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## Federal Commission Gears Up for the Home Stretch

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### The higher-education panel sets its priorities and considers new approaches to accountability and accreditation

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Indianapolis

With less than four months remaining in its charter, the secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education took a series of informal votes this month to identify members' chief goals for the commission's report.

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Topping the list was increasing access to college for low-income students and adults. That was followed by improving the nation's commitment to lifelong learning and work-force development, increasing need-based aid, doubling the number of graduates in science and mathematics, and expanding institutional accountability and transparency.

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The list is intended to guide the commission's work, although it is unclear how the commission will translate its broad goals into concrete policy recommendations by the August 1 deadline set by the secretary of education, Margaret Spellings.

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Before it voted, the commission heard four hours of testimony on college affordability and the accreditation system. Charles Miller, the panel's chairman, started the discussion by suggesting that the federal government restructure its financial-aid system to make it more "need-based, simple, student-friendly, fair — and generous." He also asserted that the accreditation system stifles innovation, and is too burdensome and arcane.

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However, Mr. Miller did not endorse a controversial proposal to eliminate regional accreditors and replace them with a national body, as suggested by a consultant to the committee. That proposal, presented in a commission discussion paper released in March, has drawn fierce criticism from leaders of some college groups, including the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an umbrella group of accreditors.



### Tax-Break Talk

During the hearing, Judith S. Eaton, president of the accreditors' group, testified that such a national accrediting body would have the effect of "driving down diversity of institutional mission in higher education" and "subordinating the work of faculty to a single set of national standards."

She suggested, instead, that the commission endorse an "accountability agenda" that would rely on incentives to encourage institutions and accrediting organizations to expand their measures of student learning, become more transparent, and raise standards for general-education programs.

Meanwhile, Carol A. D'Amico, executive vice president of the Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana system, argued that accreditation standards should be revised to better reflect the institutional missions of community colleges.

During its discussion of college affordability, the commission heard from James A. Boyle, president of College Parents of America, a national organization that advocates for parents of college students. He suggested that Congress should renew the tax deduction for tuition and related expenses, and expand it from \$4,000 to \$12,000, the average cost of a four-year public education.

But Barry D. Burgdorf, vice chancellor and general counsel of the University of Texas System, testified that research has shown tax breaks do little to increase access to higher education, though they do improve retention and graduation rates. He suggested instead that policy makers should direct more money to grant programs, which have been shown to increase access for low-income students.

James C. Garland, president of Miami University, in Ohio, argued that states could increase access by doing away with subsidies to institutions and reallocating the dollars to scholarship programs for students from low- and middle-income families.

And Frank Mayadas, program director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, suggested that the commission propose a new federal grant program that would encourage institutions of higher education to develop more online certificate and degree programs, to provide instruction more efficiently.

### **Which Path to Pick?**

The following day, the commission 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 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.

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 (another accelerated program) courses in math, science, and foreign languages over the next five years.

During the accountability portion of the discussion, Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, testified that colleges were "reaching a tipping point where the institutional leadership is stepping up," and a growing number of presidents are taking risks to bring about improvements. He said much of the progress was 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.

### **Inviting Comparisons**

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 federal 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 has released a draft position paper 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 James B. Hunt Jr., the former North Carolina governor and a member of the commission, to ask whether the land-grant association would be willing to help start such a 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.

The meeting closed with an appeal by Robert M. 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. "We need one more," he said. Charles M. Vest, president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, seconded that motion.

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