universities Data Exchange AAUDE. In May 2007, the Association of American Universities announced that its members had agreed unanimously that its institutions should collect and release information about undergraduate student performance and costs. The AAU Data Exchange (AAUDE) gathers, organizes, and disseminates information about higher education. The information exchanged and its reports on a variety of institutional topics are designed to serve member research universities and, increasingly, general audiences. Working closely with the AAU presidents and the Institutional Data Committee of the AAU, AAUDE is presently implementing recommendations that have been developed in response to public calls for increased accountability and assessment.

Institutional research and planning officials at member institutions meet annually and frequently exchange e-mail. In response to growing institutional interest, the group is devoting more attention to gathering, organizing, and disseminating information on the themes of accountability, access, transparency, assessment, and institutional performance. Improved information on a range of undergraduate and graduate activities will be used by member institutions for internal benchmarking and external reporting. Data items will include information on educational performance, particularly on the programmatic level, educational costs, and student satisfaction.

AACU and CHEA's Principles for Student Learning and Accountability. In January 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) issued "Principles for Student Learning and Accountability" as a framework for accountability and to help higher education institutions assess their contributions to "our democracy as well as our economy." The approach reaffirms the need to "constantly monitor the quality of student learning and development, and use the results both to improve achievement and to demonstrate the value of our work to the public."¹⁰⁰

The "Principles" approach places primary responsibility on colleges and universities themselves for achieving excellence and assuring appropriate public accountability. That responsibility includes establishing and clearly stating their own goals; gathering evidence about how well students achieve these goals; communicating clearly their mission, goals, and effectiveness; carefully monitoring the use of federal funds; and emphasizing high standards, transparency, and accountability.

Transparency by Design. A consortium of 10 adult-serving colleges and universities launched an initiative designed to lead institutions toward greater accountability and transparency. Participating institutions will issue annual reports in the first quarter of each year that will include student demographics, completion rates, costs, student engagement, and knowledge and skills learned. Outcomes will be reported at the program specialization level.

NACUBO's Innovation Award. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) Innovation Award¹⁰¹ was instituted to recognize achievement of higher education institutions of each constituent type (research universities, comprehensive and doctoral institutions, small institutions, and community colleges) in the areas of business and financial administration. Awards recognize higher education institutions that have successfully responded to a campus need through designing and revamping a program; improving service delivery of administrative activity; or the reduction of costs, increased revenues, or improved productivity. NACUBO has a long tradition of recognizing individual and institutional contributions to improved business practices within higher education, and the Innovation Award reinforces the importance of addressing issues of operational efficiency, resource management, and organizational effectiveness.

NCCI's Leveraging Excellence Award. In 2007, the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement (NCCI) initiated a Leveraging Excellence Award Program, to recognize initiatives where effective academic and administrative practices have been successfully implemented beyond one department, campus, or institution. "While other awards exist to recognize excellent improvements or innovations, the unique distinction of this award program is dissemination or scaling of those improvements/innovations for leveraged impact," according to NCCI's description of the program. This award is designed to acknowledge initiatives that have resulted in significant impact on quality, efficiency, service, or learning. University of Kentucky President Lee T. Todd, Jr., chair of the judging panel noted that "... this award... recognizes a new trend in higher education. It acknowledges higher education efforts that resonate with business leaders, legislators, and donors. Such relationships play an increasingly significant role in higher education today, as colleges and universities strive to build collaborative partnerships that add value to the various publics in which they serve."¹⁰²

Legislative Activity: Positions Harden

While the controversy taking place nationally and in the venues mentioned above had interesting and engaging intellectual dimensions, this was not primarily an intellectual debate. The national higher education associations and agencies, with the support of many college and university leaders around the country, clearly sought to moderate, modify, and ideally to stall the Department's and Secretary's agenda for change, an agenda that was increasingly depicted as a one-size-fits-all, federalized program for higher education. Associations, agencies, and institutional leaders continued their efforts to educate and persuade the Secretary and Department to alter the proposed initiatives. At the same time, aggressive advocacy activities were directed toward Congress, in the hope that it would slow or halt Department efforts to implement its plans. These efforts were extensive, and from the perspective of the higher education associations which had been most active in these efforts, ultimately quite successful. As one study participant stated, "The Department... underestimated the ability of the associations to... marshal congressional support... we worked very hard to achieve that."

While the goals of greater transparency, cost containment, and increased attention to documenting, assessing, and communicating outcomes seemed to enjoy a reasonable level of support within Congress, the idea of expanded Department of Education control and regulation did not.

One of the most widely circulated statements that emerged in response to these pressures came in the form of a statement from Senator and former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. The Senator made a strong appeal that higher education, rather than Department of Education, should take responsibility for improvement:

Our country does not have just some of the best colleges and universities in the world. It has almost all of them. Our higher education system is our secret weapon in America's competition in the world marketplace. It is the cornerstone of the brainpower advantage that last year permitted our country to produce thirty percent of the world's wealth (measured by gross domestic product) for just five percent of the world's people.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, to her credit, established a Commission two years ago to examine all aspects of higher education to make certain that we do all we can to preserve excellence in this secret weapon and access to it. Among other things, the Commission called for more accountability in higher education.

The Commission got the part about accountability right. We in Congress have a duty to make certain that the billions we allocate to higher education are spent wisely. Unfortunately, the Commission headed in the wrong direction when it proposed how to achieve accountability. In its report, and in the negotiated rulemaking process, the Department of Education proposed a complex system of accountability to tell colleges how to accept transfer students, how to measure what students are learning, and how colleges should accredit themselves. I believe excellence in American higher education comes from institutional autonomy, markets, competition, choice for students, federalism, and limited federal regulation.

The Department is proposing to restrict autonomy, choice, and competition. Such changes are so fundamental that only Congress should consider them. For that reason, if necessary, I will offer an amendment to the Higher Education Act to prohibit the Department from issuing any final regulations on these issues until Congress acts. Congress needs to legislate first. Then the Department can regulate.

Instead of pursuing this increased federal regulation, I have suggested to the Secretary a different course. First, convene leaders in higher education—especially those who are leading the way with improved methods of accountability and assessment—and let them know in clear terms that if colleges and universities do not accept more responsibility for assessment and accountability, the federal government will do it for them.

Second, establish an award for accountability in higher education like the Baldrige award for quality in American business. The Baldrige Award, granted by the Department of Commerce, encourages a focus on quality.... It has been enormously successful, causing hundreds of businesses to change their procedures to compete for the prize. I believe the same kind of award—or awards for different kinds of higher education institutions—would produce the same sort of result for accountability in higher education.

Finally, make research and development grants to states, institutions, accreditors, and assessment researchers to develop new and better appropriate measures of accountability. This combination of jawboning, creating a Baldrige-type prize for accountability and research and development for better assessment techniques will, in my judgment, do a better and more comprehensive job of encouraging accountability in higher education than anything Federal regulation can do.

If I am wrong, then we in Congress and the U.S. Department of Education can step in and take more aggressive steps.¹⁰³

Those in the higher education community who were adamantly opposed to governmental control took great pleasure when key legislators put pressure on the Secretary and Department to slow efforts to promulgate changes prior to legislative action. On June 15, 2007, the following letter was sent to Secretary Spellings and released to the press by Senator Edward Kennedy on behalf of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, urging the department to refrain from proposing new regulations on accreditation until after the Higher Education Act was reauthorized by Congress. Secretary Spellings agreed to comply.

Dear Secretary Spellings:

As you know, the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions is moving forward with reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. We're writing to let you know that we plan to make changes to the section of the law that deals with accreditation. We believe these changes will strengthen our nation's accreditation system by clarifying the Department of Education's responsibilities with respect to recognizing accreditation agencies and organizations, and by specifying the criteria that these agencies should examine when reviewing institutions of higher education.

Obviously, we're aware that you have just completed negotiated rulemaking on accreditation based on current law, and that the next step is for the Department to publish proposed regulations on this topic. Although members differ on the particulars, we support your overall goal of ensuring that our accreditation system is an effective means of promoting quality in higher education.

However, given our Committee's expectation that the current accreditation provisions will soon be changed, and that a new round of rulemaking on this issue will subsequently be needed, we respectfully ask that you refrain from proposing new regulations on accreditation until after the Higher Education Act is reauthorized.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

With respect and appreciation,
Sincerely,

Edward M. Kennedy

Christopher Dodd

Tom Harkin

Barbara A. Mikulski

Jeff Bingaman

Patricia Murray

Jack Reed

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Bernard Sanders

Michael B. Enzi

Judd Gregg

Lamar Alexander

Richard Burr

Johnny Isakson

Lisa Murkowski

Pat Roberts

Barack Obama

Sherrod Brown¹⁰⁴

The campaign by many of the higher education associations, agencies, and institutions was not without its challenges and bumps in the road. During the closing months of 2007, legislation to reauthorize the Higher Education Act (HEA) was considered in Congress. The House of Representatives bill (H.R. 4137) was introduced in early November, and unanimously approved at the committee level within a week. The bill included a number of elements that had broad support from the higher education community, including provisions to increase the maximum award authorization for Pell grants to students and to provide payment on a year-round basis. Concerns were expressed by the higher education associations, however, because the proposed legislation also included what were seen as undesirable provisions and reporting requirements, not unlike those suggested by the Department of Education during the negotiated rulemaking process. Specifically, the language of the proposed bill contained a provision that affirmed the importance of assessing institutional and learning outcomes, and this language was essentially the same as that in the Senate version of the HEA reauthorization bill (S. 1642).

These proposals met with strong resistance from much of the higher education community because they threatened an expanded federal role in higher educa-

tion, increased costs to institutions in meeting these requirements, and ultimately increased costs to students.¹⁰⁵ Subsequent revisions of the legislation addressed higher education's concerns, and provisions calling for increased assessment, accountability, and transparency were eliminated.

Late in the House committee's consideration of the bill, however, an amendment was accepted that eliminated the language that asserted the autonomy of colleges and universities when it comes to establishing and implementing assessment of student achievement. This reversal came as a surprise to most higher education associations and agencies, as well as to college and university leaders, and became a source of immediate and significant concern. "Elimination of this important provision ... reopens the door to determination of student achievement measures by government-sanctioned accrediting agencies, bringing with it the threat of further federalization of higher education accreditation." The issue was so important that it threatened the support of the legislation by one of the major higher education associations.¹⁰⁶ After much hand wringing by the higher education associations and significant advocacy efforts, the language that would limit Department and accrediting agency intervention was restored.

In early February 2008, the higher education reauthorization bill (H.R. 4137) came before the full House of Representatives for a vote. Strong objections to some aspects of the bill were voiced by the Office of the President and the Secretary. A February 6, 2008, "Statement of Administration Policy," asserted,

The Administration supports reauthorizing the Higher Education Act (HEA) in a manner that makes higher education more accessible, affordable, and accountable. However, the administration strongly opposes House passage of H.R. 4137 ... because it would restrict the Department of Education's authority to regulate on accreditation; create nearly four dozen new, costly, and duplicative Federal programs; condition receipt of Federal grant funding on tuition price; and restrict the Department's ability to evaluate and effectively manage Upward Bound and other TRIO programs....

The Administration looks forward to working with Congress to address these objections and other concerns, and to improve the bill as the legislative process moves forward.

In particular, the Administration strongly opposes provisions that prohibit the Department of Education from promulgating regulations affecting postsecondary accreditation. The ability to

regulate in this area is a necessary check on an otherwise self-regulating system to maintain transparency, rigorous oversight, and accountability for the investment of Federal tax dollars. H.R. 4137's prohibition would hamper the Department's ability to protect the integrity of the large Federal investment in postsecondary education and to help students and parents make informed decisions about college.¹⁰⁷

The day the House was to consider passage of its version of the Bill, Secretary Spellings also issued a personal statement in *The Politico*, "Congress Digs a Moat Around Its Ivory Tower." She reiterated her view that

While business leaders embrace the future, Congress is vigorously defending old structured and outdated practices in higher education at the behest of entrenched stakeholders who advocate the status quo....

Ironically, Congress is rejecting the same solutions it's advocating for other industries in crisis... more transparency, more rigorous oversight and more accountability for the investment of federal tax dollars. Its legislative 'fixes'... amount to digging a moat around the 'ivory tower' instead of knocking down the very barriers that block access to an affordable postsecondary education and to information that can guide a student's decision-making process.¹⁰⁸

Objections notwithstanding, the nearly 11,000-page House (H.R. 4137) version of the bill passed on February 7, 2008, with broad bipartisan support (354-58). The Senate version (S1642)—which contained some 800 pages and included similar restrictions on Department of Education activity—had previously passed with a 95-0 vote. Thus, both versions of the bill restricted the Department from playing an active role in regulating those accrediting and institution processes that would limit institutional autonomy in assessment of institutional and learning outcomes.

Both versions also addressed two other areas of major concern to higher education: college costs and requirements related to record keeping and reporting. These provisions called for the creation and publication of a "college affordability and transparency" watch list that would include those institutions with the greatest percentage price increases among peer institutions.¹⁰⁹

The House and Senate versions of the bill also contained requirements for substantial increases in recordkeeping and reporting by institutions. Estimates indicated that the House bill included some 220 new reporting requirements, while the Senate version introduced more than 150 requirements.¹¹⁰

Thus, by mid-February 2008, Congress had approved two versions of the higher education bill, each limiting controversial provisions that would allow for increased external requirements for assessment and accountability. However, the legislation included a number of new requirements for increased transparency regarding outcomes related to costs and institutional performance. At the time of this publication, federal legislation reauthorizing the Higher Education bill had not yet been finalized.

It's Not Over Until It's Over

In the closing days of February 2008, as members of the House and Senate education committees sought to develop a compromise bill, Under Secretary Sara Martinez Tucker and Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Diane Auer Jones held a conference call with members of the Spellings Commission. The purpose of the discussion was to provide an update on the Department's efforts to follow up on the Commission's activities:

By all accounts, department officials—who like all federal officials are barred [from] contacting or encouraging others to lobby Congress—did not in any way encourage the participating members of the Spellings panel to urge lawmakers to reconsider their approach to the accreditation issue. According to several participants on the call, Tucker and Jones updated the members on a wide range of recent administration and Congressional initiatives, including the renewal of the Higher Education Act, and they did make clear that they were unhappy about the outcome of the accreditation issue...

Congress's actions on accreditation prompted some college officials to question whether Spellings and Tucker had held the call hoping to spur just such an intervention. In an e-mail sent after a reporter inquired about the call and its purposes, another department official wrote to reassure the commissioners that "the Department has conversations with outside stakeholders regularly and the call/briefing many of you participated in was entirely appropriate and not subject to the open meetings requirements that we all operated under when the Commission was active."

Miller, the former commission chair, dismisses such talk as conspiracy theorizing. He acknowledges that the Congressional restrictions on accreditation “does in the short run cause a problem” for the administration’s efforts to promote more transparency and accountability in higher education, and “maybe the legislation will slow down what she was going to do.”

“[But] I don’t think she could have done a lot more in this year [anyway],” Miller said. The bigger deal is that it “potentially impedes a future secretary,” he said. “If I were talking to Senator [Edward M.] Kennedy, I would ask him, if there’s a Democratic president, why would you want to have in place and assure the continuation of a fluffy system [of higher education accreditation] with no oversight of how we measure how colleges are doing?”

“In the long term, this is not going to be good for the institutions or the accreditors,” he added. “This is the same kind of behavior that all dying industries engage in when they feel pressure. They run to Congress, they lobby special interests.”¹¹¹

THE DYNAMICS OF PLANNED CHANGE

Approximately two years have passed since the release of the Spellings Commission Report. What kinds of impact have the Report and the work of the Commission had? Indeed, this is one of the fundamental questions guiding this research project, and an issue of considerable importance from many perspectives.

To a large extent, the answer depends on how one thinks about the concept of impact. *Impact* can be taken to mean the realization of specific outcomes that correspond with Commission goals or intentions, such as the adoption of particular practices or the enactment of legislation. This is perhaps the most restricted definition of the concept. Responses such as: “I am not that aware of the follow-up activities” and “... it’s still to be seen if they can [get] legislation...” exemplify this perspective.

Or, one can conclude that an initiative has *impact* if there is any discernible consequence—positive or negative—irrespective of specific intentions or goals. Responses such as, “[It] got a lot of visibility...” and “[It got... quite a bit of press...” fit this definition. Finally, one can think of impact as the embracement, recognition, or acknowledgement of something. This is exemplified by comments suggesting that little or no impact has occurred because “the recommendations were negatively received”—or the opposite—“it has had a significant impact because the Report and recommendations were embraced by various groups.”

While those interviewed have different understandings of the concept of impact, most of their responses indicate that the Commission's report and its work have had significant impact.

In pointing to what they believe to be substantial impact, for example, members of the Department and several Commissioners refer to the number of inquiries, requests for copies of the Report, and the range of follow-up activities including the various voluntary initiatives that they see as spawned by the Commission (See Appendix: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education and Action Plan for Higher Education, Preliminary Impact Analysis—Updated January 2008.)

In a similar vein, one chief academic officer representing an institution coming up for reaccreditation commented this way: "Well it certainly had an impact on us... [in the] roughly 38 presentations had been made on campus as a part of the accreditation self-study and review process... every one of those made reference to the Spellings Commission."

Several interviewees expressed the view that the impact had not yet occurred, since specific intended actions or intentions advocated by the Report had not yet taken place. One interviewee commented, "I haven't really seen actual implementation." And, another offered the observation that "when push came to shove, they couldn't push us over [because we had] the clout to influence the Senate" as evidence that the Commission did not have an impact. Another said, "I am not that aware of the follow-up activities [yet, but it has received]... a lot of visibility and quite a bit of press, not just within higher education, but more popular press. So I think... it is going to have an impact..." While not providing evidence for specific outcomes, the statements quoted above confirm that there has been an impact in the sense that the initiative led to dialogue and debate. Commenting on "impact" in these more general terms were responses such as: "I think it's certainly kept the pressure on the whole assessment area which I welcome. I think that's important," and "It's focused attention." Another interviewee commented, "I would say it's had a pretty substantial impact... but only in terms of getting information out there." Expressing a similar view, another noted, "Well, I think it's promoted a structured dialogue on some of these issues in a way that... hadn't [happened] before. Later, this individual commented, "I think it's started, but I don't think it's really going anywhere." One institution head said, "[It has had a]... substantial impact on the conversation, but I don't know that they'll be able to pull much legislation out of it.... I don't know what the legislative impact will eventually be but I think they've stirred the important issues.

Lasting Impact: Positive or Negative?

Will the work of the Commission have a lasting impact, and if so, will that impact be positive or negative? Commissioner Robert Zemsky commented, “As a Commission, we had done no harm. What remains to be seen is whether we had in fact begun a national dialogue leading to the transformation of American higher education.”¹¹² Study participants expressed a variety of views on the subject. Most believe the work of the Commission will, indeed, lead to significant change. The Commission members and Department of Education members who participated in the study, with one exception, anticipated significant, lasting change, as did most of the presidents and chancellors. The higher education association and accrediting agency members also generally predict that the initiative will lead to lasting change. The chief business and administrative officers, on average, were mostly neutral in their assessment as were media representatives.

With very few exceptions, those interviewed across all categories saw any resulting change as favorable for higher education. One study participant put it this way, “How can you argue against accessibility, affordability, and accountability? Those are all good things and if the Spellings Commission helps with that, great.” A Commission member indicated that “the meetings raised the dialogue and got things in the press and put the spotlight on them.... Now... accreditation is... out of the dark... over time we’ll probably do something good about it.” Another suggested that some in higher education were waiting for the administration to change but this study participant doesn’t see that as making much difference. “I think the genie will be out of the bottle.” A Department of Education member observed that the higher education community realized that “this may be the last chance they have to get in front of this... if they don’t figure it out now someone is going to figure it out for them.” On the other hand, one person interviewed did not believe that the Commission should be credited as leading to significant change because much of the work was in progress before the Commission came to be.

In the view of an association/agency leader, there will be lasting change and it will be “generally favorable” change, including “much more transparency [and... much more attention to where students come from and what happens to them.” That individual also suggested that “ultimately there’s going to be some set of standardized learning outcome measures” and expressed concern about how the measures would be used. One person added that “the Spellings Commission opened our eyes to... the notion that things need to be expected of higher education, and more needs to be expected of higher education in the future [and... words like accountability and building an accountability architecture... are going to become part of the vernacular of higher education in the future.”

But several interviewees predicted little lasting change, “in the short term it’s going to move... issues. I don’t think it will improve higher education.” Another study participant expressed belief that significant, lasting changes would not be attributable solely to the Commission, but would involve “things that the Commission has highlighted and talked about.” Another said that it is still “seen as a Republican report” and “in the end politics will play an important factor in how successful the Spellings Commission report will be in bringing about change.” Another individual commented, “ACE and the other higher education organizations can be really key in making sure that they get representatives of higher education to the table to have that dialogue. I don’t think higher education has always been [good] at communicating to Congressional leadership as far as what is needed.”

Another institutional leader was “hopeful [and] more optimistic,” noting that

If it would help to improve student preparation and the alignment of primary and secondary education with higher education, that is a really good thing. If it would help with student aid and provide [greater] opportunities for low-income students... to get higher education... those are things that... the Secretary is in a good position to influence... some of the other things that they’re encouraging, they don’t have as much direct control over. [With regard to] learning outcomes, improvements in productivity, improvements in innovation... it really gets down to the faculty and administrative leadership within higher education to respond to that.

Although, as indicated, most observers felt that any change would be favorable, a limited number of those interviewed did not. One saw “plusses and minuses... student aid will be favorable, and one-size-fits-all will be very unfavorable. Transfer of credit and uniform general education requirements across universities will be very unfavorable.” Said another, “The waterfront of educational institutions is so diverse that it’s not going to be good for all institutions.”

Stages of Activity and Impact

One way to analyze the impact of the Spellings initiative is to consider it within the larger context of organizational change theory. There seems to be little question that the Department’s efforts fit the general rubric of planned change¹¹³—initiatives undertaken to promote a particular set of outcomes. Depending on one’s perspectives, these intended outcomes were either very general or quite specific, as noted previously. That issue aside, an analysis of the dynamics of change does offer some insight when it comes to assessing the impact of the Spelling Commission.

Planned change incorporates five stages: attention, engagement, resolve, action, and integration. These phases follow and build upon one another. The following discussion is based on work recently published by the first author of this study.¹¹⁴

Attention. Stage 1 involves capturing the attention of the target audience in a world where many messages and people compete for one's time. This stage also includes efforts to define or articulate a challenge or problem, create an understanding of the need for change, and establish a sense of urgency—a “wake up call.”

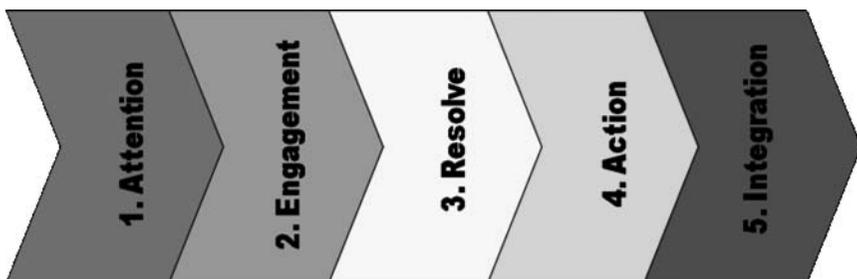
Engagement. Stage 2 consists of involving key individuals and constituencies, and creating a shared sense of the challenge or problem and its solution(s). It also includes beginning dialogue with affected parties and individuals with influence who can help to move the effort forward.

Resolve. Stage 3 involves gaining commitment to address the challenge or problem as defined, and helping to identify steps or actions needed to work toward solutions. This includes securing the support of influential individuals and constituencies and procuring necessary resources.

Action. Stage 4 identifies the point in time at which the desired outcomes are defined, and specific actions are initiated.

Integration. Stage 5 consists of the institutionalization of the results of the change efforts, such that they become a regular part of the culture of the organization. This stage also includes recognition and rewarding accomplishments, and developing mechanisms to reinforce new processes, structures, and mechanisms that support the results of the change effort.

Figure 1: Stages of Organizational Change¹¹⁵



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*.

The ultimate goal of planned change efforts is to successfully reach Stage 5—the integration of the intended changes. This represents the longer-term perspective on impact and change.

As many have noted, it is not possible to meaningfully assess the eventual outcome of complex initiatives, such as the Spellings Commission, until a substantial amount of time has passed. For this evaluation, a three-, five-, perhaps even ten-year time frame will be required. That said, it *is* possible to assess the impact of the Commission from the perspective of the stages that precede, and may indeed be prerequisite to, Stage 5—full integration.

This model helps to clarify and organize differing definitions of impact and it aids in explaining some of the underlying reasons for resistance and redirection. We believe that it also helps to validate a conclusion that the Spellings initiative and subsequent activities by the department have had substantial impact. And, finally, it provides a way of understanding the Spellings initiative in terms that can be quite easily extrapolated to other change planning and management initiatives within higher education—and beyond.

Stage 1: Attention

The Department of Education reported that there were more than 190,000 visits to the Spellings Commission Web site, and roughly 95,000 downloads of the Commission draft and final reports, from 2005 through February 2008.¹¹⁶ What stimulated such interest in a government Web site?

Was the Spellings Commission, its recommendations, and the array of follow-up initiatives fundamentally a politically motivated and alarmist effort to impose external standards and procedures that threaten to undermine higher education's bedrock values—the very values which have been fundamental to superior higher education in the U.S.? Or, was the Commission and the follow-up efforts of the Department a response to a pending crisis threatening the future of higher education? And, if the latter, was the Report simply giving a voice to the growing discontent by students, parents, employers, and other constituencies resulting from higher education's indifference and antipathy to their concerns, and more generally with our perceived resistance to assessment, accountability, cost containment, transparency, and change?

If the Commission was unduly alarmist, its activities could be interpreted as causing unnecessary problems for the higher education community and a diversion from its important work. That being the case, a change of the political party in power, the Secretary, and other Department personnel would probably bring an end to the frustrations and wasted energies devoted to defending and deflecting. If, on the other hand, there is a serious crisis, the concerns expressed by the

Commission may indeed be a troubling glimpse into the future of higher education. Far from going away, the public scrutiny and pressure for accountability and reform within colleges and universities will grow and will follow the trends in the corporate sector and healthcare.

For some—within and outside the higher education community—the Report represented an inappropriate and aggressive attack on the ability of higher education to effectively self-govern, and thus was seen as a frontal attack on the academy’s most sacred principles. For others, this strong, direct, no-nonsense approach—the “whack across the forehead of higher education with a 2 X 4,” as some have described it—and the confronting of the academy’s core values was precisely what was needed to capture the attention of the academy. Writing in *Trusteeship*, Robert O’Neil poses a rhetorical question, “Did we need to be told there were serious shortcomings in such vital dimensions of American higher education as assessment, transparency, and access?”¹¹⁷ Considering the intensity of reactions to these themes, apparently the answer is “yes.”

There is ample evidence that from the perspective of garnering attention, the Report and subsequent activities had a substantial impact. But there are questions about the extent to which the message higher education received was clear, or the one intended. Interestingly, several members of the Commission and the Department commented that they believe a better job could have been done in telling the story about the perceived need for change. One senior leader from the Department of Education commented, “... it should have been possible to more clearly communicate the compelling need for change—‘the burning platform’—not just for the public at large, but for the business community and the higher education community.... so that... people would understand that ‘we’re coming at... this not because we think... [the system is] broken, but because we think [it] needs... to be better’. In retrospect, I wish we had been able to take our case to the American public earlier.”

A president commented that it was critical for people to understand why a college education is essential for individuals and the country, how access is becoming a problem, why it is important to be confident that the learning we intend is taking place, and what the international higher education scene looks like. Without this kind of understanding, people won’t appreciate the argument that in the same way that we became a superpower, we could lose our international leadership role. “If there would have been more focus on scenarios or consequences of inaction, there might have been a little less defensiveness or resistance by higher education.”

Others interviewed made similar points about the possibilities that existed for more clearly, constructively, and sensitively conveying the need for change. However, a number of individuals observed that had the effort been more subtle, it might have gone unnoticed.

While some note that few new ideas were advanced by the Spellings Commission, it is clear that no other initiative in the recent history of higher education reform has garnered the level of attention, interest, and controversy as this one. This is a particularly interesting circumstance because other task force and advisory groups both inside and outside higher education have put forth a number of the same concerns and recommendations in recent years, but with far less notoriety and consequence.¹¹⁸ Judged against the criterion of “getting higher education’s attention,” the Spelling initiative has, indeed, had a substantial impact.

Stage 2: Engagement

Assessing the impact of the initiative as it relates to *engagement* is more complex. The Commission and Department certainly made a number of efforts to engage various individuals and constituencies from the higher education community—before, during, and after the completion of the Report—but these were not universally well received nor accepted. Commenting on this theme, Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges noted, “Some of the recommendations call for Congressional or Executive Branch mandate and are needlessly heavy handed in their unilateral approach.”¹¹⁹

Commission members and Department of Education leaders interviewed in the study believe that they made a substantial effort to involve members of the higher education community through the many open Commission meetings, outreach, national and regional forums, and other information sharing strategies. However, upon reflection they indicate that they wish they had been more successful in their efforts to foster engagement—particularly with the faculty and constituencies outside Washington. Commented one interviewee from the Department of Education,

... [I wish] we could have ... figured out a more direct communication strategy [for reaching the higher education community] ... We initially did rely on the associations a lot and I think that has been detrimental. I think we should have had regional ... and [institutional] leadership ... I’m not trying to make excuses, but there are hundreds of disciplinary groups because higher education is so decentralized. We didn’t have the savvy as to how to reach [these] folks directly, which is why we went on these regional tours. But it was very, very difficult.

A number of others interviewed from other perspectives believe that far greater involvement and engagement of the higher education community would have

improved the reception of the Report and of the Department's follow-up efforts. Commented one leader of a Washington-based association,

... if I had been Secretary, I think I would have gone to the associations and said: 'I'd like each of you to identify ten of your presidents or leaders... to come to Washington and sit down with members of the Department and we will share with them what our perceptions are of the future needs of higher education, the concerns that we have that we think need attention, and then we want to hear from you what your concerns are—we don't want to just hear about money because we know that's a problem... but there will always be too little.'

A chief academic officer critiqued, "They could have worked with higher education. They could have shown some appreciation for American higher education. We don't have the world's worst. We have an excellent system of higher education.... But we weren't seen as partners. We were seen as failures...." Another study participant commented that the confrontational tone undermined the Commission's leadership and the potential for more meaningful engagement of the higher education community.

The *attention paradox* is one explanation for the lack of engagement by higher education. While gaining attention is a first and critical step in the change process, the strategies used to do this may have a lasting impact and consequence, well beyond their original purpose. The manner in which attention is gained can facilitate and motivate engagement, or, as was evidently operational here, the kinds of attention generated can become impediments to the dialogue, trust, and negotiation that are essential for *engagement*.

It is clear that elements of the substance and tone of the Report, and the process through which it was released, ratified, and communicated, were perceived as conveying a degree of disrespect for the academy's traditions, culture, and values. While a "2 X 4" strategy can be extremely effective in grabbing attention, it tends to leave bruises, hurt feelings, and damaged egos. In this case, even the "leaked drafts" and hard-hitting critique, which increased *attention* by the higher education community to the initiative, also seems to have antagonized, heightened defensiveness, and intensified mistrust and resistance—thereby hindering *engagement*.

The adversarial climate that surfaced during and after the work of the Commission no doubt has origins that precede the Commission, and to some extent may well be inherent in the cultural relationship between higher education and any governmental agency. This difficulty was evidenced in comments by a

study participant who remarked, “I have a very dim opinion of... departments of education—both the state and federal level. I just don’t have a high opinion about them at all. Sorry I just don’t. I could give you some stories.”

That said, there is little doubt that the climate of mistrust intensified during this period, and as is often the case in such situations, each party sees the other as the “cause” of the “problem” and regards its own behavior as a rationale and reasonable response to the situation at hand. The result is a spiraling relationship of antagonism and distrust.¹²⁰

An important question—largely rhetorical at this point—is whether it would have been possible to gain the kind of attention that the Commission and Report has garnered, had the approach been somewhat less confrontational and critical, more sensitive to the traditions and culture of higher education, more collaborative, more respectful and honoring of the accomplishments of higher education. If so, the *engagement* stage might have been a clearer and more rapidly achieved success. If not, the effort may well have been stalled before it started.

At least one institutional leader who was interviewed in the study faults the Department for not being able to predict better and be better prepared to address the cultural reactions of the higher education community to the Report. The interviewee noted that the Department seemed to have been somewhat surprised by the reaction of the higher education community and

that says to me that they didn’t do their work well, because the process should have included some of those views ahead of time... That’s because you have insularity and I can talk about my experiences with the White House and how nobody wants to say to the boss, whether that’s Spellings or Bush, ‘you need to hear something you’re not thinking’... When you look at it from the academic side where we say we champion debate and academic freedom and variety of points of view, we can’t imagine that any group of people would produce such a narrow document or a narrow war policy but it happens and I can understand why it happens.

Though certainly not a textbook case of best practices in *engagement*, there is evidence that, over time, some level of engagement is occurring. Regional follow-up meetings, invitations to Department and Commission members to speak at various meetings, and voluntary follow-up activities involving higher education associations, accrediting agencies, and institutions, attest to this movement. (See Appendix: The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education and Action Plan for Higher Education, Preliminary Impact Analysis.)

Stage 3: Resolve

Viewed from the perspective of the agent of change, the *resolve* stage focuses on efforts to secure commitment to the problem as defined, and to the steps needed to work toward solutions.¹²¹ Based on the research reported here, it seems clear that the Commission and Report have become the impetus for commitments to a number of new and energized discussions and planning efforts within the higher education community. Notes *Chronicle* writer Paul Basken, “After initial criticism of the Spellings Commission and the sometimes caustic tone of its yearlong deliberations, many college leaders are recognizing common ground.”¹²²

This “common ground” is evidenced by many of the voluntary initiatives discussed previously in this study. Efforts to address issues identified by the Spellings Commission have been greatly intensified; and the level of interest within national associations, national and regional accrediting associations, and agencies, systems, and institutions is unmistakable. Whether one considers the number of forums and meetings,¹²³ or the number of new initiatives, the evidence for *resolve to act*, though certainly not universal, is nonetheless substantial. As one study participant observed, “I do think that Secretary Spellings has sort of won over a lot of hearts and minds ...”

Stage 4: Action

This stage focuses on observable activity that grows out of commitment; there is considerable evidence that what has been described as “common ground” signaled a resolve that began to be translated into actions of various kinds. The completion of initiatives that have been undertaken voluntarily by associations and agencies, the number of institutions that have adopted or adapted these, and the range of other efforts that relate to Spellings themes at the system or campus level, provide evidence of the magnitude of this action.

Stage 5: Integration

While it is too early to assess the long-term impact of the Spellings recommendations, we did ask participants in the study to speculate about the extent to which the influences of the Commission would become institutionalized and translate into lasting change. In general, those interviewed expressed the view that the work of the Commission will, indeed, lead to lasting change, and most believe those changes will be positive. With several notable exceptions, those interviewed across all categories saw any resulting change as favorable for higher education. One institutional leader mentioned two initiatives (UCAN and VSA) that “are a

consequence of the Spellings Commission” and “that when scholars look back and write about this [in] 10-20 years ... [they will] say it moved higher education in the direction of being more transparent, making more information available and to begin looking in a serious way about outcomes assessment.” Another agreed that it may have “accelerated efforts at the association level.” Another felt that “[what will] emerge from this are stronger accrediting agencies whose rules [will force] institutions to be publicly accountable about their outcomes and having sophisticated assessment systems.”

The Outcome

Considered from a number of perspectives, there can be little doubt that the Spellings Commission is having a significant impact on higher education. We have taken account of the various ways to think about “impact,” the points of view of those interviewed, and the evidence provided by interviewees and media-based account of activities—all of which seem in one way or another to be inspired by the themes advanced by the Commission and its Report. We have also considered the specific stages through which a change initiative progresses, focusing on outcomes relative to each. From all these perspectives, it seems clear that the Commission, the Report, and the follow-up activities of the Department have had considerable influence—at a national level, within higher education associations and accrediting agencies, and at the institutional level.

This is not to say that this impact is uniform within or across any of these levels or that these influences are necessarily appreciated in all cases; nor is it to predict with any precision what the long-term consequences may be. However, it is clear that the Commission, its work, and subsequent activities based upon that foundation, attracted the attention of a substantial segment of the higher education community (and within that group, many leaders), fostered a visible and increasingly engaging national conversation on the challenges and needs of higher education, and motivated or intensified commitments to a number of voluntary actions. As Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education commented, “Something is changing out there,” and he lists the following developments as evidence.

- Hundreds of U.S. colleges are using standardized student-achievement tests, allowing comparisons between institutions, while investigating options for creating more such tests.
- Several major college groups [are launching] ... projects in which their members will post to their Web sites specific performance-related data to allow direct comparisons between institutions.

- Congress, with broad bipartisan backing, this month approved the largest increase in federal student aid since the GI Bill in 1944.¹²⁴

While not all of these outcomes can be directly attributed to the Spellings Commission, there is little doubt that the initiative played a major contributing role in these efforts.

LESSONS *THAT COULD BE* LEARNED

While the phrase “lessons learned” is a bit simplistic and overused, it does convey the importance of revisiting situations and experiences in an effort to derive generalized, transferable insights. Hence, we have elected to use the language here with minor modification. Because of the complexity and controversy of the Spellings initiative, this list of such insights and reflections could be a very long one. In this section, we offer some observations about lessons *that could be* learned, drawing once again, on the insights of interviews, media coverage, and our own reflections as participants in this project.

Viewed from the perspective of the Commission and the Department of Education, the impact and the effectiveness of the initiative overall can be seen most clearly in:

- the attention it afforded to the issues and themes addressed in the Report and follow-up activities;
- the dialogue that has been stimulated by these efforts; and
- the numerous voluntary improvement projects and programs that have been energized and inspired during this period.

On the other hand, the effort has had considerably less impact and success in encouraging the kind of mutual respect, constructive collaboration, and partnering that seems necessary to unite the higher education community, Congress, and the Department in the collegial pursuit of a common agenda.

Many in the higher education community take considerable pleasure in *their* success in:

- resisting externally mandated and imposed regulations and
- initiating voluntary efforts to respond to some of the most critical pressures points identified by the Commission.

But those same individuals concede that the higher education community has been less successful in effectively creating a broader-based understanding and sup-

port among constituents as to the goals and challenges facing higher education, in presenting a unified response to the issues and themes of the Report, and in easing disquiet among many external constituencies about higher education's seeming insularity and indifference to concerns of the day.

Thus, while some goals were met, others were not. What might the higher education community, Commission, and the Department have done differently to enhance the effectiveness of their efforts? This question is explored in the following sections. We offer these observations retrospectively based on our own analysis and drawing heavily on the perspectives of the study participants. We, and they, do so with full acknowledgement that these suggestions are being provided with the luxury of the "Monday morning quarterback." Our purpose is not to critique. Rather the goal is to identify some of the factors that were barriers to greater success, and in so doing, to underscore issues that may be as important to future efforts as we believe they were to this one.

Other Ways Higher Education Might Have Responded

Nearly all of those interviewed, across various roles and perspectives, believe that the higher education community could have responded more effectively than it did to the Commission—before, during, and after the release of the Report. Drawing on their commentaries, we have identified five areas in which study participants were critical about higher education's responses. Participants noted that:

1. Much of the higher education community seemed to define the Commission and its Report as a problem rather than an opportunity.
2. Initial responses appeared defensive and reinforced images that the academy is resistant to change.
3. There was a general failure to use the initiative as a platform for telling higher education's story more effectively.
4. Actions were reactive rather than proactive.
5. Opportunities for providing needed leadership were missed.

An Opportunity Rather than a Problem

The most basic conclusion is that the higher education community could have—should have—treated the Spellings Report as an opportunity, rather than solely as a problem. One senior leader of a higher education association put it this way,

Well, I wish the higher education community had found a way to be more positive. We tended in our public statements to pick out the wrong, damaging things they were talking about and didn't spend enough time acknowledging the right things. That final statement that ACE put together with the six presidential associations... made a positive statement. I wish we had the balance to do that all along. The academy did a little damage to itself by appearing just super negative.

Reflecting this same view, a university president said,

I think the higher education community could have been more forthcoming, it could have released more data, it could have been more self-reflective, it could have been more critical but not in a negative way—[it could have] done some analysis. Almost from the beginning it was a kicking and screaming kind of thing.

Another president commented,

I should not be surprised by the knee jerk response of 'we don't like it and we are going to try to fight it' led by [several higher education association leaders].... The tendency to do the knee jerk ... disappoints ... me.... One would hope higher education would learn from its own processes of education and communication and sharing and shaping instead of just going to the battle grounds.... It's easier to teach others how to do it than... do it ourselves.... [Our behavior] reinforces the view that we have a narrow interest to protect and we're going to protect it.... [Our] methods of response do not serve to reduce the skepticism about our processes and openness and interest in producing educated people. [I think our response should have been something like]: (1) We appreciate the sentiments which have led to the work of the Commission; (2) We wish there had been more dialogue as a part of the work of the Commission and we want to promote that now and here are the steps that we want to take to expand the dialogue. Here are the points that the Commission is making that we agree with and have great empathy for, here are the concerns we have about where the further work could go and here are things that we can support, and we encourage the Commission to do, to follow up on what it has found so far.

As one senior business officer said,

I think that higher education did respond defensively and so I think that already there is this contentious relationship that has been established between the Commission and the higher education community. I think that higher education could have responded differently just by spinning the objectives and saying the Report... the Commission is absolutely right... this is an essential national priority and we believe that financial aid is a critical issue and should be number one.

Another business officer noted,

The higher education community, in general, should have responded to the Commission Report saying we agree in many ways with what is being said. That should have been the headline. Higher education should not have opposed it, questioned it, challenged it. Higher education should have said, 'we agree with some of the fundamental observations and perceptions that are being made about higher education...'. Higher education should have created institutes, agencies, think tanks... across institutions [to develop] thoughtful solutions to the issues raised by the Commission... not in response to the Commission, but in response to the needs of higher education.

From the perspective of another campus leader,

The six presidential organizations [should come] together and say, 'look, like it or not we need to take not only these recommendations, but put together our own thought piece that... responds to this in a way that is positive.... you can't [sweep] this one under the rug. You've got to really work with it, and embrace it... and say thank you.' [Then say] 'now we're going to take this [report] and we're going to do something with it'.... I think we should have had a national effort put together. It was a golden opportunity I think to respond to a national discussion. It would have been a small adjustment [to make] too. No it's not over yet... I think we could still do it. All it takes is the six presidential organizations to come together—[to shift the message of our advocacy efforts]. I understand [the president of ACE's]...

arguments. But... you still take that soapbox and use it. George Bush will be out of office in another year. Margaret Spellings will be gone. We'll still be here. We need to get rolling with this thing and make use of it.

Noted another,

I think instead of just trying to say 'no' to the whole issue it would have been—it would be—better if a lot of associations had embraced it and tried to work with... [the Department] to follow up with efforts to, to make it happen.... I think among the community colleges [the response has] been positive, but I think among the four year schools it's been, you know, 'Don't do this to me... just leave us alone.'

One interviewee from the Department of Education described the academy's reaction as one of "fear." "I won't name the president that was visiting with me who said, 'How dare you ask me to be accountable to you on student learning outcomes.' I just looked at her and said, 'You should have no trouble making your case...' I just don't get the fear." Another interviewee from the Department said,

There's some great stuff happening in [colleges and universities] and rather than trotting [out] champions, [higher education] spent time trying to say, 'you don't trust us.' 'Just leave us alone.' I think it was a huge wasted opportunity. That is probably the most disheartening thing of all.... Rather than [analyzing] where some folks are and what do we need help on, [higher education] just started throwing up barriers.

Thoughtful Dialogue vs. Defensiveness

No doubt there are many explanations for why higher education might have been on the defensive as the work of the Commission progressed and the Report was released. However, there is agreement by most study participants that defensive rhetoric was not the best option. A number of interviewees from various perspectives expressed the view that the higher education response came across as defensive and argumentative, rather than as an attempt to engage in genuine dialogue. Said one interviewee, "I think there was some overreaction, but I also think that was partly in response to... the way that the Spellings Commission opened the debate. And I think everybody could have been a little calmer."

A senior business officer commented,

The lessons are the dialogue needs to be more informed, and more thoughtful and more open to different perspectives where everyone gets led toward contributing toward a solution rather than arguing about a solution.... But another lesson is maybe higher education needs to be challenged by uninformed and thoughtless recommendations in order to focus attention on the real issues. I see this as a wakeup call. One lesson is higher education cannot abdicate its responsibility to meaningful change.... It gets what it deserves if it continues to sit back and not take a visible leadership role in promoting change within higher education... it leaves itself vulnerable to [the use of] blunt instruments [by external constituencies].

A president commented, “ I think ... part of it is at least in the [30] years or so that I’ve been part of higher education... [we have] ... resisted any form of assessment by an outside entity. Our view has been that well, you know, we know what’s best. And when we see quality we’ll know it.”

Another business officer explained,

I get exactly that same kind of reaction [as the Commission did when I offer criticism]... in my small little world—I mean just total resistance. [The response seems to be] ‘I’m just going to resist [on principle], whether I think it’s a good idea or not...’ I’ve been told its just sort of the academic approach of... always play devil’s advocate.

A chief business officer commented,

I think as I understand the process that we’ve gone through there has been some ‘connection’ along the way, but higher education doesn’t usually go willingly most places. So, I think there probably could have been more connection and interaction along the way that might have dispelled some of the “2 X 4-edness” of the Commissioner’s comments ... I think that that’s very difficult [to promote meaningful change] without great connection, coordination, and consultation.

Another study participant noted,

I think you could make an argument that if more reasoned voices in higher education had come forward [and created] ... a more balanced impression about how higher education had viewed all this stuff, the Department might have felt less pressured to make knee jerk decisions. Obviously this is Monday morning quarterbacking ... I don't think the Department was wrong to listen to the cacophony and ... conclude [higher education doesn't] like this [so] we have to find some ways to get stuff done, because there's no way it's going to happen organically. The other reality is that higher education doesn't move all that well itself unless well pushed and pressured.

Commented another higher education leader, "I think a lesson to the community is ... you've got to be more responsive when there's just so much evidence out there about the need for change." A system head said, "I would make the comment that higher education was too defensive in [our rhetoric]. What we've actually *done* [is reasonable] as opposed to *how we responded* in a public relations/media commentary." A higher education association/agency leader said,

I think the Commission taught us some lessons about how to use debate to encourage change. I think the Commission showed us in the higher education community that we need to be very, very careful if all we are going to do is oppose suggestions for change... I think that even if [the Commission] had very much diluted the recommendations and [included a lot less criticism] ... there [still] would have been opposition. I mean there's just this history of difficulty.

Another study participant who has followed the initiative closely commented,

I think that the only thing that... should have [been] done a little differently is that... [the higher education community was] a little too defensive. I think that [higher education] could have explained a little bit more about how colleges work without being as defensive ... I think that the biggest example of defensiveness was the fact that David Ward didn't sign ... In terms of the perception of higher education, the fact that the President of ACE did not sign onto it ... gave this perception that colleges were ...

defensive about things being suggested... [and] reinforced a defensive reaction and that colleges are unwilling to change. That's what the critics were calling for... I also think [his being] the only one [who refused to sign] reinforced that even more.

Effectively Telling the Higher Education Story

Frustration that higher education is not well understood nor fully appreciated is a common theme in commentaries. While one can argue over why that is and who is to blame, it seems clear that higher education should have greater motivation than other parties to address this issue. A number of those interviewed in the study felt that higher education could have been more effective in this regard. For example, speaking more generally of the issues addressed by the Commission, one chief business officer said, "I think we have for many years been not as creative as we should have been about being able to articulate for people what is... going on in our community that is driving up the price [of higher education]."

From the perspective of a chief academic officer, "We could have done a better job, I think, of publicizing higher education as a public good rather than just a private investment.... The longer term issue is that... the public, or at least the public's representatives, looks at us more as a consumer industry than a social force." Commented a senior business officer, "Higher education's ability to ignore itself is... a tremendously interesting thing."

A chief academic officer offered the following observation about one of the challenges impeding efforts to tell higher education's story more effectively,

Well, it would have been great if we could have found the language that was similar to the language that the people leading the Commission were trying to use and listen to them.... I [attended one of the Department Summits and] was in a subgroup and people were talking about learning and student outcomes [and if you take that discussion into a faculty senate on our campus]... nobody would understand what you were talking about.... Only the people in engineering, business [and certain other professional disciplines] would [understand it].... Those disciplines that have external accrediting bodies like [ABET] and [AACSB], they tend to know. [And... if you use that language in liberal arts fields, people won't understand what you're talking about.] I think if there's a way to find a common language—a language that would be understood both by the Commission as well as the higher education community—but that didn't happen.

A system head commented,

[In communicating] to our stakeholders—to our funders and to our citizens who support public education, to our parents, to our students, and to our employers—we have got to get better in terms of accountability... And I think the conversations all helped us to think through that a little better. I think the days are over where we say send us some money and we'll do good things.

Echoes of this same concern were expressed by MIT President Susan Hockfield to colleagues at the 2008 annual meeting of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. She stressed the need for clearer articulation of how private institutions are providing a public good, and why leaders at these individual institutions—not the federal government—should continue to set their own policies. “Our story isn’t well understood by Congress or the public... There’s a new struggle for the future of higher education, and here at home our model is under assault.”¹²⁵

Proactive vs. Reactive Responses

Was it not possible for higher education to have anticipated the growing concerns raised by the Commission prior to the formation of the Commission, or as the Commission undertook its work? Were these issues not on the higher education “radar screen?” If not, why not? Higher education appeared to be unprepared for these criticisms; this lent support to perceptions about its insularity and indifference. These were among the concerns voiced by those interviewed in the study.

A chief academic officer observed,

This storm was brewing before Margaret Spellings ever came on the scene, so [why weren’t there leaders from higher education] saying, ‘let’s head this off at the pass. Let’s be proactive.’ So, the other lesson is that we were very reactive instead of being proactive and that somebody should have been watching the landscape to see what was brewing and I think when this all started. [Higher education associations and leadership nationally should have recognized that was not] a typical... partisan show... They misread that.... I think that earlier on higher education should have taken this on and begun to develop... [an] effective set of proposals or processes. [The academy] should have taken the high ground.

A chief business officer expressed a similar sentiment,

We knew what the Report was going to say. We knew when it was going to come out. We could have had the Washington agencies and different presidents have some thoughtful prepared responses to it which wouldn't all be everybody agreeing about everything.... [A number of associations posted responses on their Web sites, but] ... what was wrong with them is they didn't say [much. Essentially,] they said. 'maybe you're overemphasizing this or maybe you didn't understand this quite as well or just the way we do....' For me [higher education's response to the Commission was] a non response. [We said things like] 'We wish you would meet more often.' Or, 'you don't understand us'... That certainly didn't make the public, nor... the government happy.

Commenting on the dynamics during the Commission hearings, one Commissioner expressed the sentiment that "... Commissioners [representing higher education] failed to express effectively or educate the Commission effectively on a positive way out of this.... That is we were too reactive... it was probably necessary for all of us to be much more proactive." But that Commissioner felt that various constraints—tightly structured meeting agendas, the 'autocratic style' of the Commission Chair, and interpersonal tensions that developed between individuals—meant that "there weren't many options... not much leeway." A president offered the following observation,

I suppose that... [we could have been] more measured in our response and gathered ... information and data [before responding]. Here, again, I think we were asleep at the wheel. We didn't have the information at our fingertips... apparently because we couldn't get it together. [Without it, we were] backed up against the wall... and were defensive, or sounding defensive.

A chief academic officer noted,

What higher education needs to do is come up with its own proposal [to address accountability and transparency issues raised by the Spellings Commission. The K-12 professional community] needed to present a viable alternative to "No Child Left Behind,"

but no one came up with anything better. And so it stands... [VSA is an alternative to what the Commission and Department were proposing, but in some ways—from the view of higher education—it actually goes further than what the Department proposed.] “They went over the top [with VSA, and] did more than [the Department of Education] ever would have... But we [do] need to look at [the issues raised by the Commission very carefully]. Higher education has a responsibility to look at it because if we don’t there will be another Spellings Report...

Unified Leadership

In thinking about higher education’s response—what it was, what it could have been, and what it might be in the future—a number of interviewees commented on the issue of leadership. There are many reasons why it is extremely difficult for higher education to speak with a single voice or to have a single message, and yet as several participants in the study noted, the absence of unity enhances vulnerability in situations such as this one.

One chief academic officer explained,

I think that higher education somehow has to develop a way of responding to these things with a... cohesive publicly identifiable voice. Right now I don’t think that you could identify who are the advocates for higher education on a national scale. So if you say environment [you might say]—Al Gore. If you say ‘poverty and economic growth’—Bill Clinton. You could go down the list. But who would [come to mind]... if [the topic is] higher education? I can’t name anybody. So there needs to be some cohesiveness, some unified way to react and people who will take this on as a mission and for whom this is a passion.

A higher education association leader expressed concern that,

To some degree ACE... failed to provide the kind of leadership [that was needed], and the vacuum was filled by people outside of higher education or by individual parts of higher education. And that was a negative consequence of change that you read out of this. [I’m not talking about] ‘the associations’ [in general,] I’m talking about ACE.”

A similar point of view was expressed by a business officer who commented,

[I] was shocked that [an association leader] ... didn't ... sign it [Had he signed it] he could have been [more effective as higher education's] leader. [Even though I might have the same concerns he did] I would sign anyway... and [then he could] take it to ... and say, 'you know I agreed conceptually, but ...' [I certainly didn't] agree with everything. It's just generally understood that you have a consensus and everybody signs up and then you figure out what you can do to make it work. That's the approach that I would think most of us [would have taken]. I mean you're on committees or you're on councils and you don't ever agree with everything 100 percent. But you do a little fitting in....

A chief business officer commented about what higher education could have done differently in this way,

One of the problems in higher education is the fact that we've gone now two generations without the leadership in higher education either able to make trusting investments in each other or in the sense of permitting one another to speak ... forcefully on issues or being supported enough by higher education ... to speak candidly on issues that need to be addressed.... I've thought a lot about it because I think it needs to change.... We need to renegotiate some of our roles in society and with society in particular with the federal government, and you can't do it if you don't have two parties willing to talk about it.

On the Other Hand

Not everyone was critical of the process or felt that communication was handled poorly. As one president commented,

I could argue that I think the higher education community has been pretty responsive. You've got the VSA you've got UCAN. You've got everybody now talking about outcomes assessment. You've got new energy with the regional [accrediting agencies] around this topic. So I think the higher education community has been pretty responsive.

Speaking of David Ward's decision not to sign the Report and the positions taken by other leaders, a chief business officer said,

I think overall I was pleased with the response.... David Ward did not sign it and... my reaction was that his response and explanation was fairly well done. And there were others in higher education... that acknowledged to a large degree that there were positive aspects of the Report, and agreement on some of the issues, but it's just that the recommendations seemed to be too simplistic, too broad given the complexity and differences in higher education. And he pointed that out to them.

Another business officer said, "My sense is actually that the associations have done a good job of trying to acknowledge the good parts of the Report and work on them—like financial aid. I don't think they've been as negative as some people might have liked them to be. I think they've done a good job actually..."

Other Approaches the Commission and Department Might Have Used

How might the Commission and the Department been more successful in their efforts? Nearly all study participants offered commentary and critique:

1. The Commission structure could have been more broadly representative.
2. Explanations for the establishment of the special commission and the need for higher education reform were not clearly articulated.
3. The Commission's public stance and communication strategies and styles were not collegial from the point of view of members of the higher education community.
4. Mixed signals and competing messages contributed to confusion and mistrust.
5. Greater effort to systematically engage additional higher education constituencies at various stages would have been beneficial to all parties.

Some suggestions focused on the structure and the representativeness of the Commission. A number of interviewees said that more could have been done—and could still be done—to create a clearer message about the need for the Report

and the reforms it advocated. The need to more directly and actively engage a broader array of constituencies from higher education, including faculty, was also mentioned as a shortcoming. Many study participants from higher education also commented on the perceived inappropriateness of the Department's decision to use negotiated rulemaking as a part of the change effort, and also of the timing of that action. But not all study participants offered criticisms; some believed that the approaches and strategies used were very appropriate and effective given what they understood to be the goals of the initiative.

Structure and Representativeness

Concerning the structure and make-up of the Commission, one higher education association leader said,

... one of the mistakes, I think, was that they tilted everything toward the for-profit institutions [in the membership of the Commission and in the composition of the negotiated rulemaking group]. Of course this is a market-driven administration... [and perhaps because of that] the Department overloaded [these groups]... with the for-profit representatives.

One Commissioner offered this recommendation in hindsight, "I probably wouldn't include any [higher education] association person...on [the Commission]. [It's difficult for such individuals not to succumb... to the pressures of the academy instead of [voicing their]... own views."

Commenting on the composition of those invited to attend follow-up meetings hosted by the Department, a higher education association leader remarked, "I would gather a far more representative group [more broadly representing the diverse sectors of higher education]. I would have been more honest about the results of those meetings. Many people [who attended] thought that... what [the Department] published as a result of the meeting was not the meeting that they heard. I would [also] have solicited suggestions... from the higher education community... as opposed to packing the [sessions with people who had particular points of view] and [the reporting out] unrealistic goals... and [outcomes from the meetings]."

Creating a Clearer Sense of the Need for the Commission, Report, and Follow-Up Activities

A number of interviewees from all perspectives expressed the view that more could have been done—and could still be done—to create, within the higher education

community and among other constituencies, a clearer sense of the need for the Commission, the Report, and follow-up activities. Having a clear message was mentioned as one important facet that is needed for achieving this goal.

Speaking specifically to this issue were comments by a member of the Department of Education who today believes that it should have been possible to more clearly communicate the compelling need for

change... the burning platform. Not just for the public at large, but for the business community, and the higher education community, so that... people understood... we think the system needs better access and persistence... [In retrospect, I wish we had been able to] take our case to the American public earlier... and to have them create the burning platform. Tap into families and their fears. Tap into their need for information and help them understand we were working on their behalf.

This individual expressed an intention to continue to work on this ‘...with the American public.... With higher education, I just don’t know how fractured our relationship is and whether there’s a willingness to hear [what we’ve been trying to say].’

Focusing particularly on the developments following the release of the Report, another individual from the Department noted,

There were lots and lots of letters [that have come in] applauding [the Secretary’s] focus on these issues...” And then went on to comment that resistance increased when it was announced that the Department decided that it would be best to move ahead on negotiated rulemaking and also when the loan scandals broke. ‘A lot of things happened. [We felt we needed to proceed] on negotiated rulemaking for the higher education reconciliation act... and then through hearings... but that gave the impression that we were coming at this from a federally handed approach. We were doing a lot of things simultaneously and [clearly that led to the impression that Department has being more heavy handed than we saw ourselves as being.]’

Commenting on the issue of creating a shared sense of the need for change, a business officer said, “What was the focus of doing all this? Was it ‘How can we work together and help make it better,’ or was it, ‘Okay, I’m from the government

and here to help you. We need to get these things resolved because these are problems.” This interviewee felt that unfortunately, the second of these two messages was the one communicated.

General Approach and Communication Strategy

A number of those interviewed offered comments about the general approach and strategy employed by the Commission and the Department, and other ways to promote the changes being proposed.

A higher education association leader observed,

I think ... if I had been Secretary... [I] would have gone to the associations and said, ‘I’d like for each of you to identify ten of your presidents or leaders... to come to Washington to sit down with members of the Department and we will share... what our perceptions are of the future needs of higher education, the concerns that we have that we think need attention, and then we want to hear from you what your concerns are...’ What is critical is getting the higher education community—including the faculty—involved. If... faculty don’t own the problem it doesn’t get solved, and if higher education doesn’t own the problem it’s not going to get solved. The question is how do you get higher education to own the problem? And [the Commission and the Department] had no understanding of that and they still don’t... and that’s [an] irony.... There are profound problems with higher education. I think the Spellings Commission identified a lot of them, but we need to get the higher education establishment to own the problem in order to solve it, and they went at it in such a way that they never got buy-in.

One university president evaluated the approach it this way,

... [it all] depends on what their... goals are. One scenario would say they did it just fine. They’re trying to get attention and get it out there. And... maybe it wasn’t in their interest to collaborate and to water down what they were trying to say up front. [If that was their goal]... it was better for them to come out with an absolute position and collaborate later. And that fits with [the strategy of] political jockeying. [However,] that’s more acceptable

on the political side, I think, than on the academic side. They could have had some of the same [conversations in a way that was more customary] for the education side.... The two cultures [political and academic] play by some very different rules.

A study participant who is very knowledgeable about the work of the Commission and Department offered the following observations,

I think Charles Miller... made a strategic decision that the way to get higher education's attention... was to stake out some fairly extreme positions, and I think in some ways they were more extreme than... where he wanted to go.... I've gone back and forth on whether some of it was accidental.... The Chairman's decision to use a '2x4 across the head of higher education'... was a choice, and I think he made it quite purposefully... I know the people in higher education feel that he chose an oppositional rather than collaborative strategy.

Another study participant put it this way, "I think the way [the] Department of Education presented this guaranteed that there was going to be resistance."

One president focused comments on the style of "the two personalities at the helm, namely Margaret Spellings and Charles Miller." That president indicated that their style got in the way of people being able to step back and say, "these recommendations aren't bad at all, these are the same kinds of things that we're [also] talking about..."

Another interviewee talked specifically about the need for greater patience on the part of the Commission and Department saying,

I think there's no question that... the Department, ironically, may have misjudged [the extent of resistance it would encounter], and I think the Department was too impatient.... There's a lot more support for the underlying ideas than the Commission and Department [realized]. If they had more confidence in the fact that higher education would get on board itself, I think they might have felt less obliged to aggressively push federal answers to the problem.

A chief business officer commented on the issue of “rigidity” and “prescriptiveness,”

I think they might have been somewhat less prescriptive and rigid in their recommendations, and would have seen this as sort of a beginning partnership and collaborative partnership rather than imposing rather blunt and rigid solutions for a rather diverse group of institutions. I think its recommendations would have been taken more seriously if [the Commission/Department would have seen itself as a] collaborator and not an intervener.

Another individual who followed the work of the Commission and the Department’s follow-up activities very closely suggested that both “might have taken on a smaller mission/charge to begin with... I think they probably tried to do too much and... that [undermined efforts] to put any of these things into place.... Maybe they should have just worked on one or two specific issues...”

A chief academic officer offered this summary comment, “Certainly they could have done things differently but I think it was a group on a mission. There really wasn’t anything swaying them.”

Mixed Signals and Competing Messages

A number of study participants saw the problem of mixed signals and competing messages as a significant impediment to the effectiveness of the change efforts. The negotiated rulemaking sessions, particularly the session focused on accreditation, were among the most cited examples. According to a number of study participants, the decision to use this method to reach a conclusion created mixed messages about the Department’s willingness to collaborate in the way that is familiar to the higher education community. In contrast, the Department explained that it saw the negotiated rulemaking process as a way to initiate focused and meaningful discussions—to debate and reach greater clarity and compromise,

We absolutely tried to [make it a useful deliberative process, and hoped it would result in regulations that would be useful from all perspectives]. The proposal we started with was our best thinking. It was [prepared by] attorneys, [and addressed specifics of] policy. [We were] trying to figure out what the best way [to addresses these issues] given what we knew. It was just our best attempt.... It was our best thinking [not a hard position, but a starting place for] debate. That’s the whole purpose of negotiated rulemaking. We tried [to encourage dialogue] and were interested in hearing alternatives.

Many in higher education did not respond positively. To some extent the nature and requirements of this very formal process—including the requirement for consensus on the entire set of issues being considered in the package, in order for any part of it to be binding—can be seen as mitigating against these outcomes....¹²⁶ Commented one higher education association leader,

I think ... that if [the Department] had not pursued ... the negotiated rulemaking process, they would have been more influential ... in the outcome. But I think they sort of galvanized friend and foe alike to be opposed to them and consequently strengthened the hands of Congress. (That's not necessarily bad). So they came right in with a governmental intervention, as opposed to creating more opportunities for public/private partnerships.

Echoing this sentiment was another leader of a higher education association, “[By] ... going right to negotiated rulemaking ... they went right to a federal solution and not a public-private solution. [In so doing] ... they made it very clear that they did not have confidence in the community to take action in a timely way...”

Another higher education leader expressed the same view, noting that there would have been much less resistance,

had the Secretary not done negotiated rulemaking, and ... if the Secretary had [instead] worked with Congress ... had done the summits (national meetings), done the accreditation forum, brought all the stakeholders to the table, and made it known that there were people in the higher education community that had different views from the establishment—and believed higher education could be aspirationally doing a better job—and tried to influence Congress in areas that were philosophically important to the Secretary.... Because she decided to do the negotiated rulemaking, it was impossible intellectually for higher education to separate those two processes, and they became very defensive and pulled back.

Commented another higher education association leader,

One of the reasons that I was in favor of negotiated rulemaking was because I thought that NACIQI was a little bit adrift. They were in a very bad position of ... not having regulations that had been consistently applied over the last, say 10 years They were

in the process of having to figure out how... [to exercise their responsibilities] across a very diverse population of accrediting agencies. I believed [the Department] when [they] said that one of the main reasons for doing the negotiated rulemaking was to try to bring clarity to those regulations, and [some members of the group] negotiated on that foundation... I think one of the things that [they]... could have accomplished in negotiated rulemaking—had it been limited just to the NACIQI process—would have been to get that clarity that would allow the NACIQI to do a better job.

Another study participant who followed the matter closely said,

I'm still surprised that the Department decided to initiate the negotiated rulemaking session on accreditation [at that time, given the pending status of the reauthorization legislation]... I think if Senator Kennedy and Secretary Spellings had sat down together [much progress on a shared agenda could have been made]. [Once Senator Kennedy and Secretary Spellings became engaged in a public debate, with Senator Alexander] in the middle of it, [it's] basically gone to war... over who had the right to do [what].... And I think in [terms of] content they were close... [but] they ended up [in a public conflict] over whose authority it was to do this....

More Effectively Engaging the Higher Education Community

Reaching and engaging the appropriate groups with the message is important in promoting change, and there was a sense among a number of those who participated in the study that there were shortcomings in this regard. As a Department staff member explained, "We initially did rely on the associations a lot [as a communication channel], and I think that has been detrimental. I think we should have regional [and institutional] leadership..." This individual also noted that it would also have been very helpful to have had more involvement with faculty and disciplinary groups. "I'm not trying to make excuses, but there are hundreds of disciplinary groups, in higher education because it is so decentralized and we didn't have the savvy on how to reach folks directly.... But it was very, very difficult [to reach all the groups we needed to]."

The lack of direct involvement of faculty was mentioned earlier, and there is the perception that this added to their negative reaction and resistance. As one indi-

vidual from the Department of Education commented, “The issue with the faculty probably more than anything else is that they were not engaged on the front end. We had a really tough time reaching out to faculty. They are so spread out.... Their concerns about their lack of involvement were justified.” In retrospect, we note that finding ways to reach and engage this audience was an area for improvement. In this regard, the fact that the faculty role typically involves not only teaching, but also service or outreach, and at many institutions, research, posed another barrier. The Report’s focus on undergraduate education meant that elements that faculty regard as central to their work were disregarded by the Spellings Commission.

Another suggestion for broader engagement came from a senior business officer who suggested that a good approach would have been to have

... more meetings with some of the national organizations at their annual meetings... [Secretary] Spellings could have introduced it gradually and... gotten more feedback from national organizations. I know that they held a lot of town hall meetings and other things and the Commissioners went around the country, but I don’t know if they really touched on national associations....

Another participant in the study offered the following observations,

I think the Commission and the Education Department might have been better off if they had [not] attempted to... do too much federally.... Part of the problem goes to the way higher education in this country is set up. I think the Commission identified... the right goals, and the right problems, and to some extent the right solutions.... The biggest problem was... this perception that it would be federally dictated or mandated or driven. [The task of] moving this bizarre loose confederation of institutions and... university systems in the direction of a set of national goals is very difficult. So, getting movement, nationally, without overstepping the bounds, federally, is difficult because where else do you look for that kind of movement. I think the Department’s view was that the quickest way to get movement [was through accreditation], because the accreditors basically touch every institution. If I were to try to sum up, I think the idea was that higher education needs to change and in these various ways, and again, I think there’s a lot less argument about that than about how to accomplish it.

A chief academic officer offered the following critique,

They could have worked with higher education. They could have shown some appreciation for American higher education. We don't have the world's worst. We have an excellent system of higher education. And one of the things that we do that's good is to have levels of higher education and we do want to have access. We value education and we value postsecondary education in this country. But we weren't seen as partners. We were seen as failures, which is not true. And there's this idea that someone else can do it better—that [for profit institutions] can do it better.... And it's smoke and mirrors, you know. Look at [the most popular profit institutions; their students are] all part time. That's not... what [most] students need. And cost. Some of these alternate providers are very expensive. But somehow [it's assumed that] they are just better.

A chief business officer expressed the view that the Department could have fostered better collaboration and outcomes if it had worked more closely with the presidential associations,

I have to wonder if they might have been able to work with the higher education... presidential... associations, [since that] would have provided access to... more focused peer communities.... The Department of Education can talk about the issues of postsecondary education [system], but... you have to look at the portfolio of higher education, and say 'what are the appropriate respective roles of the elite privates to the two-year community college that are teaching cosmetology and dental hygiene.'... we're all playing different instruments in this orchestra, so how can we all work together—not necessarily playing the same notes, but at the end of the day [playing in a way that] sounds... good? So their job should be the orchestra conductor. Let us play the flute and the trombone and the drums individually. We don't have to play the same... you would have had that diversity... It would have been a better way to acknowledge the different roles that we can play and should play—that we're positioned to play.

A president observed,

I think [it's important] to step back and [explain] why... college and [post graduate education is important]. I think if you ... [explain in that simple] fashion, people [will be able to better comprehend] the important strategic value [of higher education] for our country. [Without this understanding, people may not appreciate that] in the same way that we became a superpower... we could [fall from power as a country] ... If there would have been more focus on scenarios or consequences of inaction, there might have been a little less defensiveness or resistance by higher education.

On the Other Hand

Not all study participants thought that the Commission and Department should have handled their roles differently,

I don't think the particular things they have done have been inappropriate or ineffective. I think they have been fine. I think the bigger problem was ... the publicity given early to the idea of standardized tests and other things that have colored everyone's—at least higher education's view of it—and this [is an] underlying tension that's been there for a long time, and growing, [and it] meant that they were in a 'no-win' situation.

Commented another study participant, “They could have tried the more passive [...strategy], but I don't think it would have been as effective.” Making a similar point was a senior institutional leader who put it this way,

Well you know, despite my criticism, I think that what they did was probably the right political ploy because I think by using the sledgehammer they got everybody's attention. If it had been a report that was just another mealy-mouthed compilation of 100 recommendations I think it would have sat on the coffee table. I don't know whether the Secretary or the Chair identified this strategy early on, but by picking on a select few possibilities, [they] really focused things. The focus on the Report for me is *assessment* and *accountability*. And I think those two areas are higher education's weaknesses.

Another said,

I've heard some people argue quite passionately, and somewhat legitimately I think, that if [the Report] had adopted a different [stance, little would have changed because] people who complained about the tone, were actually upset about the substance, too, and used the tone as cover for opposing the substance. [Still], a number of Commissioners were truly sympathetic... to [what leadership of the Commission] wanted to do in the biggest picture way, and I think [their] view is that [the Commission made a mistake]... by adopting that confrontational tone and undermining [leadership of the Commission and the Report].

General Lessons about the Dynamics of Change within Higher Education

What general lessons about the dynamics of change within higher education can be learned from this case? Observations by study participants pointed to the importance of considering various stages in the change process, as discussed previously. Their comments also provide reinforcement for the notion that, in addition to *stages*, there are a number of *themes* that are vital across the various phases of the change process, among them *leadership, communication, culture, assessment, and planning*.

Figure 2: Cross-Cutting Themes in the Dynamics of Change¹²⁷



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*.

Leadership and Communication

As we have already noted in various ways, issues of leadership and communication were of central importance to the dynamics associated with nearly every facet and stage of activities of the Commission and in follow-up activities and reactions from the higher education community.

A chief academic officer who commented extensively on the same themes said,

I think that higher education somehow has to develop a way of responding to these things with a... cohesive publicly identifiable voice.... Higher education hasn't been very good in getting together to have a singular and cohesive voice in the areas that commonly [external constituencies] are concerned about... it's hard for [research universities] to get together with the county colleges and community colleges. Frankly some of our agendas are at odds with one another. [They are] different... not better [or worse]. We have a hard time documenting and... articulating [these perspectives in a cohesive manner].... Each sector has fought for its own little piece of the pie and not thought about the pie itself.... If there were some better leadership, there are enough points of agreement or common interest that we could have focused on those things.

A study participant from a higher education association/agency expressed some similar concerns about the importance of cohesive and unified leadership and communication, commenting, as noted previously, that “to some degree the most inclusive higher education association failed to provide the kind of broad leadership that was most needed, [and] the vacuum was filled by people outside of higher education or by individual parts of higher education.”

A number of study participants talked about the importance of leadership and communication in their reflections on lessons to be learned about change in higher education. One institutional president put it this way,

I think that what we can learn... is that we need to be more proactive and not so reactive.... That means we need to lead. Individual associations, individual colleges and universities need to develop a communications plan, so that we can tell our own story. We haven't done a very good job of that in the United States—including why the diversity of the colleges and universities and schools that we have is such an asset.

Another chief academic officer talked about the importance of having effective communication and leadership in working with key stakeholders to encourage shared commitments and understandings,

... universities like ours and our peers haven't really done a very good job overall of engaging K-12 or P-12.... The other side of that coin is that the state departments of higher education, local schools, and others have not always wanted to partner.... So it's really been a problem from both sides. We have in some cases not been clear enough about what our standards and expectations are. We haven't communicated, we haven't told our story as well as we might have. I think the other longer term issue is that higher education now is viewed so much as a private investment rather than as a public good that the public, or at least the public's representatives, look at it more as a consumer industry than a social force.... We could have done a better job, I think, publicizing higher education as a public good rather than just a private investment—in contrast to a lot of other countries which have put a much higher share of their national wealth into higher education at all levels than we have in this country.

Another study participant observed,

There are some things colleges and universities ought to have been doing—and we should have been doing them before we were forced [to act]. The issues having to do with assessment and outcomes are important. Not just from the consumerism point of view.... Outcomes [also have] to do with 'how well are we educating our students?'

For one chief business officer, the primary lesson learned was expressed in this way,

I think that we are falling behind as a nation, and so we really need to take action if we don't want to fall further behind.... We need to be more open to different ways to allow change to occur, and not be so close-minded within our own higher education community. [We need to be] open to [new]... practices and other methodologies.

A chief administrative officer commented,

I think that what plays out is a conflict that existed in higher education between faculty and staff [on the one hand], and visionary leaders who understand the need to change, and [believe] that higher education is a dinosaur and that we run the risk of becoming increasingly obsolete if we don't address these issues [on the other hand]. A lot of faculty feel this way: 'We've been successful for a long time; we're competent professionals. We've always worked this way. Why change?' Is hitting someone over the head with a club the best way to promote change or do you try to do it subtly and gradually?

In a related comment, an association/agency leader spoke of the importance of managing the message. The Commission and the Department needed to "manage their message about what level their goal setting was taking place at. I don't think the Department did a good job with that."

Also commenting on the issue of leadership and its importance to successful change, a chief business officer said, "Who are the people sitting around the table? Do they represent the kinds of folks you want to have represented in such a setting? Yes, that matters."

Another study participant commented specifically on the importance of leadership communication skills,

There are only so many people who make good [senior leaders for higher education] because of their perspectives. I [am] amazed by... folks who are so tied up in their work and are really good at their work, [but] you just can't take them out of it. I used to love talking to folks in the lab who were really, really good [at talking to a broad range of audiences] because they could take a very, very complex subject and explain to me why they needed this new piece of equipment. And they could do it in a way that I would understand it, and they didn't treat me as if I were dumb. They would do it in a way that was common sense. We need a real heavy dose of common sense.

Giving voice to a similar "lesson learned," a senior business officer said,

To me the most important lesson is the degree to which [we need more effective leadership communication from] colleges

and universities, proponents of higher education, and policy-makers who see themselves as representing the perspectives of higher education to the public. [The] miscommunication... has reached this point of seriousness to me—[and that is] the biggest lesson—that we’re not communicating. And at its worst you could say we’re adversarial. At best, we’re just not communicating. And so instead of collaborating on issues of real concern to the country, to students and their families, we’re fighting over the kinds of issues that we’ve been talking about—whether it’s a standardized test or who is the best judge of financial need of students... or the kinds of data [that] should be collected in order to provide public service information. Everything is now a case of ‘us vs. them.’

Commenting on lessons learned, a Commissioner said,

Well I think we need a [continuing] national dialogue about the topics [raised by the Spellings initiative]... the public does better in public policy response when they’re informed... [and] I don’t think it should be left up to the overseers and the so-called experts and certainly not the policy people in Washington.... So, the more we can bring this to the public’s attention... the more information and transparency we have, the more we get more trust and... better decisions [will result].

Another study participant offered the following comments, which speak to the value of criticism in promoting improved communication and change,

I think that something like this spurs colleges to explain what they’re already doing better, and also hastens their pace in terms of making changes that they’re considering. I think colleges did a much better job at explaining their processes.... For example... I think the accreditation process is much more understood today than it was before the Commission because of the Commission’s criticism of that. I think that colleges and... accreditors did a much better job of explaining what they do and how they do it. Now that doesn’t necessarily mean that people still think that that’s the right way to do it, but I think it’s forced colleges to kind of explain what they’re already doing. And then in terms of change ... we’re seeing a number of efforts now on account-

ability and giving information to parents beyond the *U.S. News* ranking. Again I think that it is because the criticisms by the Commission... in that area increased... or hastened [our efforts to better explain what we do].

Commenting on the importance and challenges of leadership and communication on complex topics, a senior administrator noted,

I think the Commission tried to tackle an extraordinarily complicated and incredibly difficult set of issues, and I think that because of that it might have almost been hopeless to try to come out with something that is really meaningful and effective across higher education.... If they focused on student aid and student preparation, I think those are issues [that they and we] can deal with. [Those issues are] applicable across higher education [and might have had a greater] likelihood for acceptance by the larger community.

A study participant from the Department of Education noted,

It's not a new lesson. Change is hard.... [Often with corporations, it's the case that the need for change—the crisis or the problem to address—is unmistakable]. There's a trigger there that is absent in higher education. The trigger there is you lose share and then the shareholders get upset and you're put on a burning platform... Even if you're still sitting there saying, 'No, things are good,' [the platform is still on fire and everyone knows that]. In higher education, in many areas there is this false sense of 'We're doing okay, as long as I have more applicants than I have slots for, and as long as people are willing to pay more money.' So what's missing is that trigger that says 'it's broken and you have to fix it.' To that end, [my] job is creating that burning platform to get people to understand we've got to change.

Commenting on the issue of communication, a business officer noted, "I do think... the language you use can be a huge distraction from the content you are trying to communicate.... I feel like that's a significant lesson." Another interviewee noted,

Higher education is not like General Motors where you can write out a directive and give that to your 15 vice presidents and have them give it to each of their 15 assistant vice presidents and in two days all 300,000 employees know that this is the way it's going to be. There are a lot of people in higher education who believe that there are changes that should be made.... But the way... this report was presented is that higher education has screwed this up and 'we need a new sheriff in town to step in and make them change.'

Another study participant commented about the importance of message clarity and logic,

I think that the Spellings Commission has within it a profound internal contradiction, which is the recognition that we need broader access to our institutions, that we're not educating... a large [enough] number of students... [but at the same time]... that the outcomes have to be improved for all students. There is a fundamental contradiction between educating a higher percentage of the population and looking only at outcomes and expecting the outcomes to be all higher. The population is a bell curve ultimately in terms of ability and interest, and you can enlarge that percentage but you are not going to change the nature of a bell curve of outcomes.

This participant raised another critical theme,

We are always going to have a distribution of institutions in this country that are going to range from the ridiculous to the sublime with 4,000 institutions.... We were very proud to say we're the best in the world. Well... we are the best of the world when you look at the top 100.... If you look at the next 3,900 or so, we don't have a lot to brag about...."

For this higher education association leader, overstated, understated, and overly generalized messages undermine the attention to the significant challenges at hand.

Also commenting on the issue of communication, was the interviewee who said,

The lessons are that dialogue needs to be more informed, and more thoughtful and more open to different perspectives, where

everyone gets led toward contributing toward a solution rather than arguing.... Another lesson [noted previously] is... that higher education needs to be challenged by uninformed and thoughtless recommendations in order to focus attention on the real issues. I see this as a wakeup call. [A third] lesson is [that] higher education cannot abdicate its responsibility for meaningful change.... It gets what it deserves if it continues to sit back and not take a visible lead role in promoting change... it leaves itself vulnerable to blunt instruments....

A leader in a higher education association concluded, "I think a lesson to the community is you've got to be more responsive when there's... so much evidence out there about the need for change."

Culture, Assessment, and Planning

Attention to the unique culture of higher education and the need for careful planning are additional cross-cutting factors of major importance. Addressing this theme were observations about the fact that the Commission and Department seemed not to fully anticipate the reaction of the higher education community. That implied to this study participant that the planning was less than fully effective. This interviewee's observation was that those who know the higher education culture should expect the resistance that occurred, and plan accordingly. Particularly predictable, according to this respondent, were reactions to issues related to assessment and accountability:

I've just been there. I mean I can recite for you the time that I, as a dean, had a conversation with the social sciences division who argued you cannot evaluate a faculty member until 40 years after they teach because 'you have to wait to see what my students do with what I've taught them....' Well we all know that for every star that does that well, you've got a couple people sitting out there reading yellow notes from 30 years ago and the students are bored to tears and aren't getting anything out of it. But the academy really says 'let me do what I want to do because I know it best and you don't. And we'll find out 50 years from now whether it worked.' As long as that's a major part of the culture, [it affects change efforts of various kinds in higher education] and the Commission and Department should not have been surprised to get this kind of reaction.

A chief business officer views inflexibility as a characteristic of higher education that plays an important role in the dynamics of change,

We all know that [higher education is] not flexible. And some days I could say that's not a bad thing, but I think [this situation] really highlighted ... the difficult time we have to make changes in higher education. One of our greatest strengths is the individual disciplines that we have within our structures. And one of our greatest weaknesses is the individual disciplines. Because... of those specific disciplines it is very, very difficult to get a faculty, a department, a discipline to have a broader perspective beyond their little world. In order to really bring about change we have to have a greater perspective on how we can pass on education to the next generation and we're just so tied up in our little silos. That's it. [It's] very hard to do.

One Commissioner responded by noting,

"Two lessons. One is... we often say... that there really isn't a higher education system in this country, just a lot of loosely coupled activities.... I've come to conclude that's wrong. There really is a system... in the sense that it's one market, it's one federal financial aid system, and it is actually one accreditation system. So, [from that perspective] you can't believe that you are going to change higher education one institution at a time. [Rather, you would change it by identifying] some best practices that are going to reverberate all through [the system]. You're going to have to figure out how to get the system as a whole to rethink some of its basic premises. That's very hard, but at least in my own mind, I'm clearer now about what has to be done than I was before.... That's where my [concepts of] dislodging events come in.... If you got a couple of the great big state systems to do it, everybody will follow suit quickly, and then everything is up in the air. And, among other things, if you shift to a three-year baccalaureate, a lot of faculty who poo-poo the measure of learning outcomes would suddenly rush to them because they would need to know what's working and what's not working.

The importance of understanding the nature of the higher education culture, and what this higher education association leader sees as the dedication to continuous improvement, is another lesson learned, “I think [the Commission and Department] underestimated the kind of constant curricular improvement and change that is going on in higher education.”

A member of the Commission also commented on the significance of cultural resistance as an impediment to change from their perspective,

[Higher education is] a very insular group. Most faculty go into teaching and higher education because they want to be in charge and they want to be isolated to some extent. It’s an industry that is resistant and slow to change.... The tactics that have been used to stop change are very old and tried and true and have been very successful to this point. ... Part of the challenge has been that the public ... state legislators ... and business leaders to some extent are a little intimidated by the academy. I think what’s happened over time is that the public at large is getting much savvier... People are now starting to expect [of higher education what they have come to expect now] of the healthcare industry.

The importance of monitoring and assessing threats and opportunities in the environment, was a key lesson to be derived from this case, according to a chief academic officer, previously quoted:

This storm was brewing before Margaret Spellings ever came on the scene... the... lesson is that we were very reactive instead of being proactive, and that somebody should have been watching the landscape to see what was brewing.

One higher education association leader commented on the importance of planning that takes cognizance of the culture of higher education in promulgating change,

When you do strategic planning at the campus level and you recognize the culture of students and faculty and researchers, you [realize you] have to have buy-in, even if you from time-to-time believe your constituency is wrong or not interested in appropriate change. If you don’t have their buy-in, it is a culture that won’t change, and if you try to force the change, the changes you get are undesirable outcomes.

Giving voice to a similar point of view, this study participant commented, “If you want real change to occur it needs to occur on campuses. I don’t think change can be externally imposed by politicians. If you understand the change process, top-down change is not lasting change...” An association/agency leader expressed the sentiment this way, “[The] ultimate agent of change has to be the higher education institutions themselves. That is not to say that they can’t be stimulated or prompted or encouraged or goaded into change, but that it can’t be mandated, simply because it is so contrary to the culture that dominates...”

And, finally, comments from a study participant who takes away from this case the idea that the Commission designed and implemented its plan very successfully,

I think the Commission is a good case study in how to manage an influential national conversation... Get attention, have resources to sustain the attention, put out a challenge, see if you can get results. Would [the various associations that have voluntarily launched new initiatives] have done what they’ve done... absent the Commission? Obviously... leverage matters.

Broader Issues

Six major questions that emerge from the case:

- Is there a higher education “system”?
- Did matters of jurisdiction and style override issues of substance?
- Are autonomy and locus of control the fundamental issues at stake?
- Do we embrace criticism of our own purposes and institutions as we advocate its importance for others?
- Should we expect the highest standards of discourse where higher education is involved?
- What, precisely, are the leadership challenges and solutions facing the higher education community at large?

The Higher Education “System”

The Spellings Commission sought to identify issues of concern to the U.S. higher education system. But is there a *system*? In a technical and abstract sense, higher education certainly has all the characteristics of a system. It is a complex entity composed of interacting and interdependent component parts, and the whole that it defines has properties and serves functions that no separate component serves in isolation.¹²⁸ As a number of those interviewed in the study pointed out, however, U.S. higher education is not organized in a way that promotes a systemic identity

and coordinated action. Indeed, for most who work in higher education, there is little in their day-to-day activity that reinforces the sense that they are part of a much broader system, nor that there are systemic issues that could and should be of urgent concern. For the most part, each disciplinary department and each two- or four-year institution operates quite independently, and each has its own particular set of primary priorities. The national and regional higher education associations formed to represent a broader array of interests, but those, too, tend to reflect the point of view and perspective of their distinct sectors—components of the system—rather than the system as a whole.

Given this reality, it is quite predictable that each component of the higher education “system”—and one might think of the Department of Education as yet another such component—would view the Report and recommendations in terms of its own—somewhat unique—perspective and agenda of concerns and priorities. The result is that there is no “system” in the sense that the Spellings Commission envisioned—no collective whole speaking, or listening, with a single viewpoint.

Many of the Commission recommendations call for a collective response from the higher education community. Ironically, it is the absence of a common conceptualization and shared sense of ownership of the “system” of higher education that stands as the major impediment even to giving thoughtful consideration to this important suggestion. A more explicit emphasis on this fundamental theme and what might be done to address it would have been a helpful additional focus of the Spellings Commission Report—and a theme that will be important to address going forward. The formidable challenge is to develop structures and strategies that maintain the benefits of a decentralized and diverse approach to higher education on the one hand, while on the other finding ways to create and advance a more common agenda and sense of collective ownership that ensures more seamless, integrated, and collaborative processes and outcomes. This is obviously a daunting challenge, particularly if the “system” is to accomplish this for itself.

Jurisdiction, Style, and Substance

One of the underlying issues associated with the Commission and reactions to its Report involves the distinction between the substantive issue of “what to talk about” and the jurisdictional issue of “who can appropriately—legally, ethically, intellectually—engage in the dialogue.” Much of the explicit controversy associated with reactions to the Report, its recommendations, the Secretary’s action plan, negotiated rulemaking efforts, and other activities, has focused on who has the right or authority to be saying and doing what—“Who is privileged to talk, be listened to, and act, and in what ways.”

From the beginning, there was a sense that the higher education community was reacting more to the messenger than to the message—that the messenger was getting in the way of the message. Much of the message, after all, was not particularly new. But, as some study participants noted, that a governmentally appointed Commission would offer such harsh criticism and assert the need for such bold changes, seemed to many in higher education to have crossed a jurisdictional line. It was a message interpreted to mean that higher education—and higher education's leadership—may have lost its way, hardly a welcome message for the community.

Commission and Department proposals aimed at encouraging learning outcomes assessment provided some good examples of the message-messenger conflict. The inferences that the government supported standardized and quantitative testing, peer comparisons, and national testing, prompted swift and intense negative reactions. Who would have imagined the relatively uncontroversial reactions to these same proposals when these elements were integrated as a part of VSA—a higher education initiated effort? It is curious that a message is of great concern when it comes from an external messenger, but that the same message may be embraced with relatively little controversy when it is delivered by a messenger from within the higher education community.

A similar contradiction relates to the issue of style. Communication style is an important consideration for leaders in all venues, perhaps more so in the political domain than elsewhere. As has been demonstrated in this case, communication styles that are interpreted as attacking, insulting, or hyperbolic may provoke and stimulate; they also interfere with the creation of shared understanding and a collaborative commitment to change. By the same token, for message recipients, it is vitally important to be able to differentiate between the quality and merit of an idea and the way in which that idea or opinion is framed and presented. In responses to the Commission and its work, it seems fair to conclude that the higher education community was sometimes less than fully successful in making this distinction.

Taking account of these and other aspects discussed in previous sections of this study, it seems clear that quite apart from the substance and tone of the Report's *message*, the nature of the *messenger* was of no small consequence in higher education's reactions to the Commission and related follow-up activities.

Autonomy, Accountability, and Locus of Control

Given the inference that the message being delivered by the Commission and the Department was one that implied greater external control, and a potential loss of autonomy and self-determination for higher education, there could be no more problematic *messenger* than one with the capability of making such an outcome a reality. No doubt there is also no better prescription for a rush to voluntary activity than this one.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for these dynamics is that comments, critiques, or recommendations that emphasize the need for greater accountability are seen as threats to institutional and sector autonomy, and therefore strike at the heart and soul of the academy. If it appears that a perceived threat to core values comes from outside the academy, and if advocates for reform are perceived to have the power to enforce change, vigorous resistance is a predictable response. For many leaders in the higher education community, this has been precisely the situation that was created by the Department-sponsored Spellings Commission. And, as study participants commented, to the extent that this perception persists, it is likely to be a major roadblock in creating or advancing a climate for collaboration and a shared agenda for dialogue and change.

Embracing Criticism and External Review

Perhaps an even more fundamental issue raised by the Commission Report and higher education's response involves the posture toward criticism and critique, and strengths and limitations of self-, peer- and public-review as pathways to excellence.

Living systems of all kinds have a tendency to resist irritants. In the animal world fight-and-flight is the typical response to hazards. In the human realm, where irritants often come in the form of messages that challenge status and stability, our communicative immune system quite typically responds by defending against or deflecting menacing intrusions. In the short run, the advantage of successful resistance is the elimination of conflict and the restoration of the harmonious state. In the long run, however, there is the possibility that success in fending off irritants results in sidestepping the very forces that could stimulate changes that would ultimately strengthen the system.

As the Commission and many others have noted, there are numerous situations where these processes have been at work within particular companies and sectors. Whether one considers the U.S. auto industry in the 1970s and 1980s, or more recent examples of healthcare, utilities, and the financial sector, there is no shortage of examples of systems that found ways to insulate themselves from irritants and critiques in the short run—with unforeseen, seriously negative consequences in the long run.

Is higher education immune to these dynamics? There is probably no sector that argues more vociferously about the importance of free expression in the marketplace of ideas, no sector that talks more about the importance of the critical examination of thoughts and opinions, no sector that professes to be more open to review and critique, no sector more willing to provide critique of others. But

what of the appetite for criticism or questioning when the higher education community perceives itself to be the target for such messages? It seems fully consistent with our ideals that we should not only tolerate—but actually welcome and encourage—critique.

Higher education does an excellent job of employing this value in efforts to advance scientific and scholarly knowledge, where the community attaches great value to the concepts of self, peer, and public review. Thus, the scholar or scientist employs a systematic methodology in viewing phenomena in which rules of evidence and analysis are well-defined. Ideas that pass this first level of review are subjected to rigorous and systematic scrutiny by peers, and ultimately by a broader public audience. As well as this model works, we are also aware that whether at the level of the individual or social enterprise, the process is not flawless.

We believe that the case of the Spellings Commission provides evidence of the value of these same processes of self, peer, and public review—when it comes to maintaining high standards within higher education. Clearly, however, the academy did not embrace the criticism provided by the Commission Report. From the 30,000 foot view, at least, the response appears to be one of those cases where there is some notable discrepancy between higher education's ideology and its practice. While self-initiated, "voluntary" review is a partial answer, one has to question whether these or other responses would be as vigorous or as constructive were it not for external critique.

In comments at a Washington conference¹²⁹ focusing specifically on issues of accreditation, Spellings Commission Chairman Miller raised the question of whether individuals embedded in a particular culture can sufficiently extricate themselves to provide the most useful breadth and depth of perspective and critique. He also asked whether it is possible to overcome the problems of bias—intended and unintended. His thesis was that higher education needs to incorporate mechanisms that assure external review. There are limitations to even the most rigorous approaches to self and peer review, despite best efforts to control and objectify the methods employed. Even then the influence of shared paradigms, methodological preferences, intellectual and financial investment, mutually socialized value sets, intellectual and educational ancestry, and force of habit can compromise and shape the process. Recognition of these dynamics leads scientists and scholars to make every effort to ensure open and wide-ranging discussion, critique, and debate as a safeguard. But even those measures provide no guarantee.

Perhaps more than any other sector, it would seem that higher education is obligated by its core values to encourage, embrace, and engage criticism and debate from all thoughtful sources—from within, and perhaps even more so from outside the community. Where there are systematic and empirically validated methods in

place to guide the analysis of scientific and scholarly work, more can be done to enhance validity, reliability, and utility in institutional and programmatic reviews.

A Higher Standard of Discourse for Higher Education

While the perspectives advanced by the Spellings Commission were certainly worthy of thoughtful discussion, much of the interplay reported on in this study had little to do with intellectual discourse and debate. Important concepts and principles—certainly worthy of discussion—are at stake, but the dynamics in this case are more often characterized as being about power, influence, and politics, than about ideas.

Early on, it became apparent that the work and potential consequences of the Commission were to be more political than substantive. Unlike many other commissions that have examined higher education, for example the Kellogg Commission, in this instance there was a significant and unmistakable link between the deliberative body and the Department of Education. The Department used its potential for influence in forming the Commission, in the dissemination and promotion of the Report, and in the plan of action developed to implement aspects of the Report. Clearly, the potential for imposed influence played—and continues to play—a significant role in deliberations and reactions to negotiated rulemaking sessions, NACIQI, and other Department initiatives.

As a number of study participants noted, the response from higher education was no less politically oriented—including a well-orchestrated effort complete with formalized talking-points created to mobilize the higher education community in order to stop—or at least limit—the potential interventions of the Department.

Many in the higher education community questioned the motives of the Commission and the Department, and expressed concern about the use of political strategies to promote change. That said, the higher education community crafted and orchestrated its own set of political counter strategies. So, for example, the Department hosted a number of events with the avowed purpose of promoting the genuine exchange of ideas, but there were perceptions that participants were carefully chosen and that the events and summaries of them were quite well-scripted. By the same token, the organizations within the higher education community hosted meetings purportedly to encourage an open exchange of ideas—those held in conjunction with the negotiated rulemaking sessions, for instance—and one could argue that those, too, were quite scripted.

Viewed from any of the available perspectives, one might conclude that something less than the best traditions of scholarly discourse were in evidence. But, perhaps “quality of dialogue” is not an inappropriate metric for assessing per-

formance in the political environment in which the government and most of the higher education associations are accustomed to operating. This is, some suggest, a matter of politics and power, influence and innuendo, stonewalling and sidestepping, turmoil and trade-offs—where sloganeering and alarmist rhetoric are simply standard tools of the trade.

It may be the observation of those who are simply uninformed about the realities of communication practices in Washington, but it seems to us that if the U.S. Department of Education and the senior leadership of the higher education community find power and influence the tactics of choice in addressing important substantive educational issues of the day, much has been lost. What might, at least in part, have been a dialogue based on substance, seems to have degenerated into a “win-lose” affair—which has unfortunately become a metaphor for communication activity in many other spheres of contemporary life. But in what sense should the most important goals be forcing, mandating, or compelling others to accept one’s perspective about the directions of higher education, or alternatively repelling, defending, resisting any influence from the perspective of the other? Does the practice of higher education in the United States benefit from this mode of interaction? Are there alternatives, or is this simply how Washington discourse must be?

Leadership Challenges

One of the recurring themes in the comments of interviewees at all levels is the importance of leadership. The sense of these comments is that more effective leadership approaches are needed within higher education—to be proactive rather than reactive, to encourage more constructive rather than defensive posturing, to inspire collaborative rather than confrontational reactions in the face of challenges such as that provided by the Spellings Commission. Effective leaders communicate an inspiring vision, define goals clearly, focus on the good of the whole, and rally others to the cause. These qualities can ultimately provide a more unitary and unifying voice for higher education. More generally, effective leadership at all levels could help to ensure that higher education’s story is more successfully articulated to our many external constituencies.

As this case study demonstrates, much, but not all, of the challenge is external advocacy and explanation. There is an important internal challenge, as well. Specific comments from study participants point to the need for leaders who will focus some of their talent inside our institutions—to clarify needs and directions, encourage more holistic conceptualizations of higher education, deliver difficult messages to those who prefer not to hear them, and more effectively advance the collaborative pursuit of shared purposes among all. And it would also be through

new approaches to higher education leadership that the roles individuals play within our systems and institutions—in academics, student life, administration and services—could be more effectively integrated for addressing the operational, financial, and communication challenges faced by institutions and the community at large.

In reflecting on Commission leadership, many of those interviewed noted that it might have been more useful for the Commission to identify a few key issues around which there was agreement and move forward with those rather than trying to cover the waterfront. To illustrate, there was widespread agreement about the need to improve the system for awarding financial aid. Identifying common interests is a concept that appears often in the organizational change literature. The Harvard Negotiation Project,¹³⁰ for example, suggests that one of the best ways to deal with differences and come to agreement is through principled negotiation. Such a strategy if employed by both the Spellings Commission and the higher education community would have moved the discussion from one of focusing on positions toward a focus on areas of common interests. It is interesting to note that another principle of negotiation refers to the need to separate the people from the problem. We found that many of the interviewees were unable to separate Chair Miller and Secretary Spellings' style and approach from the issues being studied. The same could be said of the response to David Ward's decision to withhold his signature.

Appreciative inquiry¹³¹ is another approach that could be helpful. One of its premises is that change can best occur when the focus is on success or what works well in an organization and not on an organization's past failures. Appreciative inquiry would suggest that change occurs best if you begin with a focus on what works well in the system, learn from that, and try to replicate those successes. Based on the interviews, it would be safe to say that the higher education community did not believe the Report viewed higher education with an "appreciative eye."

Looking Back, Looking Forward

This research study concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion of how the analysis of the work of the Commission can inform our planning as we go forward. To recap,

- The Report and the recommendations are viewed differently by the different sectors in higher education.
- Within each sector, there were considerable variations among chancellors, presidents, academic officers, and business officers as to how the work of the Commission and the final Report is viewed.

- There was general agreement that it is important to separate the issues identified from the politics surrounding the Report.
- The strong language of the Report, the sharp edge, and the high political visibility is off-putting to many in the higher education community. These things did, however, gain the attention of the community—in spite of, or more likely, because of—its directness.
- The primarily positive value of the Report is that it put higher education on the national agenda and with thoughtful responses, this could be used to great advantage.
- The Report was viewed—by all parties—as something more than simply a document for reflection; it was rather a call to action. This factor, along with the potential threat of government intervention, contributed significantly to the intensity of reactions from the higher education community.
- A number of associations and agencies undertook an aggressive and organized effort to clarify misunderstandings and to advocate for the higher education community—efforts that were seen as “effective” in blocking Department action, but perhaps less so in enhancing the understanding and appreciation of the higher education community at large among other constituencies.
- Many individuals indicated that their institutions were already addressing some of the initiatives raised in the Report and believed that perhaps they had not done a good job communicating the progress being made in these areas.
- The Spellings Report may have filled a vacuum created by unaddressed concerns about the costs of higher education, the value added, and higher education’s ineffectiveness representing itself to the public.
- The Commission would have been more effective if it had made a clearer case for the need for educational reform, if its communication style had been more collegial, and if it had proactively sought alliances with the higher education community to promote common values and goals.
- The higher education community would have done well to treat the Commission and Report as a set of opportunities, and to embrace the issues and create meaningful responses, rather than to respond to these primarily as problems. The opportunity to reengage and create collaborative networks and partnerships across higher education and with state and federal agencies is not lost. The creation of these ties continues to be critically important.

All of us who have dedicated our lives to higher education recognize the impressive array of accomplishments of our colleges and universities. By the same token, anyone who is well acquainted with the academy also knows that there are many, many opportunities for improvement within each of our institutions.

Those who served on the Commission; leaders from the Department of Education, the higher education associations and accrediting agencies, colleges and universities; and all those who read and reacted to the Report in one way or another must certainly understand this duality. In this instance, as in others we have seen—and will see in the future—the challenge for those seeking to advance the purposes of higher education is one of balance. Should the focus be on the many attributes, accomplishments, and achievements of the U.S. higher education community in the hope of broadening public understanding and much needed support? Or, should the emphasis be on the gaps, the needs, the weaknesses, and the contradictions in order to stimulate and mobilize the talent and resources to accelerate progress and improvement? The pursuit of either has attendant risks, and it is difficult for any single commission, report, or initiative to convey both perspectives effectively. In choosing to emphasize accomplishments, the risk is that of endorsing the status quo, deemphasizing the need for innovation, and encouraging a self-congratulatory and detached posture within the academy. Emphasizing shortcomings carries the risk of undermining public confidence and support, and fostering defensiveness, denial, and deflection among those within our institutions whose energies are most needed to advance innovation and progress.

As this case study has documented, the Spellings Commission adopted a style and approach that focused primarily on challenges, gaps, and needs. The gains and risks associated with this approach were predictable and both have been realized in some measure. The final outcome will be determined over time and it may well be years before we can ascertain the extent to which the Commission ultimately had a positive or negative impact on higher education.

Regardless of how one feels about particulars of the Commission Report or the style through it was communicated, we believe that the fundamental premise of the Report is valid and continues to be most worthy of continuing attention:

Whether America's colleges and universities are measured by their sheer number and variety, by the increasingly open access so many citizens enjoy to their campuses, by their crucial role in advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research discoveries, or by the new forms of teaching and learning that they have pioneered to meet students' changing needs, these postsecondary institutions have accomplished much of which they and the nation can be proud.

Despite these achievements... U.S. higher education needs to improve...¹³²

In looking back to draw lessons from this high profile initiative for education reform, we are mindful of the need, also, to look forward. As the Spellings Commission made clear, colleges and universities address economic and professional needs and provide benefits—for individuals and for the nation—that are critically important. They also strive to make vital contributions through enhancing the quality of students' personal lives, relationships, and communities; promoting civic engagement, ethical behavior, social responsibility, interpersonal competence, and intercultural appreciation; developing leadership and communication skills; enhancing aesthetic appreciation, media and information literacy, political participation, and critical analysis of contemporary issues; and building important understandings, capabilities, and commitments to lifelong learning.

The communication challenge here is of vital importance. There is a continuing and compelling need to create and capitalize on opportunities for telling the higher education story effectively—to thoughtfully explain its contributions to economic, professional, and personal development through teaching and learning, research and discovery, outreach and public service. And while not every institution in the higher education community has each of these purposes as a central element of its mission, it is important to emphasize their collective contribution to the public good. The story should be told in a manner that takes cognizance of the diverse needs and perspectives of the various constituencies for whom an understanding and appreciation of the multiple facets of the academy's work is essential. At the same time, balance is needed in order to highlight challenges and needs for improvement.

Based on this case study, we conclude that talented leaders are needed at all levels to promote and leverage innovations and effective practices, identify new initiatives where common challenges can be cooperatively addressed, and seek new opportunities for collaboration between higher education and governmental agencies and offices. Perhaps most importantly, we need to unite the institutions, associations, and agencies that define the higher education community in America, to more effectively engage with our many constituencies so that the story we share addresses needs and expectations and creates a future for all we serve and all on whom we depend.

Endnotes

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2. U.S. Department of Education, "Secretary Spellings Announces New Commission on the Future of Higher Education," September 19, 2005, <http://www.ed.gov/print/news/pressreleases/2005/09/09192005.html>.
3. See Appendix for a list of Commission members.
4. U.S. Department of Education, *The Spellings Commission Report*. September 2006.
5. U.S. Department of Education, "Highlights of the Final Report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education: A Test of Leadership—Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education," September 19, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/pre-pub-report-highlights.htm>. The full report may be viewed at <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf>.
6. Results of an analysis of media coverage of the Commission are presented and discussed in subsequent sections of this report.
7. A list of potential interviewees was compiled and e-mail invitations to participate were sent by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). In all cases, individuals invited to participate, agreed to do so. Participants were assured that responses would be confidential, that only group-level data would be reported, and that no individual responses would be directly associated with a respondent's name. The interviews lasted between one and one and one-half hours. All the interviews were completed in a one-to-one setting—either in a face-to-face or over-the-phone mode—following a predetermined interview guide. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. All interviewees were assured that their responses were confidential, and that while verbatim comments and more general reporting of responses would be provided in this report, no one individual would be associated with specific responses.
NOTE: All attributed quotations appearing in this report are from published sources.
8. An effort was made to interview a diverse group of higher education leaders in order to depict a variety of points of view of the Commission and its work.
9. The Report presents results and discussion of this review and analysis on pages 58-59. See Tables 58 and 59.
10. Responses/comments made to core articles comprise 80 percent of our data. Brief news/informative updates were not selected since the goal of this study was to only analyze in-depth commentaries of the Commission. Also, organization's formal policy and position statements were excluded.
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12. Source: U.S. Department of Education interviews.

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19. P.L. 105-244. See "Study of College Costs and Prices 1988-1989 to 1997." National Center for Education Statistics, <http://165.224.221.09/das/epubs/2002157.goals/asp>.
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31. U.S. Department of Education, "Highlights..." September 19, 2006.

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- National Commission on Excellence in Education , *A Nation at Risk*. Portland, OR: USA Research, 1984; National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2007.
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LIST OF COMMISSION MEMBERS

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Chairman and CEO
Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation
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Higher Education
University of Pennsylvania

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**

Charter

A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Authority

A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Commission) is established by the Secretary of Education and governed by the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) (P.L. 92-463, as amended; 5 U.S.C.A. Appendix 2).

Background

Higher education in the United States encompasses a wide array of educational opportunities and programs. Students attend institutions of higher education offering programs that range from baccalaureate and advanced degrees to occupational training of less than one year. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, has benefited millions of students by making higher education more affordable and ensuring its quality. As we look to the future, it is imperative that we maintain a system of higher education that meets the needs of our diverse population, and in particular the needs of traditionally underserved communities; provides enhanced opportunities for lifelong learning; and addresses the economic and workforce needs of the country.

In particular, the country is encountering a significant change to its economic structure, resulting in unmet workforce needs. This is particularly true with respect to highly skilled workers and in the fields of mathematics and science. The need is clear and unavoidable: only 68 out of 100 entering 9th graders graduate from high school on time. Yet, 80 percent of our fastest-growing jobs will require some higher education. As the need for highly skilled workers continues to grow, institutions of higher education must assess whether they are providing the necessary coursework and incentives that will enable American students to compete in the new global economy.

Purpose and Functions

The purpose of the Commission is to consider how best to improve our system of higher education to ensure that our graduates are well prepared to meet our future workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the changing economy. To accomplish this purpose, the Commission shall consider Federal, state, local, and institutional roles in higher education and analyze whether the current goals of higher education are appropriate and achievable. By August 1, 2006, the Commission will provide its written recommendations to the Secretary.

Structure

The Commission will be composed of no more than 20 representatives appointed by the Secretary from the public and private sectors, as well as several ex officio members from the Department of Education and other Federal agencies. These representatives shall include former or current public and private college presidents, and may also include former elected officials, representatives of Fortune 500 corporations, the financial services industry, for-profit education companies, nonprofit education foundations, higher education researchers and other such group representatives as the Secretary deems appropriate. As representatives, the members will speak for the groups of persons they represent, drawing on their personal experience as members of these groups with respect to these issues.

The Secretary shall appoint members for the life of the Commission. Any vacancy in the Commission shall not affect its powers but shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment. The Secretary shall select one or more chairpersons from among the members of the Commission.

The Secretary names the Designated Federal Official (DFO) to the Commission. The Institute of Education Sciences, the Office of Postsecondary Education, and the Office of the Secretary will provide management and staff support.

Meetings

The Commission will conduct at least three (3) meetings in different parts of the country to obtain a public discussion of the issues. In furtherance of its duties, the Commission shall invite experts and members of the public to provide information and guidance.

The Commission shall meet at the call of the DFO or the DFO's designee, who is present at all meetings. Meetings are open to the public except as may be determined otherwise by the Secretary in accordance with Section 1 D(d) of the F ACA. Adequate public notification will be given in advance of each meeting.

Meetings are conducted and records of the proceedings kept, as required by applicable laws.

A quorum of the Commission consists of eight members. A lesser number of members may hold public meetings.

Estimated Annual Cost

Members will serve without compensation. Members may each receive reimbursement for travel expenses for attending Commission meetings, including per diem in lieu of subsistence, as authorized by the Federal travel regulations. Funds will be provided by the Department of Education to administer the Commission. The estimated annual person-years of staff support are three (3) Full Time Equivalents. The estimated one fiscal year non-pay cost will be approximately \$700,000.

Report

As representatives, the Commission's members will work independently of Departmental supervision to produce their report. The Commission's written report will address how best to improve our system of higher education, from increasing academic preparation in secondary school to building transitions for students between secondary school, higher education, and the workplace. Recommendations will be targeted at ensuring that our graduates are well prepared to meet our changing workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the new economy.

The Commission's report shall address the following questions. In addressing these questions, the Report should address the appropriate roles for the various participants and how they intersect with one another.

How can State and local governments, with the assistance and encouragement of the Department of Education, better align secondary and higher education systems?

What changes are needed to ensure that higher education remains both affordable and accessible to students and their families?

What should be done to promote, sustain, and enhance world-class research and intellectual discourse?

How well are institutions of higher education preparing our students, especially nontraditional students and lifelong learners, to compete in the new global economy? What must be done to ensure that our system of higher education is able to keep up with the demand for highly skilled workers? How can the business community, other public and private sector organizations, and the higher education community work together to accomplish this goal?

Termination

The Commission shall terminate 30 days after submitting its report.

The Commission is hereby chartered in accordance with Section 14(b) of F ACA. This charter expires two years from the date of filing or before as the Secretary determines.

Approved:
Sept. 23, 2005

Margaret Spellings
Secretary

Filing date: October 14, 2005

HIGHER EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS REFERENCED IN THE TEXT

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC): In service since 1920, the AACC has aptly been called the “voice of America’s community colleges.” The Association represents and advocates for more than 1,200 associate-degree granting institutions enrolling more than 12 million students—almost half of all U.S. undergraduates. The mission statement of AACC is “*Building a Nation of Learners by Advancing America’s Community Colleges.*” <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/>

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU): AASCU’s 430 public college and university members are found throughout the United States, and in Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and enroll more than three million students or 56 percent of the enrollment at all public four-year institutions. AASCU has a four-fold purpose. Membership is open to any regionally accredited institution of higher education offering programs leading to bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degrees and wholly or partially state supported or state controlled. <http://www.aascu.org/>.

The Association of American Universities (AAU): AAU was founded in 1900 by a group of 14 universities offering the Ph.D. degree. Currently, the AAU is comprised of 62 institutions, including 60 American and two Canadian universities. The association serves its members in two major ways. It assists members in developing national policy positions on issues that relate to academic research and graduate and professional education. It also provides them with a forum for discussing a broad range of other institutional issues, such as undergraduate education. <http://www.aau.edu/>.

The American Council on Education (ACE): ACE, the major coordinating body for all the nation’s higher education institutions, seeks to provide leadership and a unifying voice on key higher education issues and to influence public policy through advocacy, research, and program initiatives. <http://www.acenet.edu/>.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U): Founded in 1915, AAC&U’s membership is comprised of institutions of higher education dedicated to ensuring that the advantages of a liberal education are available to all students regardless of background, enrollment path, academic specialization, or intended career. AAC&U membership, which stands at more than 1,100 strong today, includes representatives from all sectors of higher education. <http://www.aacu.org/>.

Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA): A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. <http://www.chea.org/>.

Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities: The commission was created in 1996 by NASULGC to help define the future direction of public universities and to recommend an action agenda to speed up the process of change. The commission consists of 25 members charged not only with defining and bringing to public attention the kinds of changes occurring at public universities today, but also with analyzing necessary reforms and suggesting ways to accomplish them and monitor the results. <http://www.nasulgc.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=305&srcid=305>.

The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI): NACIQI was established under the Higher Education Amendments of 1992 (Public Law 102-325) and consists of 15 members who advise the Education Secretary on matters related to accreditation and to the eligibility and certification process for institutions of higher education. <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/naciqi.html>.

National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO): NACUBO serves a membership of more than 2,500 colleges, universities, and higher education service providers across the country, representing chief administrative and financial officers through a collaboration of knowledge and professional development, advocacy, and community. NACUBO's vision is to define excellence in higher education business and financial management. NACUBO represents more than two-thirds of the higher education institutions in the United States. <http://www.nacubo.org/>.

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU): NAICU serves as the unified national voice of independent higher education. Since 1976, the association has represented private colleges and universities on policy issues with the federal government, such as those affecting student aid, taxation, and government regulation. With nearly 1,000 members nationwide, NAICU reflects the diversity of private, nonprofit higher education in the United States. <http://www.naicu.edu/default.asp>.

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC): The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) is a voluntary, nonprofit association of public research universities, land-grant institutions, and many state university systems and has member campuses in all 50 states and the U.S. territories, with headquarters in Washington, D.C. NASULGC has 217 member institutions. Its membership includes 76 land-grant universities (35 percent of NASULGC's membership), of which 18 are the historically black public institutions created by the Second Morrill Act of 1890, and 29 public higher education systems (13 percent of NASULGC's membership) and 33 tribal colleges. <http://www.nasulgc.org/>.

National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI): Founded in 1999, NCCI represents a wide range of institutions, with many individuals working actively in organizational development, quality assessment, planning and/or institutional improvement. NCCI is committed to advancing administrative and academic excellence in higher education by identifying, promoting, supporting, and sharing effective organizational practices among member institutions. <http://www.ncci-cu.org/>.

U.S. Department of Education: The Department was created in 1980 by combining offices from several federal agencies. The Department's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. <http://www.ed.gov/>.

COMMISSION WEB SITE PAGE VIEWS AND DOWNLOADS

Web Site Page Views:

General Higher Education Spellings Commission Web Site

<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>

Year/Month:	Page views:
2005	7,735
October	2,443
November	2,319
December	2,973
2006	74,535
January	3,139
February	4,916
March	3,808
April	5,449
May	4,095
June	4,893
July	5,680
August	9,780
September	10,325
October	7,166
November	7,148
December	8,136
2007	95,344
January	8,967
February	8,260
March	9,057
April	8,064
May	8,110
June	7,554
July	7,406
August	7,432
September	7,730
October	7,939
November	7,647
December	7,178
2008	12,780
January	7,626
February	5,154
Cumulative:	190,394

Web Site Downloads:

Final Report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education

<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>

Year/Month:	Page views:
2006	3,363
June	*
July	*
August	*
September	*
October	*
November	775
December	2,588
2007	30,939
January	3,621
February	3,013
March	3,266
April	2,571
May	2,992
June	2,305
July	1,954
August	2,252
September	2,642
October	2,755
November	2,184
December	1,384
2008	3,145
January	1,931
February	1,214
Cumulative:	37,447

*Data unavailable

Web Site Downloads:

Draft Report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education

<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf>

Year/Month:	Page views:
2006	33,275
June	*
July	*
August	*
September	11,497
October	11,572
November	7,083
December	3,123
2007	21,933
January	3,319
February	2,549
March	2,415
April	1,971
May	1,653
June	1,329
July	1,243
August	1,343
September	1,517
October	1,720
November	1,586
December	1,288
2008	2,769
January	1,662
February	1,107
Cumulative:	57,977

*Data unavailable

FACT SHEET

Action Plan for Higher Education

Accessibility

“There are far too many Americans who want to go to college but cannot—because they’re either not prepared or cannot afford it.” — Secretary Spellings

To expand access to higher education we must better educate and prepare our students, beginning with high standards and accountability in our public schools.

The Secretary’s proposal:

- Strengthen K-12 preparation and align high school standards with college expectations.
- Work with Congress to expand the successful principles of the *No Child Left Behind Act* to high schools.
- Redesign the 12th-grade NAEP (Nation’s Report Card) test to provide state-level estimates of college and workforce readiness.
- Raise awareness and mobilize leadership to address the issue of adult literacy as a barrier to national competitiveness and individual opportunity.
- Develop a federal research agenda for adult literacy to identify strategies, models, and programs that work.

Facts and Findings:

“Access to American higher education is unduly limited by ... inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers.” — Commission on the Future of Higher Education

- While about 34 percent of white adults have obtained bachelor’s degrees by age 25–29, the same was true for just 18 percent of African American adults and 10 percent of Hispanic adults in the same age cohort.
- Forty percent of college students will take at least one remedial education course, at a cost of over \$1 billion yearly.

- Over 60 percent of the U.S. population between the ages of 25–64 has no postsecondary education credential (source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Affordability

“There is little to no information on why costs are so high and what we’re getting in return.” — Secretary Spellings

Tuition continues to outpace inflation, health care costs, and family income levels. While funding for Pell Grants has increased nearly 50 percent over the past five years, the financial aid system remains in urgent need of reform. We must streamline the process to help students and families prepare, plan, and pay for college.

The Secretary’s proposal:

- Simplify the process by partnering with states to use existing income and tax data to help students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in half the time.
- Notify students of their estimated aid eligibility before spring of their senior year in high school.
- Work with Congress to provide new funds for need-based aid through the federal financial aid system.
- Commission an independent management consultant review of the federal financial aid system.
- Revitalize the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to promote innovation and productivity.
- Encourage organizations that report annual college data to develop consistent affordability measures.

Facts and Findings:

“Too many students are either discouraged from attending college by rising costs, or take on worrisome debt burdens in order to do so.” — Commission on the Future of Higher Education

- From 1995 to 2005, average tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities rose 51 percent after adjusting for inflation (for private schools, the increase was 36 percent).

- Median debt levels among students who graduated from four-year colleges and universities were \$15,500 for public and \$19,400 for private institutions.
- State funding growth for higher education has fallen to its lowest level in over two decades.

Accountability

“No current ranking system of colleges and universities directly measures the most critical point—student performance and learning.” — Secretary Spellings

In the Information Age, it is essential that clear, comprehensive, and comparative data about colleges and universities be collected and made available to students, parents, and policymakers.

The Secretary’s proposal:

- Work with a consortium of states to build on and link together the 40 existing, privacy-protected higher education information systems.
- Explore incentives for states and institutions that collect and report student learning outcome data.
- Convene members of the accreditation community to recommend changes to the standards for recognition that will place a greater emphasis on results.
- Redesign the Department of Education’s college search Web site to allow consumers to weigh and compare institutions based on their individual interests and needs.

Facts and Findings:

“Because data systems are so limited and inadequate, it is hard for policymakers to obtain reliable information on students’ progress through the educational pipeline.” — Commission on the Future of Higher Education

- The U.S. college attainment rate has fallen to 12th among major industrialized countries (source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development).

- Total per-student expenditures for higher education averaged over \$22,000 annually in 2001, almost twice the average of other major industrialized countries.
- The percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy (able to read and extrapolate from a complex text) has declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade (source: National Assessment of Adult Literacy).

(U.S. Department of Education, “Action Plan for Higher Education: Improving Accessibility, Affordability and Accountability,” September 2006). (<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/actionplan-factsheet.html>)

LIST OF ISSUE PAPERS

Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Burgdorf, Barry and Kent Kostka. 2006. *A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Issue Paper*, "Eliminating Complexity and Inconsistency in Federal Financial Aid Programs for Higher Education Students: Towards a More Strategic Approach." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/burgdorf-kostka.pdf>.

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Schray, Vickie. 2006. *A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Issue Paper*, "Assuring Quality in Higher Education: Key Issues and Questions for Changing Accreditation in the United States." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/schray.pdf>

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[Source: U.S. Department of Education, *A National Dialogue: Commission on the Future of Higher Education*. Prepared Remarks for Secretary Spellings at the Meeting of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 19, 2005, pp 45-46. <http://www.ed.gov/print/news/speeches/2005/09/09192005.html>]

ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS THAT PROVIDED INFORMATION TO THE COMMISSION

Academy One Navigating Education System
Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology
Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology
Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training
Achieve, Inc.
Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women of Washington
American College Health Association
American Council of Trustees and Alumni
American Council on Education
American Dental Education Association
American Federation of Teachers
American Indian Science and Engineering Society
American InterContinental University–London
American Productivity and Quality Center
Anti-Defamation League
Appalachian State University
Arizona State University
Associated Students of Oregon State University
Association for Consortium Leadership
Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools
 Accreditation Commission
Association of American Colleges and Universities
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of American Universities
Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts
Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors
Association on Higher Education and Disability
Bellevue Community College
Bentley College

Boston Foundation
Boston University
Bunker Hill Community College
Business Roundtable
California State University System
California Student Public Interest Research Group
Cambridge College
Capella Education Company
Carnegie Mellon University
Carol R. Goldberg Seminars
Center for Law and Social Policy
Center for Reform of School Systems
CISCO Systems
College Board
College Parents of America
College Solutions Network
College Summit, Inc.
Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
Connecticut Board of Governors for Higher Education
Consortium for High Academic Performance Institute for the Study
of Social Change
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
Council for Aid to Education
Council for Higher Education Accreditation
Council of Regional Accreditors
Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action
Distance Education and Training Council
Education Sector
Education Trust
Educational Testing Service
Eduventures, Inc.
Federal Interagency Committee on Education
Florida Department of Education
Florida Higher Education Accountability Project
Genentech
Georgia Institute of Technology
Heritage University
Highland Campus Health Group
Houston Community College

Indiana University
Institute for Community Inclusion
Institute of Education Sciences
International Association of Medical Schools
Ivy Tech State College
Jobs for the Future
Just for the Kids
Lawrence Berkeley National Lab
Louisiana Tech University
Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Massachusetts School of Law at Andover
Miami University, Ohio
Minnesota State College Student Association
Minnesota System of Higher Education
NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
National Academic Advising Association
National Association for College Admission Counseling
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Manufacturers
National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
National Center for Academic Transformation
National Center for Education Statistics
National Center for Higher Education Management Systems
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
National Down Syndrome Society National Policy Center
National Education Association (NEA)
National Science Foundation
Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Olin College of Engineering
Oregon State University
Pepperdine University
Project on Student Debt
Public Interest Research Groups
Quad Ventures
Quinsigamond Community College
R.W. Baird

RAND Corporation
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
Saint Anselm College
San Diego State University
Seattle Community College District
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Stark Education Partnership
State Higher Education Executive Officers
State PIRGs' Higher Education Project
Student Debt Alert
Temple University
TERI–The Education Resources Institute
Texas A&M University
TICAS–The Institute for College Access and Success, Inc.
Tufts University
United States Student Association
University of Massachusetts
University of Northern Colorado
University of Oregon
University of Texas
University of Texas-Austin Board of Regents
University of Washington
University System of New Hampshire
Upward Bound
Utah State University
Wagner College
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
Washington State University
Wayne State University
Western Connecticut State University
Western Illinois University
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS FROM THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS PROVIDED TESTIMONY TO THE COMMISSION

Bellevue Community College
Cambridge College
Capella University
Central Washington University
Columbus State Community College
Eastern Washington University
Evergreen State College
Harvard University
Howard University
Kaplan University
Lane Community College
Massachusetts Bay Community College
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
Northeastern University
Oberlin College
Providence College
Quinsigamond Community College
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
Salem State College
St. Louis Community College at Meramec
St. Phillips College
University of Alaska
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
University of Connecticut, Storrs
University of Maryland, College Park
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
University of Massachusetts, Boston
University of New Hampshire
University of Oregon
University of Southern Maine
University of Washington
Vanderbilt University
Western Governors University

THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION'S COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ACTION PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Department of Education Preliminary Impact Analysis Updated January 2008

The Commission Report

Numbers

- As of September 2007, more than 12,000 copies of the Report have been distributed to a wide array of stakeholder groups, including states, institutions, governing boards, associations, and students and parents.
- More than 7,000 copies were mailed to college presidents in the United States in September 2006.
- More than 1,000 copies were distributed to participants at the national and regional higher education summits and town hall meetings held in 2007.
- More than 4,000 copies of the Report have been requested through EdPubs for individual use.

Examples of Uses

- States, higher education associations, institutional leadership, and faculty have used the Report as a springboard for conversations on higher education issues and strategic planning. For example, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) released a publication for its members entitled "An AGB Analysis: What the Recommendations of the Spellings Commission Mean for Governing Boards." The Report is also required reading for several graduate programs in education administration, including George Washington University, Georgetown University, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Indiana State University.

Examples of the Department's Outreach Activities

- Accreditation Forum (November 2006)
- National Higher Education Summit (March 2007)

- Regional Higher Education Summits and Town Hall Meetings (June 2007)
 - Kansas City, MO; Seattle, WA; Phoenix, AZ; Boston, MA; Atlanta, GA
- Under Secretary's College Tour (Fall 2007–Spring 2008)

Examples of External Organization/Association Activities

- **The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)** College Portrait/Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) provides information about each participating university and its programs utilizing common definitions and format.
- **The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU)** University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) is designed to give, in a common format, prospective students and their families concise, Web-based consumer-friendly information on individual private colleges and universities.
- **The Association of American Universities (AAU)** is working with its member institutions to develop better information for students and parents about the actual costs incurred to attend an AAU university, the average times to degree, graduation rates, and the post graduation outcomes of students.
- **The American Council on Education (ACE)** has launched a major public service campaign to encourage low-income, first-generation students to prepare for college. The *Know How to Go* campaign uses national public service announcements to provide information on how low-income students can prepare for college.
- **Transparency by Design** is an initiative by distance learning providers who have agreed to participate in a voluntary accountability system for higher education institutions that serve adults through distance learning programs. The plan was developed to ensure that higher education courses and programs for adults learning at a distance are of high quality and readily accessible.

- **The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO)** has completed a study of the Spellings Commission and its impact, designed to gain insights about the dynamics of change in higher education. The study includes participants from a wide variety of colleges and universities, associations, and agencies concerned with higher education.

Examples of State Activities

ACCESS

- **Indiana:** Indiana has launched a college outreach campaign targeting low-income students called Learn More Indiana. Through this initiative, Indiana provides an extensive college outreach program to every student in the state. The initiative includes sending out mini-magazines (K-12), a comprehensive Web site dedicated to information on going to college, a 1-800 Helpline, and information materials on paying for college.
- **Massachusetts:** Governor Deval Patrick signed an executive order in March 2007 to implement comprehensive reforms to the entire public education system in Massachusetts. Recommendations include extending education an additional two years beyond secondary school and aligning curricula from pre-K through higher education and workforce development.
- **New York:** The state higher education commission formed by former Governor Eliot Spitzer made recommendations, including a program that would guarantee free college tuition for seventh and eighth grade students in high-need school districts who meet academic requirements.
- **Michigan:** Governor Jennifer Granholm has asked the state legislature to create “Promise Zones” in cities with a combination of low rates of educational attainment and high rates of poverty and unemployment. The zones would allow local communities to capture half the growth in state property tax revenues and use them to supplement local funds. This is the first state effort to use a tax increment financing mechanism to expand higher education opportunity in a community.

AFFORDABILITY

- **Louisiana:** Governor Kathleen Blanco proposed in her 2008-09 budget the state's first substantial need-based aid program. The program would spend \$15 million to give an extra \$1,000 to each Pell eligible student in the state of Louisiana.
- **Minnesota:** In May 2007, Governor Tim Pawlenty signed into law \$10.8 million for ACHIEVE, a new initiative to allow high school students to earn college credit and receive a scholarship to any Minnesota college or university. Students who successfully complete advanced courses in high school will receive \$1,200 to be used at a public or private Minnesota college.
- **Virginia:** Virginia passed a law giving financial aid dependent students who attend community colleges in Virginia up to \$2,000 to transfer to four-year institutions and earn their bachelor's degree.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Connecticut:** In spring 2007, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Connecticut State University System and the Connecticut Community College System, establishing guiding principles that streamline the transfer process for students.
- **Illinois:** In November 2006, the Illinois Community College Board released its System Performance Report, which is structured around the policy areas in the Board of Higher Education's *Illinois Commitment* and the statewide strategic plan for community colleges. The Board uses a common set of performance measures used to evaluate community college productivity.
- **Minnesota:** In February 2007, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education released a 2007 report on the state's higher education performance, the state's first effort to assess the performance, effectiveness, and productivity of the state's higher education sector as a whole.
- **New Jersey:** In 2007, Governor Jon Corzine signed a law mandating that upon a student's acceptance, an associate degree awarded by a community college in New Jersey must be fully transferable and count toward the first two years of a baccalaureate degree at any of the state's public institutions.

- **Oregon:** In 2007, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski created the Postsecondary Quality Education Commission, charged with establishing a quality education model to be used by state policy makers and for funding postsecondary education in Oregon, including community colleges and universities.