

Secretary Margaret Spellings at the American Enterprise Institute Washington, DC | 13 March 2007

Bush administration officials find the American Enterprise Institute a comfortable—or at least less hostile—place to discuss their policies. The 12th floor conference room has six large round tables. Chairs were brought in as 80 gathered to hear U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings report on her Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The audience was suit and tie—with only one exception, who left early. Only three who looked younger than 35.

Margaret Spellings in Action

Exactly at 12:55 Secretary Spellings entered the room and began after a one-paragraph introduction by University of Ohio economist and AEI fellow Richard Vetter—one of the Commission members. She said the purpose of the Commission was to “provoke a national dialog” and it had. Although U.S. higher education is the “envy of the world,” she expressed concern it was “in danger of losing prominence.” With a command of recent research, she said “drilling down” into the data reveals underserved students—low income minorities with the potential to succeed in college—the “raging fire”. She chided policy analysts to consider the “costs of reduced civic engagement” by those who did not attend college.

She listed actions taken by the Bush administration: The Academic Competitiveness Grants commenting that it requires full-time attendance, omitting deserving part-time students. The increased Pell Grant moving from the current \$4,050 to \$4,600 and then up to \$5,400 in five years. She pointed out this makes college affordable at low-tuition community colleges.

She cited Florida as an example where common course numbering facilitates transfer and the availability of Advanced Placement courses and dual-enrollment shorten time to degree.

Referring to next week’s summit, she said the objective was a clear understanding of the issues and a progress report.

For twenty five minutes Secretary Spellings took questions. Her answers were direct to the question, she cited research and gave statistics where appropriate, and credited others—often in the room—by name for their research contribution.

The consensus at our table: Best performance by an administration official.

Zemsky: Did It Accomplish Anything?

The University of Pennsylvania’s Bob Zemsky led the panel responding to the question “The Spellings’ Commission: Did It Accomplish Anything?” Though giving credit for the “big tent” and dialog, he described the report as a “non-event.” He said a “dislodging

event” is necessary to change higher education, and the report provided none. He said there was no Commission discussion of how to change higher education. He mentioned the “three-year baccalaureate” as an example of a dislodging event; forty nations have agreed to transferable three-year degrees; transferable courses follow.

On Accreditation

Judith Eaton, representing the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, defended the accreditation agencies that form the basis for institutional eligibility for federal financial aid. During recent negotiated rulemaking the Department questioned whether their peer reviews were adequate—“professional judgments” in CHEA terminology. The Department, as Spellings pointed out, wants measures of outcomes and quality as criteria for institutional eligibility.

The accreditation agencies learned the Department has substantial power through regulation; Congressional action is not needed to change their role. As an endangered species, the agencies are trying to reach a compromise between the Department’s interest in outcome and performance measures and traditional “professional judgment.” Eaton pointed out the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges was initiating voluntary data collection, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities has established a task force to “Focus on how the academy can develop useful and credible evidence of the value that higher education adds for its students in terms of learning outcomes and student growth outcomes.” Apparently they see the future.

Eugene Hickok commented on the efforts needed to create “intellectual infrastructure” and to create “responsible, efficient and effective ‘ownership’ of learning.”

Ron Ehrenberg, Cornell University initiated the discussion of “Financing higher Education: The Future of Government Support.” He said one of the objectives should be support for the rapidly growing underrepresented groups. He said it is important to monitor quality of education, but at the same time consider the role of graduate education and scientific research—a traditional land grant university role that has served the nation well.

He reminded the audience that private education receives major federal benefits—tax credit for research, investment in capital facilities, and tax subsidies—and private education has a responsibility to the public for the benefits it received. He suggested incentives for student access and persistence. He observed the social return for education is greater than the private return.

Too much investment in higher education teaching and learning?

Richard Vedder raised the question of whether there is an overinvestment in higher education. He points out the trend for colleges and universities to allocate more funding to administration and research and less to instruction.

Charles Murray said there is a question of who can benefit from a college education. He suggests that only 25% or less can benefit. Other would benefit from work-related education. He observed that lifetime earnings for many jobs are equal to those that require college preparation. He also commented that it is better to be smart than rich in a successful meritocracy. As he said, his observations are controversial.

Harry Lewis, former Dean of Harvard College, began the discussion of “Commission’s Omissions: Curriculum, Campus Culture, and Informed Trusteeship.” He reminded the audience that faculty focus on research had, over 50 years, created a prosperous economy and a strong nation. To focus on teaching and learning, faculty incentives would have to change from their research to their teaching. He commented that Harvard’s “core curriculum” focuses on what a responsible citizen should know about the U.S. government. (Commenting that he has only one of 600 votes).

Lewis added the phrase “Data is the plural of anecdote” to the discussion.

Comments on the Conference

Is Zemsky right? Was the Commission a non-event? His conclusion underestimates Secretary Spellings’ knowledge and political skills. She has a natural constituency: the State Higher Education Executive Officers and the governors. Florida is not the only state that seeks reorganization of the education system and processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Schwarzenegger in California, Keating in Oklahoma and George W. Bush in Texas all had Performance Reviews with similar recommendations. Pressed by the rising costs of medical care and prisons, the governors have little choice but to continue to reduce funding of higher education. The State Higher Education Executive Officers will be responsible for managing budgets. Their constituency is citizens, not big research.

Zemsky is right the Commission never considered the “customer” of higher education—students and their parents. Perhaps with the exception of major research universities, the public expects a focus on teaching and learning. Educating only those both rich and smart does not meet public expectations.

Vetter on Learning Technology

Research continues to demonstrate that revised teaching practices and the use of online learning—especially as a supplement to lectures—is effective for a broad range of student preparedness. Dr. Carol Twigg, National Center for Academic Transformation, had presented supporting data to the Commission, After the conference, I asked Richard Vetter about this testimony and why there was no reference in Commission discussions or documents. He said there was no discussion of learning technology or its use to increase productivity. “It wasn’t a topic for Commission discussion.” He said learning technology was important and he hoped to study it further.

The Spellings Strategy

What next? Spellings' strategy has three steps. The first was to spotlight performance and outcomes. The Commission's report did that. The second is underway: the Department's Institution of Education Sciences is studying the feasibility of the longitudinal record of students. And the Department will be awarding contracts to analyze current state data—40 states have student-level historical data—for outcomes. By July 2008 Spellings will have documented the feasibility of a national or federated database of student higher education experience and have some practical results. Because of current state data collections, the Department can begin reporting immediately on almost all higher education students. The third step is to convince the country and Congress and more important, governors, that providing performance and outcomes data will be helpful.

It is unlikely this solution will be implemented before the President leaves office. But it is likely, with this level of awareness, clearly articulated objectives, and momentum, her plans will be implemented.

The New Future

What does this mean for colleges and universities? An intense focus on teaching and learning. We will see mass implementation of education technologies. As John Mayer and the Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction (CALI) have made podcasts a productive professional "tool" for law school faculty, the combination of new content and full-function learning systems will change teaching and learning. The community colleges will continue to lead in the use of education technology for undergraduate education, where it produces documented results. Digital repositories and learning systems incorporating collaboration suites from industry and major research universities, will serve graduate students and research faculty.

And the statistics will show most students learn more at the community colleges and teaching colleges and universities, and at lower cost. Robert Zemsky and Richard Vetter will be two of those who will lead the transformation.