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“A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education”

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by

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Madam Secretary, Members of the Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity. Our hope in addressing you this morning is that we find common ground and affirm a common purpose. “Access,” “affordability,” “accountability,” and “quality:” these issues not only characterize this and the other public hearings you are holding across the country, they are also the oft-expressed concerns of policymakers, business leaders, the media, parents, and students of all ages. If this is to be a candid, and ultimately useful, national dialogue, let’s begin by acknowledging that many today are asking whether our institutions of higher education are more interested in their own preservation and prerogatives than with the admission, support, and successful graduation of students. Fair or not, such perceptions are increasingly setting the tone and shaping the current national debate.

We come before you today as representatives of the six New England state higher education executive officers (SHEEO's) to suggest that our states – indeed all states – need to speak directly to these concerns. We believe that an increase in the number of citizens graduating well prepared from our nation's colleges and universities is both a moral and economic imperative. The evidence of this need is compelling and deeply troubling. You know it; we know it; we all cite it. Commissioner Lewis and I would report to you this morning the recent commitment of our six states to work as one to meet the urgent demand for more and better prepared graduates.

But let us illustrate why we know this must be the focus – indeed the “face” – of our work.

In this proverbial picture worth a thousand words, you see hundreds of faces representing the youth population of our New England states. Our cohort is not growing like that of a California or Florida, but it is increasingly and stunningly becoming more diverse ethnically, culturally, and economically. Consider this set of facts: of every 100 first year high school students in New England, only 75 currently make it to graduation and possess a diploma that in today's marketplace is worth less than it was even a decade ago. Consider further that of these 75 high school graduates, only 44 immediately enter college, this despite the fact that we in New England have an especially high density of colleges as well as

a long tradition of appreciation for higher education. Of these 44 entering college students, however, only 34 will be enrolled in their sophomore year. And finally, please look carefully at the 25 faces of those who will actually earn a college degree. While we may congratulate those who have graduated, we must be shamed by the talent that has fallen by the wayside: the other 75, many of whom have missed the chance to acquire the habits of heart and habits of mind to secure a productive and satisfying future.

It is for all of those faces that we peeled off this picture that we commit publicly to the steps that we are taking *as a region*. Working within the New England Board of Higher Education, we unveiled last month "College Ready New England:" an unprecedented, region-wide alliance that has a P-16 vision to increase the number of high school graduates and GED completers who aspire to and are ready for college, and to increase the percentage of those who enroll in and graduate from our colleges and universities. This project has just begun, but it has the full support of all six of our governors, and in many ways parallels the purpose of your Commission. We are developing shared data sources and measurements to assess our progress across an agenda that includes the following:

- Securing from each of our governing boards a public commitment that its priority is affordable access to higher education, especially for low- to middle-income students of all ages.
- Partnering with K-12 in success-tested programs such as middle-school mentoring and dual admission for high school seniors.
- Reallocating resources to increase funding need-based institutional financial aid as a supplement to, not a substitute for, federal financial aid.
- Developing incentives that challenge our institutions to improve retention and graduation rates and encourage students to graduate within shorter time periods.
- Sharing those best practices across our six-state region that assess student learning *en route* to graduation, student performance at graduation, and alumni and employer satisfaction out after graduation. (We need to know, not just assume, that our graduates leave with the knowledge and skills critical for success in today's global economy and society.)
- Rewarding innovative and successful institutional efforts to improve productivity by reducing the cost of instruction while maintaining quality, including single-point of contact for program and financial information, on-line and hybrid instruction, and flexible scheduling.

- Providing for ease of transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, including development of block transfer articulation agreements, dual admission, and timely and effective advising across sectors.

This is what we have committed to do. What best practices we identify and then try to expand across our region will be worked out in the coming months. What is noteworthy is our resolve once again to work together as a region. Fifty years ago, these six states, formed a compact establishing the Regional Student Program, and by so doing recognized the impact of collaboration to expand access. Today, through the College Ready New England, we again agree to address access, affordability, accountability, and quality as a region. We set a high standard fifty years ago; we need to set a higher standard today so we are prepared for tomorrow. We would ask that the Federal Government support this commitment by the following:

- Provide financial aid to low- and lower-income students. We are concerned that the trend toward private loans is increasing the debt load of our graduates and is creating an undue burden on our next generation of workers.
- Support the establishment of a national student unit record system (with fail-safe privacy safeguards) so that we can assess the actual costs of and student progress through higher education.

- Provide incentives to higher education to partner with business leaders and policy makers to increase graduates in critical shortage areas, including creative and flexible measures to support the education of older students and those wishing to change careers.
- And lastly, continue this dialogue. The recommendations you ultimately frame, drawn as they surely will be from the hundreds of testimonies you will have received, should set a common agenda for all of us who share responsibility for the education of our fellow citizens.

The faces no longer in the picture behind me should be more than sufficient incentive for us all to find our common cause.