

POLICY INFORMATION REPORT

Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission:

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

A NEW BOOK FROM NACUBO



We mean business in higher education.

The tenure and the influence

of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, and of current Department of Education policy leaders and their educational philosophies, are limited, but the issues raised by the Commission are likely to be of interest for some time. Rutgers University Professor Brent Ruben, executive director of the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, led a NACUBO-sponsored study team in interviewing leaders from higher education, the Spellings Commission, the Department of Education, and higher education media about their reactions to last year's Commission recommendations. The 196-page resulting report, *Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission: The Message, the Messenger, and the Dynamics of Change in Higher Education*, provides a systematic analysis of the impact of the Commission that can contribute to policy formation and communication well into the future.

With this well-executed study and analysis, Brent Ruben makes a convincing case for all of us in the higher education arena to consider more carefully the opportunities we have to advance the purposes of U.S. colleges and universities. Institutional leaders as well as executives at higher education associations will find interesting ideas in the report for redirecting their responses to the Spellings Commission recommendations, and for working more collaboratively with government officials and other constituencies in our shared goal to strengthen higher education.

JOHN WALDA
NACUBO President and CEO

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What impact has the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education and its work had on higher education?

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 of the 36 individuals interviewed for this report—ranging from Commission members to college and university leaders to higher education association presidents—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.

While interviewees noted that the higher education community already had some efforts underway to solve the broad problems of access, affordability, quality, and accountability when the report was released in September 2006, and hence agree that these are important issues, many in the higher education community reacted negatively to the report's release, viewing it as an attack on U.S. colleges and universities.

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. 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 dynamics associated with each stage are examined through the eyes of the authors and the study's participants.

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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).

Among the case study's findings from operational, policy, and scholarly perspectives are the following:

- » 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.
- » 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 was 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 in representing itself as a public good.
- » 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 been more successful in creating alliances with the higher education community to promote common values and goals.

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.

The case study concludes 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 for all on whom we depend.

ABOUT NACUBO

NACUBO, located in Washington, D.C., serves a membership of more than 2,500 colleges, universities, and higher education service providers across the country. NACUBO represents 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 takes pride in offering our membership the best resources, advocacy, and professional development programs in higher education business and financial administration.

Copies of the book *Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Report: The Message, the Messenger, and the Dynamics of Change in Higher Education* can be ordered for \$30 at www.nacubo.org/bookstore or by calling 888-450-9961. A 20 percent classroom discount is available for orders of 10 or more copies.

For more information or to download the full 196-page report or supplemental information, including the survey instrument and a summary of interview responses, visit: www.nacubo.org/spellings

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