

Bush Commission Causes Concern

By Charisse Dengler

In an effort to fix some of the problems with federal aid programs, a commission is considering different options that would change the accreditation and aid-allocation processes.

Due to recent rises in the cost of higher education and the drop in literacy rates among college graduates, the committee was mandated by the Bush administration to address these and other education problems.

In an issue paper on the subject of accountability, Charles Miller, leader of the commission, and Geri Malandra, a member of the commission, wrote that “our reputation as a world leader is in jeopardy of slipping and our higher education system is at great risk.”

The two went on to write that “higher education in this country is a mature sector that is not paying attention to internal problems and globally disruptive forces.”

“If we do not forthrightly address these problems, our country will fall farther behind and risk losing the preeminent position that inspires pride and imitation,” they wrote.

The group of 19 was put together by Margaret Spellings, Education Secretary, and is made up of both education and business officials.

The primary goal of the commission when it was created was to research the cost of higher education and come up with a way to keep colleges and universities accountable so that the U.S. education system can continue to improve and compete with that of other nations.

Spellings’ representative told the *New York Times* that she is confident in the commission’s ability to solve the big problems in higher education.

“We have the finest system in the world, but it is right and righteous for us to ask questions, especially about the affordability, accountability, and accessibility of higher education,” she told the *Times*.

One of the major issues being talked about by the commission is the accreditation procedure. Accreditation is the process by which schools are reviewed by an organization and proven to meet specific requirements, making sure programs offered by colleges and universities are held to certain standards. Another phrase to describe the accreditation process is quality assurance.

Currently, accreditation is the responsibility of private groups, but the committee is weighing the option of having schools accredited by a large national foundation put together by the President and Congress. A national review board would benefit students and create a more inclusive standard of accreditation.



Other changes being considered include taking about 17 different grant, tax-credit, and loan programs and lumping them into either one or three federal aid programs. The committee has also suggested implementing standardized testing at colleges and universities.

These proposed changes, however, are causing some unrest between those in the educational field and those in the business field. Miller, who is a former chairman of the University of Texas Board of Regents, is frustrated at the group's refusal to unify and was surprised by those in the educational field that were unaware of the increasing cost of higher education and the changes that need to be made.

“Those who are squawking the loudest are those who have a private place to play and a lot of money, much of which comes from the federal government,” Miller said in a *New York Times* interview. “What we hear from the academy is, ‘We’re the best in the world, give us more money and let us alone.’”

On the subject of standardized testing, many have compared the commission's proposal to President Bush's No Child Left Behind law. Miller said that even though he does not think a required federal test is the answer to the nation's education problems, he does think colleges and universities should have to report to the public on the quality of learning that is taking place at their institutions; and one of the ways this can be done is by testing the students.

Even though the commission has managed to keep its deliberations out of the media, some college and university presidents have nevertheless gotten wind of the options being considered and are tracking the developments with interest.

Daniel L. Anderson is one of them. Anderson, President of Appalachian Bible College in Bradley WV, told the *New York Times* that he thinks the idea of a national accreditation organization would only cause problems in institutions of higher education.

“The federal government isn't set up to manage the grass-roots affairs of our country,” Dr. Anderson said. “Why would the federal government intrude to impose more regulation on higher education?”

On the other hand, many in the business field have spoken out on the myriad of problems with colleges and universities and recognize that these institutions may benefit from national support and regulation.

Nicholas Donofrio, Executive Vice President at IBM and member of the commission, told the *New York Times* that although he is not in full support of government regulation, he does think the government has a right to voice its opinion in regard to federal aid programs and the cost of higher education.