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Too Much Change, or Not Enough?

As members of a federal commission studying higher education and those who have been following the panel's work digested [a second draft of its report](#), which was formally released Monday, there was widespread agreement that the paper treated higher education more gently than [the first draft did](#). Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing was up for debate.

The original draft report of the Secretary of Education's [Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#), released last month, was widely perceived — even by members of the panel who aren't universally supportive of traditional higher education — as going out of its way to insult colleges and universities. Critics also panned the report, which was drafted by the commission's outside writer and stable of consultants, as primarily reflecting the views of Charles Miller, the panel's chairman, and his aides, at the expense of the ideas the panel's 19 members shared during the group's quite thoughtful open meetings.

The second draft, which lacks an introduction or a conclusion, more fully represents the views of the 19 commissioners, some of whom met privately to revise the report in Washington last month and all of whom shared written comments. By and large, [the new report adopts a much softer tone](#), offering far more praise and far less criticism of colleges, although the underlying recommendations are largely unchanged.

In an e-mail message making the partial second draft public, Miller wrote that the document "will continue to undergo changes and edits over the course of our discussions. As also expected, since we represent a very diverse group of stakeholders, the draft report represents a multitude of opinions. This is a work in progress and the lively debate we anticipate will result in a strong report to the Secretary and the nation."

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, the primary association that represents college presidents, said in a memorandum to its members that the second draft showed "improvements in both tone and content" over the first draft, which, he noted, was released "to the overwhelming concern of the higher education community" last month.

"I believe the improvement in the overall tone of the document indicates a willingness to develop a final set of proposals that are constructive, creative and worthy of support by the majority of

commission members," said Ward, [who had warned in a similar statement to presidents](#) last month that he would not sign a report unless it was radically transformed.

Ward's enthusiasm was leavened, however, by "a number of significant problems" with the report. He noted that the second draft omitted the preamble that contained the harshest rhetoric of the first draft, and since "these introductory comments will set the tone for the rest of the report ... I am very anxious to see what changes will be made in this area." He also took issue with several of the report's findings and recommendations, including a proposal to consolidate the existing student aid programs and a call for colleges to "benchmark their prices against growth in family income." Of the latter proposal, he said: "I know of no other sector — certainly no other labor-intensive sector — that uses such a standard. Obviously, this standard makes no sense."

If Ward thought the second draft didn't change quite enough, some other commissioners and other observers said they feared the drafters might have gone a little too far.

Richard K. Vedder, an economist at Ohio University and one of the more critical voices on the commission, shared Ward's view that over all, the second draft was much more likely to gain the support of a majority of commissioners. He also said that while the language of the report had changed to soften its criticisms of higher education, "on the important things, the substance, things haven't changed dramatically." Vedder said he largely supported the findings and recommendations of the first draft, though he agreed that the report took some unnecessary potshots at colleges.

But he described the second draft as "a little bit of a sugar-coated version" that "doesn't grab you much." The danger in that, Vedder said, is that "we issue a report and no one pays attention to it."

He added: "I'm worried the report will come across as banal and boring. We would probably win more votes today than the earlier version would have. But as we move to maximize support within the commission, we run risk of making it more of a pabulum, inoffensive document that says relatively little."

Vedder said he thought the second draft had taken a step backward by giving less attention to the innovations of nontraditional colleges, especially for-profit ones, and by dropping references to grade inflation and the declining state of undergraduate education. On that last point, he was seconded by Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Neal, who testified before but is not a member of the commission, said in an e-mail that the first draft's focus on "important curricular issues — and their connection to the serious cultural illiteracy that the commission recognizes — are utterly supplanted by a studiously process-oriented focus on how to make colleges and universities more accessible, more affordable, and more accountable."

"In a time of global competition and conflict, transparency and assessments don't matter if the product is not worthy," Neal added. "Access and completion rates are simply irrelevant if the education received is incoherent and fails to guarantee the common ground of training and outlook on which our society depends. Yet the commission remains silent on these critical points."

One key member of the commission, Richard Stephens, a vice president at Boeing, said Monday that he believed that the draft "begins to really show what we as the commission thinks," and that the

report is “headed in the right direction.” But the commissioners have a lot of work to do, Stephens said, in producing a report that both persuades the public that there is a serious problem and “provides a set of hard hitting recommendations” that points policy makers on a path to solving the problem.

“We have got to be more direct and more specific,” Stephens said, “if we’re going to have success.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)