

Michael McPherson • The Spencer Foundation  
and  
Morton Owen Schapiro • Williams College

# The Spellings Commission Report ONE YEAR LATER

**T**he report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (aka the Spellings Commission) was released almost exactly one year before the Forum for the Future of Higher Education's 2007 Aspen Symposium. With so many people reflecting on the work of the Spellings Commission as its one-year anniversary approached, it proved to be a fitting and timely focus for the Ford Policy Forum, an integral part of the Forum for the Future of Higher Education's Annual Symposium. The Ford Policy Forum is chaired by Michael McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, presidents of The Spencer Foundation and Williams College, respectively. Its goal is to bring the insight of economists and other scholars to bear on key issues affecting higher education. As always, the hope is that lessons drawn from the Ford Forum's work not only will inform the policy agenda at the state and federal levels but will have direct implications for how we might run our colleges and universities, with the aim being to better meet institutional goals and to better serve the public interest.

## NOTEBOOK

- The Spellings Commission report is perhaps best known for its call to increase institutional accountability. Congress continues to exert pressure on higher education to prove, rather than merely assert, its effectiveness.
- Given the widespread embrace of standardized tests by the academy—from the AP to the SAT to the GMAT—it is bemusing that so many resist the application of tests to measure outcomes.
- The CLA is designed to measure the most important aspects of student learning—critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication. It reflects more than 60 years of test development.
- Contrary to cries that the Spellings report is somehow partisan in nature, Breneman argues that such a commission formed by a Democratic administration likely would have produced a very similar report.



## The Spellings Commission

The Spellings Commission garnered tremendous attention throughout the course of its work, and much was written about it as the one-year anniversary of the release of its report approached. With the benefit of time, we can look back on the report and ask how effective it has been and what its prospects for the future are.

The Spellings Commission report is perhaps best known for its call to increase institutional accountability. Last year's Ford Policy Forum focused on exactly that subject, citing the worry that if higher education doesn't take outcomes assessment more seriously, somebody else might very well do it for us. Indeed, Congress continues to exert pressure on higher education to prove, rather than merely assert, its effectiveness, with colleges' and universities' favorable tax status and government funding hanging in the balance. We cite again from the preamble to the Spellings report:

"...American higher education has become what, in the business world, would be called a mature enterprise: increasingly risk averse, at times self-satisfied, and unduly expensive. It is an enterprise that has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be trans-

formed to serve the changing educational needs of a knowledge economy..." (p. xii). The text itself states, "We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the other reforms we propose. Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families" (p. 4).

Strong words indeed. By assembling some of the debate's key players, our intention was to move beyond name-calling and instead have a substantive discussion about the critical issues at stake.

Charles Miller did a remarkable job presiding over a commission comprised of people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The fact that they reached near unanimity in signing the report is a testament to his savvy and perseverance. A distinguished businessman with extensive experience in higher education (including his service as chair of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas System), his presence at the Ford Policy Forum was as appreciated as it was anticipated. The other two participants, David Breneman and Richard Shavelson, are distinguished academics. Their scholarly contributions are well known, and they have had impressive hands-on experience as college and

university administrators as well. Breneman has been a liberal arts college president and a dean at a public research university; Shavelson has been a dean at both a public and a private research university.

## Charles Miller Reflects on the Report

Miller, a long-time friend of both Secretary Spellings and President Bush, describes the background leading to the formation of the commission, formally known as A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Miller advocated for some time for the creation of such a commission; it eventually was formed as a bipartisan group comprised of distinguished men and women committed to engaging in an open-minded dialogue about higher education's problems and solutions. In addition



**Congress continues to exert pressure on higher education to prove, rather than merely assert, its effectiveness, with colleges' and universities' favorable tax status and government funding hanging in the balance.**

to eight meetings of the full group, held in six different cities, the commission broke out into various task forces. They listened to many experts and collected and analyzed an impressive amount of data. Their report, *A Test of Leadership*, reflects a remarkable consensus among the commission's members.

Miller insists that two of the earliest negative reactions to their work—that the commission sought to federalize higher education and that they were going to propose a set of simplistic standardized tests for all of higher education—were off the mark. For Miller, a self-described libertarian, those criticisms were, at best, uninformed. The federal government has long been a player in American higher education, and the commission's aim was to determine how best to involve the federal government going forward. As for testing, Miller reflects on his work in Texas to create public school accountability, motivated not by a desire to centralize authority but rather to deregulate a highly centralized bureaucracy.

Miller's experience at the University of Texas was to gain the freedom of self-management and then to develop an accountability system to measure the university's results. From the beginning, he supported providing maximal institutional autonomy along with accountability. He predicts that pressure at the state level will lead to outcomes assessment regardless

of whether institutions want it or not. As for testing, while it is easy to disparage simple-minded measures of cognitive and other gains, many detractors ignore some highly sophisticated alternative instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Moreover, given the widespread embrace of standardized tests by the academy—from the AP to the SAT to the GMAT—it is bemusing that so many resist the application of tests to measure outcomes.

Miller also addresses criticisms of the “tone” of the report. He says that he was warned that if the commission were not sufficiently genteel in its recommendations, members of the academy would reject the report out of hand. Miller thought that was absurd. Indeed, Secretary Spellings charged the commission with being as direct as possible in its report, and it was.

The commission also was criticized for what it didn’t focus on. Community colleges, graduate education, research, globalization, etc., allegedly got little attention, although Miller argues that a close reading of the report shows that aspects of a number of these topics were indeed addressed.

The report focuses on the key elements of educational success: access, affordability, accountability, and quality. In terms of access, the problem of poor preparation for college is widespread, and higher education has a good deal of responsibility to help fix K–12 education. As for affordability, Miller sums up the issue as follows: “We found that our financial aid system is confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative, and frequently does not direct aid to students who truly need it.” The solution, he says, is not to pour more money into need-based aid but instead to completely rethink the system. Moreover, he argues, the entire higher education financing system is dysfunctional.

Turning next to accountability, Miller believes that a lack of transparency results in a lack of public trust. Available data have limited usefulness, but when the commission recommended a longitudinal data system that would track student progress, certain higher education leaders were highly vocal in resisting it. Miller suggests that unit record systems are coming, regardless of what some leaders might hope. He then returns to the CLA as an answer to how we might measure important aspects of student learning. Employers would appreciate real measures of educational outcomes and so too would students. Institutions that do the best job of educating their students would receive well-deserved recognition and rewards.

Finally, in terms of quality, Miller argues that not only have higher education outcomes not been improving, they have in fact been deteriorating. The report points to accreditation as a barrier to change and innovation, rather than a solution.

Miller concludes by arguing that ignoring the issues

highlighted by the commission could lead to the kind of intervention institutions fear. “For me today, the biggest thing would really be full transparency, because if we could do that and get the trust, learn the best practices, understand the full cost, find ways to measure productivity, we could provide the autonomy that institutions need to do their business correctly.”

### **David Breneman on Whether the Report Will Have a Long-Term Impact**

Breneman raises the question of whether a report issued in the waning years of a presidential administration will have any relevance in the future. He answers with a resounding “yes.” The four key issues—access, affordability, quality, and accountability—are not going away regardless of the particular administration in office. Moreover, contrary to cries that the Spellings report is somehow partisan in nature, Breneman argues that such a commission formed by a Democratic administration likely would have produced a very similar report.

Breneman takes issue with the generally negative reaction to the commission’s work from inside the academy. The ever more prevalent view outside higher education, he notes, is that we need to face up to a number of serious challenges, and our defensiveness in the face of valid concerns is troubling. People who ask tough questions, according to Breneman, need not be labeled anti-intellectual.

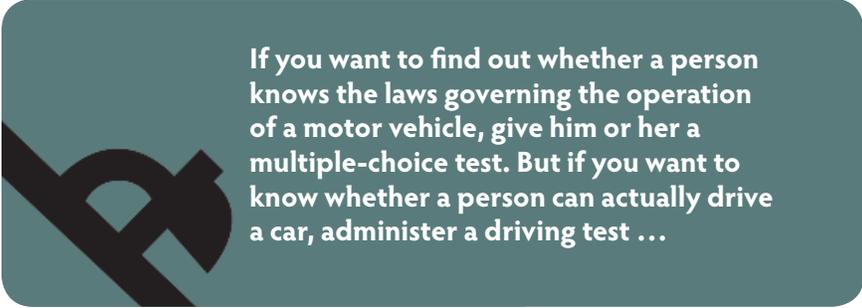
Breneman points to six examples of system-wide underperformance: too much remedial work being done in higher education; rapid rises in sticker prices; an incomprehensible and inequitable system of financial aid; low rates of college completion; limited college access for a number of student groups; and failure to assess student learning. The Spellings Commission addressed each of these areas, and higher education needs to respond.

Why then hasn’t the report been taken more seriously? First, the examples of underperformance outlined above have limited relevance for the narrow band of highly selective public and private colleges and universities that receive an undue amount of attention. At these schools, little remediation is needed, admission is more competitive than ever regardless of price, resources are available to provide increasingly generous aid packages, graduation rates are very high, and their graduates are in great demand. Thus, it isn’t at all surprising that leaders of “elite” higher education seem to be ignoring the commission’s report.

Breneman argues, however, that viewing the work of the Spellings Commission as irrelevant is short-sighted. The leaders of the nation’s top colleges and universities should use their

national platform to address all of higher education. If they do not, eventually they may face the consequences of their apparent arrogance and insensitivity. Already we hear rumblings about taxing endowments, changing tax benefits for charitable giving, price caps on tuition increases, and the like.

Breneman emphasizes the need for serious dialogue about these issues and hopes that the commission's report serves as a starting point.



**If you want to find out whether a person knows the laws governing the operation of a motor vehicle, give him or her a multiple-choice test. But if you want to know whether a person can actually drive a car, administer a driving test ...**

### **Richard Shavelson on Measuring Outcomes**

When the Spellings report cited the use of the CLA (which Shavelson and his colleagues developed) as a way to promote educational accountability, it shined a spotlight on what many think is a promising tool to measure outcomes. As a result, the number of colleges and universities using the CLA has doubled since the report was issued in September 2006.

The CLA is designed to measure the most important aspects of student learning—critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication. Shavelson illustrates the approach underlying the CLA with the following example: If you want to find out whether a person knows the laws governing the operation of a motor vehicle, give him or her a multiple-choice test. But if you want to know whether a person can actually drive a car, administer a driving test that covers appropriate sample tasks such as starting the car, making turns, and parking. As Shavelson argues, life doesn't present itself as a set of alternatives with a single correct answer, and neither should testing.

The CLA includes both performance and analytic writing tasks and reflects more than 60 years of test development. It addresses problems related to the time and cost of scoring by taking advantage of the Internet and computer and statistical technologies.

Shavelson argues that the CLA is but one piece of the assessment and accountability puzzle. That may be true, but those who say that the Spellings Commission has recommended simple-minded testing as a way to assess learning outcomes should become familiar with this innovative and sophisticated assessment tool.

### **Conclusion**

Panels frequently are in tune with their audience. Preaching to the choir has many benefits, not the least of which is to leave everyone with the pleasant feeling that there is an obvious truth, and that they have discovered it. That isn't what happened at the Ford Policy Forum's 2007 session. We would describe this forum more in terms of uncomfortable learning—being confronted with ideas that place you outside your comfort zone as you try to find a common language to discuss real differences in a collegial and productive way. Our hope is that this forum can enhance the quality of a discussion that all too often disappoints as a result of widespread distrust and suspicion. Finding common ground isn't easy, but these issues are too important to not try.

Michael McPherson is president of The Spencer Foundation and is currently serving as co-chair of the College Board's Rethinking Student Aid study group. He was president of Macalester College from 1996 to 2003. Prior to that, he was professor of economics and dean of the faculty at Williams College. McPherson can be reached at [pres@spencer.org](mailto:pres@spencer.org).

Morton Owen Schapiro is president of Williams College, a position he assumed in 2000. Prior to that, he was dean of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and chair of the economics department at the University of Southern California. He served previously at Williams as professor of economics and assistant provost. Schapiro can be reached at [mschapiro@williams.edu](mailto:mschapiro@williams.edu).