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Federal Higher-Education Panel Seeks to Focus on 'Big Ideas'

By KELLY FIELD

With less than six months remaining on its charter, the secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education appears to be heading toward a series of recommendations that would alter accreditation, promote lifelong learning, and encourage — but not necessarily require — standardized testing.

While the commission has yet to offer any concrete proposals, there seems to be a consensus of the need to focus on three or four "big ideas" and not get mired in minutia.

So far much of the conversation has centered on the need for increased transparency and accountability in higher education. Members appear to agree that consumers and policy makers alike deserve to know how well colleges and universities are preparing students to compete in the global economy.

"We must do a better job of measuring the institutional performance of colleges and universities," said Charles Miller, chairman of the commission and a former chairman of the University of Texas System's Board of Regents, at a meeting earlier this month in San Diego. "Without a transparent information system, accountability today is only guessing."

He said the commission is reviewing two new "highly credible" measures of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication: the Collegiate Learning Assessment and a new test by the Educational Testing Service.

Asked if he was proposing mandatory testing, Mr. Miller said he was not suggesting a "one size fits all" approach. However, he predicted that students and employers will soon start to press colleges to offer the tests as evidence of learning.

Several committee members have also expressed support for the administration's proposed "unit record" data system, which would track the educational progress of students using their Social Security numbers. That plan has run into strong resistance from private colleges, who worry about the risk to student privacy.

While there has been less talk of accreditation, Mr. Miller made clear in a memorandum sent to the commission in January that he hopes to "fix" the accreditation system by reducing regional variability in standards, increasing the independence of accreditors, and making the process more responsive to Internet-based learning.

Praise for For-Profits

Another major focus of the commission has been lifelong learning and the role the for-profit sector plays in educating adults. One idea that seems to be gaining traction is the creation of "lifelong learning accounts" that could be used to finance continuing education. Under that plan, employees, employers, and federal and state government could contribute to the accounts either directly or through tax credits and deductions.

Along with praise for for-profits, there has been plenty of criticism for traditional colleges at commission meetings. One speaker at the meeting went so far as to describe state and community colleges as "paternalistic," "self-important,"

and unresponsive to consumer demand.

"State colleges and universities, particularly community colleges, amount to state-run enterprises and suffer from all the inefficiency and poor decision making of Soviet-style factories," said Trace A. Urda, senior research analyst for Robert W. Baird & Company.

That comment elicited a withering reply from a commission member, Charlene R. Nunley, president of Montgomery College, in Maryland, who described herself as "the president of a Soviet-style factory."

"You have completely ignored the continuing-education mission of universities," she said. "I think your criticism is unduly harsh and unsubstantiated by evidence."

And Howard Block, managing director and senior research analyst at Banc of America Securities, stressed that while for-profits have performed well financially, they have not improved the quality of education or been "sufficiently accountable for taxpayers."

"Too many of the companies continue to sacrifice the integrity of our higher-education system at the altar of earnings growth," he said.

Still, he encouraged traditional colleges to emulate the for-profit industry by providing more-frequent start dates for classes, more-convenient campuses, and nonsequential curricula.

"If traditional schools would copy the for-profits," he said, "they would be better able to protect their market shares."

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