

# Access and the Future of American Higher Education: A Question of Accountability?



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For fairly obvious reasons, I suppose, we don't have royal commissions in America. For that matter, I don't know whether the British do any more either. But every now and then the Administration does appoint some sort of national panel of worthies when it wants to draw attention to an issue or, as may equally be the case, avoid it altogether. Into which of these categories the recent Spellings report on the Future of Higher Education (1) will fall remains to be seen.

Appointed about a year ago by the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, the commission's findings have been dribbling out (not to mention watered down) for months. Even so, the report certainly appears to be a call to action, the New York Times characterized it as urging nothing less than a "broad shake-up" of American higher education. We've got used to this rhetoric, mind you – American education has been the subject of dozens of 'wake up call' reports over the past few decades. Still, the consequences may be more far-reaching this time. Whether they are the consequences some of us would wish for is another matter.

“ The commission was charged with “developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future.”

This may seem unexceptional enough to British eyes, but it has to be remembered that the American Constitution spells out no defined role for the federal government in higher education. There have been major national

initiatives over the years, of course, particularly in terms of expanding educational access and opportunity. But the problem now, according to the report, is that a system renowned for its size, diversity and market sensitivity has become complacent in the face of critical challenges such as globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, diverse and aging population and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs and paradigms. The recommendations, as dramatic in some instances as they are eclectic, call for substantial investment in student financial assistance, on the one hand, and equally substantial improvements in institutional efficiency, innovation accountability, on the other.

The report draws on four strands of domestic thinking and concern about American higher education in recent decades: the centrality of postsecondary education in a knowledge economy, the importance of postsecondary education as a driver of social mobility, the growing realization that access is meaningless without attainment, and the emerging consensus that colleges and universities need to be more accountable for student outcomes. There is no question that each represents an important challenge for higher education in the US, as they do in the UK. The Dearing Report, after all, covered much the same ground. Yet whether they quite hang together as a comprehensive strategy to improve student access and attainment is not altogether obvious.

Opening with the now almost obligatory exhortations about America's declining educational position in the world, the report moves quickly to an endorsement of the importance of higher education as a driver of economic and social mobility. Yet, as it laments, too many students are dropping

out of secondary schools, are unprepared for college if and when they get there, and even then take too long to complete their degrees, or not complete them as the case may be.

The focus on student access is particularly welcome and acknowledges the mounting chorus of concern about the apparent intractability of income, race, age and geography as determinants of educational and therefore occupational attainment. And yet by linking access so closely to accountability, the report is not simply expressing the very reasonable argument that institutions need to pay more attention to student learning and achievement. It is also endorsing a policy shift that has been taking place over a couple of decades now. We may be moving toward a more comprehensive national strategy for higher education, but at the same time we appear to be moving away from a comprehensive federal commitment to address the underlying causes of differential access and attainment. After all, the transformations from elite to mass higher education in the US have been driven and justified historically by economic necessity on the one hand and social justice on the other. Both arguments and imperatives remain in the Spellings report. But the conventional wisdom now seems to view access more as a function of institutional and system accountability. Indeed, the report contains very little analysis or even acknowledgement of the political, economic or demographic conditions that shape differential access and attainment. What do we lose when we put this aside? It may well be true that American higher education is “increasingly risk averse, at times self-satisfied and unduly expensive.” But why would a system in which colleges are “more nimble, more efficient, and more effective” necessarily do a better job of reducing educational inequality?

Similarly, when the report talks about the structural impediments to access it tends to do so largely in institutional and system terms. By this logic, the essential challenges have to do with raising educational standards and better “alignment” of secondary and tertiary systems. Yet while the report endorses moves to make secondary coursework more challenging by increasing access to Advanced Placement (2) and International Baccalaureate curricula, the implications of which could be enormous, there is little discussion of what this might require in terms of scalability and investment.

To be fair, the proposal to essentially restore the Pell grant (for low-income students) to its original purchasing power in the early 1970s, roughly 70% of public university tuition fees, is quite dramatic and would have a substantial impact.

And it may be that we are on the verge of a much needed overhaul of a federal financial aid system that has become too complicated and fails to sufficiently address the needs of part-time and adult students. Whether such investments are likely to be endorsed let alone embraced by an Administration that has been more inclined to cut educational budgets than increase them seems somewhat improbable. And there will be those who argue, sometimes disingenuously perhaps but also not entirely without point, that increased federal funding for financial aid will only further accelerate the “high cost – high aid” spiral that has allowed institutions to pursue enrollment strategies geared more to increased prestige than accessibility. Even so, the panel should be commended for putting the financial aid issue firmly on the table.

American higher education may be as much a part of the problem as the solution when it comes to student access. But the report could have done more to explore the underlying causes and dynamics of educational inequality, including the complicity of federal and state policy-making in recent decades. Colleges do need to become more accountable, but the sorts of measures envisaged by the commission, such as national achievement tests for college graduates, ring a bit hollow given what we are learning, or not learning, from the deluge of ‘high stakes’ test data now flowing from states and secondary school districts around the country.

The fact is that this country is not at a point where it is likely to embark on major investments in education or other social infrastructure needs. We have been told for some time now that we cannot “throw money” at such problems. If the Spellings report leads to substantial increases in financial assistance for low-income Americans, it will be no small achievement given the current climate. In return, higher education will be asked to become more accountable for national objectives. But will this be enough? Assigning accountability can be a slippery exercise, often revealing as much about those doing the assigning as those to whom it has been assigned. But then we don’t need a royal commission to tell us that.

### Notes:

1. The report can be found on the website of the US Department of Education at:  
<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>
2. A national program offered by the College Board in which college level curricula are taught at the secondary school level. As with the International Baccalaureate, American students taking Advanced Placement courses may gain college as well as secondary school credit.