

## ED Commission Releases Draft

*By Judith Earley*

On June 26, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education published a copy—dubbed a “very rough” preliminary draft—of their final report.

The 27-page document addresses the areas of access, affordability, quality, innovation, and accountability of higher education in the United States. It admonishes U.S. colleges and universities in the areas where the commission determined that they fall dangerously short.

The report states, “Our year-long examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector’s past attainments have led it to unseemly complacency about the future...Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U.S. higher education, we have found equal parts meritocracy and mediocrity.”

The report states that because of poor preparation and inadequate financial resources, “too few of those who could benefit from college actually attend,” and “unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need.”

The report also makes the troubling assertion that not enough information exists about the cost and quality of higher education, calling for strict “accountability mechanisms” for institutions.

After the preliminary draft circulated among commission members, it was greeted with concern and disapproval over its harsh tone. The topic is, according to commission chair Charles Miller, “complex and huge” and he went on to say that he was neither surprised nor troubled by the debate’s divisive tone. The commission is comprised of members from a wide variety of academic backgrounds.

The statement that “every person who can benefit from postsecondary education should have a place in college, and that it should be affordable” was countered with the argument that including the term “universal” implied that colleges did not have a right to set standards. Another debate centered on use of the word “unaffordable.” The argument: How can a higher education be unaffordable when students are enrolling at American colleges and universities in record numbers? Is it price or insufficient preparation that is keeping students away?

The panel reached a tentative agreement on the idea of targeting financial aid to truly needy students and added that “need-based aid should be the dominant practice of financial aid programs and offices.” This concept would deemphasize state lottery-based merit aid programs and also potentially to eliminate, or at least reduce, federal tax credits and loan subsidies for students who do not have significant financial need.



On the topic of infusing additional funding into higher education, it was stressed that any further monies should be provided only if colleges and universities can prove that they are doing a good job with what they already have been given.

The majority of agreement was reached on the idea that American schools must provide “significantly more and better information about their operations to a broad set of constituents, including students and parents, employers, policy makers, and the public.” But there was a caveat: Schools are already wary of having to play a numbers game and teaching to tests rather than really educating students

When the commission convenes for its next session, it will continue discussions on meeting labor and work force needs and fostering innovation.

If you would like to view the commission’s report in its entirety, you may do so at <http://insidehighered.com/index.php/content/download/70817/971018/file/Draft%20Report%206.22%20watermarked.pdf>.