

**SPEECHES****Secretary Spellings' Prepared Remarks at the National Press Club: An Action Plan for Higher Education****FOR RELEASE:**

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A year ago, I formed a bipartisan Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Its purpose: to launch a robust national dialogue on the vital issues of accessibility, affordability, and accountability.

Some of our best and brightest came together from across many sectors to examine these issues. Not from the standpoint of the government, but from that of consumers, employers, and academics.

Their report: A Test of Leadership offers keen insights into the changes that must be made for us to remain the world's leader in higher education ... providing wider opportunities for more Americans.

Higher education has long been one of the undeniable strength of our nation. In quality, diversity, and character, it's the envy of the world.

American universities have been the incubators of great ideas, the birthplaces of great inventions, and the testing grounds of great individuals.

For generations, a college education has meant the difference between a life lived on the edge of promise and one lived in the full embrace of the American Dream. A system so intrinsically linked to the future success of our children and our nation should be one of our highest priorities.

So, I ask: In our changing and ever-flattening world has higher education kept pace? Is it accessible to students of all backgrounds, including minorities, low-income students, and adults? Is it affordable? And accountable to the students, parents, and taxpayers who foot the bill?

Our universities are known as the best in the world. And a lot of people will tell you things are going just fine. But when 90-percent of the fastest-growing jobs require post-secondary education—are we satisfied with "just" fine?

Is it "fine" that college tuition has outpaced inflation, family income, even doubling the cost of health care?

Is it "fine" that only half of our students graduate on-time?

Is it "fine" that students often graduate so saddled with debt they can't buy a home or start a family?

None of this seems "fine" to me. Not as a policymaker, not as a taxpayer, and certainly not as the mother of a college sophomore. The Commission drew a similar conclusion. In their words, "...higher education has become... at times self-satisfied and unduly expensive."

In fact, times have changed. Nearly two-thirds of all high-growth, high-wage jobs created in the next decade will require a college degree; a degree only one-third of Americans have.

Where we once were leaders, now other nations educate more of their young adults to more advanced levels than we do!

This makes families anxious, and I understand why. We know higher education is the key to our children's future. We want more than anything to provide it. Yet, it's becoming difficult to do so and still make ends meet.

And like many parents, I'm wondering—will my daughter graduate equipped with skills for a career, or is she going to move back home with me?

Colleges and universities are the keepers of the flame of intellectual discourse. Well then, let's have some discourse! Let's have some debate on how to make higher education available and attainable for more Americans.

I'm not the first to grapple with these issues. States, local leaders, the business community and many in higher education are already hard-at-work tackling challenges from affordability to measuring student learning. They need and deserve our help and support.

This is an issue that touches us all. Parents, students, and taxpayers pick up the majority of the tab for higher education. Over the years, we've invested tens of billions of dollars in taxpayer money and just hoped for the best. We deserve better.

So, today I'm announcing my immediate plans to address the issues of: accessibility, affordability and accountability raised by the Commission.

First: how do we make college more accessible?

There are far too many Americans who want to go to college but can't—either because they're not prepared or can't afford it. To expand access to higher education we must better prepare our students—starting with high standards and accountability in our public schools.

These principles are the pillars of *No Child Left Behind*. And let me assure you—NCLB is going strong.

We've made great progress towards our goal of every child reading and doing math at grade level by 2014—and that's not too much to ask!

Thanks to this law our youngest students have made more academic gains in the last 5 years than the previous 28 combined. But, at the high school level, it's a different story.

A million kids drop out every single year. And those who do graduate often aren't prepared for college.

As a result, colleges, students, and taxpayers spend over a billion dollars a year on remedial classes after graduation. Ultimately, we pay the bill twice, because students don't get what they need in high school.

A high school diploma should be a ticket to success—including success in college. That's why President Bush proposed a plan to increase academic rigor in our high schools and prepare more students to succeed.

ACTION ONE under my plan is to build on this by expanding the effective principles of *No Child Left Behind* and holding high schools accountable for results.

And we will continue efforts to align high school standards with college work by increasing access to college-prep classes such as Advanced Placement.

Next, how do we make college more affordable?

Higher education's escalating sticker price has many parents facing the tough choice—whether to save for college or their own retirement. In the past five years alone, tuition at four-year colleges has skyrocketed by 40 percent. I want to know why ... and I know other parents do too!

As the Commission noted, the entire financial aid system is in urgent need of reform. At the federal level, it's a maze of 60 websites; dozens of toll-free numbers; and 17 different programs. Just to give a comparison the main federal student aid form is longer and more complicated than the federal tax form!

The Commission recommends Congress scrap the system and start over with one that's more user-friendly and effective.

In the meantime, ACTION TWO under my plan is for my Department to streamline the process, cut the application time in half, and notify students of their aid eligibility earlier than Spring of their senior year to help families plan.

The reality is no matter the costs the wealthy can pay. But for low-income, mostly minority students, college is becoming virtually unattainable. Chuck Vest, former MIT President and Commission member, put it this way: "In this country, you are better off being rich and dumb than poor and smart."

Lately, increases in institutional and state aid for low-income families have not kept pace with assistance for more affluent families. In a recent report card, 43 states were given an "F" for failing on affordability.

We must increase need-based aid. We've worked with Congress to strengthen financial aid and we've made progress. This includes making available four and a half billion dollars in scholarships for low-income students who take challenging courses in high school and study fields such as math and science.

I look forward to teaming up with Congress again to improve the financial aid process and help the students who need it most. But more money isn't going to make a difference if states and institutions don't do their part to keep costs in line.

We, at the federal level, can do our part, too. As the Commission pointed out, a big part of the cost burden on higher education is complying with the more than 200 federal regulations currently on the books. We can help lift that burden.

But even so, there are still too many who will say "just give us more money." Money's important. But we're going to keep chasing our tail on price until we realize that a good deal of the solution comes down to information. Like any other investment or enterprise, meaningful data is critical to better manage the system.

My daughter's college costs went up this year... for what? And, this is not unique to me. For most families, this is one of the most expensive investments we make. Yet there is little to no information on why costs are so high and what we're getting in return.

Which brings me to my final point. How are we going to make college more accountable for results?

I, too, experienced the confusion and frustration many parents face with the college selection process. I found it almost impossible to get the answers I needed. And I'm the Secretary of Education!

We live in the "Information Age." If you want to buy a new car you go online and compare a full range of models, makes, and pricing options. And when you're done you'll know everything from how well each car holds its value down to wheel size and number of cup-holders.

The same transparency and ease should be the case when students and families shop for colleges, especially when one year of college can cost a lot more than a car!

That's why I support the Commission's recommendation on this issue. ACTION THREE under my plan will work to pull together the same kind of privacy-protected student-level data we already have for K through 12 students. And use that data to create a higher education information system.

More than 40 states already have a system like this in place, but that's 40 islands unto themselves.

That kind of localized system may work when you're dealing with kindergarten through 12th grade, but it's not helpful when it comes to college and you're trying to compare options: in-state versus out of state, public versus private, community college versus four-year.

We want to work with Congress, states, and institutions to build a system that's more useful and widely available to every student.

The information would be closely protected. It would not identify individual students, nor be tied to personal information. It wouldn't enable you to go online and find out how Margaret Spellings did in her political science class.

Armed with this information, we can re-design my Department's existing college search website and make it much more useful—capable of addressing concerns such as: How much is this school really going to cost me? How long will it take to get my degree?

Believe it or not, we can't answer these basic questions. That's unacceptable. And I challenge states and universities to provide the information to make this system a reality.

Information will not only help with decision-making it will also hold schools accountable for quality. As the Commission wrote: "higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance."

No current ranking system of colleges and universities directly measures the most critical point—student performance and learning.

You'd never buy a house without an inspection, take a vacation without researching your destination, or these days, buy groceries without reading the nutritional label. And in almost every area of our government we expect transparency and accountability: from prescription drug programs to housing to K-12 education.

If we're that particular in those areas, shouldn't we do the same with higher education? Something so critical to our future success and quality of life?

We absolutely should! And ACTION FOUR under my plan will provide matching funds to colleges, universities, and states that collect and publicly report student learning outcomes.

Right now, accreditation is the system we use to put a stamp of approval on higher education quality. It's largely focused on inputs, more on how many books are in a college library, than whether students can actually understand them. Institutions are asked "Are you measuring student learning?" And they check yes or no.

That must change. Whether students are learning is not a yes or no question ... It's how? How much? And to what effect?

To that end, Action Five under my plan will convene members of the accrediting community this November to move toward measures that place more emphasis on learning.

I realize after what I've just said commencement speaker invitations may suddenly get lost in the mail. But the urgent need to spark this debate and engage on these issues is worth the risk.

As I've outlined, we need to make higher education more accessible by better preparing our students in high school. We need to make higher education more affordable by increasing need-based aid, simplifying the financial aid process, and holding costs in line.

And we need to make higher education more accountable by opening up the ivory towers and putting information at the fingertips of students and families.

This course will not, should not, and cannot be charted by the federal government alone. Just as the Commission reflected a cross-section of higher education stakeholders, finding the right solutions will take a similar partnership.

Today, I've touched on some of the main recommendations, but the Commission has done a comprehensive examination of a whole host of other issues from adult learning to innovation to information technology.

This Spring, I'll convene a Summit and bring these many sectors together to discuss the full slate of recommendations, our progress, and specific responsibilities going forward.

This is the beginning of a process of long over due reform. And let me be clear: at the end of it we neither envision, nor want, a national system of higher education. On the contrary, one of the greatest assets of our system is its diversity—something we must protect and preserve.

Our aim is simply to make sure the countless opportunities a college education provides is a reality for every American who chooses to pursue it. The Commission's report is rightly titled: "A Test of Leadership" and for the sake of our students and our future, this is one test we must not fail!

Thank you.

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