

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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is to promote greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England.

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Transparency

On the chance that the report of the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education defies its genre and does not collect dust, New Englanders need to pay attention ... especially to the commission's calls for increased transparency.

To be sure, the process launched by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings in 2005 and headed by Houston investment manager Charles Miller, a former Bush-appointed chair of the University of Texas System, began inauspiciously in the historical seat of American higher education. Of the commission's 19 members, only one, former MIT President Charles Vest, had any significant connection to New England. And when the commission held its sole New England hearing last March, just five of the 19 showed.

Nonetheless, the commission's final report issued in September 2006 could gain traction on some heretofore intractable problems such as aligning high school curricula with higher education's expectations and making college more affordable. And the report will surely generate further debate with its trajectory toward college-level standardized testing and its call for a national "unit-record" database to track students' progress and open a window on how colleges are performing and accounting for costs.

In a September speech at the National Press Club, Spellings offered a hint at which recommendations would be part of the now lame-duck department's agenda. Conspicuously absent was the commission's call to dramatically increase need-based Pell Grants—a proposal Washington's most stalwart supporter of opportunity, Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, has already signaled will be a priority when he retakes the chairmanship of the powerful Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

The secretary did champion the controversial student record database as part of an overall emphasis on making higher education more transparent, noting: "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!" The idea, the secretary explained, is to find out: "How much is this school really going to cost me? How long will it take to get my degree?"

The database will be a tough sell for an administration that has disregarded privacy in its quest for "total information awareness." Still, the general call for transparency could find legs as the public tires of secrecy all around. And despite resistance from academe, that may not be such a bad thing. But in the car analogy, cup-holders and even resale value are not the end all. Consumers also should know why Detroit steadfastly resists alternative fuels and why it took so long to equip cars with air bags. In the same way, higher education transparency should go beyond oversimplified measures of graduation rates and job placement.

How about a clear view, for example, into the outreach efforts of the couple of dozen New England colleges that still in this day and age—in this demography—enroll a student body that is more than 95 percent white? Could we see exactly how many children of alumni a given college admits each year? How much money do wealthy colleges draw from their endowments each year and how does that square with their inevitable annual tuition hikes? How many students get tuition discounts? How many drop out after incurring life-changing debt? How about the precise terms of deals struck between colleges and commercial vendors from Nike to credit card companies. Isn't it time for full transparency on exactly what it is about a course at one accredited New England college that makes its credits unacceptable to another college? How about publishing the ratio of adjuncts to full-time professors teaching undergraduates?

The last federal education report to have any real impact was *A Nation at Risk*. Ronald Reagan mostly hoped its authors would call for prayer in schools and the abolition of the Education Department. But in the end, it was the report's other recommendations on accountability and teacher pay that ushered in 20 years of education reform, standards and testing. Transparency could be a lasting—and enlightening—byproduct of the recent commission's work as long it allows students and families to see through to something that matters.

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