

COMMENTS ON THE SPELLINGS COMMISSION REPORT

It has been roughly one year since the release of the Spellings Commission report, and the Bush administration is on its way out of office. A report released by a Secretary of Education in the waning years of any administration is bound to raise the question of whether, once that administration leaves office, anyone will bother reading a report so sponsored. Thus, the first issue to be considered is whether the report will have continuing relevance based on its substance and not just on its provenance.

My answer to that question is a resounding “Yes!” From the perspective of public policy toward higher education, the four issues that the report emphasizes are the right ones, issues that will continue to be with us for years after the commission’s report has been forgotten:

1. Access
2. Affordability
3. Quality
4. Accountability.

I believe that any objective observer would agree that these four issues are not inherently politically partisan, nor heavily ideological. A case can also be made that under other circumstances, we might well have seen a report focusing on similar issues from a Democratic administration. To make that point, let us suppose that in 2000 the Supreme Court had elected Al Gore rather than George Bush. Had that happened, a leading contender for the position of Secretary of Education in a Gore administration would have been Governor James Hunt of North Carolina, an education governor if ever there were one. Hunt

was a prominent and effective member of the Spellings Commission, and his imprint on the report is obvious to those who know him. He has also served for the past 10 years as chair of the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPE), whose president, Pat Callan, served as a consultant to the Spellings Commission. Since 2000, NCPPE has released a biennial report card on state performance in U.S. higher education, entitled *Measuring Up*. This series of reports has graded each state on six measures of educational performance:

1. Preparation
2. Participation
3. Completion
4. Affordability
5. Benefits
6. Learning.

The parallels of the *Measuring Up* reports and the issues highlighted by the Spellings Commission are close and obvious. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I should note that I serve as chair of the Advisory Committee to the *Measuring Up* reports and thus have had a clear window on the thinking of Governor Hunt, the NCPPE board, and staff as they have compiled these documents.) Hence, my conclusion is that under a Gore administration, we might likely be discussing the Hunt Commission Report and, were we doing that, we would be having essentially the same discussion.

The Public Policy Perspective

A worrisome disconnect between public policy and the nation's leading higher education institutions exists today. The generally negative—even hostile—reaction to the Spellings Commission report from the academy, including some after-the-fact confessions by disillusioned academic members of the commission, is illustrative. The “public policy perspective” is the general view of higher education one hears from those external to the institutions—intelligent and thoughtful legislators, governors, business people, and alumni—who are broadly supportive and understand the importance of a strong system of higher education but who do not swallow all of the arguments the higher education community makes on its own behalf. From this vantage point, it is reasonable to raise the following issues concerning the U.S. system of higher (postsecondary) education:

1. How well is it serving our citizens?
2. How can affordability be ensured?
3. How well and effectively are students learning?

4. How cost-effective is the system?
5. How do we ensure that the system is globally competitive?

To challenge our colleges and universities to do better in these areas is not necessarily hostile or anti-intellectual, but rather part of the normal work of public policy analysis. By and large, that seems to be what the Spellings Commission has done, and I am troubled by the defensive—or dismissive—reaction that the report has received on many of the nation's campuses.

Both the Spellings Commission and the *Measuring Up* reports highlight a number of areas of system-wide underperformance, including the following:

1. Heavy reliance on remediation in many colleges and universities
2. Price increases that consistently exceed increases in the Consumer Price Index
3. A complex, nontransparent, largely incomprehensible, and often inequitable system of student financial aid
4. Low rates of college completion, even after six years of enrolled time
5. Denial of access to many, including older, part-time students
6. Failure to assess student learning.

Higher Education's Response

Any objective review of American higher education will quickly show that the questions and issues noted above are appropriate, reasonable, and worthy of discussion and study. To not respond to them as serious concerns is to abdicate responsibility.

Why then has the response from much of the leadership of higher education to both sets of reports been so negative? Part of the answer lies in the fact that these shortcomings do not resonate with the experience of the leaders of the top 5 to 10 percent of our nation's colleges and universities. Specifically, our leading institutions are not troubled generally by remediation, but curiously more with its opposite: the overpreparedness of many highly qualified students who bring 20 to 30 units of Advanced Placement credits with them when they enroll. These institutions are wrestling with how much of that credit to accept, thereby releasing students from many entering courses covered by those exams. Their issue is whether Advanced Placement courses are truly the equivalent of college courses, and some faculty and administrators have their doubts.

Further, with regard to tuition increases, the most selective institutions long ago discovered that, for all practical purposes, the demand curves they face are highly price-inelastic; i.e., students and their families are simply not deterred by high and rising prices. Instead, these colleges face extreme excess demand, with many more students clamoring for admission than they can accept. Indeed, many joke (wryly) about why Princeton's or Amherst's tuitions are so low, as the market-clearing price would be thousands of dollars above current levels. Furthermore, these campuses note that resources available per student from all sources are much greater than the tuition price, as everyone enrolled receives a subsidy from endowment earnings, annual gifts, and the like. Consequently, concerns about affordability do not generate much traction on these campuses.

In addition, most of these institutions have begun offering virtually free rides to students admitted from families with incomes below some measure, such as twice the poverty level for a family of four. Consequently, these institutions can argue that with federal and state student aid, plus their own resources, they are handling the affordability problems that a modest number of their students face. This factor dilutes their concern with the overall health of the student financial aid system.

With regard to completion, most of the top colleges graduate a very high percentage of students within four years (or four years and a summer), and thus do not see the completion rate as an issue of concern. And, being selective colleges, by definition they do not accept responsibility for universal access. That task is left to nonselective four-year colleges and the community college system.

Finally, with employers and top graduate and professional schools eager to snap up their graduates, selective colleges are not impressed by the arguments for developing better measures of student learning. Granted, this stance avoids the question of value added of the education they offer, but in this environment it is easy to not be concerned about assessment. As long as graduates meet the market test of the labor market and of further education, it is hard to generate much enthusiasm for the messy and uncertain work of trying to measure student learning.

In short, leaders of the top colleges and universities, viewing the world from their own vantage points, see little in the Spellings Report or in the *Measuring Up* reports to motivate them to change. The fully predictable response from this group of college leaders to any new report from an external group that is critical of higher education is initially defensive, as leaders assess the reports

for what may be perceived as harmful. The next response, having concluded that the reports are largely irrelevant to their institutions, is to dismiss the reports and simply ignore them. Such a response is understandable in that these colleges are succeeding in the marketplace by virtually any measure. Why bother to respond to external critics when the criticism does not pose a direct threat to either institutional resources or prestige? The result is a nonconversation on these concerns of public policy, as the groups fail to interact. My concern, however, is that ignoring reasonable issues about the system raised by external parties may be a short-sighted response.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE NATION'S LEADING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE STRATIFICATION OF OUR SYSTEM AND THE UNFORTUNATE FACT THAT ONLY THE LEADERS OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS ARE GIVEN A PLATFORM FROM WHICH TO ADDRESS CONCERNS ABOUT SYSTEM PERFORMANCE.

Conclusion

The disconnect between the nation's leading colleges and universities and public policy draws attention to the stratification of our system and the unfortunate fact that only the leaders of the most prestigious institutions are given a platform from which to address concerns about system performance. The presidents of Eastern Midwestern State University or Big City Community College simply do not command the attention of the higher education community and thus have to rely on their more prestigious colleagues to engage in the public discourse on these policy issues. But, as we have seen, it is precisely these most prestigious institutions that have little reason to so engage. At various moments in our history we have had individuals, such as Clark Kerr, whose backgrounds have been in high-level college or university administration in the most prestigious institutions and who have commanded a national platform to address all of higher education, but those moments have been the exception rather than the rule.

It surely will not be healthy for higher education in the long run if external parties conclude that the leadership of our institutions will not engage them in addressing reasonable concerns. Is it only accidental that one hears rumblings from Congress about taxing endowments, altering tax benefits for charitable giving, imposing price caps, or

denying student aid to certain campuses—all blunt clubs that may be more indicative of frustration than careful thought? Does this failure to engage help to explain the withdrawal of the major private foundations from support for studies of the higher education enterprise? Are governors and state legislators, as well as the business community, likely to seek ways to hit higher education with the proverbial two-by-four in order to get our attention?

Naturally, one hopes to avoid such harmful confrontations. Perhaps the vehicle to do so would be to undertake

serious thought, discussion, and action on this troubling disconnect between policy makers and the higher education community. That would be a valuable and noble purpose, worthy of all of our support.

DAVID BRENEMAN is University Professor, Newton and Rita Meyers Professor in Economics of Education, and director of the BA/MPP program in Public Policy at the University of Virginia. He served as dean of the Curry School of Education there from 1995 to 2007. Breneman can be reached at dwb8n@virginia.edu.