



Archived Information



A NATIONAL DIALOGUE:

The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

SUMMARY OF MEETING February 7, 2006, Seattle

A variety of topics and emotions were presented in a two-part hearing of A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education on February 7 in Seattle. Leading educational experts spoke passionately of innovative programs and policies to improve higher education while college students described their struggles to pay for school and fervently sought an expanded federal role in financial aid. The testimony was widespread but dutifully reflected the central task of the Commission—to develop a comprehensive strategy for higher education that recognizes diversity and addresses the future economic and workforce needs of America. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced the formation of the Commission last September and requested a final report with “bold” recommendations in August. Commission members attending were Mr. Richard Stephens of The Boeing Company, who served as acting chair; Dr. Richard Vedder of Ohio University; Dr. James Duderstadt of the University of Michigan; Dr. Robert Mendenhall of Western Governors College, and Ms. Sara Martinez Tucker of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund. The goal of this session was to hear prepared testimony, then open the proceedings to the community at large.

Remarks by Dr. Sam Smith, President Emeritus, Washington State University

Smith advocated more private and public sector partnerships to address accessibility and affordability issues. He believes America is losing ground in key subject areas, particularly in math, science, engineering, and technology. “There is no question that our higher education system as compared to other countries around the world is slipping,” he said, calling for new funding methods to keep institutions competitive. “Our universities today are working . . . with very limited resources.”

Vedder: *Should we be doing more online things with bright kids in their junior and senior years in high school, encouraging them to attend universities early?*

Smith: *The divide between high school and college is a foolish device. The more we look at institutions that are a combination and the more we can use the technology to bridge that, I think the better off.*

Remarks by Dr. Pam Tate, President, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

Tate said the Commission must pay attention to adult learners because they are 45 percent of undergraduate students and future workforce demands make them valuable assets. Regarding affordability, she said a national survey shows only 35 percent of some 7,000 employers offered tuition assistance. She recommended employing “a social marketing campaign” to get small and mid-sized businesses and industry more involved in higher education.

Tucker: *Have you found a difference between adult learners retraining for better or different jobs and those making their way to higher education for the first time?*

Tate: *Yes. We see a very different kind of support needed for people coming to education for the first time. A lot are lacking the most basic skills necessary for success in college; whereas those who are returning for retraining at least have a level of skill and knowledge they can bring to the table.*

Remarks by Dr. Charles H. Mitchell, Chancellor, Seattle Community College District

Mitchell described the educational mission of America's more than 1,150 community colleges and their importance to the economic, cultural and civic well being of the population. He urged increased state and local funding, greater reliance on community colleges to deal with workforce needs, and wider recognition of their role in remedial and pre-college education.

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Remarks by Dr. David Conley, Director, Center for Educational Policy Research, University of Oregon

Conley questioned the effectiveness of the high school-college separation, noting there was little accountability regarding who is admitted to higher education and the fate of the “middle fifty percent” of scholastic achievers. “They’re really not prepared for what they run into.” He recommended a closer working relationship between high schools and colleges and a review of entry-level courses.

Remarks by Mr. Mark A. Emmert, President, University of Washington

Emmert presented a more cheerful picture of American higher education, calling it “one of the great competitive advantages of our nation.” He said maintaining it will require aggressive action to maintain global competitiveness. Besides education, he said, “Universities produce two things—smart people and great innovative ideas.”

Duderstadt: *Will the priorities of aging baby boomers—health care, crime, taxes—mean less public resources for education or will they make it a priority once they understand its importance to their future?*

Emmert: *It is a juggling act. You have to operate inside political realities. I am disappointed in our baby boomer generation because we seem to be a little self-centered in the things we’re investing in.*

Remarks by Mr. Andrew Menter, CEO, Highland Campus Health Group

Menter said dwindling state funding is forcing universities to explore other revenue streams, which may create additional cost and risk. He said student health centers that do not accept private health insurance create two problems—the students are paying out-of-pocket for ancillary charges and the services are missing out on significant revenue streams by not billing for office visits. He recommended creating policies that make it worthwhile to partner with higher education.

Remarks by Dr. Richard Anderson, Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington

Anderson explained the “tremendous potential” of applied technology to the classroom. He cited the following examples: The Tutored Video Instruction, which facilitates discussion with pre-recorded, archival material, and Digital Study Hall, which uses low-cost digital technology to show educational content. Anderson’s current project uses networked devices such as PDAs and laptops to enhance traditional instruction.

Vedder: *Will the higher education community, with its lack of incentive to change, utilize technology?*

Anderson: *I do find a lot of conservatism at the university, but I also find tremendous energy on the part of individual faculty in experimentation and innovation.*

Remarks by Ms. Pam Silas, Executive Director, American Indian Science and Engineering Society

Silas said a complex history, socio-economic barriers to pursuing higher education, and distrust of school systems that advocate assimilation has made achievement difficult in Native American communities. Nonetheless, her program has helped 17,000 Native Americans pursue degrees in science and engineering. “A lot of our population is still in very rural and remote areas,” she said. “Access to opportunities and role models is minimal.” Silas recommended improving teacher training and strengthening partnerships with industry.

PUBLIC TESTIMONY

Carolyn Hayek, Washington State President, American Association of University Women: “Research shows two-thirds of all college students are reporting incidents of sexual harassment in their college experience. It appears verbal and physical abuses are becoming a way of life on campus.”

Cynthia Johnson, Director, Venture (special needs program), Bellevue Community College: “Postsecondary special education echoes civil rights issues in our nation’s past with regard to access and attitudinal barriers. We believe this is the last bastion of prejudice in higher education.”

Jennifer Pae, Vice President, United States Student Association: “We’re graduating an entire generation of educated youth in debt. Federal grant aid and loans are key components of financial aid.”

Tyson Johnston, student, University of Washington: “Higher education must be accessible to all and the federal government must take a larger role. Larger means grant aid must be expanded.”

Melissa Aar, student, University of Washington: “The burden to cover the cost of education is increasingly being left up to students . . . it is time the federal government steps up and meets that effort.”

Garrett Havens, student, Eastern Washington University: “The number of hours students are working is not conducive to a proper and healthy education . . . (expanding) federal grants is a necessary component to addressing this concern.”

Kathryn Gyman, student, Lane Community College: “Student aid is evaporating before our eyes. We can protect our education by investing more grant and aid and cheaper loans for college students.”