

Comments on the Spellings Commission Report from the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association of America March 2007

A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education, a recent report commissioned by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, offers stringent criticisms of American higher education and has stirred much national discussion. The most general and hard-hitting of these criticisms is that "too many Americans just aren't getting the education that they need--and deserve" (vii). More specifically, the Spellings commission report faults higher education for "poor alignment between high school and colleges," an oversight that often results in "substandard high school preparation" for college (1). It goes on to say that many students who do enter college "never complete their degrees at all, at least in part because most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed." Even worse, "there are disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever." "The consequences of these problems," according to the report, "are most severe for students from low-income families and for racial and ethnic minorities" (vii).

Compounding these problems, the report charges, is "a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality" of college education along with "a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms" to "ensure that colleges succeed in educating students" (vii). Parents and students "have no solid evidence, comparable across institutions, of how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one college than another" (13). To address these problems, the Spellings commission urges a number of reforms. The most controversial is that, to improve accountability, "higher education institutions should measure student learning" (23) using "quality-assessment data" that would be made public. These "outcomes-focused" measurements of what students are learning at particular colleges would "be accessible and useful for students, policymakers, and the public," as well as for academics themselves (23), and would enable parents and prospective students to compare the quality of education offered by different colleges

and universities.

Our response to these criticisms and recommendations is mixed. We think many of the criticisms of higher education in the Spellings commission report are legitimate and need to be heard. We also think, however, that several of the commission's assumptions and arguments need to be challenged. We note that the commission makes virtually no mention of the humanities, despite their established central role in higher education. The humanities are conspicuously missing from the report's assertion that the United States "must ensure the capacity of its universities to achieve global leadership in key strategic areas such as science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions" and from the report's statement that achieving this global leadership requires "increased federal investment" in the scientific and technical fields that are "critical to our nation's global competitiveness" (26).

Yet, although the report ignores the humanities, the educational skills it emphasizes are precisely those that the humanities are credited with developing. A persistent theme of the report is the urgent need to produce college graduates who have mastered "critical thinking, writing, and problem solving skills needed in today's workplaces," that is, the very skills the humanities teach. The commission cites the complaints of employers, who "report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire" are lacking in these broad critical-thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills (3), but ignores the widely publicized fact that many of these same employers say they prefer hiring humanities graduates over those with more specialized and ostensibly practical training because humanities students tend to have greater mastery of these skills. As one department store manager put it, "We look for people who can think critically and analytically. . . . The breadth and depth of a liberal education allows new hires to benefit the organization immediately."¹

Indeed, since it is hard to imagine scientists, engineers, and doctors doing their jobs competently without a command of critical-thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills, the humanities are no less crucial than the sciences to "global leadership in key strategic areas." Other strategic areas surely include government and international diplomacy, where recent history might be different had politicians, journalists, and citizens exercised more of the critical thinking taught in humanities courses. By the Spellings report's own logic, then, and even by its rather narrowly utilitarian standards, the humanities deserve strong support and "increased federal investment."

The report ignores the humanities' role in training workers for the new global knowledge economy and their ability to help citizens think more imaginatively, feel greater sympathy with others, and make sounder moral judgments. Our society needs scientists, engineers, and doctors who are not only technically proficient but also conscious of the moral, social, and human consequences of their decisions. A liberal education in languages and literatures takes on special importance in a post-9/11 world in which our survival as a nation may depend on our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of those who think very differently from us.

None of these objections is meant to deny the Spellings commission's finding that too many college students fail to master "the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates" and that "the consequences of these problems are most severe for students from low-income families and for racial and ethnic minorities." Nor do we deny the existence of a "poor alignment between high schools and colleges," a problem that until recently higher education has been guilty of neglecting. We would point out,

however, that in making these complaints the commission merely reiterates criticisms already voiced inside higher education. More important, the commission ignores the strenuous efforts colleges and universities are now making to improve the quality of education and to assess what students are learning. Indeed, the report's call for "outcomes assessment" echoes the thinking and even the language of an assessment and accountability movement that has been gathering momentum in higher education for several decades. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has been implementing measurable competency standards for foreign language instruction for over a quarter century. Most American colleges and universities have reviewed or are currently reviewing their curricula and are monitoring teaching. In the last two years alone, with support from the Teagle Foundation, more than sixty colleges and universities have been participating in faculty-led collaborative assessment projects. Such efforts signal a growing recognition inside higher education that the kinds of knowledge the report sees as crucial to our national welfare need to be taught more effectively to a much wider range of students, beyond the high-achieving few.

These considerations bring us to the report's most controversial proposal, that, to improve accountability, "higher education institutions should measure student learning" and that to this end college students should be systematically tested. Some critics of the report see this proposal as calling for a college version of the notoriously flawed No Child Left Behind program in American elementary and secondary schools. If this kind of program is indeed what the Spellings commission has in mind, we must voice our strongest objections, since the tests that have been instituted in the schools are frequently of questionable intellectual merit and since the report fails to indicate who will devise college-level assessments and tests. Higher education must insist that assessments in its domain continue to be designed and applied with the full participation of local college faculties and administrators. Some passages in the report, like one that proposes "a focused program of cost-cutting and productivity improvements in U.S. postsecondary institutions" (2), make us wonder if the commission envisions a plan similar to the ill-judged No Child Left Behind, which aims to improve higher education by starving it. Recent economic research on education in the United States--for example, Robert Haveman and Timothy Smeeding's article in *Opportunity in America*--makes the case that unfunded mandates and "cost-cutting" will not result in "productivity improvements," especially after nearly three decades of languishing support for public education. Unfunded mandates and cost cutting will only decrease already severely compromised access to higher education for qualified students from middle- and lower-income families. Such policies will also reduce college graduation rates in the United States, which have already fallen behind those in Canada, Japan, Finland, and Korea. Bold rethinking and new policies are clearly necessary, and some policies may not even require additional federal funding (see Haveman and Smeeding). But a "focused program of cost-cutting" will only deepen the already difficult situation many families face in sending their children to college. In higher education and education in general, then, such cost cutting will reinforce inequality rather than extend democracy.

To end on this note would be defensive, however, and defensiveness seems to us an unwise response. In principle, it is hard to disagree with the argument that colleges should be held publicly accountable for the quality of education they provide and that careful assessment of what our students learn is a reasonable means of demonstrating such accountability. If these principles are applied in an intelligent fashion and with full cooperation by American colleges and universities, the report of the Spellings

commission can usefully spur them in their continuing effort to improve the education they offer.

Note

1. For this and other similar comments from the business sector, see "Selling Your Liberal Arts Degree to Employers."

Works Cited

Haveman, Robert, and Timothy Smeeding. "The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility." *Opportunity in America*. Spec. issue of *Future of Children* 16.2 (2006): 125–50.

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<http://www.indiana.edu/~career/students/apply/selling_liberal_arts.pdf>.

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