

## **Commission Report 6/22/06 Draft**

Three hundred and seventy years after the first college in our fledgling nation was established to train Puritan ministers in the colony of Massachusetts, it is no exaggeration to declare that higher education in the United States has become one of our greatest success stories. Whether America's colleges and universities are measured by their sheer number and variety, by the increasingly open access so many citizens enjoy to their campuses, by their crucial role in advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research discoveries, or by the new forms of teaching and learning that they have pioneered to meet students' changing needs, these post-secondary institutions have accomplished much of which they and the nation can be proud.

But despite these achievements, this Commission believes U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the glaring deficiencies that remain. Our year-long 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. As Americans, we can take pride in our Nobel Prizes, our scientific breakthroughs, our Rhodes Scholars. But we must not be blind to the less inspiring realities of college life in our nation:

- For all the strides we have made toward widespread access to post-secondary education, the complex interplay of poor academic preparation, inadequate information, and lingering financial barriers means that too few of those who could benefit from college actually attend.
- Among high school graduates who do make it on to post-secondary education, a troubling number of undergraduates waste time – and taxpayer dollars – mastering English and math skills that they should have learned in high school.
- Rising costs, combined with a confusing, inadequate financial aid system, leave some students struggling to pay for education that, paradoxically, is of uneven and at times dubious quality.

- Ultimately, unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism correctly holds, knowledge matters more than ever.
- Compounding all of these problems is a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of post-secondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students. The result is that students, parents, and policymakers are often left scratching their heads over the answers to basic questions, from the true cost of private colleges (where most students don't pay the official sticker price) to which institutions do a better job than others not only of graduating students but of actually teaching them something.

In the face of such challenges, this Commission believes change is overdue. But when it comes – as it must – it will need to take account of the new realities that are sometimes overlooked in public discussions about the future of higher education. While many Americans still envision the typical undergraduate as an 18- to 22-year-old with a recently acquired high school diploma attending classes at a four-year institution, the facts are more complex. Of the nation's nearly 14 million undergraduates, more than four in 10 attend two-year community colleges. Nearly one third are older than 24 years old. Forty percent are enrolled part-time.

The higher-education landscape is evolving in unexpected directions that demand innovation from the institutions that serve the nation's learners. Beyond high school, more students than ever before have adopted a "cafeteria" approach to their education, taking classes at multiple institutions before obtaining a diploma. And the growing numbers of adult learners – some 92 million, according to the latest figures – aren't necessarily seeking degrees at all. Many simply want to improve their career prospects by acquiring the new skills that employers are demanding.

In this consumer-driven environment, growing numbers of students care little about the distinctions that preoccupy the academic establishment, from whether a college has for-profit or nonprofit status to whether its classes are offered online or in brick-and-mortar buildings. Instead, they care – as we do – about results.

Against this backdrop, we have adopted an ambitious set of goals that spell out what our Commission expects from the nation's colleges and universities:

- We want a world-class higher-education system that educates its citizens and creates new knowledge;
- We want a system that is accessible to all qualified students in all life stages, regardless of their financial status;
- We want colleges and universities to be productive and efficient in order to be affordable to the students, taxpayers, and donors who sustain them;
- We want post-secondary institutions to be accountable to the American public for their performance and transparent in their operations;

- We want a higher-education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy;
- We want a system that contributes significantly to innovation and global competitiveness.

To reach these objectives, we believe that U.S. higher education must recommit itself to its core public purposes.

We have no illusions that the necessary adaptation, evolution – and, in some cases, transformation – will come easily. But we do have confidence, based on the rich history of post-secondary education in this country, that our nation’s colleges and universities are up to the challenge. They are, after all, the most American of institutions. Their history is our history, from the founding of the first settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia through the westward expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the emergence of today’s network linking public systems of higher education, private colleges and universities, and specialized post-secondary training institutions. It is a history replete with the milestones of public affirmation and public purpose: the Morrill Act of 1862, which made land-grant universities an integral part of the American landscape; the publication in 1945 of Vannevar Bush’s *Science, the Endless Frontier*, which helped make the modern research university a uniquely American invention; the G.I. Bill following Second World War, which first made access to higher education a national priority; and, in the 1960s and 1970s, the launching and rapid growth of community colleges.

For close to a century now, access to higher education has been a principal—some would say *the* principal – means to personal and societal advancement. Much of our nation’s inventiveness has been centered in colleges and universities, as has our commitment to a kind of democracy that only an educated and informed citizenry makes possible. It is not surprising that American institutions of higher education have become a magnet for attracting people of talent and ambition from throughout the world.

But today that world is becoming tougher, more competitive, less forgiving of wasted resources and squandered opportunities. In tomorrow’s world a nation’s wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster – making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and for society writ large.

What we have learned over the last year makes clear that American higher education has become what, in the business world, would be called a mature enterprise: increasingly risk-averse, frequently self-satisfied, and unduly expensive. It is an enterprise that has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing educational needs of a knowledge economy. It has yet to successfully confront the impact of globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, an increasingly diverse and aging population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs and new paradigms.

History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to – or even to notice – changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers. Without serious self-examination and reform, institutions of higher education risk falling into the same trap, seeing their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence.

Already, troubling signs are abundant. Where once the United States led the world in educational attainment, recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicated that our nation is now ranked seventh among major industrialized countries with respect to the proportion of adults aged 25-64 with some postsecondary credential. Another half dozen countries are close on our heels. And these global pressures come at a time when data from the U.S. Department of Labor indicate that 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require some form of postsecondary education.

To implement the goals outlined above, we have distilled our deliberations into a series of findings in four key areas that the U.S. Secretary of Education charged us with examining when she created this Commission: Access, affordability, quality, and accountability. We have expanded our discussion of quality to include the closely related question of innovation, which will be key to the continued success of higher education and our nation. Those findings are followed by a series of far-reaching recommendations aimed at all the parties whose efforts will be needed to ensure that reform takes root: Colleges and universities; accrediting bodies and governing boards; state and federal policymakers; elementary and secondary schools; the business community; and parents and students themselves.

We note that the commissioners did not agree unanimously on every single finding and recommendation. This was a diverse group, with varied perspectives and backgrounds, and from the beginning our Commission's explicit mandate was to engage in debate and discussion, as indicated by the first part of our panel's formal name: "A National Dialogue." In a higher-education system as diverse and complex as ours, it is no surprise that knowledgeable individuals can and do differ over certain matters. Nevertheless, there has been remarkable consensus among our members not only on what is wrong with the nation's colleges and universities but also on how we can begin to fix those weaknesses and build a promising foundation for a thriving 21<sup>st</sup> century postsecondary education system.

Our specific findings and recommendations are summarized below and are spelled out in further detail in the remainder of this report:

- **Access to higher education**

We found that access to American higher education is unduly limited by inadequate preparation, by informational and financial barriers, and by poor alignment between America's high schools and universities. Although the proportion of high school graduates who go on to college has risen substantially in recent decades – from 52 percent in 1970 to 67 percent in 2004 – the college

completion rate has failed to improve at anywhere near the same pace. Shortcomings in high-school preparation mean that an unacceptable number of college students must take costly remedial classes: Some 40 percent of four-year college students and 63 percent of two-year college students end up taking at least one remedial course. Moreover, there is a troubling and persistent gap between the college attendance and graduation rates of low-income Americans and their more affluent peers: Less than 10 percent of those in the bottom socioeconomic quartile will graduate from a four-year institution, compared to 58 percent of those in the top quartile.

We propose to dramatically expand college participation and success by outlining ways in which post-secondary institutions, K-12 school systems, and state policymakers can work together to create a seamless pathway between high school and college. States' K-12 graduation standards must be closely aligned with college and employer expectations, and states should also provide incentives for post-secondary institutions to work actively and collaboratively with K-12 schools to help underserved students improve college preparation and persistence. While better high-school preparation is imperative, colleges themselves must take responsibility for the academic success of the students they admit. Improving the information about college available to students – and reducing financial barriers to attendance, which we address below in our discussion of affordability – are also crucial to improving access.

- **Affordability**

The Commission notes with alarm the seemingly inexorable increase in college costs, which have outpaced inflation for the past two decades and have made affordability an ever-growing concern for students, families, and policymakers. Too many students are either discouraged from attending college by rising costs, or take on worrisome debt burdens in order to do so. While consumers bear the immediate brunt of tuition increases, affordability is also a crucial policy problem for those who are asked to fund higher education, notably federal and state taxpayers. We believe that affordability is directly affected by colleges' and universities' failure to seek institutional efficiencies and by their disregard for improving productivity, since the current system provides institutions with few incentives to do either. The problem is made worse by the confusing and complex nature of the nation's financial aid system. There are 17 separate federal programs providing direct financial aid or tax benefits to individuals pursuing post-secondary education. In brief, America's system of higher-education finance is increasingly dysfunctional, inefficient, and inadequate.

To improve affordability, we propose a two-pronged effort that would begin by encouraging a focused program of cost-cutting and productivity improvements in U.S. post-secondary institutions. That effort would be accompanied by a significant increase in need-based financial aid and a complete overhaul of the

current federal financial aid system: Our recommendations call for consolidating programs, streamlining processes, and eliminating the FAFSA.

- **Quality and Innovation**

As other nations rapidly improve their higher-education systems, we are disturbed by evidence that the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining. A number of recent studies highlight the shortcomings of post-secondary institutions in everything from graduation rates and time to degree to learning outcomes and even core literacy skills. According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, for instance, the percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy has actually declined by 40 percent in the past decade. These shortcomings have real-world consequences: Employers report repeatedly that the new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces. In addition, business and government leaders have repeatedly and urgently called for workers at all stages of life to continually upgrade their academic and practical skills. But both national and state policies and the practices of post-secondary institutions have not always made this easy, by failing to provide financial and logistical support for lifelong learning and by failing to craft flexible credit-transfer systems that allow students to move easily between different kinds of institutions.

In our view, correcting shortcomings in educational quality and promoting innovation will require a series of related steps, beginning with some of the accountability mechanisms that are summarized below and discussed at greater length later in this report. In addition, we urge post-secondary institutions to make a commitment to embrace new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve student learning. We also propose a concerted effort to eliminate existing barriers to transfer of credit between different kinds of post-secondary institutions. More broadly, policymakers and educators must work together to develop a national strategy to promote and facilitate lifelong learning, which is an ever more important component of keeping our nation at the forefront of the global knowledge economy.

- **Accountability**

We have found a remarkable shortage of clear, accessible information about crucial aspects of American colleges and universities, from financial aid to graduation rates. While higher education prizes transparency of information, precision of data, and rigorous analysis in its own scholarship, as an enterprise it has failed to apply the same standards to itself. Some colleges are beginning to experiment with new assessment tools, but most make no serious effort to examine their effectiveness on the most important measure of all: How much students learn. What's more, because data systems are so limited, it is hard for policymakers to obtain reliable information on students' progress through the

educational pipeline. This lack of useful data and accountability hinders policymakers and the public from making informed decisions and prevents higher education from demonstrating its contribution to the public good.

We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the other reforms we propose. Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information to improve communications with students and families. Student achievement, which is inextricably connected to institutional success, must be measured by institutions on a “value-added” basis that takes into account students’ academic baseline when assessing their results. This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities.

In outlining these conclusions, and detailing them in the remainder of this report, we recognize that higher education may not easily accept either our diagnosis or our prescriptions. But we would note that past reforms that later came to be recognized as transformational for American society were not initially embraced by the academic establishment. The G.I. Bill, for instance, greatly worried such 20<sup>th</sup>-century academic luminaries as Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, and James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, each of whom fretted that newly returned veterans might overwhelm campuses and be ill-suited to reap the benefits of higher education. In retrospect, such concerns seem positively archaic.

We can make no promise that our proposed reforms would have an impact as enormous as that historic, door-opening measure. Nor do we make light of the inevitable questions and concerns that may be raised by post-secondary institutions and other interested observers in response to our findings and recommendations. But were the American system of higher education to make the changes our Commission recommends, we believe other important changes would follow. The result would be a network of institutions and programs that are more nimble, more efficient, and more effective. What the nation will gain is a heightened capacity to compete in the global market place. What individuals will gain is full access to educational opportunities that allow them to be life-long learners, productive workers, and engaged citizens.

## **Findings**

The challenges and opportunities we found in our nation’s higher education system fall under four general headings: Access, affordability, quality and innovation, and accountability. These categories, which the U.S. Secretary of Education charged us with examining when she created this Commission, are not exhaustive, but we believe they

cover the aspects of post-secondary education that matter most to the American people. Inevitably, the groupings overlap with one another; the same is true of the recommendations we suggest later in this report. Taken together, we believe they offer a comprehensive and useful framework for diagnosing the problems, as well as a promising prescription for fixing those shortcomings.

## Findings Regarding Access

This Commission is committed to building and sustaining a higher-education system that is accessible to all qualified students in all life stages. Unfortunately, while the proportion of high school graduates who go on to post-secondary education has risen in recent decades, the national rate of college completion has failed to keep pace. Most important, and most worrisome, too many Americans who could benefit from post-secondary education do not continue their studies at all, whether as conventional undergraduates or as adult learners furthering their workplace skills.

We found that access to higher education in the United States is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers. Inadequate high school preparation is compounded by poor alignment between high schools and colleges, which often creates an “expectations gap” between what colleges require and what high schools produce. The result is a high level of remediation by colleges (and by employers), a practice that is both costly and inefficient. We are especially troubled by gaps in college access for low-income Americans. Notwithstanding our nation’s egalitarian principles, there is ample evidence that qualified young people from families of modest means are far less likely to go to college than their affluent peers with similar qualifications.

- **Several national studies confirm the insufficient preparation of high school graduates for either college-level work or the changing needs of the workforce.**
  - Dismal high school achievement rates nationwide have barely budged in the past decade, according to results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the federal testing program known as “the nation’s report card.” According to the most recent NAEP scores, only 17 percent of graduating seniors are considered proficient in mathematics and just 36 percent are proficient in reading.
  - High school course requirements often lack rigor. The American Diploma Project recommends that all graduates take four years of math, including Algebra I and II, geometry, data analysis, and statistics. But only two states – Arkansas and Texas – require graduates to take at least Algebra II.
  - The ability to handle complex reading is the major factor separating high school students who are ready for college-level reading from those who are



- not. But just half of high-school seniors are ready for college level reading, according to the ACT, which administers a popular college-entrance exam.
- Overall, American high school students are no better prepared for college than they were 10 years ago, according to the ACT. Of the 1.2 million students throughout the country who took its college-entrance tests in 2005, only 22 percent earned scores suggesting they were ready for college-level work in all three of these core subjects: English, mathematics, and science.
- **While a number of states are working to improve alignment, higher education has not sufficiently engaged and educated high schools on the level of preparation needed to succeed at the university level. The nation can no longer afford to have K-12 and higher education systems operate in isolation.**
    - A 2003 report by Stanford University's Institute for Higher Education Research noted that schools and colleges in the United States have much less to do with each other than their counterparts in other industrialized nations. The study found that an overwhelming majority of college admissions and placement officers were unaware of the standards and assessments being used by elementary and secondary schools. At the same time, elementary and secondary school educators and students generally knew little or nothing of the entrance and placement policies of public colleges in their states. The researchers also found that high school coursework was disconnected from college course work and that high school tests and college entrance and placement requirements often emphasized different skills.
    - The upshot of this poor coordination is unsurprising: Professors and secondary school teachers differ significantly in their assessment of students' readiness for college-level work. Forty four percent of faculty members say students aren't well prepared for college-level writing – in stark contrast to the 10 percent of high school teachers who say the same thing. Similarly, 32 percent of college professors – but just 9 percent of high school teachers – say students are not well prepared in math.
  - **The consequence of substandard preparation and poor alignment between high schools and colleges is that remediation has become far too common an experience for American post-secondary students.**
    - Some 40 percent of four-year college students and 63 percent of two-year college students end up taking at least one remedial course, according to an estimate by three national education-research organizations.
    - Each year, taxpayers pay an estimated \$1 billion to provide remedial education to students at public universities and community colleges. Deficits in basic skills cost businesses, colleges – and underprepared graduates themselves – as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs.
  - **College access remains persistently linked to students' socioeconomic status.**

- Twenty-two percent of college-qualified low-income graduates do not attend college at all, compared with four percent of high-income graduates. In real numbers this means that approximately 168,000 college-qualified graduates annually are not enrolling in college.
- Only 9.7 percent of young people in the bottom socioeconomic quartile will graduate from a four-year institution, compared with 57.9 percent of those in the top quartile.
- Low-income high school graduates in the top quartile on achievement tests attend college at the same rate as high-income high school graduates in the bottom quartile on the same tests.

## **Findings Regarding Affordability**

The Commission is committed to ensuring that America's colleges and universities are productive, efficient, and affordable. But to our dismay, we have found that our nation's system of higher-education finance is increasingly dysfunctional, inefficient, and inadequate.

Most public discussions of college affordability are framed solely in terms of the financial strain faced by students and families, which is appropriate and understandable in an era when for 25 years average tuition and fees have increased faster than inflation, per capita personal income, consumer prices, and even health insurance. Yet because students and families only pay a portion of the actual cost of higher education, affordability is also an important public policy concern for those who are asked to fund colleges and universities, notably federal and state policymakers, but also private donors.

In our view, affordability is directly affected by the failure of post-secondary institutions to take aggressive steps to improve institutional efficiency and productivity. That abdication of responsibility can, in turn, can be traced to a system of third-party payments – including state appropriations and private donations, as well as federal student aid – that gives college and universities little incentive to control costs and find innovative ways to teach students. On the contrary, for many institutions the path to prestige involves spending more money, whether on costly laboratories or lavish student dorms, an academic arms race that often doesn't serve the public interest.

Adding to these structural problems is the unwieldy and confusing federal student aid program, which is difficult to navigate for students and expensive to manage for the government.

- **Rising college costs and student indebtedness are of growing concern to the American public.**
  - Over the 10-year period from 1993 to 2003, average tuition and fees at public and private four-year colleges and universities rose 38 percent after adjusting for inflation. According to College Board and Census Bureau figures, the price of a public four-year college education increased by

more than 200 percent from 1981 to 2003; the Consumer Price Index rose by 80 percent during the same period.

- During the same period, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant, which is aimed at the nation's neediest students, has declined significantly.
  - Over half of today's undergraduates take out loans to finance part of their college work. Nearly three-quarters of BA recipients in private, non-profit institutions graduate with some debt, compared to 62 percent of BA recipients in public institutions. According to the most recent College Board figures, average debt levels were \$10,600 for graduates of public institutions and \$16,000 for graduates of private, non-profit colleges and universities. While 80 percent of adults say a college education is more important today than it was a decade ago, two thirds say that affording college is harder now – and 70 percent say they expect it to be even more difficult in the future. Large majorities of adults – 59 percent overall and 63 percent among parents of college students – say students today graduate with too much debt.
- **Colleges and universities have shown little inclination to cut costs and improve their productivity.**
    - Despite the fact that public spending on higher education grew more slowly than the national economy during the 1980s and 1990s, American higher education continues to lead the world in cost. Average per student spending, at \$20,245, is almost twice the level of other industrialized nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
    - Non-instructional costs are high and rising at many institutions, thanks to spending on student centers, recreational facilities, intercollegiate athletics, elaborate housing facilities, and the like. At the same time, colleges' vast physical plants are often grossly underutilized, with a typical work space used perhaps 50 percent as much annually as in the private sector. Reduced teaching loads over the past 50 years, the results of an increased focus on research, have raised the per student instructional cost over time. Adding to this pattern of inefficient and at times wasteful spending, some schools maintain expensive programs, especially at the doctoral level, that enroll relatively few students and that are available at other nearby institutions.
    - Researchers believe that the intensity of competition among institutions for students, faculty, research dollars, and prestige is a primary driver of spending increases, particularly at elite universities, both public and private.
    - In addition, the prevalence of third-party payment in higher education, whether from student-loan agencies or from private donors, means that colleges and universities are somewhat insulated from the consequences of their own spending decisions. They lack incentives, for instance, to substitute capital for labor by using technology to lower their instructional costs.

- Despite the rapid increase in higher-education costs, there is no evidence that learning outcomes have improved. To the contrary, some aggregate measures of student learning have actually declined.
- **Federal financial aid programs are often confusing, while financial aid programs of all kinds are at times inequitable and economically inefficient.**
  - There are 17 separate federal programs providing direct financial aid or tax benefits to individuals seeking post-secondary education. The system is overly complex and its multitude of programs sometimes redundant. For the typical household, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, is longer and more complicated than the federal tax return. Moreover, the simplest IRS tax form, the 1040EZ, already collects most of the key pieces of data that determine aid eligibility.
  - The current system does not provide definitive information about freshman year aid until the spring of the senior year in high school, which makes it difficult for families to plan and, for some, discourages college attendance.
  - Unmet financial need among the lowest-income families (those with family incomes below \$34,000 annually) grew by 80 percent from 1990 to 2004, even as average student aid package for families in the top income quartile more than tripled.
  - The availability of financial aid to relatively affluent families can be explained by the growing use of merit-based aid to recruit students by both state governments and individual institutions. These monies are often given to students who would be attending college anyway. While merit aid is often politically popular, it will not necessarily garner a large return on public investment and actually serves to divert resources away from students applying for need-based aid.

## **Findings on Quality and Innovation**

This Commission believes it is crucial that the United States sustain a world-class higher education system that contributes significantly to innovation and global competitiveness. But even as other nations rapidly improve their post-secondary institutions, we have found troublesome evidence of shortcomings in the quality of student learning in American colleges and universities. While educators and policymakers have commendably focused on getting more students into college, too little attention has been paid to what students should accomplish once enrolled. The result is that unacceptable numbers of students fail to complete their studies at all, while even those who make it through college don't always learn very much. A number of recent studies highlight the inadequate performance of U.S. higher education as measured by rising time to degree, dismaying core literacy skills, and disturbing racial gaps in student achievement.

We fear that university standards have become diluted and teaching methods outdated. With faculty members rewarded for academic scholarship to a much greater degree than

teaching – particularly at major research universities – we see a lack of clarity and purpose about what faculty should teach and what students should learn to become informed, engaged and productive citizens capable of prospering in an interconnected global community. Simply put, many undergraduates are being shortchanged at a time when they should be developing essential writing, critical thinking and quantitative skills. Beyond undermining the core teaching mission of our universities, these problems help explain why employers frequently report dissatisfaction with the core skills of new graduates.

In addition, we have found that our colleges, universities and other post-secondary institutions have failed to seize opportunities for innovation in their own operations. This is true not only when it comes to creating new forms of classroom teaching and content delivery, but also in the equally important endeavor of finding imaginative ways to cater to the broad demand for lifelong learning, which business and government leaders have frequently called an urgent necessity for workers at all stages of life. For their part, both state and federal policy makers have also failed to make supporting innovation a priority by providing incentives for individuals, employers, and post-secondary institutions to pursue and provide more opportunities for lifelong learning.

- **Although there is a woeful lack of systematic and comparable data on student learning at college, the information that does exist reflects serious deficiencies.**
  - The percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy has actually declined by 11 percentile points from 1992 to 2003. According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), the average document literacy score for college graduates dropped by 14 points from 1992 to 2003, and by 17 points for those with some graduate education.
  - Students' basic computational and analytical skills are also lagging. Another national survey found that 20 percent of those completing 4-year degrees – and 30 percent of those earning 2-year degrees – are unable to estimate if their car has enough gasoline to get to the next gas station or calculate the total cost of ordering office supplies. More than half of students at four-year schools and more than 75 percent of those at two-year colleges lacked the skills to interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure, understand the arguments of newspaper editorials, compare credit card offers with different interest rates and annual fees, or summarize results of a survey about parental involvement in school.
  - Students are not showing significant increases in key learning skills during their college years. Students who start college with average critical thinking skills only tend to progress over the next four years to the point where their abilities are equivalent to those of entering freshmen in the 69<sup>th</sup> percentile.

- Achievement gaps between white and Asian students and African-American and Latino students actually grow larger during the college years.
- Increasing numbers of students don't complete college in a timely manner: Only 55 percent of four-year college students complete a baccalaureate degree within six years.
- **Many critics have drawn attention to the lack of coherence and lax standards that often characterize the undergraduate curriculum.**
  - Students are often not required to take core subjects fundamental to a liberal education. A survey of 50 colleges and universities, including all of the Big Eight and Big Ten universities, the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters colleges, and an additional grouping of 13 colleges, found that not one of the surveyed colleges or universities required a general course in economics. Only 12 percent mandated a general course in literature, while only 14 percent of the colleges compelled their students to study American government or history. On many campuses, the core curriculum has fragmented into a collection of independent courses that fail to engage or build on one another. As another report on undergraduate education concluded: "In the absence of shared learning goals and clear expectations, a college degree more frequently certifies completion of disconnected fragments than of a coherent plan for student accomplishment."
  - Grade inflation continues to increase on college campuses with no apparent correlation to higher levels of student achievement. At Harvard University in 1950, for example, about 15 percent of students earned grades of B-plus or better; by 2001, half of all grades earned at Harvard were As or A-minuses. The trend at other elite universities, while less dramatic, is still pronounced. And student grade point averages have risen significantly without a corresponding increase in more objective measures such as average SAT scores.
  - The movement away from a core curriculum gives students more opportunity to select less demanding courses.
- **A key aspect of the problem is that many professors are excessively preoccupied with research, pay too little attention to innovative teaching techniques, and turn a blind eye to a campus culture that in too many instances seems to promote underachievement, anti-intellectualism, and excessive socializing.**
  - Universities reward academic scholarship to a much higher degree than teaching and educational leadership. As one analyst concluded: "On most campuses, faculty are neither expected to spend time on the quality of the collective general education nor rewarded for doing so. As a result... general education is an orphaned curriculum, fragmented and incoherent."

Universities reward the most successful professors by offering them time away from teaching, which increases instructional costs and diminishing the amount of attention paid to the quality of undergraduate instruction.

- Faculty members are not taking advantage of the growing body of research that exists on how much students are learning and how they could learn more. Hundreds of studies have accumulated information on how undergraduates develop during college and what effects different methods of teaching have on improving critical thinking, moral reasoning, quantitative literacy, and other skills vital to undergraduate education. Yet one researcher has found that fewer than 10 percent of college professors pay any attention to such work when they prepare for their classes.
- **The economic demand for a better-prepared workforce has never been greater, but employers assert that the college graduates they hire are not prepared for the workplace, lacking the new set of skills necessary for successful employment and continuous career development.**
- **Innovation is crucial to the success of post-secondary education, but colleges and universities as well as government policymakers have failed to sustain and nurture an innovative campus culture.**
  - As Commission member James J. Duderstadt has argued, reports from those working at the grassroots level in fields such as teacher preparation and math and science education indicate that the results of fundamental research are rarely translated into practice. Little of the significant research of the past decade in areas such as cognitive science, neurosciences, and organizational theory is making it into American classrooms, whether at the K-12 level or in colleges and universities.
  - Nor are opportunities for lifelong learning being adequately supported. As U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has testified, “[W]e live in a very different world today than the one our parents and grandparents knew. In that world, a single occupation could last a lifetime, from Graduation Day to retirement; a single skill could ensure a worker a comfortable living for his or her family. Today, guarantees of stability and security are fewer. But opportunities are far more numerous—if we are prepared to seize them.”
  - Students too often receive conflicting information about credit-transfer policies between institutions, leading to an unknown amount of lost time and money (and additional federal financial aid) in needlessly repeated coursework. Underlying the information confusion are institutional policies and practice on student transfers that are too often inconsistently applied, even with the same institution.

- **The lack of innovation on college campuses is at least partly attributable to the heavy regulatory burden with which post-secondary institutions must contend.**
  - At present, institutions of higher education must comply with more than 200 federal laws – everything from export administration regulations to the Financial Services Modernization Act. At their best, federal regulations are a mechanism to support important human values on campuses. At worst, regulation can absorb huge amounts of time and waste scarce campus financial resources with little tangible benefit to anyone.

### **Findings regarding accountability**

We believe colleges and universities must be accountable to the American public for their performance and transparent in their operations. But we have found a remarkable shortage of clear, accessible information that gauges the success of post-secondary institutions and reports that information to the public. Some crucial data about colleges are simply unavailable. The information that does exist, from financial aid to program quality to learning outcomes to post-graduation results, is often confusing to parents, students, and policymakers.

To be sure, some promising initiatives are underway: A number of colleges are experimenting with new assessment tools; several states are developing better tools for tracking the progress of students; and nonprofit groups such as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Education Trust are creating accessible tools for measuring the effectiveness of institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, most people are still forced to take college quality on faith because of the lack of solid, comparative evidence of how much and how well students learn in college, or whether they learn more at one school than another. This scarcity of information is particularly ironic given that colleges and universities prize transparency, precision of data, and rigorous analysis, yet have apparently failed to apply those standards to themselves. Moreover, the accreditation systems that colleges have traditionally used to measure their performance have significant shortcoming that limit their reliability and relevance to the general public. Better accountability systems are especially vital at a time when higher education is under increasing pressure to demonstrate its contribution to the public good.

- **Beyond lofty vision statements, parents and students have no solid evidence, comparable across institutions, of how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one school than another.**
  - There are no commonly used tests or other assessments to supplement inherently subjective course grades to determine how much undergraduates have learned in college. Fewer than one third of colleges nationwide conduct comprehensive evaluations to find out whether their



general-education programs are effective. While entrance exams to graduate and professional schools provide some achievement data, these evaluations are by their nature administered to a self-selected group of students. Moreover, such tests can't provide one of the most sorely needed measures of college learning: A "value-added" assessment of how much colleges are able to improve a student's academic skills based on the level of that student's skills when he or she entered the institution.

- **Similarly, policymakers need better data to help them decide whether their investment in higher education is paying off.**
  - Extensive government data on higher education do exist, but they leave out large numbers of students and rarely focus on outcomes. The National Center for Education Statistics, for instance, through its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS), collects extensive data on 6,800 post-secondary institutions around the country. However, those data are limited to full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students in a particular year. While information on race, ethnicity, and gender is available, no data exist on family income or on time to degree for individual students. In addition, students who transfer and graduate from a different institution are not counted in the statistics; nor are students who enroll on a part-time basis, nor are those who, in an increasingly common pattern, begin their studies, drop out, and then restart. All these shortcomings renders this voluminous data of limited relevance. As U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings observes: "At the U.S. Department of Education, we can tell you almost anything you want to know about first-time, full-time, degree-seeking, non-transfer students. The trouble is that over half of today's college students are nontraditional students."
- **Accreditation, the large and complex public-private system of federal, state and private regulators, has significant shortcomings.**
  - Accreditation plays a "gatekeeper" role in determining the eligibility of institutions and programs to receive federal and state grants and loans. However, despite increased attention by accreditors to learning assessments, they continue to play largely an internal role. Accreditation reviews are typically kept private, and those that are made public still focus on process reviews more than bottom-line results for learning or costs. The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation. Accreditation and related issues of credit transfer are in need of serious reform in order to promote and assure quality and accountability of higher education.

## Recommendations

We offer these proposals for change in a spirit of humility. The history of public policy reform, whether in education or other fields, has too often been marked by a grandiose tendency to promise too much while delivering too little. Yet although we are determined to be realistic about the steps that can be taken to improve post-secondary education, and to be mindful of the need for careful implementation, we are also determined to be bold. The problems facing our nation's colleges and universities are grave. They call for imaginative solutions that are not just incremental but that rethink numerous aspects of today's higher-education system in substantial ways. Moving forward on these proposals will take open-mindedness and hard work. Still, we are also optimistic about the prospects for reform, because we are convinced that as the problems we have documented are better understood, educators, policymakers and the general public will rise to the challenge of fixing them.

## Access

**1. We recommend that the nation commit to an unprecedented effort to expand college access and success by providing substantial increases in need-based aid, improving student preparation and persistence, and addressing non-academic barriers to college.**

- Federal and state policy should focus on improving persistence and sealing the leaks in the educational pipeline at all levels: K-12, post-secondary and workforce education. Colleges should be held accountable for the success of the students they admit. Improved collection of data on student persistence will allow consumers of higher education to evaluate institutional success and identify best practices.

- A high school degree should mean that a student is college and work ready. States should align K-12 graduation standards with college and employer expectations and should provide incentives for higher education institutions to make long-term commitments to working actively and collaboratively with K-12 schools and systems to help underserved students improve college preparation and persistence.

- States and institutions should review and revise standards for transfer of credit among higher education institutions to improve quality and reduce time-to-goal.

- The Commission recommends support for initiatives that help states hold high schools accountable for teaching all students and provide federal support for effective and timely intervention for those students who are not learning at grade level. Such initiatives would include requirements for state assessments in high school to ensure that diplomas mean students are prepared to enter college or the workforce with the skills to succeed.

- Overhaul K-12 teacher preparation with particular emphasis on reforming colleges of education.

- Non-academic barriers to college access must be addressed by developing partnerships among schools, colleges and the private sector to provide early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance. Such efforts should include developing students and parents knowledge of economic and social benefits of college through better and culturally appropriate information, use of role models and extensive career exploration. Research-based principles should guide development of models for advancing college access and success for underserved students.

## **Affordability**

**2. We recommend that the entire student financial aid system be overhauled in favor of substantial increases in need-based aid and a streamlined system more in line with student needs and national priorities.**

- Federal funding of need-based financial aid for higher education should be significantly increased, subject to simplification and restructuring the system, to give priority to need-based financial aid relative to public expenditures in general. Other providers of financial aid state and local governments, private institutions, businesses and private contributors – should give the highest priority to need-based aid in order to provide equitable access to higher education to qualified students from underserved communities.

- The existing convoluted, complex and counterproductive financial aid system for students should be restructured and the current federal aid form (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA) should be eliminated in favor of a small, post card-sized application form. The applications process should be substantially simplified by analyzing student need through the federal tax system. In addition, students should have information about financial aid eligibility sooner, with early estimates of likely aid available as soon as the eighth grade.

- The present financial aid system should be replaced with a strategically oriented, results-driven consolidation of programs to serve students who need aid in order to attend college. A restructured financial aid system should be built on the principles of (i) increased access, or enrollment in college by those students who would not otherwise be likely to attend; (ii) increased retention, or graduation by students who might not have been able to complete college due to the cost, and (iii) decreased debt burden.

**3. We recommend that post-secondary institutions develop new and better means to control costs and improve productivity, and demonstrate the “value added” they provide for student learning.**

- College tuition should not rise faster than family incomes. A “bottom line” for college performance should be created that measures institutional costs and performance and enables consumers and policymakers to see institutional results in the areas of academic quality, productivity and efficiency.

- Federal and state policymakers should support the dissemination of technological advances in teaching that lower costs on a quality-adjusted basis. Institutions that reduce instructional costs generally on a quality-adjusted basis should be financially rewarded.

- The expansion of college experiences in high school through Advanced Placement, early college enrollment, dual enrollment, Early College on-line programs, etc, has considerable cost reduction potential.

- At the state level, one promising approach that should be encouraged is placing increased emphasis on empowering consumers by redirecting assistance to individual students instead of institutions. The same effect could occur with a well designed expansion of the Pell Grant program.

- Another cost-reduction strategy would simply be to strengthen relatively new competitors to traditional four-year institutions, notably community colleges and non-traditional providers. The lower cost of community colleges and private for-profit providers suggests that great reductions in average per student costs are obtainable by increasing the proportion of students using these less expensive alternatives. This can be partially accomplished by reducing barriers to the transfer of credit between institutions, and reducing unnecessary accrediting constraints on new institutions.

## **Quality and Innovation**

**4. We recommend that America’s colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning, particularly in the area of science and mathematical literacy.**

- Establish a federal fund to provide incentives for effective teaching, and use of the latest research in the rapidly growing areas such as neuroscience, cognitive science, and organizational sciences.

- Do more to support and harness the power of distance learning to meet educational needs of rural students, adult learners and workforce development.

**5. We recommend development of a national strategy for lifelong learning designed to keep our citizens and nation at the forefront of the demanding and ever-changing global knowledge economy.**

- The Secretary of Education should take the lead in developing a national strategy to keep the U.S. at the forefront of the knowledge revolution, creating a system that encourages knowledge and skills to be obtained and continuously updated on a regular basis through a lifetime of learning. The Secretary’s plan should emphasize innovation incentives, development of tailored, digital delivery of knowledge, ability to transfer credits among institutions easily and the ability to acquire units linked to skill certification in addition to degrees.

- Establishment of a nationwide pilot program for Lifelong Learning Accounts (individual asset accounts to finance education and training) would allow workers to continuously upgrade their skills while helping to advance their own careers and earnings potential. A national demonstration project would provide an incentive to lower and middle-income earners to save and spend for education and training to improve their career related skills and knowledge. The accounts would be financed through tax incentives to individuals and employees.

- Transfer of credit and other barriers to lifelong learning – across accrediting regions, across state boundaries, across the lifelong learning spectrum of institutional and corporate providers – should be eliminated.

- The establishment of a “National Innovation Partnership” program, a competitive program offering federal matching funds to states would encourage innovation in areas such as program formatting, delivery and transfer of credit.

- The Secretary of Education, in partnership with state-based organizations, should develop a comprehensive plan for better integration of policy, planning, and accountability between postsecondary education, adult education, and vocational education. The plan should include specific recommendations for legislative and regulatory changes needed to create an efficient, transparent, and cost-effective system needed to meet workforce needs

## **Accountability**

**6. We recommend the creation of a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education. Every one of our other goals, from improving access and affordability to enhancing quality and innovation, will be more easily achieved if higher education embraces and implements serious accountability measures.**

### *Develop better measures of student learning*

- States should require public institutions to measure student learning using quality-assessment data from instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CSSE), which survey undergraduates about key aspects of their college experience; the

Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which measures how much student learning – and growth – takes place in colleges; the MAPP, The Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning, and/or graduate and professional entrance exams. The federal government should provide incentives for states, higher education associations, systems, and institutions to develop outcomes-focused accountability systems designed to be accessible and useful for students, policy makers, and the public, as well as for internal management and institutional improvement

- The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how much students' skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly. These results should be included on transcripts and in national databases of accountability data. Higher education institutions should make aggregate summary results of all postsecondary learning measures, e.g., test scores, certification and licensure attainment, time to degree, graduation rates, and other relevant measures, publicly available in a consumer-friendly form.

- The collection of data allowing meaningful interstate comparison of student learning should be encouraged and expanded to all 50 states. By using assessments of adult literacy, tests that many students already take for licensure and for graduate and professional school admission, and specially administered tests of general intellectual skills such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, state policymakers can make valid interstate comparisons of student learning and identify shortcomings as well as best practices.

- The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), should be administered by U.S. Department of Education at five, instead of ten, year intervals. The survey sample should be of sufficient size to yield state-by-state as well as national results. The NAAL should also survey a sample of graduating students at two and four-year colleges and universities and provide state reports.

***Improve accountability and policymaking by enhancing federal data collection and reporting efforts***

- The Secretary of Education should require the National Center for Education Statistics to prepare timely annual public reports on college revenues and expenditures, including analysis of the major changes from year to year, at the sector and state level. Unlike the current system, institutional comparisons should be consumer-friendly, and not require a sophisticated understanding of higher education finance.

- Develop a national student unit record tracking system, with appropriate privacy safeguards, which collects, analyzes and uses longitudinal student progression data as a vital tool for accountability and policy-making. Such a system would provide an accurate measure of colleges' retention and graduation rates, and their net tuition price. Collecting individual student records would give policymakers and institutions accurate

information on all students, including the growing proportion of transfer students, and a better means to assess colleges' performance.

- The accountability system for higher education should give policymakers the ability to track education and labor market outcomes on an aggregate level for all students and provide state-by-state comparisons of how states are meeting the needs of adult learners.

- The philanthropic community, and other third-party organizations, are urged to invest in the research and development of instruments measuring the intersection of institutional resources, student characteristics, and educational value-added. Tools should be developed which aggregate data at the state levels, and which also can be used for institutional benchmarking.

***Create a consumer-friendly information database on higher education with useful, reliable information on institutions, coupled with a search engine to enable students, parents, policymakers and others to weight and rank comparative institutional performance***

- The Department of Education should create a searchable, consumer-friendly database that gives consumers access to institutional performance and student outcomes in a secure and flexible format. This framework should be designed to recognize the complexity of higher education, have the capacity to accommodate diverse consumer preferences through standard and customizable searches and make it easy for consumers to get comparative information including cost, price, college completion rates and, eventually, learning outcomes.

- Third party organizations should be encouraged and enabled to publish independent, objective information using quality measures for institutions. Reports such as the *Measuring Up* state evaluations, which are conducted by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in an effort to measure how successful states are at preparation, participation, affordability, completion, and learning, should be encouraged and strengthened.

***Reform the accreditation system away from spending and other inputs and toward achieving world class outcomes in teaching and learning***

- Accreditation standards should be primarily focused on measurable quality outcomes, rather than inputs or processes. A national accreditation framework should be established which accomplishes the following:

- (i) requires institutions and programs to demonstrate that they are producing results, especially evidence of student learning. The framework should contain a set of comparable performance measures on learning outcomes appropriate to degree levels, consistent with institutional missions and suitable for accreditation, public reporting and consumer profiles;

(ii) promotes more open and flexible process standards that encourage innovation and diversity in higher education and does not prescribe specific input and process standards. These national process standards would be based on proven public and private models such as Baldrige. Colleges should apply for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award once a decade as requirement for accreditation; and

(iii) requires institutions and programs to move toward world-class quality relative to specific missions and report measurable progress in relationship to their national and international peers. This requirement would be modeled after leading best practices for benchmarking and continuous improvement techniques.

- Accreditation should provide greater transparency – expanded and more useful information to the public about institutional performance and student achievement – as a condition of accreditation.

- The accreditation process should be more open and accessible by making the findings of reviews easily accessible to the public and increasing the proportion of public representatives in the governance of accrediting organizations and members of review teams from outside higher education.

## **Promising Practices**

*These four mini case-studies (or ones similar) – one each for Access, Affordability, Quality and Innovation, and Accountability – will appear as sidebars next to each section in the printed report.*

### **Access:**

#### **The California State University System: Increasing Access and Improving Preparation**

One of the best national models of how higher-education and K-12 officials can collaborate to help students is the Early Assessment Program (EAP) developed by administrators at the California State University (CSU) system in partnership with the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education. This statewide assessment is designed to test students' proficiency in mathematics and English and to reduce the likelihood that students will have to take remedial classes once they enter college. The award-winning program embeds a voluntary college-placement exam in the state testing program required of all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, using the CSU's admissions placement standards in math and English. The "early" component of the program – testing in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, rather than the 12<sup>th</sup> – provides students an opportunity to make gains in areas of weakness during their senior year.



Additionally, CSU is raising awareness of college opportunities by reaching future students where they are – in their homes, their churches, and their communities. Partnering with community leaders and the state’s K-12 system, administrators are targeting low-income and minority students and putting higher education within their reach. For the 54 percent of CSU’s 405,000 students who are racial or ethnic minorities, initiatives such as visits by campus presidents to the largest African-American church in Los Angeles and partnerships with Latina mothers of elementary school children show the university system’s commitment to bringing underrepresented populations into higher education. An informative “How to Get to College” poster available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese outlines step-by-step advice on how students and parents can begin getting ready for college as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. These posters have been distributed to the state’s middle and high schools and contain helpful information on the admission process, applying for financial aid, and appropriate courses to take in high school to best prepare students for collegiate-level learning. Finally, the system has a dedicated web site (<http://www.csumentor.edu>) to help students and families navigate the college admissions and financial aid application processes.

**Affordability:  
Cutting Costs at the University of Maryland**

In response to increasing enrollments and decreasing state support, the University System of Maryland Board of Regents established an Initiative on Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) in 2003 designed in the words of the university’s chancellor to “increase the quality of the University System of Maryland and its value to the citizens of the state by reducing the System’s overall cost structure and, thereby, freeing up funds for reinvestment in academic priorities.”<sup>1</sup> Comprised of regents and advised by presidents and senior university administrators, the E&E work group reviewed the academic and business operations of the System’s 11 universities to improve cost-containment measures. The group explored a number of approaches, including increasing faculty course loads system-wide, joint purchasing arrangements, limiting the number of credits required for most degrees, consolidating business processes and operations, and innovating in service delivery. Results have been positive: an estimated savings of \$26.6 million; streamlined business processes; more efficient use of facilities and human resources; and room for an additional 2,100 full-time equivalent students at no additional cost to the state. For more information, visit <http://www.usmd.edu/usm/workgroups/EEWorkGroup>.

**Quality and Innovation through Course Redesign**

Developed in 1999 by the National Center for Academic Transformation, the Program in Course Redesign (PCR) helps institutions enhance quality of instruction, improve learning, and reduce costs through the use of technology and innovative

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<sup>1</sup> Kirwan, W. (2003, October 10) Memorandum to USM faculty and staff. [Hhttp://www.usmd.edu/usm/workgroups/EEWorkGroup/letter.html](http://www.usmd.edu/usm/workgroups/EEWorkGroup/letter.html)H

teaching. The 30 participating institutions, including Carnegie Mellon University, Northern Arizona University, and Tallahassee Community College, have redesigned instructional approaches to introductory courses using innovations such as embedding active learning in curricula using computer-based learning resources, requiring learning for mastery, providing on-demand help, and using alternative staffing such as undergraduate peer mentors.

The PCR has reached close to 50,000 students. Its use of continuous assessment and feedback have been shown to improve student learning and engagement. The initiative has also helped colleges and universities reduce costs. Institutions report an average of 37 percent reduced cost, a savings of about \$3 million collectively in operating costs. For more information, visit

[http://www.collegecosts.info/pdfs/solution\\_papers/Collegecosts\\_Oct2005.pdf](http://www.collegecosts.info/pdfs/solution_papers/Collegecosts_Oct2005.pdf).

### **Accountability:**

Several new initiatives aimed at assessing – and thereby improving – student learning show how much opportunity there is for colleges and universities to improve their efforts in this area.

### **The Collegiate Learning Assessment**

Among the most comprehensive national efforts to measure how much students actually learn at different campuses, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) promotes a culture of evidence-based assessment in higher education. Since 2002, 134 colleges and universities have used the exam, which evaluates students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication using performance tasks and writing prompts rather than multiple choice questions. Administered to freshmen and seniors, the CLA allows for comparability to national norms and measurement of value added between the freshman and senior years. Additionally, because the CLA's unit of analysis is the institution and not the student, results are aggregated and allow for inter-institutional comparisons that show how each institution contributes to learning. For more information, visit [www.cae.org/cla](http://www.cae.org/cla).

### **The National Survey of Student Engagement and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement**

Administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its community college counterpart, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), survey hundreds of institutions annually about student participation and engagement in programs designed to improve their learning and development. The measures of student engagement – the time and effort students put into educational activities in and out of the classroom, from meeting with professors to reading books that weren't assigned in class – serve as a proxy for the value and quality of their undergraduate experience. NSSE and CCSSE provide colleges and universities with readily usable data to improve that experience and create benchmarks against which similar institutions can compare themselves. With surveys from several million students already compiled, these instruments provide a comprehensive picture of the undergraduate student experience at four-year and two-year

institutions. Results from NSSE and CCSSE, which are publicly reported, can provide institutions and external stakeholders data for improving institutional performance, setting accountability standards, and strategic planning. For more information, visit <http://nsse.iub.edu>.

### **The National Forum on College-Level Learning**

The National Forum on College-Level Learning has been called “the first attempt to measure what the college educated know and can do across states.”<sup>2</sup> Piloted in 2002 across Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina, the study collected data on student learning using multiple assessment instruments already in use or widely available such as the National Adult Literacy Survey, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (for four-year colleges) or WorkKeys (for two-year colleges), and graduate admissions exams. Results from these assessments provide states comparable information on how their colleges and universities contribute to student learning and identify challenges such as performance gaps and inconsistent teacher preparation. Comparable assessment also allows states to identify best practices, providing information useful in creating policy and programs that will improve the states’ intellectual capital. For more information, visit <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/centers/collegelevellearning>.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, M. A. H<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/centers/collegelevellearning>H