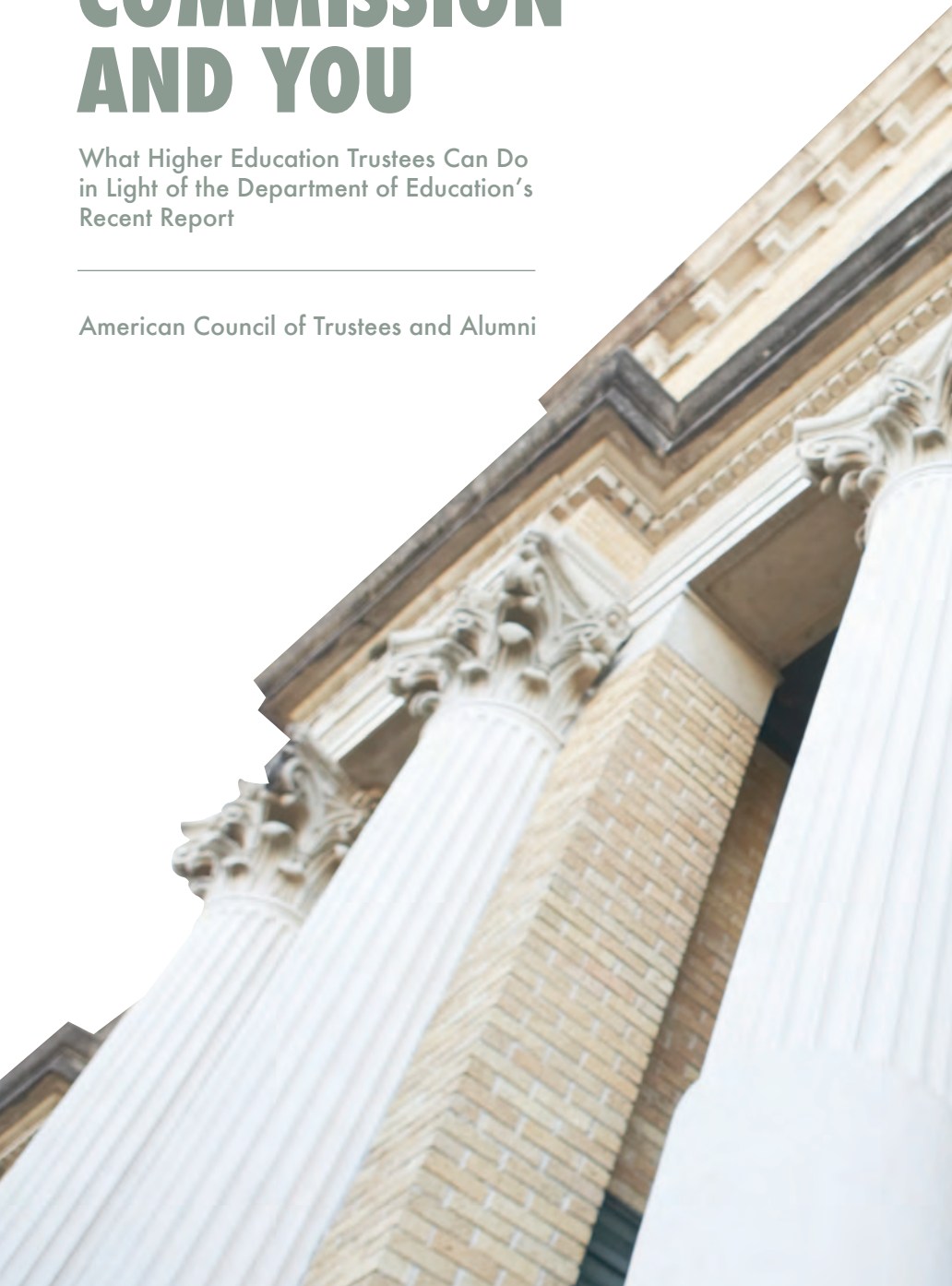


THE SPELLINGS COMMISSION AND YOU

What Higher Education Trustees 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 you oversee.

In 2005, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings named this blue-ribbon 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 trustees like you can make the Commission's recommended reforms happen.

Here's where the problems lie—and what you, as a trustee, 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 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 “bottom-line results for learning or costs.” Clearly, things need to change.

What trustees can do.

Now, let's talk about what you, as a trustee, can do to begin to address the issues raised by the Commission. 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.

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

- New performance benchmarks
- Better cost management
- Increased use of cost-saving technology
- Decreasing barriers for transfer students
- Making more college-level courses available to high schoolers
- Creating more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners

As a trustee, you are in a unique position to encourage your university to innovate in these ways and to hold your administration accountable. The board should work with the university's faculty and administration to make efficiency and accountability central parts of the board's strategic plan and set goals and objectives accordingly.

Trustees must take an active role in governance, insisting that the board hear competing viewpoints on important issues—not just the administration's perspective. And make certain you are involved early in establishing budget priorities. Only when you demand accurate information and ask tough questions can you govern effectively.

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

To ensure trustees are prepared, ACTA advises governing boards to participate in a regular program of orientation and continuing education that deals with the following issues: legal and ethical responsibilities; academic standards; intellectual diversity and academic freedom; budget development; management and auditing; selecting and evaluating new presidents; teacher education and the relation of higher education to K–12 education; managing resources effectively; and setting strategic goals. The best way for boards to perform well is to obtain objective *outside* information on current trends and “best practices.”

Improve 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.

As a trustee, you can make a real difference when it comes to academic quality. In too many places, institutions allow students to pick and choose from hundreds of courses instead of offering a rigorous general education about basic subjects such as English, history, math, and science. Ask for a listing of general education offerings to determine what students are being asked to learn. What are the course requirements? Are the courses general or narrow? Are they regularly available? It’s up to the board—working closely with faculty and administrators—to establish a rigorous curricular framework that achieves the institution’s educational mission.

And take steps to ensure that students in your institution truly succeed. Reducing or eliminating grade inflation is one way to start so that faculty and students have a clear picture of student learning gains. Introducing learning assessments—in areas such as math and writing—is another approach. Assessments that evaluate student progress highlight areas in which students—and professors—need to improve. These assessments can become part of the university’s continuous

improvement plan and trustees should receive regular reports on how results led to program modifications and improved learning.

Demand Effective Teacher Preparation. Insist on rigorous and effective teacher preparation. Studies consistently show the surest guarantee of student success is a good teacher. And trustees are in a unique position to work for reform in teacher training programs.

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 in guaranteeing that institutions are living up to their potential—and making proper and efficient use of the generous public resources they are given.

Trustees should review their institutions' incentive structures and insist that faculty be rewarded for excellent teaching and fresh approaches to classroom instruction. Scholarly research on teaching and learning should be put into practice. Professional development for professors should also be implemented when necessary.

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.

It is your fiduciary duty to expect better. Request and review all financial information, including a breakdown of how tuition is calculated, in order to identify and reduce unnecessary costs. Consider establishing strict graduation requirements or credit-hour limits so that students don't have to be enrolled for more than four years and don't eat up taxpayer money. Question the administration when it seeks to introduce narrow or trendy courses and demand that your university be more financially prudent by exploring expanded teaching loads, reductions in administrative staff, and combining programs. Ask for program productivity assessments—at least biennially—so that the board can close unproductive programs.

Improve accreditation. Accreditation associations often interfere in the affairs of the board of trustees, requiring major allocations of resources or revisions of policy. Never allow your governance authority to be overridden in this way. Appoint a committee or task force to monitor the accreditation process and coordinate the board's participation. Consider soliciting bids for accrediting services, just as you do for other services.

You can also encourage your administration to release consumer-friendly information about graduation rates, core curricula, and student achievement. Tell the public what it needs to know. Make accreditation reports publicly available.

ACTA can help.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni works with trustees from colleges and universities around the country to promote high academic standards, a strong liberal arts-based core curriculum, an end to grade inflation, improved teacher training, and increased accountability.

Please contact us.

American Council of Trustees and Alumni

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 802

Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 1-888-ALUMNI-8 or 202-467-6787

Fax: 202-467-6784

Email: info@goacta.org

Website: www.goacta.org

About ACTA

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a non-partisan, 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.

Jerry L. Martin is Chairman of ACTA. From 1988 to 1995, he held senior positions at the National Endowment for the Humanities, including Acting Chairman in 1993. Prior to joining NEH, Dr. Martin was Chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Colorado-Boulder. He holds degrees from the University of California-Riverside, University of Chicago, and Northwestern University.



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