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Commission Finalizes Report

By Amy Wong

Washington, D.C. - After 11 grueling months, eight meetings, and numerous emails, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education has finally agreed to send their final report to U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings.

The Commission, formed by Spellings, is comprised of a diverse and influential membership. The final report provides recommendations to the White House and state government on how to make higher education more accessible, affordable, accountable, and globally competitive.

However, the report's influential power has been greatly weakened by the criticism surrounding it. After blaming educational ills on universities, the first draft drew heated responses from many higher education organizations. The final draft maintains, albeit with delicate wording, its original point: that universities' high spending is responsible for decreased college enrollment.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, was the sole dissenter among 18 proponents of the report. He argued that the report singled out expensive colleges as the culprit when, in actuality, there are many other contributing factors that explain the drop in college enrollment. The report took on a "one size fits all" approach to improving a highly diverse educational system.

Ward continued, "Change in higher education is needed, but we need to get it right and, above all, do no harm. I believe I can be more effective in this continuing dialogue if I am free to contest some aspects of this report."

Robert M. Zemsky, chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education, voted in support of the bill but harbored similar concerns regarding the report. Concurring with Ward, Zemsky argued that the report should not focus on higher education's flaws. Rather, recommendations should build on its strengths.

Zemsky acknowledged a great number of "people who are hostile" and "no longer believe" in the Commission. Blaming colleges for educational problems has created great animosity, "so [that] we have more than heavy lifting to do. We have trust building as well."

By concentrating on the faults of educational institutions, the report neglected to address other pressing matters. While colleges hike up tuition prices, the government has decreased the amount of student financial aid.

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Unable to afford college, many students are taking out large loans. The report did not recommend improvements to the student loan industry, thus allowing the burden of student debt increase further.

In an attempt to cut college administrative costs and reduce tuition, several organizations have suggested the removal of standardized testing, but the Commission has left this concern unaddressed.

The final report did, however, recommend a unit-record tracking system, which would gather information on individual students. Complaints have been filed to Commission Chairman, Charles Miller, citing student-privacy complications.

Other relevant issues that were not sufficiently addressed include grade inflation, faculty tenure, and improvements to graduate education.

Despite the many complaints revolving around the report, there are a few positive points worth highlighting. The report recommended that the federal government consolidate all its financial aid programs and increase Pell Grants to account for 70 percent of in-state tuition costs.

Also, in response to criticism, the final draft removed a recommendation that only allowed low-income students to obtain federally backed student loans, thus forcing some students to take out more expensive private loans.

It seems that Spellings has gotten the "national debate" she wanted. After the Commission had approved the final draft on Thursday, Spellings said, "I will review findings, determine appropriate actions, and continue this national dialogue."

Several Commission members noted that the hardest part will come in the next couple of months when they try to turn their recommendations into reality. Nonetheless, there are many who wonder whether these recommendations will be implemented.

Ward's prepared statement said, "Despite improvements with each successive draft, there remain several issues of serious concern to me-particularly as I look ahead to the challenges of implementing the report's recommendations, with which I will inevitably be directly involved."