A Year Later, Spellings Report Still Makes Ripples

More colleges test students and share data

By PAUL BASKEN

Washington

A year ago, Charles Miller, a former chairman of the University of Texas' Board of Regents, walked into the U.S. Education Department here and dropped off a glossy 76-page document with a crisp red cover.

Its recipient, Secretary Margaret Spellings, promptly hailed the final report of her Commission on the Future of Higher Education as a turning point: It was the day, she hoped, when U.S. colleges reoriented their mission to provide the highest possible quality of education to the most students possible at the lowest possible cost.

Such epochal aspirations motivate many government commissions. One year later, however, there is accumulating evidence that the vision in this case might, at least in some key aspects, actually be realized.

"Something is changing out there," says Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. After initial criticisms of the Spellings commission and the sometimes caustic tone of its yearlong deliberations, many college leaders are recognizing common ground.

"This was not," Mr. Callan says, "some group of ideologues or people who had no respect for higher education or had an ax to grind."

Among recent key developments seen to stem from or be encouraged by the Spellings commission:

- Hundreds of U.S. colleges are using standardized student-achievement tests, allowing comparisons between institutions, while investigating options for creating more such tests.

- Several major college groups are set to outline in coming weeks projects in which their members will post to their Web sites specific performance-related data to allow direct comparisons between institutions.

- Congress, with broad bipartisan backing, this month approved the largest increase in federal student aid since the GI Bill in 1944.

"We're under way," Ms. Spellings said in an interview with The Chronicle last week. "Are we done? Heck no. We haven't even started."

Previous Reports
The Spellings panel cannot claim all the credit. Democrats, who took over Congress from the Republicans last fall, had long urged a substantial student-aid increase. And the commission's general goal of making college more affordable for more students, and more responsive to U.S. economic needs, was already being highlighted by others.

The department's own Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, in a September 2006 report issued just as the Spellings commission was wrapping up its own work, warned that between 1.4-million and 2.4-million potential U.S. college graduates would fail to enroll or to complete their classes because of financial obstacles. A year earlier, the National Academies issued a report warning that the U.S. risked losing its technological and economic pre-eminence if it didn't graduate more science students.

The contribution last September of Ms. Spellings's commission, led by her Texas friend, Mr. Miller, had its shortcomings. It offered most of its recommendations in the form of general guidance rather than specific objectives. It overlooked major problems such as the conflict-of-interest scandal that subsequently enveloped both college financial-aid offices and the student-loan industry. It had no student representation. It contained no significant international comparisons.

And in terms of specific goals that Ms. Spellings devised in response to the report — from redesigning high-school tests to simplifying the federal student-aid application form — few have been put in place so far.

Yet the Spellings commission tackled college orthodoxies in ways that previous panels had not. Rather than urge more government funds or suggest some shifts in academic focus, the Spellings panel proposed a direct challenge to some deeply cherished and longstanding ways in which colleges operate, calling on higher education to shed some of its mystery and fundamentally prove the value it delivers.

That change should be accomplished, the commission said in its final report, by devising new "accountability measures" that allow comparisons of student performance. That means developing standardized tests and compiling and sharing more data on both "inputs" and "outcomes," including total student costs and college completion rates, it said.

Such proposals prevented the commission from granting its unanimous approval. One member, David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, withheld his vote, saying he could not be sure how Congress might translate his colleagues' language into legislation.

Even so, many member institutions of ACE are already moving ahead, embracing standardized testing and comparative data as a means both for improving internally and competing for new students.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, with more than 400 member institutions, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, with more than 200 members, are at the forefront. The two groups plan to introduce a common system of data presentation this fall, to be posted on college Web sites, which will publicly provide data ranging from projected costs of attendance to standardized-test results.

Testing Students in Texas

One major university system is already doing it. For the past few years, Mr. Miller's successors at the 15-institution University of Texas system have been testing students, in groups of freshmen and seniors, using an exam known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Results are publicly posted.

The CLA, developed by the RAND Corporation, is designed to measure critical thinking, problem solving, analytic reasoning, and written communication. It is now in use at about 230 U.S. campuses, and was suggested by the Spellings commission as an example of outcomes-based assessments that other colleges
could consider. Other examples include the National Survey of Student Engagement, in which students answer such questions as how much class time is spent in discussion.

At the University of Texas at Dallas, the outside assessments have helped improve classroom instruction, says Robert S. Nelser, vice provost. Mr. Nelser, who teaches his own course, "Exploration of the Arts," said that data from the National Survey of Student Engagement helped him realize he needed to have his students spend more time critiquing each other's work in classroom discussions.

Another Texas campus, Permian Basin, in Odessa, has been advertising its scores on the Collegiate Learning Assessment after results showed that the small and little-heralded university, which accepts 95 percent of students who apply, had the system's highest rate of academic growth between the freshman and senior years.

Mark G. Yudof, chancellor of the University of Texas system, likes the competition. "The idea of stimulating universities to do this is very valuable," he says.

Other institutions — including many of the nation's most prestigious universities — remain much less sure. "The very underlying concept of comparability, that the Spellings commission proposed, we object to," says David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, which represents nearly 1,000 private institutions.

Mr. Warren's organization is also proposing that its members provide some common sets of self-descriptive statistics on their Web sites. Unlike the plan being proposed for the public colleges, however, Mr. Warren's version will not include any test-based data. He contends that the missions of private colleges are too varied and too complex to be captured by any broad-based tests.

The public colleges share some of that concern, says M. Peter McPherson, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Their associations are proposing that member colleges take several years to decide what types of test data will be included in their public reports.

Mr. Warren's opposition is more categorical, emboldened by "focus group" sessions his group held with prospective college students and their parents. The participants said they wanted to choose colleges on the basis of factors such as job-placement rates and admissions to medical schools.

"In all of the focus groups," he said, "not a single parent, not a single student, ever said, 'Gee I absolutely want learning-outcome measures, I can't see how I can make a decision if I don't have learning-outcome measures.'"

**Movement by Some Colleges**

Mr. Miller rejects such logic, saying colleges that resist meaningful tests of student accomplishment fear they will be shown to be "not adding any value that's measurable."

Many elite U.S. colleges' curriculums are so "watered down" that students don't learn much, he says. "What the kids gain is they get the stamp of approval — they come in as top students, they leave as the top whatever. But what is the value of that?"

Among some groups of private colleges, Mr. Miller's point of view may be winning the day. Many members of the Council of Independent Colleges, which represents more than 500 liberal-arts institutions — generally a less-wealthy subset of Mr. Warren's organization — are also trying out the Collegiate Learning Assessment, says the group's president, Richard H. Ekman.

The council's members are largely outside the group of 100 to 200 "truly selective" private U.S. colleges, and "they are trying to put their best foot forward" to attract applicants, Mr. Ekman said. "What the CLA and
other measures of cognitive growth provide to these colleges is another source of evidence that they're a good place to go to school," he says.

That type of debate over standardized tests is a political tightrope that Ms. Spellings already walks on the elementary- and secondary-school level. The Bush administration strongly supports mandatory state-based testing in public schools, yet it rejects any form of national test, even as some states respond to the federal pressure by weakening their standards.

That degree of dispute over national testing on the college level appears far away, Ms. Spellings told The Chronicle. Testing, even if the format is determined for now by the colleges, "will empower consumers, and it will be huge step forward," she said. "And some other secretary in the future can worry about what happens after the first, second, and third steps happen."

Either way, student-aid advocates warn that the argument over testing and data may be drowning out a more extensive examination of still-rising college costs. The commission proposed a series of steps to reduce "nonacademic barriers" to college attendance, including curriculum revisions at the high-school and community-college levels to avoid unnecessary repetition of course work. But few may have noticed, said William E. Troutt, president of Rhodes College, in Memphis, who chaired the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education in 1998.

"Nine out of 10 college presidents could not describe the commission's message on affordability," Mr. Troutt said. "That's unfortunate, because nine out of 10 college presidents wake up every morning thinking about affordability."

'Public Discussion' Prompted

For all the work remaining, the commission has "started to provoke a long-overdue public discussion," Ms. Spellings said. "We have put the elephant in the middle of the dining-room table, and we're starting to talk about stuff that we ought to be talking about."

The pace of that reform, the secretary said, may be too slow for some and too fast for others. "To the extent that grownups don't like change, and any change is too much change for some people," she said, "that may be true."

She suffered one major setback when she proposed new regulations requiring outcomes-based assessments as part of the federal accreditation process. Colleges, which need that accreditation to remain eligible for the government's $83-billion student-aid program, lobbied lawmakers who then persuaded Ms. Spellings to abandon the effort.

The overall battle remains ahead, Ms. Spellings said.

"We are in the infancy in American higher education of being able to describe to our publics — whether they're state legislatures, Congress, parents, philanthropists — what we're doing, and to what effect," she said. "And we all have a responsibility to start to answer that question. And we've barely begun."

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Section: Government & Politics
Volume 54, Issue 5, Page A1