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## A Near-Final Report?

The Secretary of Education's [Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#) released [the next iteration of its report Thursday](#), which for those of you scoring at home is the third partial draft and the first truly complete one (it contains not only the preamble and summary that were missing from its second draft but, for the first time, a conclusion, too).

The new draft finds the commission treading largely the same path that it started on with [the second draft](#), in which its members sanded down some of the sharpest-edged criticisms about higher education contained in [the staff-written first draft](#) and added praise about the importance of higher education and context about such things as declining state financial support for colleges.

In Draft No. 3 (which [is available here](#)), higher education's "unseemly" complacency about its future becomes its "unwarranted" complacency. "Glaring deficiencies" mutates into "unfulfilled promise." Gone is the suggestion that colleges shun transparency and precise data about their own practices and make "no serious effort to examine their effectiveness" in what students learn. And added to the mix are stronger statements about how need-based financial aid has not kept pace with students' costs, multiple mentions of the centrality of community colleges, and acknowledgement that colleges and accreditors have actually paid more attention to gauging student learning.

Despite the slightly softer "tone" of the new draft, however, it still packs a punch and offers a toughly worded, urgent assessment about the state of higher education and what needs to be done to improve it. "This commission believes U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways," the report's preamble says. "Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U.S. higher education, we have found much to applaud, but also much that requires urgent reform."

Largely unchanged from previous drafts are both the problems the commission identifies (inadequate student access to and success in higher education, particularly for low-income and minority students; the lack of affordability for students, due both to rising college prices and inadequate need-based financial aid; a dearth of solid and publicly accessible information about colleges's costs and performance; too little innovation by colleges, often impeded by accreditors and governments) and the solutions it proffers:

- A significant expansion of need-based financial aid (one twist is that the third draft specifies that the federal government should aim over five years to increase Pell Grant spending so that the average grant covers 70 percent of the average in-state tuition at a four-year public college).
- The creation of a "robust culture of accountability and transparency," including a federal database to give the public comparable information on colleges' costs, prices, admissions data, completion rates and learning outcomes, and a call for states to require public universities to measure student learning.
- More focus on innovation and increased productivity, through better use of technological advances, enhanced student transfer, less government regulation and more thoughtful accreditation practices.
- An increase in federal investment in areas critical to America's global competitiveness.

Because the report was released relatively late in the day and was not published on the commission's Web site, several commissioners contacted late yesterday said they had not had a chance to digest it and therefore could not comment. (Richard Vedder, an economist at Ohio University, described the report as "not perfect" but said he planned to vote for it unless "there are significant revisions that water the report down made in the next few

days.")

Charles Miller, the panel's chairman, [distributed a letter](#) to his colleagues with what he called his "personal comments." He said he hoped the report would "produce a sense of urgency regarding the future of higher education," which he said faced a "confluence of alarming factors: global competitive pressures, powerful technological developments, restraints on public finance and serious structural limitations that cry out for reform. The future of higher education is threatened by these forces."

Many of the college officials who have been following the commission's work and dissecting its every word had not had a chance to see it Thursday and also declined comment on it. It is hard to say for sure, then, whether the new draft will change the political environment within the commission (though it seems likely, at this point, to earn the votes of a majority of its members), or whether it is likely to win over the many college officials who had critiqued aspects of the commission's previous drafts. Panel members have been asked to have their responses in by Monday, in advance of the commission's final meeting in Washington on Thursday.

Those who have been most critical, like the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, which represents private nonprofit colleges, are unlikely to be assuaged; the new report, like its predecessors, continues to call, among other things, for streamlining the federal aid programs, holding tuition increases to growth in median family income (though not "price controls," the commission insists in this draft), and a national database of student academic records ("privacy protected" and using "non-identifiable" data, the panel's report insists). The private colleges severely dislike all of those ideas.

In the last week, two other major associations of research institutions, the [Association of American Universities](#) and the [National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges](#), have issued assessments of the commission's second draft that criticize some fundamental elements of the panel's approach and pick apart many of its specific recommendations. Those groups have focused their concerns on the fact that the commission virtually ignores graduate and professional education, oversimplifies the interplay of cost, price and higher education finance, and calls for mandatory, rather than voluntary, accountability systems at the state level. None of those things has changed significantly in the third draft.

But even before the third draft was released, at least one major higher education group has more or less thrown its support behind the overall thrust of the commission's themes and recommendations, a move that seems likely to alter the political environment for the panel's work.

In a speech last month to the State Higher Education Executive Officers, Constantine W. (Deno) Curris, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, which represents 400 public institutions, largely praised the commission's then-just released second draft. While he acknowledged that the report's early drafts contained language that offended many college officials, he said higher education leaders had signaled that "we seem to be more concerned with tone than recommendations."

On the substance of the report, Curris insisted, "most of us engaged with higher education's important work view the draft recommendations as solid and worthy of support," Curris told the state higher education leaders. Listing some of the panel's major proposals — undertaking "an unprecedented effort to expand college access and success," overhauling the federal student aid system, developing "new and innovative means to control costs [and] improve productivity," creating a "robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education," increasing federal spending on "areas critical to the nation's global competitiveness — Curris said: "These are excellent recommendations — good for higher education and society."

In an interview Thursday, before the release of the commission's third draft, Curris reiterated his view that while the tenor of the commission's reports to date may leave something to be desired, "the more important parts of any national commission are the messages it sends and the recommendations."

The "two strong messages" of the first two drafts, Curris said, were "making sure college is affordable and the playing field is leveled for individuals irregardless of their backgrounds," and "the concept of greater accountability and transparency — the message that higher education institutions must prove that they support a public good, not just private gain."

"Higher education needs to accept those messages, and they make sense to us," Curris said. "And while we haven't seen the final draft yet, the recommendations proffered at this point, on the whole, are very solid, and

may be helpful to the future of higher education if they are adopted.”

AASCU’s endorsement of the commission’s general thrust could serve to turn up the pressure on David Ward, president of the American Council on Education and a member of the Spellings commission. As the head of the group that seeks to represent the common interests of higher education, he is in the uncomfortable position of trying to balance dissenting views like those of NAICU and AASCU, who sit on opposite ends of a continuum in their assessments of the commission’s work.

In one way, whether Ward ultimately agrees enough with AASCU that he signs the commission’s final report or sides with NAICU and withholds his support may not matter if the panel’s chairman, Charles Miller, can garner enough votes from business leaders and others on the panel. But since the ultimate success or failure of the commission’s report may depend on how widely it is embraced by those who would actually need to carry much of it out — college administrators and faculty members — the support of Ward and other higher education leaders on the panel probably does matter.

Ward’s views, like those of other commissioners, will become clear by the time of the panel’s August 10 meeting. Up and down votes could occur then.

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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