Commission on the Future of Higher Education:

In September, 2006 the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education published its findings in a report. Excerpts from that report:

- **Overall conclusions**
  - U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways
  - Education sector is complacent based on its past successes
  - U.S. system is falling behind international competitors
  - The consequences of systemic failures fall disproportionately on low-income, racial and ethnic minorities
  - Lack of clear, reliable information and absence of accountability mechanisms places users (parents, students and policymakers) at a disadvantage
  - Students have a consumer attitude
    - Cafeteria approach – take courses at multiple locations before settling on a credentialing school
    - Care more about results (jobs, success) than academic distinctions that are generally important to academic institutions
  - Higher education system is a mature industry
    - Increasingly risk-averse
    - At times self-satisfied
    - Unduly expensive
    - Failing to address the issue of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve changing needs of the knowledge economy
    - Failing to address the impact of globalization, rapidly changing technologies, diverse and aging population, and evolving marketplace
  - Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the U.S., E.U., former soviet republics, Japan, but not China and India) ranks U.S. education system 12th
  - Desired goals
    - World class system that creates new knowledge, contributes to economic prosperity and global competitiveness, and empowers citizens
    - Accessible to all Americans throughout their lives
    - Postsecondary institutions should provide high-quality instruction while improving efficiency and being more affordable
    - Creates workplace skills needed to adapt to rapidly changing economy
    - Institutions adapt to world altered by technology, demographics, and globalization, new providers and paradigms

- **Findings**
  - Value of higher education
    - 90% of fastest-growing jobs in information and service economy will require post-secondary education
    - Lifetime earnings of college graduate twice that of high school graduate
- Department of Labor predictions for new job openings in the period 2006-2016
  - Access
    - Inconsistent and substandard high school preparation
    - Pew reports the No Child Left Behind Law has received mixed reviews
      - Parents of public school children
        - 42% say the law has made public schools better, but only 30% say the law made their child’s school better
        - 43% say the law overemphasizes standardized testing
      - Public generally – the law made schools better because
        - 20% – students get more individualized attention
          - 12% – test scores improved
          - 11% – more accountability
      - Law made schools worse because
        - 30% – too much testing
        - 18% – standards were lowered
      - 40% of white respondents thought the law gave the federal government too much influence over schools, while 45% of black respondents thought the law gave federal government too little influence over schools
      - 64% of college graduates indicated the law places too much emphasis on standardized testing
    - Expectations gap between what colleges require and high schools provide
    - Gap between attendance and graduation rates for low-income and minorities and the majority
    - Sees the need for a “seamless” pathway between high schools and colleges
      - Better alignment between K-12 and college and employer expectations of those graduates
      - Help underserved improve college preparation
  - Affordability
    - College financing system provides limited incentives for colleges to improve efficiency and productivity
    - State subsidies are declining, tuition is rising, and cost per student is increasing faster than rate of inflation
    - Large share of higher education is funded by either public funds or private contributions, thus insulating producers (colleges) from consumers (students); i.e., the real cost per student is greater than the out-of-pocket cost each individual incurs
    - Cost reduction incentives are counter-balanced by perception within academic community that prestige is a function of resource accumulation
    - Percentage of family income needed to cover net college costs at private four-year institutions after grant aid in 2003 and (1992)
      - Lowest quartile – 83% (60%)
      - 2nd quartile – 41% (33%)
      - 3rd quartile – 29% (25%)
      - 4th quartile – 19% (17%)
Unmet financial need among families with income below $34,000 grew by 80% from 1990 – 2004, compared to 7% growth for families at the highest income levels over the same period.

Propose focused program of cost cutting through new performance benchmarks; lower per-student costs by reducing barriers for transfers of credits; and encourage more college courses provided in high school.

Propose revamping the current financial aid system to align it with student needs and national priorities.

**Quality**

- Evidence that quality of student learning at U.S. colleges is inadequate and sometimes declining compared to the results in other nations.
- Only 66% of full-time four-year college students complete their degrees within six years – Creighton’s rate is 75%.
- National Assessment of Adult Literacy report indicates the number of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy (ability to search, comprehend, and use continuous texts) declined from 40% to 31% in the most recent decade, and in document literacy (ability to search, comprehend and use non-continuous texts in various formats) from 37% to 25%, the quantitative literacy (ability to perform computations using numbers embedded in printed materials) rate was unchanged at 31%.
- National and state policies, and institutional practices, have failed to provide financial and logistical support for lifelong learning.

**Accountability**

- Shortage of clear, accessible information about crucial aspects of colleges and universities.
- Decisions many times are made based on reputation and rankings derived from inputs (such as financial resources) rather than outcomes.
- No evidence that is comparable across institutions regarding student learning outcomes at colleges and universities.
- Government data bases, such as National Center for Educational Statistics, omits large segments of nontraditional students.
- Accreditation reviews are generally are either kept private or focus primarily on process reviews rather than bottom-line learning and costs.
- Institutions and government have failed to sustain and nurture innovation.
  - Results of scholarly research on teaching and learning are rarely translated into practice.
  - Research in cognitive science, neurosciences, and organizational theory rarely are part of classroom experience.
  - Traditional academic calendars and schedules are an inefficient use of physical resources and foster sub-optimal learning programs.
  - Although innovation occurs at intersections of multiple disciplines, curricula and research funding remain largely in specific academic disciplines and departments.
- American students are underrepresented in STEM programs (science, technology, engineering and mathematics); foreign-born students.
represent about half the graduate students in computer sciences and earn over half the doctorates in engineering

- Calls for transparency about cost, price, and student success outcomes
- Student achievement must be measured on a value-added basis that takes into account the students’ academic baseline
- Colleges and universities must embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula and technologies to improve learning, especially in science and mathematics

**Recommendations**

- Every student in the U.S. should have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education
  - Colleges should remove barriers to student mobility (e.g., transfers)
  - Colleges should promote new learning paradigms (distance education, adult education, workplace programs)
  - Businesses should partner with colleges to provide resources for college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance
- Entire student financial aid system should be restructured
  - Public providers of financial aid should commit to meeting the needs of low-income students
  - Policymakers and higher education leaders should develop institutional level means to control costs, improve productivity and increase the supply of higher education
    - Develop new performance benchmarks designed to improve productivity and efficiency (e.g., growth in tuition should not exceed growth in median family income over a five-year period)
    - Lower per-student costs by reducing barriers to transfers
- Higher education must change from reputation based to performance based by creating a robust culture of accountability and transparency
  - Consumer-oriented information database with useful, reliable information (searchable) to enable weighing and ranking of institutional performance
  - Enhanced information for policymakers and public on financial issues and student-level (properly protected for privacy) performance outcomes
  - Postsecondary institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes
  - Accreditation should focus on performance outcomes as a priority over inputs and processes
- Higher education must embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement to improve learning, especially in science and math
- America should develop a national strategy for lifelong learning
- The U.S. government should increase its investment in educational programs that are critical to global competitiveness, such as science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions
Secretary of Education Speech to National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI):

Secretary Spellings reinforced some themes from the Commission’s Report:

- Accreditation with oversight by Department of Education helps maintain public trust in higher education
- College degree is not a sign of privilege but a prerequisite for opportunity; as a result, postsecondary system is called on to serve a larger, more diverse group and face the challenges of an ever-changing labor market
- Accreditation should look to results, not processes
- Although institutions are unique, consumers, represented by NACIQI, have the right to ask for more and better information that enables comparisons
- Because of the diversity of missions, institutions need to measure achievement in their own unique ways – no one-size-fits-all measures

Comments:

Regardless of when, or if, assessment and outcomes based data is mandated, as more schools embrace this culture of accountability, marketplace competition will cause responses in kind. Many schools have expressed frustration with input and process based evaluations by accrediting agencies and commentators, such as U.S. News. Providing mission-based outcome information enables an institution to present itself in a light most favorable to its own unique mission and programs. Providing information across multiple dimensions of interest enables institutions to present a comprehensive picture of success to the various publics in which they operate.

Sources:
Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, Press Release, 12/18/2007
Pew Research Center, “Mixed Grades for a Federal Education Law”
Creighton University Fact Book