

Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission

*The Message, the Messenger, and the
Dynamics of Change in Higher Education*

Brent D. Ruben, Ph.D.

Laurie Lewis, Ph.D.

Louise Sandmeyer, M.A.

with

Travis Russ, Ph.D.

Stacy Smulowitz, M.A.

Kate Immordino, Ph.D.



Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission

*The Message, the Messenger, and the
Dynamics of Change in Higher Education*



Brent D. Ruben, Ph.D.

Laurie Lewis, Ph.D.

Louise Sandmeyer, M.A.

with

Travis Russ, Ph.D.

Stacy Smulowitz, M.A.

Kate Immordino, Ph.D.

Copyright 2008 by NACUBO

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ruben, Brent D.

Assessing the impact of the Spellings Commission : the message, the messenger, and the dynamics of change in higher education / Brent D. Ruben, Laurie Lewis, Louise Sandmeyer ; with Travis Russ, Stacy Smulowitz, Kate Immordino.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56972-044-8

1. United States. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. 2. Test of leadership 3. Education, Higher--United States. 4. Educational leadership--United States. I. Lewis, Laurie. II. Sandmeyer, Louise. III. Russ, Travis. IV. Title.

LB2322.2R83 2008

378.73--dc22

2008024955

National Association of College and University Business Officers
Washington, DC
www.nacubo.org

Design by Colburnhouse Publishing, Marketing, and Graphic Design

Printed in the United States of America

Brent D. Ruben, Ph.D.
Professor of Communication
Executive Director
Center for Organizational Development and Leadership
Rutgers University

Laurie Lewis, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Communication
Director, Masters of Communication and Information Studies
Rutgers University

Louise Sandmeyer, M.A.
Executive Director
Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment
The Pennsylvania State University

with

Travis Russ, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Communication
Fordham University

Stacy Smulowitz, M.A.
Research Assistant
Rutgers University

Kate Immordino, Ph.D.
Manager of Research and Assessment
Center for Organizational Development and Leadership
Rutgers University

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
Introduction	2
The Commission: Formation and Launch	4
The Report—the Document and its Dissemination	5
The Aftermath—Reactions and Follow-Up Activities	6
Higher Education Responds.....	6
Emphasis and Interpretation	7
Substance and Tone.....	8
Context.....	10
Autonomy vs. Accountability	11
The Report Becomes a Plan for Action	11
Legislative Activity: Positions Harden	11
The Dynamics of Planned Change	12
Stages of Organizational Change	13
The Outcome	15
Lessons <i>That Could Be Learned</i>	15
Looking Back, Looking Forward	17
Cross-Cutting Themes in the Dynamics of Change	18
TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS	21

RESEARCH REPORT	25
Introduction	25
Important Questions	26
This Study	28
Data Gathering and Analysis	28
The Commission—Formation and Launch	30
Composition of the Commission	30
Meetings and Activities	31
Communication about the Commission	34
The Report—The Document And Its Dissemination	34
Official Statement by the Department of Education	37
Dissemination of the Report and Related Information	38
Aftermath—Reactions And Follow-Up Activities	39
Report Recommendations and Comments by Study Participants	39
Emphasis and Interpretation	47
Reactions of Key Constituencies	49
Media Content Analysis	58
Substance and Tone	58
The Higher Education System	60
“One-Size-Fits-All”	62
How Big the Gap; How Great the Urgency	63
Reactions to Report Recommendations	64
Language and Style ... and Release of a Working Draft	70
The Withheld Endorsement	75
Context	76
Accountability vs. Autonomy	78
The Report Becomes a Plan for Action	79
Details of the Plan	80
Implementing the Plan	80
Organized Resistance to Department Efforts	83
Heightening Tensions	87
Voluntary Initiatives	89
Legislative Activity: Positions Harden	94
It’s Not Over Until It’s Over	100

The Dynamics of Planned Change	101
Lasting Impact: Positive or Negative?	103
Stages of Activity and Impact	104
Stage 1: Attention.....	106
Stage 2: Engagement	108
Stage 3: Resolve.....	111
Stage 4: Action.....	111
Stage 5: Integration.....	111
The Outcome	112
Lessons That Could Be Learned	113
Other Ways Higher Education Might Have Responded.....	114
An Opportunity Rather than a Problem	114
Thoughtful Dialogue vs. Defensiveness	117
Effectively Telling the Higher Education Story	120
Proactive vs. Reactive Responses.....	121
Unified Leadership	123
On the Other Hand	124
Other Approaches the Commission and Department Might Have Used....	125
Structure and Representativeness	126
Creating a Clearer Sense of the Need for the Commission, Report, and Follow-Up Activities	126
General Approach and Communication Strategy.....	128
Mixed Signals and Competing Messages	130
More Effectively Engaging the Higher Education Community	132
On the Other Hand	135
General Lessons about the Dynamics of Change within Higher Education	136
Leadership and Communication	137
Culture, Assessment, and Planning.....	143
Broader Issues	146
The Higher Education “System”	146
Jurisdiction, Style, and Substance.....	147
Autonomy, Accountability and Locus of Control.....	148
Embracing Criticism and External Review.....	149
A Higher Standard of Discourse for Higher Education	151
Leadership Challenges.....	152
Looking Back, Looking Forward.....	153

ENDNOTES	157
APPENDIX	167
List of Commission Members	168
Commission Charter	170
Higher Education Associations Referenced in the Text	174
Commission Web Site Page Views and Downloads	177
Fact Sheet for Action Plan	180
List of Issue Papers	184
Organizations and Institutions that Provided Information	187
Preliminary Impact Analysis—January 2008 Update	192

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, the authors wish to gratefully acknowledge the National Association of College and University Business Officers for its sponsorship of this project. From the moment we proposed this project, NACUBO President John Walda and staff have provided encouragement, support, and the opportunity to pursue this study in a climate of complete academic freedom.

We also want to thank the 36 individuals who took time from their busy schedules to talk with us and to provide the foundation for this report. Because of their participation, this manuscript is informed by the insights and observations of leaders who bring an incredible richness of personal, occupational, organizational, and sectoral experiences to their views on the Spellings Commission and its consequences. In each case, these individuals shared their views with us on conditions of anonymity which we have sought to carefully preserve. Additionally, this work draws on analysis of electronic and print media documents, published opinions, and news stories.

The project also benefits, we believe, from the background and knowledge of members of the study team, which includes individuals with higher education administrative and academic experience, as well as research expertise in the areas of communication and organizational change. What emerges from this blend is a rather unique document. It is at once a journalistic story, a history, a policy analysis, a social science research report, and a case study. We hope readers agree that it is enriched from this mix and that the whole is more than a simple sum of its parts.

We also want to offer a note of appreciation to our colleagues at Rutgers and Penn State Universities for their advice and counsel, and especially to our colleagues in the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, and the Office of Federal Relations at Rutgers, and the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at Penn State. We also want to acknowledge the U.S. Department of Education for assistance in data and document-gathering. Very special thanks to Carol S. Goldin of Rutgers for her many editorial contributions.

While the authors bear ultimate responsibility for the form and content of this work, we want to be clear in expressing our sincere appreciation to NACUBO, our study participants, and all who have shared their perspectives on the Commission and its work with us over these past months. We are most grateful for your help with a project we hope and believe will have value for all of us.

Executive Summary

It is time to examine how we can get the most out of our national investment in higher education. We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation's needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.

On September 19, 2005, with these words U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced the formation of a Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Over the next two years, the Commission's activities were comprehensively reported and widely debated in the media, and vigorous discussions of the Commission continue. The high visibility of the process and the sometimes acrimonious public debates about its recommendations have fueled a good deal of interest within the academy and beyond. The Commission's Report and responses to it have also generated important questions about the dynamics of change in higher education. *Assessing the Impact of the Spellings Commission* provides a review and analysis of the Commission's activities, the outcome of its work, and the impact of its recommendations, and considers the lessons learned from this process for advancing theory and practice in planning, communication, and change in higher education.

This publication takes the form of a case study. Information for the analysis comes primarily from three sources: 1) a broad review of print and electronic media articles, reports, statements, press releases, and commentaries published by the Commission, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department), national higher education associations, and accrediting associations discussing the Spellings Commission and its work; 2) interviews with 36 individuals selected because of their leadership roles and perspectives; and 3) a content analysis of 1,363 core articles and responses published in higher education outlets, journals, and

online sites. Those interviewed include Commission members, U.S. Department of Education senior staff, higher education association and accrediting agency leaders, senior college and university executive officers, and key individuals from higher education media.

The case study begins with a description of the formation and membership of the Commission, an overview of its work for the first year, and a summary of the Commission's Report and recommendations. Soon after its publication, the Report was recast as a "plan for action." Using information from interviews with individuals in different sectors of the higher education community and from published sources, the study analyzes reactions to the Report and its call to action, focusing on issues of both substance and tone.

Building on this particular case, this study considers broader questions of impact and puts forward a model of the dynamics of planned change. The study explores a number of "lessons learned" and discusses possible alternate ways of responding to the Report by the academy. The study uses these analyses to elucidate some broader higher education issues related to jurisdiction, autonomy, criticism, communication, and leadership challenges. This report also considers ways in which the Commission and Department of Education might have enhanced the effectiveness of their efforts.

This volume concludes with an appendix that provides background materials, including a list of Commission members and their affiliations, Commission charter, fact sheet for action plan, list of issue papers, list of organizations and institutions that provided information to the Commission, and the Commission's Preliminary Action Analysis—Updated January 2008.

INTRODUCTION

In announcing the formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Secretary Spellings charged the Commission with "developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future."

The 19-member Commission met nine times over the next year and solicited input from representatives from across the higher education community and the general public, sponsored studies to gather information on key topics, and provided opportunities for input from the general public. The Commission's final Report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, was released in September 2006.

The Commission offered broad recommendations for improving student academic preparation; making financial aid more accessible and the financial aid system simpler; creating and sustaining a “robust culture of accountability and transparency” for higher education; enhancing continuous innovation and quality improvement in colleges and universities; targeting federal investments to areas critical to America’s global competitiveness; and developing a strategy to encourage lifelong learning.

The work of the Commission, the drafts and the final version of its Report, and various follow-up activities by the Department of Education were covered extensively in the higher education media, and have been the topic of considerable dialogue within the higher education community at the national, state, and campus levels.

Given the high level of visibility of the Report and the many subsequent responses, conferences, and conversations, this case study addresses the following basic issues:

- How has the Commission’s work been perceived by key constituencies within the higher education community, and more generally?
- How do the various constituencies value the themes and specific recommendations advanced by the Commission?
- What is it about the work of the Commission and its Report that has stimulated such vigorous and continuing reaction?
- How have groups within the higher education community—national associations, accrediting agencies, and institutions—responded during the months following the release of the Report?
- Will the work of the Commission, and the reactions and responses to it, result in significant and lasting change?

While the influence of any government-sponsored commission is limited and closely tied to the tenure of policy leaders, the Spellings Commission raised critical issues that are well established as important topics for the present and for some time to come. Therefore it is useful to identify the enduring themes and issues arising from its work. Furthermore, by analyzing this single initiative, the authors seek to develop more generalized insights about the dynamics of organizational and sector change that may be abstracted for use in other contexts. A thorough understanding of the dynamics of the Commission’s work and a systematic analysis of its impact will also help inform future planning initiatives and reform efforts.

The study identifies six major issues:

1. Is there a higher education “system”?

2. Did matters of jurisdiction and style override issues of substance?
3. Are autonomy and locus of control the fundamental issues at stake?
4. Do we embrace criticism of our own purposes and institutions as we advocate its importance for others?
5. Should we expect the highest standards of discourse where higher education is involved?
6. What, precisely, are the leadership challenges and solutions facing the higher education community at large?

The research report provides a perspective on each of the issues that should prove useful to the practice and study of change in higher education.

THE COMMISSION: FORMATION AND LAUNCH

To assure a broad-based dialogue, the Department envisioned a Commission composed of individuals who would represent a variety of key constituencies and relevant perspectives on higher education. The panel included former and current public and private college presidents; former elected officials; representatives of Fortune 500 corporations and the financial services industry, for-profit education companies and nonprofit education foundations and associations; and distinguished scholars.

In addressing its charge, the Commission undertook an extensive review of documents from approximately 175 organizations, agencies, and institutions, including white papers, opinion pieces, and research reports of past blue-ribbon commissions. In addition, the Chair commissioned issues papers and testimony on diverse topics, including complexity and inconsistency in financial aid programs, accreditation reform, accountability and consumer information, federal regulation of higher education, and quality assurance in higher education.

The U.S. Department of Education's Web site was a primary communication channel for conveying information about the Commission's formation and the conduct of its research and deliberations.

THE REPORT—THE DOCUMENT AND ITS DISSEMINATION

To address what it termed “urgent reform needs,” the Commission in its final report offered six broad recommendations:

1. Student academic preparation should be improved and financial aid made available so that more students are able to access and afford a quality higher education.
2. The entire student financial aid system should be simplified, restructured and provided with incentives to better manage costs and measure performance.
3. A “robust culture of accountability and transparency” should be cultivated throughout the higher education system, aided by new systems of data measurement and a publicly available information database with comparable college information. There should also be a greater focus on student learning and development of a more outcome-focused accreditation system.
4. Colleges and universities should embrace continuous innovation and quality improvement.
5. Federal investments should be targeted to areas critical to America’s global competitiveness, such as math, science, and foreign languages.
6. A strategy for lifelong learning should be developed to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of a college education to every American’s future.

The Department of Education issued the Report along with a message indicating that the Secretary of Education would be considering these and other proposals and would prepare an “action plan for the future of higher education” to be formally released on September 26, 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The plan would “outline a course forward as we begin our work together towards solutions that will best meet the needs of all consumers of the system—educators, institutions, taxpayers, parents, and students.” The Commission’s findings were to result in an action plan, not merely a blue ribbon report.

THE AFTERMATH—REACTIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Higher Education Responds

As with the formation and launch of the Commission, the U.S. Department of Education's Web site was the primary channel used for distributing the Report. The site also provided a convenient point of access to the full range of related information that had been generated from speeches, press releases, issue papers, and other supporting documents.

The involvement of many individuals from the higher education community facilitated the rapid diffusion of information about the Report through personal and professional networks. In addition to the Web site, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* were key channels for disseminating news. Other public and professional media also published articles and letters on the initiative and reactions to it. In subsequent weeks and months, information about the Commission and Report was disseminated to a progressively larger number of individuals within the higher education community. The Department of Education reports that from 2005 through February 2008, there were more than 190,000 visits to the Spellings Commission Web site and roughly 95,000 downloads of the Commission draft and final reports. (See Appendix.)

The Report highlighted the distinguished tradition and the continuing contributions of U.S. colleges and universities to teaching and learning, research, and outreach. As a result, it could be seen as providing precisely the kind of national attention that many within higher education felt was clearly needed. Troubling declines in public support—financial and sometimes attitudinal—had been the topic of discussions throughout the higher education community.

The issues and challenges identified by the Commission were not unfamiliar ones. The importance of a commitment to higher education quality, increased accountability, greater transparency, heightened attention to institutional performance and learning outcomes assessment, refined approaches to financing and financial aid, improved access and transferability, an intensified commitment to continuous improvement and innovation, and overcoming complacency and resistance to change—were familiar ones to members of the higher education community. All of these ideas had been the subject of numerous books, articles, task forces, commissions, and conference panels and presentations within the academy in recent years.

Indeed, as this study documents, most higher education leaders saw the recommendations of the Commission as generally positive and quite significant to the future of higher education.

Emphasis and Interpretation

The Report did indeed bring focus and attention to higher education, trumpeted its accomplishments and value, and reaffirmed many of the challenges and needs already identified as priorities. But the initial reaction from the higher education community did not focus on these positives. Instead, almost from the moment of its release, responses to the Report targeted areas of concern and disagreement. As a consequence, there was little opportunity for the higher education community to leverage the accolades or develop a shared agenda for addressing needs and priorities.

The intention of the Commission may well have been to offer a reflective analysis of a national problem and a thoughtful and mobilizing call to collaborative action. But, in spite of its laudatory comments and efforts to describe the problems as shared challenges, many—if not most—within the higher education community regarded the Report as an attack on U.S. colleges and universities.

Initial and subsequent reactions from the higher education community in general, and specifically from the individuals interviewed for this study, generally supported this interpretation. Study participants noted that overall, the Commission's work was perceived unfavorably—with cynicism and annoyance—by many, if not most, within the higher education community.

But all sectors did not respond identically to these events. Based on personal interviews, the study describes differing perspectives of those associated with higher education, including administrators, board members, alumni, presidents, students, members of Congress, representatives of state governments, members of the business community, and the media. According to those interviewed, the harshest reaction came from the Washington-based higher education organizations; the responses from the six presidential associations and various other associations and agencies were characterized as “considerably more negative than in other parts of the higher education community”—ranging from “skeptical” to “openly hostile.”

Media coverage of the Commission and its work was quite substantial. The authors of this study identified, categorized, and analyzed 1,363 online or paper articles and responses published from September 5, 2005, to September 7, 2007. They concluded that the majority of articles and responses were “persuasive” in nature, generally displaying positions critical of the Commission. Over a quarter of the responses/comments to articles did not comment directly on the Commission's work or process, but focused on critiques of other responses and comments.

Substance and Tone

The initial critique of the Report within higher education focused on both *substance* and *tone*. From the perspective of substance, any initial enthusiasm about the Report's praise of higher education dissipated quickly among most higher education readers when more specific details were considered.

The higher education community seemed to reach a consensus that the Report offered too much of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the challenges identified, and did not take into account or value the diversity of missions within the community. National associations, accrediting agencies, and institutional leaders were particularly concerned about this approach to the complexities of assessment. The Commission Report and Department statements suggested that *outcomes* should receive greater emphasis—that assessment should shift from a primary emphasis on reputation, input, and resource measures to a focus on measures of performance, impact, and outcomes. Higher education leaders expressed fear that if a single approach were put in place, standardized methods and measures would be applied across all types of higher education institutions without regard to their differences, especially differences associated with mission. Further, they feared that simplistic and potentially damaging comparisons would be broadly publicized, in the name of transparency. These reactions were immediate and intense, and served to galvanize resistance to the Commission, the Report, and the Department of Education.

Interpretations differ as to whether fears over the one-size-fits-all approach were justified or not, and whether such fears arose at least partially as a consequence of planned communication efforts by some organizations within the higher education community, designed to intensify resistance. Whether by design or default, concerns about a one-size-fits-all approach had important consequences. One interviewee noted: "At least in my perception of the higher education community—that's probably the most contentious issue."

Furthermore, there was a general resistance to what many higher education leaders believed was an overly harsh critique of the current state of higher education. They expressed opinions in public media and association Web sites that the gap between the present and desired state of higher education is not as wide as the Commission implied in its Report. Many indicated that the Commission saw itself chronicling a crisis, when, in fact, the concerns it voiced were not particularly new, were being addressed, and were not a cause for alarm or panic. This created yet another source of friction and resistance between the Commission and the higher education community.

The study documents differing perspectives on priorities and methods addressed in the Commission's Report, noting that most of the recommendations were not viewed as especially controversial or innovative. The study provides a close look at how different segments of the higher education community responded to each of the Commission's recommendations.

Most of the recommendations are sufficiently general that they enjoy a considerably broad level of support—in the abstract. For example, there has been widespread agreement about the need to address improving academic preparation, removing barriers, and increasing student aid. Similarly, there has been support for restructuring the financial aid system and improving measurement and management of costs and institutional productivity, and promoting a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement in pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning. Most agreed that it is very important to develop a national strategy for lifelong learning. Finally, there was strong support for increases in federal investment in attracting the best students to strategic areas, critical to global leadership and competitiveness, specifically, to science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions.

The recommendation that generated the most controversy concerns assessment: “creating a robust culture of measurement, accountability, and transparency.” This recommendation fostered considerable discussion—in published documents and in interviews for this study—about a potentially enlarged role of accrediting agencies and an intensified focus on institutional and learning assessment goals and outcomes, the need for clearer communication of such indicators to the public, the value of developing more standardized approaches for reporting, and the importance of increasing attention to the assessment of institutional effectiveness in terms of productivity, efficiency, and cost effectiveness.

In addition to issues of substance, there were also reactions to what might best be termed tone. An early draft, released in June 2006, had considerably harsher language than the final version. Largely the work of a commissioned writer, the document became public before it had been reviewed and edited by most of the Commission members. The Department of Education reported that the distribution of this early draft was accidental—that the draft was being reviewed by some members and was inadvertently released. Because the accidentally-released draft was quite widely circulated through informal e-mail and other channels, the Department decided to post that version on its Web site.

Reactions to the early release were mixed. Though most of those interviewed believed that the early release of a harsh first draft was accidental rather than strategic, there was agreement that the tone certainly contributed to negativity among

those in the higher education community who had been following the activity of the Commission—and that included many of the higher education associations and agencies.

The final Report retained its use of what was regarded by most as very direct and forceful language in discussing the challenges, the perceived problem of complacency, and the assumed need for reform. Secretary Margaret Spellings and Commission Chair Charles Miller made similarly strong public statements. Those interviewed were in general agreement that the language of the Report and the approach, style, and critical comments made by Spellings and Miller were significant factors in heightening both the visibility and intensity of reaction to the Report. Others noted that the public postures and communication styles of the Secretary and the Chair contributed to the climate of resistance within higher education. It should be noted, however, that not everyone felt these strong pronouncements were inappropriate. A number felt that the Report's hard-hitting rhetoric, personal examples, and no-nonsense style were exactly what were needed to create a "wake up call."

In addition to reactions based on the substance and tone of the Report, decisions by Commission members to endorse—or fail to endorse—the final draft were also a factor in reactions to the Report. Controversy was heightened by the knowledge that while the final version carried the signed endorsement of the Commission, one member, David Ward, president of the American Council on Education (ACE)—representing the association with the most global and inclusive perspective on the higher education system as a whole—decided he could not endorse, nor sign, the Report.

Context

The context in which the work of the Commission was undertaken and played out also contributed to the array of reactions to the Report. There were concerns about the political party in power, perceptions of the Bush administration, and perspectives on the controversial "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) program. Some expressed fear that the Report endorsed a version of the NCLB program for higher education. Common themes of accountability, assessment, and transparency, coupled with the inclusion of the NCLB logo along with the Department of Education seal on the header of the official announcement of the Spellings Commission, made this conceptual linkage predictable.

Other factors, more comprehensively discussed in the case study, include concerns about loss of autonomy, anxieties about increased government intervention, and the potential impact of the Report on the Higher Education Act reauthorization legislation underway on Capitol Hill.

AUTONOMY VS. ACCOUNTABILITY

The case study notes that the issue of autonomy was the most critical factor in stimulating the intensity of initial and subsequent reactions to the Commission and Report. This concern centers on the question of who has the responsibility and the right to criticize, recommend, and/or initiate change within higher education. As study participants noted in different ways, self-determination and autonomy are among the most treasured values at all levels within higher education, and viewed as essential to the success that U.S. colleges and universities have enjoyed.

The perceived threats to autonomy were exacerbated by a seemingly widespread belief within the higher education community that enhanced systems of accountability would inevitably lead to diminished autonomy. Some, however, believed it would be possible to be accountable and transparent, while maintaining autonomy. Recommendations that are perceived to threaten the autonomy of higher education strike at the heart and soul of the academy. Particularly if a perceived threat to that principle comes from outside the academy, and if it appears that the outsiders may have the power to enforce change, vigorous resistance is a predictable response. For many leaders in the higher education community, this has been precisely the situation created by the Spellings Commission.

The Report Becomes a Plan for Action

A number of individuals interviewed in connection with this study said they believed that the initial goal within the higher education organizations and agencies in Washington was to minimize the attention given to the Commission deliberations. From a strategic perspective, the thinking was that the more the higher education community responded, the more visibility the Commission's work would receive. However, with the level of public attention generated by the release of the Report, it became apparent that this strategy would not be effective. It became clear that not only would the Report continue to attract considerable attention, but also that the Department of Education envisioned the Spellings Report as a component of a broader agenda for change.

Legislative Activity: Positions Harden

The national higher education associations and agencies, with the support of many college and university leaders around the country, sought to moderate, modify, and ideally stall the Department's and Secretary's agenda for change—which was increasingly depicted as “a one-size-fits-all” federalized program for higher education.

One of the clearest examples of legislative countermeasures came in the form of a widely circulated statement from Senator and former Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander on May 24, 2007. Senator Alexander made a strong appeal that higher education, rather than the Department of Education, should take responsibility for improvement. And Senator Edward Kennedy on behalf of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, urged the Department to refrain from proposing new regulations on accreditation until after Congress reauthorized the Higher Education Act.

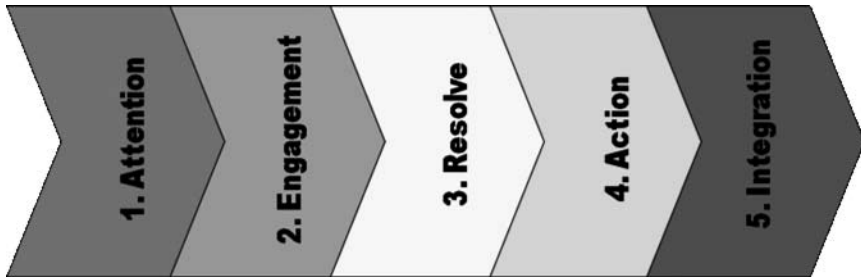
THE DYNAMICS OF PLANNED CHANGE

What impact has the Commission and its work had? This study takes a close look at this question from several perspectives. To a large extent, the answer depends on how one thinks about the concept of “impact.” Most interviewees believe that the work of the Commission and the Report have had a significant impact, but they differ in their perspectives of what the impact actually is and whether the impact will ultimately be positive or negative. A Department of Education member observed that the community realized that “this may be the last chance they have to get in front of this ... if they don’t figure it out now someone is going to figure it out for them.” Others noted that many of the issues cited in the Commission’s Report have been discussed for a long time, and efforts to solve problems were underway before the establishment of the Commission.

In addition to documenting these perspectives, this case study analyzes impact by considering these issues within the larger context of organizational change theory. Planned change efforts proceed through a predictable set of stages, depicted below. In assessing impact, this case study describes *attention, engagement, resolve, action, and integration* and evaluates the extent to which the responses to the Commission’s work meet the criteria for each stage. Successful change requires completion of each phase—and change agents seek to bring their initiatives to the final stage of long-term integration.

The authors argue that this model is useful for assessing the impact of the Spellings Commission and that it helps to clarify and organize differing definitions of impact. The framework also helps explain some of the underlying reasons for the resistance and redirection that has occurred in this case. Each stage is comprehensively discussed in the full research report; the analysis is briefly described here.

Figure 1: Stages of Organizational Change



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*. Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2008 (in press).

Attention. Viewed from any of a number of perspectives, and considering various source of evidence, the Spellings initiative and subsequent activities by the Department of Education have had substantial success in directing attention to a number of the issues and challenges facing higher education.

Engagement. Assessing the influence of the Spellings initiative as it relates to engagement is more complex. Commission members and study participants from the Department of Education acknowledged that they wished they had been more successful in their efforts to foster engagement—particularly with the faculty and constituencies outside Washington. Others agree that broader involvement and engagement of the higher education community would likely have improved the reception of the Report and of follow-up efforts by the Department.

Attention and engagement are inextricably linked; while gaining attention is a first and critical step in the change process, the strategies used to do this may have a lasting impact and consequence, well beyond their original purpose. The manner in which attention is gained can facilitate and motivate engagement, or can become an impediment to the dialogue, trust, and negotiation considered to be essential for engagement. Elements of the substance and tone of the Report, and the process through which it was released, ratified, and communicated, were perceived to convey a degree of disrespect for the academy's traditions, culture, and values. Similarly, the "leaked drafts" and hard-hitting critique, which increased attention by the higher education community, also seem to have antagonized, heightened defensiveness, and intensified mistrust and resistance, making engagement all the

more difficult. It must be acknowledged, however, that the adversarial climate that surfaced during and after the work of the Commission, no doubt has origins that precede the Commission, and to some extent may well be inherent in the cultural relationship between higher education and any governmental agency.

Resolve. The resolve stage focuses on efforts to secure commitment to the problem as defined, and help to identify steps needed to work toward solutions. One possible outcome could be a resolve to disengage. But in this instance, the outcome has been greater engagement. Based on the research reported here, it seems clear that the Commission and Report have become the impetus for a number of new and energized discussions and planning efforts taking place within the higher education community. The serious consideration of diverse voluntary initiatives—in line with Commission priorities—provides evidence of some level of affirmation by higher education associations and colleges and universities. At the same time, study participants indicate that commitment at the ground level is uneven. Such buy-in is a critical component of resolve and the subsequent stages of institutional change.

Action. This stage considers progress towards identified goals. The case study documents what may be described as “common ground,” which signals a resolve that is being translated into actions of various kinds. The magnitude of this common ground can be seen in the completion of a number of initiatives that were undertaken voluntarily by associations and agencies. It is also evidenced by the number of institutions that have adopted or adapted these or similar institution-generated initiatives at the local level.

Integration. This stage refers to institutionalizing change, so that reforms become a permanent part of policy and practice. In this regard, it is useful to differentiate between short- and long-term impact. While we can look at some of the immediate repercussions of the Commission’s Report, it is premature to make any definitive determination about its influence. Participants in the study were asked to speculate about the extent to which the influences of the Spellings Commission would translate into lasting change. Interviewees generally expressed the view that the Commission’s work will ultimately result in lasting change, and most stated that the changes would be positive.

The understanding of planned organizational change elucidated through this example can be generalized to help clarify and improve other planning and change initiatives within higher education and beyond.

The Outcome

There is little doubt that the Commission, its work, and subsequent activities based upon that foundation, attracted the attention of a substantial segment of the higher education community, fostered a visible and vigorous national conversation on the challenges and needs of higher education, and motivated or intensified commitments to a number of voluntary actions that can be seen as direct responses to the themes of the Report.

Viewed from the perspective of the Commission and the Department of Education, the impact of the Commission and the effectiveness of the initiative overall can be seen most clearly in: 1) the attention it afforded to the issues and themes addressed in the Report and follow-up activities; 2) the dialogue that has been stimulated by these efforts; and 3) the numerous voluntary improvement projects and programs that have been energized and inspired during this period. However, the effort has had considerably less impact and success in fostering the kind of mutual respect, constructive collaboration, and engaged partnering that seems necessary to unite the higher education community, Congress, and the Department in the joint pursuit of a common agenda.

Much of the higher education community has taken considerable pleasure in its success at resisting externally mandated and imposed regulations and in initiating voluntary efforts to respond to some of the most critical pressures points identified by the Commission. But as study participants note, through its response the higher education community has been less successful in effectively telling the “higher education story” to the public at large, in presenting a unified response to the issues and themes of the Report, and in easing disquiet among many external constituencies about higher education’s presumed insularity and indifference to concerns of the day.

LESSONS THAT COULD BE LEARNED

Nearly all of those interviewed, across various roles and perspectives, believe that the higher education community could have responded more effectively than it did to the Commission and the Report—before, during, and after its release. Many expressed regret that the community had interpreted the issues raised by the Spellings’ initiative more as problems than as opportunities, had appeared defensive and reinforced images that the academy is resistant to change, failed to use the situation as a platform for effectively telling higher education’s story, acted

reactively rather than proactively, and missed opportunities to provide needed leadership. The case study examines these issues in detail and provides compelling evidence that higher education might have benefited with a different approach. By avoiding defensiveness and the appearance of being resistant to change, higher education might have been more effective in getting across the values and goals that it deems important and that it believed were threatened by the Department's initiative. With a more proactive stance and better coordinated leadership, the higher education community might have mounted a clearer case for its own priorities.

Those interviewed also suggested ways that the Commission and the Department of Education might have delivered its messages more effectively. They noted that the Commission could have been more broadly representative, provided a clearer rationale for its existence and its recommendations, could have communicated in a more collegial manner with clearer signals, and could have more broadly and effectively engaged the higher education community in the dialogue. The case study examines these assertions in detail. With a broader engagement and a different communication strategy, the Commission might have been better able to put its concerns before the public and the higher education community in a manner that would generate interest rather than defensiveness and that would have avoided at least some of the anger and push back that garnered so much attention in the media. A more collegial communication process may have elucidated the many areas in which the Commission and the Department shared goals for reform with the higher education community. With a recognition of these shared goals, cooperative initiatives to improve higher education were—and still are—feasible.

Going beyond this particular case study, this study raises broader issues about the higher education system, about posturing and politics, about criticism, standards, and leadership. The case study itself illustrates the importance of jurisdictional issues—at the bottom of the controversy lies the fundamental issue of the right to criticize and initiate change. Key considerations are briefly considered below.

One of the recurring themes in the comments of interviewees at all levels is that more effective leadership approaches are needed within higher education to inspire collaborative rather than confrontational politics in the face of challenges, and ultimately to unite voices on behalf of higher education. More generally, effective leadership at all levels could help ensure that higher education's perspective is more effectively understood and appreciated by its many external constituencies.

External advocacy and cogent explication of critical issues are key challenges for higher education. But, there is also a need for new leadership to enhance communication and interaction among components within the higher education community. With new approaches to higher education leadership, the roles individuals

play within our systems and institutions—from academics to student life and administration—could be more effectively integrated to better serve operational, financial, and communication challenges faced by institutions and the higher education community at large.

A number of those interviewed suggested that the Commission would have been more effective if it had identified a few key issues around which there was agreement, such as the need for improvement in the awarding of financial aid, and then had built on that common ground. Identifying common interests is a concept that appears often in the organizational change literature. A strategy of principled negotiation could then move the discussion from divergent positions to areas of common interests. This is one of several available strategies that might have been useful. The need to separate the people from the problem is another widely understood principle of negotiation. This allows those involved to get away from over identification with a person's style and get to the issues under discussion.

Specific comments from study participants point to the need for articulate, inclusive, proactive leaders—leaders who promote the highest standards of discourse and substantive dialogue—for clarifying needs and directions, for fostering more genuine and productive engagement, for encouraging more holistic conceptualizations of higher education, for delivering difficult messages to those who may prefer not to receive them, and ultimately for more effectively advancing the collaborate pursuit of shared purposes.

What general lessons about the dynamics of change within higher education can be derived from this case? An analysis of comments by study participants indicates that in addition to *stages*, there are a number of *themes* that are vital across the various phases of the change process, among them *leadership*, *communication*, *culture*, *assessment*, and *planning*. Extensive comments by study participants elucidate these ideas in the case study.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The study concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion of how the analysis of the work of the Commission can inform our planning as we go forward:

- The Report and the recommendations are viewed differently by the different sectors in higher education.
- Within each sector, there were considerable variations among presidents, chancellors, academic officers, and business officers as to how the work of the Commission and the final Report is viewed.

Figure 2: Cross-Cutting Themes in the Dynamics of Change



Source: Ruben, Brent D., *Understanding, Leading and Planning Social and Organizational Change*. Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2008 (in press).

- There was general agreement that it is important to separate the issues identified from the politics surrounding the Report.
- The strong language of the Report, the sharp edge, and the high political visibility were off-putting to many in the higher education community. These things did, however, gain the attention of the community—in spite of, or more likely, because of—its directness.
- The primarily positive value of the Report is that it put higher education on the national agenda and with thoughtful responses, this could be used to great advantage.
- The Report was viewed—by all parties—as something more than simply a document for reflection; it was rather a call to action. This factor, along with the potential threat of government intervention, contributed significantly to the intensity of reactions from the higher education community.
- A number of associations and agencies undertook an aggressive and organized effort to clarify misunderstandings and to advocate for the higher education community—efforts which were seen as “effective” in blocking Department action, but perhaps less so in enhancing the understanding and appreciation of the higher education community at large among other constituencies.

- Many individuals indicated that their institutions were already addressing some of the initiatives raised in the Report and believed that they perhaps, had not done a good job communicating the progress being made in these areas.
- The Spellings Report may have filled a vacuum created by unaddressed concerns about the costs of higher education, the value added, and higher education's ineffectiveness representing itself as a public good to the public.
- The higher education community would have done well to treat the Commission and Report as a set of opportunities, and to embrace the issues and create meaningful responses, rather than to respond to these primarily as problems. The opportunity to reengage and create collaborative networks and partnerships across higher education and with state and federal agencies is not lost. The creation of these ties continues to be critically important.
- The Commission would have been more effective if it had made a clearer case for the need for educational reform, if its communication style had been more collegial, and if it had it been more successful in creating alliances with the higher education community to promote common values and goals.

Those who served on the Commission—leaders from the Department of Education, the higher education associations and accrediting agencies, colleges and universities—and all those who read and reacted in one way or another, understand both the accomplishments of and opportunities for improvement within higher education. The challenge for those seeking to advance the purposes of higher education is one of balance. Should the focus be on the many attributes, accomplishments, and achievements of the U.S. higher education community in the hope of broadening public understanding and much needed support? Or, should the emphasis be on improvement needs, gaps, weaknesses, and challenges, in order to stimulate and mobilize the talent and resources to accelerate progress?

The Spellings Commission adopted a style and approach that primarily emphasized challenges, needs, gaps, and potential areas for improvement. The gains and risks associated with this approach were predictable, and both have been realized in some measure. The final outcome will be determined over time and it may well be years before we can ascertain the extent to which the Commission had a positive or negative impact on higher education.

In looking back to draw lessons from this high profile initiative for education reform, we are also mindful of the need to look forward. As the Commission made clear, colleges and universities address economic and professional needs and provide benefits—for individuals and for the nation—that are critically important for all of us. They also strive to make vital contributions through enhancing the quality of students' personal lives, relationships, and communities; promoting civic engagement, ethical behavior, social responsibility, interpersonal competence, and intercultural appreciation; developing leadership and communication skills; enhancing aesthetic appreciation, media and information literacy, political participation, and critical analysis of contemporary issues; and building the many important understandings, capabilities, and lifelong commitments that benefit all of us.

The communication challenge here is of vital importance. There is a continuing and compelling need to create and capitalize on opportunities for telling the higher education story effectively—to thoughtfully explain its contributions to economic, professional, and personal development through teaching, research and discovery, outreach, and public service. To be effective, the story must be told in a manner that takes cognizance of the needs, perspectives, and sensitivities of the various constituencies whose understanding and appreciation of the multiple facets of the academy's work is critical.

As the analysis presented in this study so clearly underscores, leadership at all levels is essential to the realization of these goals. There are vital and continuing leadership challenges related to identifying, promoting, and leveraging innovations and effective practices; identifying new initiatives where common challenges can be proactively and cooperatively addressed; seeking new opportunities for collaboration between higher education and governmental agencies and offices; and developing collective public voices to span and unite the various types of institutions, associations, and agencies that define higher education in America.