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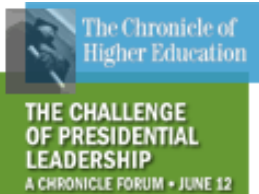
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## Federal Panel Hears Ideas on the Transition to College and Gauging Results

By KELLY FIELD

Meeting for a second day here on Friday, the secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education heard from a dozen speakers about ways to increase accountability in higher-education and ease the transition between high school and college.

Jay Pfeiffer, of the Florida Department of Education, told the panel members how his state had developed a "Cadillac of data systems," a database that tracks students from kindergarten through college graduation. Mr. Pfeiffer, who is the state agency's assistant deputy commissioner of accountability, research and measurement, urged the advisory panel to coordinate any federal effort to develop a national tracking database with the states, to avoid duplication or inconsistency.

James B. Hunt Jr., a commission member and a former governor of North Carolina, suggested that the federal government provide money to the states to help them develop databases like the one in Florida.

### Preparing Students for College

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which administers the Advanced Placement examinations, noted that many high schools do not offer AP mathematics and science courses. He urged the commissioners to support President Bush's proposal to train an additional 70,000 teachers in AP and the International Baccalaureate program's courses in math, science and foreign languages over the next five years. He also asked the commission to call on colleges to train more AP teachers and to push high schools to offer at least four AP courses.

Richard Kazis, senior vice president of Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Boston, described his organization's efforts to blend high-school and college work, and to help low-income and minority students succeed at community colleges. One of the group's programs, the Early College High School Initiative, allows students to earn up to two years of college credit while still in high school.

After Mr. Kazis' presentation, Jonathan Grayer, a commission member who is chairman and chief executive of Kaplan Inc., suggested that the panel recommend expanding early-college programs, so that more students could graduate early.

"If we were to be bold, we could say that college is a three-year experience, and provide the first year in high school," he said, arguing that such a plan would save families a lot of money.

But another commissioner, Robert M. Zemsky, cautioned that that plan would work only if all high schools provided a rigorous curriculum.

"I think we don't pay enough attention here to the supply coming up" from high schools, said Mr. Zemsky, who is a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania.

### **Measuring Students' Performance**

The discussion then turned to accountability.

Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, started the discussion by suggesting that while colleges have historically been "allergic" to the idea of assessment, they are "reaching a tipping point where the institutional leadership is stepping up."

"You have a growing constituency of presidents that are willing to take risks," he said.

Much of the progress, he argued, is attributable to accreditation agencies, which have increased their focus on student learning in recent years.

Mr. Ewell recommended that the commission ask accreditors to require institutions to measure their students' performance against a standard of their choice, and make the results of that measurement public. He also suggested that the commission recommend a new federal matching grant program to encourage state efforts at assessment.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, offered a more critical view of accreditation, arguing that accreditors have allowed grade inflation to mount, accountability to suffer, and academic standards to slide. She asked commissioners to recommend an end to mandatory accreditation, which she said has done little to improve institutional quality.

Commissioners also heard from the president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, which

released a draft [position paper](#) late last week calling on state universities to develop a voluntary approach to assessment that would make comparisons of institutions possible. The association's president, Peter McPherson, said that while he was "strongly against a federally mandated system," he believed testing could be included as part "of a bundle of things."

Mr. McPherson also said he was "intrigued" by the idea of a "unit record" data system, which would use students' Social Security numbers to track the educational progress of every college student in the United States.

That comment prompted Mr. Hunt, the former North Carolina governor, to ask whether the land-grant association would be willing to "help us get a national unit-record system."

Mr. McPherson replied that he would want "to work through the issue more" and talk to members of Congress before formally endorsing the plan.

Mr. Zemsky then asked when the association would issue a definitive position paper on accountability, noting that while some might view the group's draft paper, as Mr. McPherson described it, as "leading by the chin," others could see it as "a grand filibuster."

Referring to the commission's mandate to deliver recommendations to the education secretary in less than four months, he added pointedly, "Our deadline is August 1 -- what's yours?"

Mr. McPherson answered that it would likely take a several months to develop a voluntary system.

The federal panel's chairman, Charles Miller, then thanked McPherson for his leadership, saying, "We're behind you, and probably pretty close."

Mr. Miller, a private investor, is a former chairman of the University of Texas System's Board of Regents and the chief architect of that university's accountability system.

## **Two Measurement Tools**

Three witnesses testified about two tools that Mr. Miller has endorsed: the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA, which has been used in the Texas accountability system since 2002, and the National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE.

Stephen P. Klein, a senior research scientist with the RAND Corporation who helped develop the CLA, said that colleges need benchmarking measures to know if their efforts to improve

education are working. "You can't measure progress unless you know where you start," he said. Responding to concerns that students may not be motivated to do well on tests in which they have no stake, he suggested that schools could up the ante by including the tests as part of their capstone courses.

George D. Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington, which administers the National Survey of Student Engagement, offered that assessment as a complement to such outcomes-oriented measures like the CLA. He asked the commission to recommend that the Education Department devote more resources to validate measures of student learning.

After the presentations on the CLA and NSSE, Arthur J. Rothkopf, a commissioner who is president emeritus of Lafayette College and senior vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, asked whether colleges were making the results of their assessments public, and whether their results ought to be posted on the Department of Education's Web site or institutions' Web sites.

Roger Benjamin, president and chief executive officer of the Council for Aid to Education, which co-produces the Collegiate Learning Assessment, answered that colleges choose whether to publish their results. Mr. Kuh said that he encourages colleges to make their results public, though he is "dead set" against using the results to rank colleges.

"The data is too complex to reduce it to a simple number," he said, adding that one danger of publishing results is that they can be easily misinterpreted.

A commission member, Robert W. Mendenhall, who is president of the online Western Governors University, asked whether the Collegiate Learning Assessment could be adapted for use by adult learners, noting that many of them lack the SAT scores that the test uses as a base line for measuring student growth.

Mr. Klein replied that his organization uses another instrument, developed by Wonderlic Inc., to measure the base line of students without SAT scores.

The meeting closed with an appeal by Mr. Zemsky to his fellow commissioners "to resist any attempt to bring us a draft" report by the next meeting, which will be held on May 18 and 19 in Washington, D.C. He "strongly urged" the commission to hold a final face-to-face meeting sometime after the May meeting, saying "we need one more."

Charles M. Vest, president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, seconded that motion.

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Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Federal Panel on Higher Education Identifies Access and Lifelong Learning as Top Goals for Final Report](#) (4/7/2006)
- [To Avoid Federal Mandate, Colleges Should Devise Own Gauges of Student Learning, Land-Grant Group Says](#) (4/7/2006)
- [Another Accountability Idea: a New Database That Would Customize College Rankings](#) (3/31/2006)
- [Federal Panel Considers Giving Colleges a 'Gentle Shove' Toward Accountability Testing](#) (3/31/2006)

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