

PRESS RELEASES

Secretary Spellings Leads National Higher Education Transformation Summit in Washington, D.C.

Secretary hosts national dialogue on making college affordable, accountable and accessible to more Americans

FOR RELEASE:

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U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings today continued the national dialogue on higher education by convening leaders and stakeholders from across the U.S. for a summit in Washington, D.C. on "A Test of Leadership: Committing to Advance Postsecondary Education for all Americans."

The summit focuses on action items around five key recommendations by the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education to improve college access, affordability and accountability. These action items include

- Aligning K-12 and higher education expectations;
- Increasing need-based aid for access and success;
- Using accreditation to support and emphasize student learning outcomes;
- Serving adults and other non-traditional students;
- And enhancing affordability, decreasing costs, and promoting productivity.

Secretary Spellings initiated a national dialogue on higher education when she created the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005. The Commission's findings were the basis for the Secretary's action plan to improve America's higher education system and provide students and families with more information and more affordable access to higher education. The Secretary announced her action plan in a speech to the National Press Club in September, 2006. A key component of that plan was to convene a summit to bring stakeholders and policy makers together to discuss the Commission's recommendations, progress and specific responsibilities and actions for the future. Another priority was streamlining the process by which students apply for federal student aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

This week, the Secretary announced the creation of the FAFSA4caster, an online tool that

- Instantly calculates a student's eligibility for federal student aid, including grants,
- Reduces the time it will take to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and

- Simplifies the financial aid process for students and families.

In the spirit of the Commission's call to create a "robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education," Secretary Spellings also announced the selection of three volunteer states—Kentucky, Florida and Minnesota—to participate in a consumer information pilot study to provide better and more easily accessible information about higher education for students and families, particularly for adults returning to school and other underserved populations. The primary outcome of the pilot study will be three new or upgraded state consumer websites. The websites will enable students to compare institutions in the state and allow them to select criteria that are most important to him or her.

To help more Americans afford and attend college, President Bush's budget proposes to increase the maximum Pell Grant to \$4600 in 2008, the largest increase in over 30 years, and to \$5400 by 2012, the largest five-year increase ever.

For more information on the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, please visit <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/plan/index.html>.

Following are the Secretary's prepared remarks at today's summit "A Test of Leadership: Committing to Advance Postsecondary Education for all Americans" in Washington, D.C.:

Thank you for that warm welcome. And thank you for being a part of this higher education summit. I appreciate your willingness to bring your expertise and insight to the issues confronting our system at this critical time.

And, I'm counting on you to build consensus and action around the solutions we need to address our most pressing challenges of access, affordability, and accountability. Institutions, government, business, parents, students, we all have a vested interest in maintaining our system's reputation for excellence.

And what a reputation it is. In character, quality, and diversity—higher education is one of the undeniable strengths of our nation. America's colleges and universities have given generations of Americans opportunity, hope, and the ability to pursue the American Dream.

They've been the birthplaces of great inventions, the incubators of great ideas, and the promoters of free thought and civic engagement.

America's universities have long been the envy of the world. But the data shows that we are in danger of losing that position. What does it mean for our country that:

- If you're white you have a pretty good chance of getting to college, and if you're an African-American student, and particularly an African-American male student, you don't?
- Only about 17% of our high school freshmen are getting bachelor's degrees within ten years—and when you disaggregate the data, it's even worse.

- For example, only 10 percent of Latinos earn bachelor's degrees by age 29
- Only 9% of low-income kids earn degrees by age 24

It's what the President sometimes calls the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Our system does a pretty good job serving our more privileged students. But that's not the extent of our job or our responsibility.

In today's competitive economy, a college education is becoming more and more of a necessity. Ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs require postsecondary education or training—and 60 percent of Americans have no postsecondary credentials at all.

At a time when more Americans need a degree, it's becoming more difficult to get one—and for low-income and minority students it can be nearly impossible. We all believe that education is the great equalizer. The idea that regardless of whether you are born to the heights of society or the depths of poverty—education will help you rise. That's the ideal. But the reality is far different.

In too many of our cities, the reality faced by minority and low-income kids is tragic. 15% of our high schools produce more than half of our dropouts. Of these dropout factories many are found in our cities and most of the students trapped in them are minorities.

For example, in New York City alone, there are more than ninety high schools where graduation is a 50/50 shot. Where most freshmen enter unable to read or do math at an eighth grade-level. Where one in five of their teachers are not certified.

And I'm not just picking on New York. A study on the dropout crisis found similar scenarios in Dallas, Chicago, and cities all across our country.

Think about the implications. We will not remain the world's innovation leader for long if we continue to leave so much talent and potential untapped.

By 2050, the majority of our population will be African American and Hispanic. If we don't improve minority access to higher education now, then we will become a poorer, more divided nation of haves and have-nots.

The American people want, deserve, and expect our leadership. We can't sit around in denial that our approach is working just fine and that it's adequately serving every American. It isn't and it's not!

That's why I launched my Commission on the Future of Higher Education. All of you are familiar with their work and recommendations. Their report brought to light serious problems with the status quo, and I thank those Commission members here for their very thoughtful work.

I know Sara (Under Secretary Sara Martinez Tucker) updated you earlier on our Department's progress to address the issues that fall within our sphere of responsibility. In the past six months:

- We've called for increasing high school accountability and rigor as part of our plans for NCLB reauthorization.
- We've proposed the largest Pell increase in 30 years.
- We've launched a new FAFSA Forecaster tool to give high school juniors early notification of their financial aid eligibility.
- And we've convened the accrediting community to ensure student learning and achievement is the main criteria for accreditation.

It's been a busy six months! Instead of going over that ground again, I'd like to take this time to talk about why I believe this work is so important. When we start debating alignment, accreditation, assessment—it's easy to get bogged down in the details and lose sight of why we're having this discussion in the first place.

In this century, a skilled, inventive workforce is as critical a national resource as energy or technology. Talent is becoming one of the most sought after commodities and going forward our ability to compete will rest on the level of skill and education our citizens hold.

Nations from Japan to China to India understand this reality all too well. In my travels and I know you've seen the same, we've witnessed first hand how they're actively investing to ensure their workers come out on top. They're adapting their education systems at a rapid clip.

As Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke recently observed, "As the larger return to education and skill is likely the single greatest source of the long-term increase in inequality, policies that boost our national investment in education and training can help reduce inequality while expanding economic opportunity."

So, there's a strong case that strengthening higher education is critical to our future competitiveness. But in my opinion, there's an even stronger moral case to be made. Helping more Americans earn a degree is not only important for our economic standing...it's essential to reinforcing what our country stands for.

If our nation stands for equality, if we believe every child deserves access to the opportunities education provides, then the sad fact that so many of our low-income, minority students are in effect being locked out of higher education doesn't reflect those uniquely American ideals. The very same issues of access, affordability, and accountability that make it more difficult for Americans to pursue higher education pose even greater hurdles for our neediest students.

First, when it comes to access the problems begin long before a college application is ever filled out. Despite our best efforts, there are still vast inequities within our K-12 system. With No Child Left Behind we've made progress in the early grades where we've focused. Reading and math scores are at all-time highs for Hispanic and African-Americans. And, the longstanding achievement gap has finally begun to close.

Unfortunately, in our high schools it's a much different story. In addition to an epidemic dropout rate, only half of those who graduate are really ready for college-level math and science.

Twenty-five years ago, the landmark A Nation at Risk report recommended that high school students be required to take a minimum of three years of math and three years of science to graduate. It's hard to believe that today, not even half our states require this bare minimum.

We know that rigorous coursework is one of the best ways to improve student achievement. Studies show that just taking one or two Advanced Placement courses increases a student's chance of going to college and their odds of graduating in 4 years. And yet here again, we see a troublesome lack of equity.

There's something wrong when right here in the nation's capital, suburban Langley High School offers 24 AP courses while D.C.'s inner city Ballou offers but four. And, you're sure to find these discrepancies in your communities too.

When I looked in my own hometown of Austin, I discovered the same problem—suburban Eanes' Westlake High offers 27 AP courses, but Johnston High within the city limits offers only 9. This isn't only about students failing to succeed in challenging environments; it's about schools failing to challenge them in the first place.

A good case study can be seen in the implementation of our new Academic Competitiveness Grants. These scholarships are designed to reward Pell-eligible students who complete a rigorous high school curriculum, but to date, only half the total award funding has been distributed.

Granted, it's a new program, but why aren't more students qualifying for and receiving these awards? 40 percent of high school graduates are eligible for Pell grants, but so far only four percent are receiving the new AC grants.

The two reasons are they're either not enrolled full-time as stipulated in the law, or they didn't take enough rigorous coursework in high school. Both point to the very real problems of access our low-income students have in their efforts to prepare for and obtain a degree.

On affordability the story is much the same. Skyrocketing tuition increases that have outpaced inflation, family income, even health care costs, have also outpaced many Americans ability to afford and attend college.

Consider that in 1975, the Pell grant covered 84% of costs—today only 36%. In addition, state and institutional non-need based aid has far surpassed aid to more needy students. A recent Ed Trust report that studied 50 state flagship institutions found over the past decade grants to families making more than \$100,000 increased by 406%, while aid to families making less than \$20,000 actually decreased by 13%.

With numbers like this, it's not surprising that on the recent Measuring Up report card—43 states got an "F" for failing on affordability.

The role of government in education has always been to help our students most in need, and, frankly, we've all let them down. No more. The President is answering the call to make college more affordable.

His budget called for the biggest Pell Grant increase in over 30 years—raising the grant to \$4600 next year and increasing to \$5,400 over the next five years. I know the Congress is committed on both sides of the aisle to getting this done. And I want to thank them for acting recently to put more money into Pell.

But federal aid is only one slice of the pie. States and institutions must also do their part to help our students gain access. And I know how dedicated all of you are to this goal—that's why you're here and that's why so many of you are already doing this work in your own states and at your own institutions.

Finally, to better serve all our students we must inject more transparency into our higher education system. If we believe we must educate more Americans, how are we going to do that without adequate information about how well we're serving our customer? Like any other investment or enterprise, we need meaningful data to better manage and improve the system.

We expect detailed information about nearly every purchase or investment we make, from choosing a doctor to buying a car or home. And in almost every area of our government—from prescription drug programs to welfare to K-12 education—we expect accountability for tax dollars.

Yet, when it comes to higher education, we've invested hundreds of billions in taxpayer money and just hoped for the best. Colleges and universities must be more transparent about cost, graduation rates, and learning outcomes, so that students and parents can make more informed choices.

We need a system where an individual student can easily search across regions what engineering program is the most affordable and has the best success graduating African-American students in four years for example.

To this end, we're awarding Florida, Minnesota, and Kentucky \$100,000 each for consumer information pilots that will make this data more available and useful to families and students.

On all these issues—from access to accountability—we're working to do our part, but more importantly, we're not working alone.

Since the Commission report was released, states like Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina and Texas have announced comprehensive strategies to increase need-based aid, reduce college costs, measure student learning, and hold colleges accountable for the number of students they graduate.

We all have a stake. At the Department, we've been hard at work, and we're just getting started.

In the coming months, we'll work with Congress to address our top priorities including:

- Aligning high school curriculum with college and workforce needs and requiring a more accurate accounting of high school graduation rates as part of our NCLB reauthorization proposals.

- Enacting the President's Pell and AC grant increases.
- Further simplifying the financial aid process.
- Increasing transparency by passing the President's \$25 million pilot program to help states collect and analyze college student data and measure results.

This is urgent work. Too many Americans are being left behind at a time when it has never been more important to pursue higher education. Education is the key to our continued competitiveness and essential to our democracy.

It's a truth President Lyndon Johnson recognized when he signed the Higher Education Act into law. As he put it, "the leadership of your country believes it is the obligation of your nation to provide and permit and assist every child born in these borders to receive all the education that he can take." Forty years later, we're "the leadership" to whom he's referring.

So ask yourselves—is my state? Is my institution living up to its obligation to help every child? Are we as leaders living up to the trust placed in us by our fellow citizens and our prospective students?

It's our responsibility and our privilege to meet this obligation. Our responsibility to make sure the higher education system serves every American well. I'm honored to share this responsibility with you and encouraged that together we can ensure higher education remains the path to the American dream and that all Americans have access to it.

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focused. Reading and math scores are at all-time highs for Hispanic and African-Americans. And, the longstanding achievement gap has finally begun to close.

Unfortunately, in our high schools it's a much different story. In addition to an epidemic dropout rate, only half of those who graduate are really ready for college-level math and science.

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