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The Rise and Fall of the Spellings Commission

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Abstract

The invitation arrived in late June 2005. The secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, was asking me to join her in Denver for a round-table discussion focusing on higher education. Nothing seemed right: There was no list of invited participants, no offer to cover travel costs, no indication really of intended purposes or likely outcomes. I had all but decided to decline, citing family and other responsibilities, when an e-mail message arrived from Jim Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan, saying he hoped that I would join him for breakfast in Denver the morning of the round table. I bought my tickets that afternoon.

Comments

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The Rise and Fall of the Spellings Commission

By Robert Zemsky

The invitation arrived in late June 2005. The secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, was asking me to join her in Denver for a round-table discussion focusing on higher education. Nothing seemed right: There was no list of invited participants, no offer to cover travel costs, no indication really of intended purposes or likely outcomes. I had all but decided to decline, citing family and other responsibilities, when an e-mail message arrived from Jim Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan, saying he hoped that I would join him for breakfast in Denver the morning of the round table. I bought my tickets that afternoon.

For more than a decade now, I have done what Jim has asked, knowing that his projects and thrusts, if not always successful, are always interesting. In Denver, Jim surprised me again, suggesting we arrive early at the session to meet with a certain Charles Miller, a Texas investor who was helping Spellings organize the round table.

Miller showed up with a copy of an essay that I, along with Greg Wegner and Bill Massy, had written for *The Chronicle* (July 15, 2005) based on our just-released *Remaking the American University: Mission Centered and Market Smart* (Rutgers University Press, 2005). Miller had read the piece and marked it up, highlighting what he liked and just as pointedly what he didn't like, all the while using the margins to push an imaginary argument with me about the right way to approach the topic. His copy looked like that of an attentive student who wanted to make sure of his assertions before launching his critique in class.

Miller need not have worried — he was more than ready to take me on. What was wrong with higher education, he observed, was that no one was really in charge. Rather than the market making colleges more disciplined, the pursuit of new revenues was making higher education just plain wasteful. "Where's the accountability?" he asked. "Who are the change agents? Why is it taking the academy so long to recognize the need for systemic change?"

And that's how I met Miller, who, like the secretary of education, is a confidant of the president, and whom then-Governor Bush had appointed to the University of Texas Board of Regents, of which Miller later became chairman. From the get-go he was larger than life — smart, driven, funny, and engaging, not to mention manipulative, controlling, and inherently argumentative.

In Denver, Miller's assignment was to test whether a national commission might successfully begin an extended dialogue on the future of higher education. I eventually understood that the session that Miller was about to run was in fact a kind of tryout. Like most of the other participants, I was being auditioned — in my case, to see whether I was sufficiently independent to judge an enterprise in which I had spent most of my professional life as a prickly and, at times, just barely tolerated insider-outsider.

The Denver session also happened to coincide with the announcement of the latest round of federal testing of educational outcomes in which elementary-school students, in particular, had made substantial gains in reading and math. More important, the results indicated that African-American youngsters had narrowed the gap between their performance and that of white elementary students on the standardized tests. Spellings was energized, Miller was in charge, and the discussion that followed was about as good as it gets — focused, forward looking, and decidedly collegial.

We talked easily and candidly about higher education's strengths and weaknesses, as well as about the need for new investments in its research mission and more focus on producing work-ready graduates. While we noted higher education's often cumbersome ways, we also discussed why it should be more of a national priority. Most participants came away from the Denver session believing a national dialogue on the future of higher education just might be possible and a good idea. David Ward, the president of the American Council on Education, later told me that an earlier round table that Spellings and Miller had convened in Washington had the same character.

In September, Spellings announced the creation of her National Commission on the Future of Higher Education and that Miller would be its chairman. In all there were 19 of us. Almost half were drawn from higher education, another quarter from industry, and the remainder from public agencies. The commission's task, Spellings told a forum at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, was to develop a "comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education." She went on to say, "Now is the time to have a national conversation on our goals for higher education," and "I'm here to start that discussion."

And discuss we did, in a half-dozen formal sessions, spread over the course of a year and often watched by a hundred or more observers. There were also innumerable sidebar conversations wherever two or more commissioners gathered, along with countless e-mail messages among us on the commission and between us and others who were worried about what we were up to.

Miller had his assignment. For the next year he would hold higher education's center stage, cajoling, criticizing, and provoking. Above all Miller wanted a real discussion. In his view, good civic discourse, while always polite, was necessarily pointed as well. One could recognize the substantial achievements of higher education and still suggest the need for improvement or, as he came to increasingly insist, recognize that there were real problems that required real, even daring, solutions.

Miller was everywhere spreading the message that the commission would make a difference. Always charming and prepared, ever the good listener, he eagerly sought sessions with the leaders of higher education's principal organizations. But his true appeal and power derived from his understanding of the news media. He was someone journalists could count on for "a good interview." Like many successful politicians, he had the ability to distill complex arguments and make them simple, and then wrap them

in the kind of pungent language that reporters like to quote and readers end up remembering.

He was always on message. Despite higher education's dependence on market income, he insisted, there was no bottom line — just an endless pursuit of new revenue. No one really knew whether higher education's products were any good or not. What, if anything, students were learning was anybody's guess. There was no accountability. Accreditation wasn't working. No governmental body — federal, state, or local — could know if it was getting its money's worth. In an era of heightened global competition, business as usual would not suffice.

He talked eagerly and willingly about the need for better tests of educational outcomes, provoking across higher education a renewed interest in standardized testing. People even made bad jokes about Miller's penchant for testing. At the University of Pennsylvania one wag suggested the commission had as its mandate "No College Left Behind."

But Miller enjoyed a real give-and-take as well. Early on he appointed Richard Vedder, a distinguished professor of economics at Ohio University, and me to co-chair a committee on affordability, clearly expecting us to duke it out. And we did, though never without a sense of humor and appreciation for the complexity of the issues that we were debating.

It was an approach that stimulated other people to join the discussion. In March, Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University who is currently serving as interim president, added his voice, writing in *The Washington Post* that greater accountability on the part of higher education was long overdue. A growing body of research, he noted, indicated that students weren't really learning what they needed to. "Tests of writing and of literacy in mathematics, statistics and computer technology suggest that many undergraduates improve these skills only slightly, while some actually regress," he said.

It didn't matter that Bok had made many of those same arguments in his recent book *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton University Press, 2006) or that he dismissed Miller's call for the development of a national test of learning outcomes as a search for a "standardized test" that could only make matters worse. What did matter was that Bok and others were taking Miller seriously and joining him in proclaiming that business as usual was no longer acceptable. They were lending their prestige to the search for a better understanding of learning outcomes, and, in the process, were bestowing on Miller's quest a greater legitimacy than it could otherwise have claimed.

As if to underline that last point, Peter McPherson, new head of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, appeared before Miller and the commission the month following Bok's commentary, saying that his organization was prepared to take on the challenge of building a voluntary system of accountability that included the measurement of student outcomes. In a discussion paper that he brought with him to the commission's meeting in Indianapolis, McPherson noted: "We should consider a voluntary system, by type or mission of colleges and universities, based on outcomes. There should be a serious discussion on how to do this within the higher-

education community and not just in the public policy/political community." Miller was getting what he was looking for.

As it turned out, that meeting proved to be the apogee of Miller's and his commission's track across higher education. With little fanfare and not much notice to the commission itself, he began to turn increasingly to his staff and a variety of consultants, including an old friend, Pat Callen, who, like Arturo Madrid, had been a member with me of the Pew Higher Education Roundtable, and Bob Dickeson, recently of the Lumina Foundation. Miller was organizing the commission's work just as a powerful chairman of a legislative committee would. He chose the staff members, interviewed and hired the consultants, organized the agenda, and issued the invitations to testify before the commission — although, in fairness to him, he regularly asked what additional witnesses should be called.

He remained on message, encouraging dialogue rather than combat. Yet the witnesses testifying before the commission, as well as the papers the commission's staff members and consultants were distributing as official documents, took on a decidedly negative tone. David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and Miller's most persistent as well as effective critic, voiced the growing concern of many of us that we avoid a too-negative approach when he said in an interview that the commission had often been treated to a "parade of the disaffected." And so we were.

After that, Miller adopted a much less conciliatory public persona, noting in another interview that the commission planned to issue a report that had strong recommendations about holding colleges more accountable. The tone wars had begun.

In May the commission, again in open session, began to outline a set of basic findings and policy recommendations that most of us who served on the commission felt were largely positive, at times even celebratory. We wanted to raise the bar, defining success not in terms of the past but in preparation for a future of increased global competition. We talked about the need for a true overhaul of the system of federal student aid. If you listen closely to the tape of that meeting, you can hear one commissioner sotto voce suggesting that we needed to "nuke it." We wanted to eliminate most, if not all, of the back-door merit aid that had crept into the system. We were close to agreeing that we needed to find ways of making the system as a whole less expensive by making it more welcoming of change and innovation.

We wanted to support the findings of the National Academies' study *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* and its call for more direct federal investment in higher education's research mission. We discussed the need to increase college readiness among elementary- and secondary-school students. We wanted more transparency, more-complete financial reporting, and better performance indicators, and we went in search of a way of supporting the goals of a "unit record system" that didn't trigger the massive opposition of those who wanted to preserve a student's right to privacy. It was, as I said at the time, a good-natured conversation that seemingly put us on the right track.

Unbeknown to us, however, Miller and his team of consultants, along with Ben Wildavsky, a former editor in charge of the rankings issue at *U.S. News & World Report*, had begun drafting a set of findings and a preamble to a report whose clear intention was to jolt higher education. In June, partly by accident, perhaps partly by intent, a draft of those findings and preamble began circulating — first among some commissioners, then among the whole commission, and shortly thereafter as a public document. While the May meeting had focused almost exclusively on possible recommendations, the draft in circulation did not.

Indeed, the draft minced no words: "Our yearlong examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led it to unseemly complacency about the future. It is time to be frank. Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U.S. higher education, we have found equal parts meritocracy and mediocrity."

For many of us on the commission, it was not "our" text that was in circulation. That draft's indictment was, as one commissioner later put it, all about "playing the blame game," when what we wanted was a report that challenged higher education. Or, as another member put it, "I recommend, as many of you have, that we adjust the tone of our report to be one of inspiration, aspiration, and perspiration."

The findings imbedded in that draft report were, if anything, even more inflammatory. David Warren's warning that a "parade of the disaffected" could take control of the commission was proving all too prescient. Midway through a long litany of what was wrong with higher education, the draft report in quick succession slammed institutions for the cost and quality of the product, grade inflation, and binge drinking.

The news media loved it. Headlines proclaimed "Panel's Draft Report Calls for an Overhaul of Higher Education Nationwide," "Draft Report From Federal Panel Takes Aim at Academe," and "Commission Draft Report Calls for Shake-up in Higher Education."

Miller appeared to look forward to the battle that lay ahead. In an interview with the *Austin American-Statesman*, he conceded that he had "been advised to say things in moderate terms, to not criticize the academy. ... It's almost like being censored. Some of the language ... could be toned down, but the real issue is putting responsibility on the higher-education system for things it's not doing well. It has some really bad flaws." And just in case anyone missed the point, he continued: "If you wrap it up in academic language, which is what the academy wants, you get long sentences and footnotes, and it gets put on the shelf. ... Strong language gets attention."

The firestorm that followed the release of the first draft text confirmed the wisdom of Bok's observation that attacking higher education seldom, if ever, leads to purposeful change. Too many vested interests are ready to fire back. Within a month, the annual conference of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education featured not one but two plenary panels moderated by CBS's Bob Schieffer that roasted the draft report —

panels that featured John Sexton, president of New York University, on one, and David Ward and myself on the other. Without meaning to, the authors of the draft report had demonstrated how easy it was to unleash the passions of discontent and how difficult it was to pursue constructive discourse thereafter.

Still, my hope is that the Spellings commission will be seen as having made an important contribution to American higher education. We should be saluted for having taken on the task of making clear the strengths and vulnerabilities of colleges in the first decade of a new century. I also hope that we will also be recognized for having supplied, if only indirectly, an important set of clues as to why higher education seems so impervious to change and what an enlightened public might do to encourage reform and transformation.

Serendipitously, Secretary Spellings and her chairman had begun a natural experiment detailing higher education's changing contours and highlighting its fault lines. As a commissioner, I was flooded with paper and electronic documents. A steady flow of witnesses, each ready to tell us exactly what was wrong with higher education, appeared at every one of the commission's public sessions. My e-mail in box was regularly loaded with communications from fellow commissioners and all those who thought a little extra effort at communication would tip the commission's deliberations in their favor.

Some of what I was hearing while serving on the commission I already knew a lot about. I had already pretty much concluded that the argument over higher education's affordability was something of a sham. Given the continuing growth in college enrollments, it is pretty hard to argue that a college education has become increasingly unaffordable. Expensive, yes, perhaps even too expensive, but not on the evidence unaffordable.

I had similarly concluded that if the nation wanted to change the demographics and ethnic composition of its colleges, those who pushed for change needed to talk less about access and more about preparation and participation. It is not so much the price of a college education or the often arcane ways in which economically disadvantaged students must go about the business of assembling the necessary funds to attend, but the fact that too many high-school graduates are simply not academically prepared to succeed in college. Improving college readiness will not only increase the number of inner-city and rural youths in college but significantly improve their chances of persisting to graduation, as well.

But the commission also made me aware of other issues that I'd overlooked. I suppose that I should have known, but I had never focused on just how dysfunctional federal programs of student aid had become, or how much federal aid was being awarded using criteria other than financial need. In addition, because Jonathan Grayer, chairman and chief executive of Kaplan Inc., was on the commission, I got a firsthand glimpse of the growing world of for-profit education — its motivations other than profits, its challenges, and the degree to which it feels disadvantaged by current regulations and accreditation processes.

I was surprised and more than a little disheartened to discover just how unimportant the research mission had become among higher education's would-be reformers. Despite the presence and advocacy of Jim Duderstadt and Chuck Vest, president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on the commission, we never really dug in and talked about what enhanced investment in higher education's discovery agenda would mean or cost. Indeed, critics of the final report who pointed out that we were really just dealing with undergraduate education and even then with only the first two years were essentially right. In a similar way, technology, while often mentioned, was almost never incorporated into our discussions or deliberations.

My biggest surprise, however, was the near absence of insights about teaching and learning in either the materials presented to us or in the discussions within the commission. We talked a lot — at times seemingly endlessly — about testing what students knew and didn't know. But we barely discussed at all how students learn and whether different learning approaches would yield better results. To be fair, Jim Duderstadt regularly reminded anyone who would listen that we now had access to a host of new insights, principally neurological, about how people learn. The problem was that none of us were really listening, although I am still not sure why that was the case.

I also came to understand just how important it was to begin talking, in almost singular terms, about an American higher-education system — huge, complex, diverse, but nonetheless interconnected by the workings of the market, by a plethora of federal programs of student aid, and by the machinations of accreditation. Most of my research and writings had dealt with the workings of individual colleges or, in the case of market segments, with groups or clusters of institutions. Similarly, much of what passes for public policy focusing on higher education has taken on a disaggregated cast. We talk about community colleges separately from research universities, which, in turn, are seen as distinct from liberal-arts colleges, on the one hand, and comprehensive institutions on the other.

That mind-set is reflected in the structure of the groups that speak on behalf of organized higher education. The Association of American Universities is not to be confused with the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, which is distinct from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities as well as the Council of Independent Colleges and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. The nation's community colleges have their own organization, as do a host of religiously oriented consortia and advocacy groups. There is even a special and very separate association — the Consortium on Financing Higher Education — that speaks on behalf of the nation's wealthiest and most-selective institutions.

In such a climate, it is easy to dismiss systemic solutions as a mistaken search for "one size that fits all." Woe to the would-be reformer who would talk broadly and comprehensively about costs or outcomes or learning — even though such integrating conversations are exactly what may be needed if higher education is to be seen as anything other than a diverse set of businesses selling similarly packaged products.

Thus my first lesson was that there really was a need for a national dialogue, one that treated higher education as a whole by asking, "How do the parts relate to one another?"

My second — and, in many ways, more obvious — lesson, was that what was missing in the discussions of change and transformation was a workable strategy for getting large numbers of colleges to do things differently. Miller would argue that he did, in fact, have a strategy, the first step of which was getting higher education's attention. The way to do that was to use what he called "strong language," forcefully identifying the enterprise's many flaws and broken parts — in short, a strategy of jolt and shame, or roughly the educational equivalent of shock and awe.

By then, however, a considerable portion of the commission had begun spending an inordinate amount of time trying to persuade Miller that he was wrong, that frontal assaults on higher education inevitably yielded institutions that hunker down, all the while telling themselves and their supporters that "this too must pass." The more the commission played the "blame game," we argued, the more David Warren's caricature of a process that had gone mad would come to be seen as an accurate description of the commission and its chairman.

In the end, Miller more than budged, although once his first inflammatory draft was in circulation, what mattered most was the tone of the report rather than its actual recommendations. Each succeeding draft became more sanitized, more tolerant of ambiguity, more ready to admit a diversity of opinion. Yet that struggle over tone and message had sapped the energy of the commission, resulting in a less than bold set of final recommendations.

What we ultimately proposed seemed almost commonplace: more federal money for Pell Grants, but no real push for a simpler, less convoluted system for awarding federal student assistance. Having declared that a college education at current prices was too expensive, we urged institutions to tie their price increases to changes in average family income, but the final report put forth no program for achieving that goal. Accreditation was slapped, but then again, the accrediting agencies had few friends anywhere.

There were calls for more transparency in higher-education finance, for more data, even more and better tests to measure student outcomes, and for a "unit-record system" that would allow researchers and policy makers to track the progress of individual students, even those who transferred or dropped out and then back in. But that proposal, having just been rejected by the U.S. House of Representatives, is not likely to pass the new Congress either. Nor is it likely that our call for spending an additional \$75-billion on Pell Grants and other forms of federal student aid will make it into law.

Instead of a shot across its bow, what higher education got was a mild scolding couched in civilized language that proposed little that was new and much that was neither possible nor likely. As a commission, we had done no harm. What remains to be seen is whether we had in fact begun a national dialogue leading to the transformation of American higher education.