



**National Association for
College Admission Counseling**

Guiding the way to higher education

Secretary Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education: NACAC Statement on the Final Draft Report

In October 2005, United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings convened the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The intent of the Commission, according to Spellings, was to realize the "unfulfilled promise" of American postsecondary education by focusing on improving access, affordability, accountability, and quality.

In August 2006, the Commission issued its third and final draft report. The Commission approved this draft report by a vote of 18-1, with David Ward, President of the American Council on Education (ACE), casting the lone dissenting vote.

Despite widespread agreement that the Commission correctly identified many of the nation's challenges with respect to postsecondary access, NACAC's press release on August 17 expressed disappointment with the Commission's efforts and recommendations.

College Access

- The Commission stated that college access in America is "unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers." Addressing these issues, in fact, have constituted NACAC's policy priorities for the past three years.
- However, the Commission's recommendations do not call for a substantial investment in public secondary schools to enhance educational instruction and offerings. Nor does the Commission's report mention supporting increased access to college counseling in public secondary schools to eliminate the information divide between socio-economic groups. While the Commission does recommend a substantial increase in need-based financial aid, the details of such investment are not clear, and the Commission-recommended increase comes with numerous, ill-defined "terms and conditions."
- Rather than support college counseling in schools, and established early awareness and college preparatory programs like GEAR UP and TRIO, the Commission recommends that "businesses partner with schools and colleges to provide resources for early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance."

Cost and Affordability

- The Commission “notes with concern the seemingly inexorable increase in college costs.”
- The Commission makes no reference to the Study of College Costs and Prices mandated by Congress in the 1998 Higher Education Act reauthorization. This report found that declining state appropriations were the single biggest cost driver in tuition increases at public institutions, and that a wide range of factors (with few rising to a level of statistical significance) was responsible for increases at private institutions. The Commission’s recommendations are presented with no regard for the critical findings of this report.

Financial Aid

- The Commission notes that “our financial aid system is confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative, and frequently does not direct aid to students who truly need it...Unmet financial need is a growing problem for students from low-income families, who need aid the most.”
- While the Commission makes the laudable recommendation to restore purchasing power of the Pell grant to cover 70 percent of public undergraduate tuition, the Commission’s policy recommendations for achieving this end are far from clear. The Commission states that to achieve this goal, “federal grant programs should be consolidated to increase the purchasing power of the Pell grant.” Thus, it is not clear which federal programs that support college access, such as Work Study, GEAR UP, TRIO, and other campus-based aid programs, would be eliminated to achieve this goal.

The Commission expects to release its final report in the fall of 2006. This brief overview will be updated upon release of the final report.

For more information and news about government activities affecting college admission counseling, visit NACAC’s government relations web page: <http://www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/GovernmentRelations/>.