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A NATIONAL DIALOGUE:

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

SUMMARY OF MEETING

March 20, 2006, Boston

New England, with its rich tradition of fine colleges and universities, proved an ideal setting for the March 20 meeting of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The focus was on change and innovation as the Commission continued to implement Secretary Margaret Spellings' mandate to develop a comprehensive higher education strategy that secures America's future workforce and economic needs. A final report is due in August. Referring to the New England area as "the epicenter for quality in higher education," Dr. James J. Duderstadt, a Commission member and President Emeritus of the University of Michigan, served as acting chair. Other Commission members attending were Mr. Nicholas Donofrio of IBM Corporation, Dr. Charlene R. Nunley of Montgomery College, Dr. Richard Vedder of Ohio University, and Dr. Charles M. Vest of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Nine presenters, most of them university presidents, and 40 members of the public testified before the commission regarding their major concerns, which included increasing federal financial aid, strengthening science and math programs in secondary schools, fostering closer alliances between university and secondary school instructors, helping students apply classroom lessons to everyday life, and expanding higher education access to non-traditional students.

Remarks by Dr. Susan Hockfield, President, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Hockfield told the Commission that federal budget reductions of more than \$12 billion for student loans over the next five years and the continued freeze on maximum Pell Grant allotments for the past four years are counterproductive to expanding educational opportunities. "About 15 percent of MIT students come from families with incomes less than \$40,000 a year. To help ease the debt burden of our students with the greatest financial need, beginning next fall we will provide matching funds for the Federal Pell Grants for our students," Hockfield said. "Next year, 57 percent of our 4,000 undergraduates will receive need-based scholarships from MIT averaging \$25,500 per student. These policies have made the American dream come true for many MIT alumni. Hockfield recommended that the federal government increase student financial assistance and provide special support to students studying in the so-called STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering and math.

Dr. Jack Wilson, President, The University of Massachusetts

Wilson, who leads a 60,000-student university, said his goals include applying more technology to the academic environment, maximizing interaction between faculty and students, and establishing programs that encourage and enable participation from under-represented groups. Wilson said his principal concern is dwindling state funding. "The university has a \$2 billion budget . . . about \$400 million of that comes from the state. That represents about 20 percent of our budget. Not too many years ago, the state provided 40 percent of our budget," he said. "We're not alone. So many of the public universities have faced that same challenge. It's happening across the country." Wilson said despite economic challenges, the school launched UmassOnline about five years ago. The online venture serves primarily older, employed students who need a degree or certificate. Wilson said the successful program has logged 20,000 enrollments and generated about \$20 million in revenues.

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Dr. Dennis D. Berkey, President, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Berkey described his school of 2,800 undergraduates and 1,000 graduate students as an innovative institution that places a “high premium” on student-faculty interaction and collaborative learning through a curriculum driven by projects. “This mode of learning emphasizes the development of important work and life skills, such as cooperation, team work, appreciating differences, dealing with ambiguity, effectiveness in written and oral communication, and working within real constraints on time and resources,” said Berkey, who added WPI’s methods are expensive but effective in preparing graduates to be “excellent” entrepreneurs, inventors, and leaders. He urged expansion of collaborative instruction and a closer working relationship among elementary, secondary, and university teachers to improve curricula.

Dr. Robert Brown, President, Boston University

Despite its problems, “The American higher education system of public and private universities and colleges is the envy of essentially all nations,” said Brown, who urged the Commission to “resist recommendations that normalize institutions toward any standard . . . International leaders realize the competition between these institutions is responsible for the excellence of our schools.” Brown also noted that high school students interested in college need better academic preparation and recommended that college faculty work with public schools to improve teaching in mathematics and reading. He said the federal government should increase higher education funding and provide more financial aid for needy undergraduates. “It’s critically important to help qualified needy students have access to all universities, especially private universities,” Brown said.

Dr. Richard Miller, President, Olin College of Engineering

Miller thinks his school is developing the higher education model that may be useful for other schools seeking more innovative curricula. The small, experimental institution currently enrolls 288 students with 34 faculty members and is funded by an endowment from the Olin Foundation, which provides 90 percent of the operating revenue. And although its first commencement is not until May 21, Miller said the school’s instructional model is already a proven success because its unique curriculum for undergraduate engineering majors emphasizes practical application of classroom learning, teamwork, and participation in school administration. Students receive eight semester tuition scholarships and work closely with professors in an atmosphere that encourages both independent thought and teamwork. Students routinely serve on most administrative committees,

work alongside professors on research projects, help select incoming freshman, and new professors. They are required to work on an ongoing project and present work to corporate visitors and the school community during the Olin Expo each semester. “When recruiting our first several classes of incoming students, we told them when people ask you where you are going to college, tell them you’re building your own,” Miller said.

Dr. Lawrence S. Bacow, President, Tufts University

Bacow said tuition at Tufts is “breathtakingly expensive” and makes it more difficult to bring the hope of a college education to economically challenged groups. At Tufts, where it costs approximately \$42,000 a year to attend, “We guarantee that if we admit a student, we will meet the full financial need so that they can attend Tufts regardless of the ability of their families to pay,” Bacow said. The school’s average annual financial aid award exceeds \$25,000 per student. Bacow said he is wary of the growing number of institutions awarding merit scholarships—financial aid given to students at the top of their high school class or who scored well on standardized tests. “If we expend scarce financial aid resources merely to redistribute the brightest kids among our institutions, it’s doing nothing to improve access,” Bacow said. “I encourage the Commission to refocus attention on our students whose need is greatest.”

Dr. Mary Fifield, President, Bunker Hill Community College

Fifield discussed the enhanced status of community colleges in the American education system. “Today there are more than 1,150 community colleges across this great country,” she said. “They enroll almost half of all students who go to college. More than 45% are first generation college students, and almost 44 percent of community college students are 25 years or older.” More than 12% live below the poverty line and have only a 20% chance of going to college. Fifield recommended ending the federal government’s “four-year freeze” on Pell Grants, continuing support for pre-college enrichment programs, allowing part-time students to apply for Academic Competitiveness Grants, continued funding for pre-college enrichment programs, and assistance for undocumented immigrant students who have spent most of their lives in this country. “Ultimately,” Fifield said, “the goal to build a nation of learners will be measured in terms of how well the nation is able to educate those who are most difficult to reach.” Commissioner Nunley asked would a “unit records” system provide greater insight into community college student attendance patterns? Fifield said the system had some merit but added, “We’re concerned because it provides information on individual students, individual people. And frankly, there’s some skepticism as to where that information may ultimately go.”

Dr. Stephen Reno, Chancellor, University System of New Hampshire
Ms. Valerie Lewis, Commissioner, Connecticut Board of Governors of Higher Education

Reno and Lewis offered joint testimony. The leading concerns of policymakers, business leaders, the media, parents, and students are access, affordability, accountability, and quality, according to Reno. “An increase in the number of citizens graduating well prepared from our nation’s colleges and universities is both a moral and an economic imperative,” he said. “The evidence is compelling and deeply troubling.” Reno cited statistics to bolster his argument: Only 75 of every 100 first-year high school students in New England make it to graduation; of those 75 graduates, only 44 immediately enter college; of the 44 entering college, only 34 will make it to the sophomore year. Reno recommended increasing financial aid to low-income students, establishing a national student database to track progress, and enhancing the network between educational institutions and the private sector. “Continue this dialogue,” Reno said. “The recommendations you ultimately frame should help us all to set a common agenda, one that is not divisive, but one that truly unites us.” Lewis described a successful program that provides a model for assessment. The project tracked 37,000 high school graduates in Connecticut for six years from 1998. Test results and continued tracking with various state databases provided reliable prediction for college retention, graduation rates, and valuable clues about how to help students. “We must become data driven in higher education, just as our business partners are,” she said. “We must use information to our best advantage.”

PUBLIC TESTIMONY—EXCERPTS

Catherine Burdell, President, Massachusetts Association, which represents 10,000 public education employees:

“Support the concept of higher education as a public good, not just as an individual benefit. Insure that higher education is accessible and affordable. We need to increase the government’s role in the funding of higher education.”

Kristi Pierce, Associate Executive Director of College Access Programs at TERI, the Education Resources Institute:

“Research shows that taking rigorous college prep courses is the most important predictor of college success. Low income and under represented groups are less likely to take the courses needed to prepare them for college.”

Jason Pramas, student, University of Massachusetts:

“We need a taxpayer funded higher education system, extending our existing K through 12 public school system to become at least a K through 16 system.”

Priscilla Walker, student, University of Massachusetts:

“State legislatures and the federal government follow taxpayers’ voice. If they do not insist on increasing their educational budget for public institutions of higher learning, then the politicians will place the money elsewhere.”

John Jeavitts, student, University of Connecticut:

“One way to more productively address the issues of access and affordability is through financial aid on both the state and federal levels.”

Elvis Mendez, student, University of Massachusetts:

“One of my best friends, unbeknownst to his parents, is actually taking a semester off from school so that he can work a full-time job and with that money enroll in the fall.”

Joshua Chaisson, student, University of Southern Maine:

“Financial barriers need to be broken down instead of built up. There is a clear correlation between education and less poverty, more education and a stronger economy, more education and more opportunities.”

Jessica Laflamme, student, Salem State College:

“Think twice before supporting cuts to grant money and raising interest rates on student loans. The students that suffer from poverty or graduate from inner city high schools mostly equipped with a smaller student-to-teacher ratio are among some of the strongest, most driven individuals.”

Mubarak Guy, student, Rutgers:

“Invest in loan programs for students that will keep the Perkins Loan alive and push for increases in federal Pell grants.”

Scott Peach, student, University of New Hampshire:

“When making decisions about our future as college students . . . Don’t only rely on statistics and numbers. Keep the person behind it all in mind.”

Jahantab Siddiqui Kim, student, University of Maryland:

“The problem is not with how much funding we get. The problem is how much students and their families can afford to pay because household income does not go up at the same rate tuition and fees go up.”

Chad Sinclair, student, University of Maryland:

“Now is the time to make a change. I ask you on behalf of students all across the country to include in your final report policy recommendations that will increase grant and loan aid at the federal level.”

Precious Kofie, student, Howard University:

“Federal funding for many students is a lifeline that provides that much needed support in order to continue their education. There are so many future ambassadors, teachers, scientists, ministers, and politicians calling on you all to help them reach their maximum potential.”

Richard Allegra, Associate Executive Director, Association on Higher Education and Disability:

“Too often students with disabilities are missing crucial information as part of their transition planning from high school to college. It is often not until they are admitted to college that they learn the difference in the level of services they will receive.”

Eileen O’Leary, Director of Student Aid and Finance, Stonehill College: “Demographic studies show that the college students of the future will be increasingly poor. We cannot afford to ignore these qualified and motivated students . . . Current federal grant programs provide proportionately less for needy students today than they did when initially created.”

Rishi Jaitly, trustee, Princeton University: “Every year in America more than 200,000 low income students graduate from high school ready for college, but do not enroll because college transition in America is close to impossible unless you have the proper guidance.”

Jessica Bibeau, student, Harvard University: “We envision an accountability system where institutions are asked to define and publish their short term strategic plans. The plan should call for definable short-term goals, obtainable measures, and concrete data speaking to these measures.”

Deborah Hart, Education Coordinator, University of Massachusetts: “Keeping college in the mix of possibilities, as students with intellectual disabilities explore which steps to take after high school, says that we believe in their potential for success.”

Jack Foley, Vice President for Government and Community Affairs, Clark College: “It is imperative that the United States Department of Education take a leading role in encouraging and supporting the development of strong, meaningful transition and post secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities.”

Jim Rooney, Director of Public Affairs, the Boston Foundation: “Over the past ten years there has been a blossoming of partnerships across academia, business, government, and neighborhood institutions in economic development, quality of life, and civic engagement. Our main recommendation is that leaders both in academia and in other sectors work more strategically to nurture and accelerate these.”

Courtney Burn, student, Northeastern University: “As a sophomore I’m already facing insurmountable debts. I owe over \$30,000 already. Our only hope is to publicly expose these shameful votes that cut and eliminate higher education funding.”