THE SPELLINGS COMMISSION AND YOU

What State Policymakers Can Do in Light of the Department of Education's Recent Report

American Council of Trustees and Alumni



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"Urgent reform." That, according to the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, is what our nation's universities need. What's more, the Commission says you can help—by improving the colleges in your state.

In 2005, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings named this blueribbon commission to hold a "national dialogue" on higher education. After examining the issues, the Commission issued a report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*,* warning that "the sector's past attainments have led our nation to unwarranted complacency about its future." The U.S. has "remained so far ahead of our competitors for so long," the Commission said, that "we began to take our postsecondary superiority for granted."

What happened? "The results of this inattention...are sobering," the report says. While America rests on its laurels, other nations are "educating more of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are."

That's why "urgent reform" is needed—because if we don't urgently reform our system of higher education, the rest of the world may leave us in the dust.

And the Commission's report explicitly calls upon state policymakers like you to make these reforms happen.

Here's where the problems lie—and what you can do.

^{*} http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html.

What the Commission found.

The cost of college is spiraling out of control. Over the last decade, tuition and fees at private four-year colleges and universities have increased by 36%; at public institutions, the increase was a mind-blowing 51%. And according to the Commission, one of the culprits for these escalating costs is "inadequate attention to cost measurement and cost management."

Incentives to keep costs low regrettably don't exist on many campuses. Third-party funding—publicly-subsidized aid and private giving insulate students and college administrators from the consequences of their spending decisions, as prices soar ever higher.

If these weren't problems enough, the Commission found "disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates." And still, only 66% of full-time college students graduate within six years.

As more money pours into higher education, students and the general public remain completely in the dark as to what they are getting for the ever accelerating price. There is "no solid evidence" available to determine how much (or how little) students learn at competing institutions. Similarly, the public has no idea if "investment in higher education is paying off and how taxpayer dollars could be used more effectively."

To streamline this information bottleneck, the Commission has recommended a "transformation of accreditation." Accrediting agencies award the Congressionally-mandated stamp of approval to colleges, allowing their students to be eligible for federal aid. This certification, however, says virtually nothing about the quality of education—it tends to measure inputs and processes, and not "bottomline results for learning or costs." Clearly, things need to change.

What state policymakers can do.

Now, let's talk about what you can do. And as you do it, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—a non-partisan organization with a decade of success in advancing higher education—would be delighted to help you.

Make more information available. It's a common lament: Policymakers can't get meaningful information on higher education. In many cases, the information that *is* available is based on inputs, not the things that matter.

For instance, colleges like to talk about how much they pay their faculty, or how many books are in their libraries. But the point of college isn't to pay professors or to buy books—it is for students to learn what good citizens and qualified workers need to know. Are students learning subjects like math, science, writing, and civics? Are they graduating on time? Are they ensured a free exchange of ideas in the classroom?

Knowing which schools stand out for their commitment to excellence would be valuable information. But as the Commission's report points out, there is no solid data available on student learning. You can fix that by starting with something simple: asking the right questions—whether at hearings or in program reviews. And if you need help, come to ACTA—just as officials in Indiana, Montana, and South Dakota have.

Improve accreditation. There's more you can do to make helpful information available. States can encourage colleges, as a condition of—or substitute for—traditional accreditation, to release key data about graduation rates, core curricula, and student achievement. ACTA has helped develop a model accountability bill that requires colleges and universities to post consumer-friendly information about institutional profiles, student success and costs.

You can get the information you need to oversee your state's system of higher education, and give your constituents the data they—the people who pay for these institutions—deserve.

Furthermore, states can break the link between any state-subsidized aid and a school's accreditation status. That will let colleges decide for themselves, in an open and free market, whether or not to submit to accreditation reviews that often fail to measure quality. Alternatively, states can require colleges to solicit bids for accrediting services, just like they do for other services. By encouraging a competitive market for accreditation, states can better ensure that accreditation reviews measure quality and the results that matter to students and taxpayers.

States could also seek waivers of the federal law requiring accreditation (much as was done with welfare reform). They could then devise their own mechanisms for ensuring the educational quality of their institutions.

In an increasingly competitive world, it's imperative that states create environments that welcome new providers and new paradigms for learning, from for-profits to distance learning.

Encourage efficiency and accountability. The Commission's report calls upon universities to increase their productivity and cut their costs—two concepts that are often foreign on today's campuses. Specifically, the Commission recommended:

- Better cost management
- New performance benchmarks
- Decreasing barriers for transfer students
- Increased use of cost-saving technology
- · Creating more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners
- Relieving the regulatory burden on colleges

As a state policymaker, you are in a unique position to encourage your state's universities to innovate in these ways—and to take steps yourself to relieve the regulatory burden they face. Specifically, the Commission recommended that states (along with the federal government) undertake a review of the hundreds of often overlapping regulations with which colleges and universities must comply, and see how they can be streamlined and simplified.

You can also follow the Commission's recommendations by providing incentives for institutions to pursue innovation and efficient practices, such as modifying traditional academic calendars to use institutions' physical plants and learning programs in more optimal ways.

Promote improved student learning. Despite vast increases in both public money and public attention, Department of Education statistics have documented a *decline* in the percentage of college students who have the knowledge and skills they should. That means that colleges don't just need to become more affordable and more cost-efficient—they also have to do a better job ensuring that their graduates can write well, think critically, read with comprehension and reason quantitatively.

The Commission also found that universities have failed to take advantage of technology and innovation in order to produce more effective teaching methods and model curricula. State and federal governments as well as boards of trustees have an important role to play to guarantee that institutions are living up to their potential—and making proper and efficient use of the generous public resources they are given.

To help trustees do their job, ACTA has prepared model legislation endorsing "a program of orientation and continuing education for all board members" dealing with critical issues like legal and ethical responsibilities, academic standards, intellectual diversity and academic freedom, budget development, management and auditing, selecting and evaluating a president, teacher education, the relationship between higher education to K–12 education, managing resources effectively, and setting strategic goals.

The Commission also identified a troubling trend: our high schools are failing to produce graduates capable of college-level work. As a result,

colleges expend precious resources on remedial classes for underprepared students. States have an opportunity to address this problem by encouraging postsecondary institutions and K–12 school systems to work together and by ensuring more rigorous and effective teacher preparation. As the Commission noted, it's important that states' graduation standards be closely aligned with college and employer expectations. And states can consider giving incentives to postsecondary institutions to work actively with K–12.

Don't think more money is the answer. As the Commission's report points out, "The bottom line is that state funding for higher education will not grow enough to support enrollment demand without higher education addressing issues of efficiency, productivity, transparency, and accountability clearly and successfully." While institutions often say otherwise, the reason today's colleges have problems is not that they don't have enough money—it's that they're not spending what they've got efficiently.

Think about it. Today's high-tech world is changing rapidly. Just thirty years ago, there was no such thing as CNN or the laptop computer, let alone the iPhones today's college students use. Has the academy adapted along with every other business? No. It is still doing things much the same way it always has. You can help change that—to the benefit of the students, parents, and taxpayers in your state.

ACTA can help.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni works with states around the country to promote high academic standards, a strong liberal artsbased core curriculum, an end to grade inflation, improved teacher training, and increased accountability.

Please contact us.

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About ACTA

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities.

Founded in 1995, ACTA is the only national organization that is dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees and education leaders across the country to support liberal arts education, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas, and ensure that the next generation receives an open-minded, high-quality education at an affordable price.

ACTA has members from colleges and universities across the country. Its quarterly publication, *Inside Academe*, goes to over 12,000 readers, including over 4,000 college and university trustees.

Anne D. Neal is President of ACTA. From 1990 to 1992, she served as General Counsel and Congressional Liaison of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Prior to joining NEH, Ms. Neal specialized in the First Amendment at the New York City law firm of Rogers & Wells. She holds degrees from Harvard College and Harvard Law School.

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