

The Context of Higher Education Reform in the United States

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Higher education in the United States has received much scrutiny in the recent past from the federal and state governments, the press and the general public. In response to this scrutiny, a number of blue ribbon panels have been formed to examine how effectively higher education is serving American society. In this article, I analyse the proceedings and impact of the most recent prominent panel, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly known as the Spellings Commission. I also briefly examine how the new administration of President Barack Obama is likely to affect colleges and universities in light of the global economic crisis.

Contexte de la réforme de l'enseignement supérieur aux États-Unis

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Ces dernières années, le gouvernement fédéral, les États, la presse et l'opinion publique ont placé l'enseignement supérieur aux États-Unis au centre d'une attention toute particulière. En conséquence de cela, de nombreux groupes d'experts se sont formés pour étudier dans quelle mesure le système d'enseignement supérieur sert efficacement la société américaine. Cet article examinera les procédures et l'impact de la commission du ministre de l'Éducation sur le futur de l'enseignement supérieur, plus généralement dénommée la commission Spellings, qui constitue le plus important groupe d'experts récemment constitué. Nous étudierons ensuite brièvement dans quelle mesure la nouvelle administration du Président Barack Obama est susceptible d'affecter les universités dans un contexte marqué par la crise économique mondiale.

Higher education has been under the scrutiny of policy makers, the press and the public for as long as it has existed in the United States. Even during the earlier years of the country, when proportionally few citizens enrolled in its institutions of higher education, colleges and universities received attention from a broad cross section of society.

As participation in higher education expanded in the 20th century, and as higher education became a more important contributor to the economic and national security needs of the nation (particularly beginning during World War II), this scrutiny became more heightened. Both states – which have the governance and funding authority over public institutions of higher education – and the federal government – which funds research and student financial aid – have formed numerous commissions and review panels over the years that have looked at the role of higher education in serving society. These organisations have recommended a variety of changes over the years to improve the higher education sector and how it serves the nation.

It is fair to argue that the 21st century finds the attention paid to higher education in the United States at record levels. This has been driven by a number of factors:

- Participation in higher education, as measured by total number of enrollees or by the proportion of the population enrolled in college, is at an all-time high. Enrollments exceed 18 million students; almost 50% of 18- to 19-year-olds are enrolled in college (as compared to about one-third 30 years ago) and 36% of 20- to 24-year-olds are enrolled (23% 30 years ago). Thirty years ago, approximately half of all secondary school students enrolled in college within a year of graduating from high school; today, two-thirds do (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, Tables 2, 7 and 200).
- Even as participation in higher education has grown, the price of attending college in the United States in recent years has grown more rapidly than has the average income of families or measures of price inflation (College Board, 2008a). This has brought much scrutiny from potential students and politicians alike, who raise concerns that students, particularly those from lower- and moderate-income families, will be priced out of attending college.
- Public investment in higher education continues to grow. Between 1991 and 2006, state and local governments increased their funding for higher education institutions 71%, from USD 39.1 billion to USD 67.0 billion. The

federal government increased spending on research at universities by 133%, from USD 13.8 billion to USD 32.1 billion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, tables 31, 352 and 373). The amount of grant aid provided to students by the federal government increased from USD 6.6 billion to USD 19.4 billion, or 193% (College Board, 2001, 2008b). Consumer prices during this period grew only 49% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). As governments put more funding into higher education, this increases the scrutiny and calls for accountability.

This first decade of the 21st century has seen a number of calls for reform and changes to higher education and how it serves American society. In this article, I review the most prominent of these, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly known as the Spellings Commission, and describe the institutional, political and economic contexts that surrounded it. I also provide a brief analysis of the likely environment for reform of higher education under the new administration of President Barack Obama.

The Spellings Commission

Background

In announcing the creation of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education in September 2005 US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings noted that "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" (US Department of Education, 2005a). The formal charge given to the Commission was to "consider how best to improve our system of higher education to ensure that our graduates are well prepared to meet our future workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the changing economy" (US Department of Education, 2006a, p. 33). The Commission had 19 members, including former college presidents, academics, representatives of higher education policy and advocacy organisations, and representatives of the business community. It was chaired by Charles Miller, a former Chairman of the Board of Regents (governing board) of the University of Texas, one of the largest public universities in the United States.

Historically, while the federal government has provided funding for colleges and universities, it has done so while imposing relatively few restrictions on the governance and operations of the institutions. The United States Constitution, written shortly after the founding of the nation in the 18th century, does not contain the word "education". Thus, control and authority over educational institutions at all levels – primary, secondary and

tertiary – has been devolved to individual state and local governments. Federal involvement in postsecondary education has largely been accomplished through application of the policy “carrot” of federal funding and inducements targeted at particular societal needs, rather than through the policy “stick” of regulation and control (Fitzgerald and Delaney, 2002).

The timing of the announcement of the Spellings Commission was important, as it came as Congress was preparing to take up the reauthorisation of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), the primary federal statute that governs the provision of institutional (non-research) support and student aid to the nation’s colleges and universities. The HEA, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 as one of his Great Society social welfare programmes, needs to be reauthorised every five years. Last accomplished in 1998, Congress was overdue on renewing the law as it was dealing with other priorities. So every year since 2003, the law was continued an additional year with a simple continuing resolution. But following the elections of 2004, when President George Bush was reelected and his Republican Party solidified control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives, congressional leaders announced their intent to finally move forward with a comprehensive reauthorisation of the HEA.

From its first announcement, the Spellings Commission was greeted with some skepticism and criticism. Much of this was driven by concerns over the possibility of an increased federal role in regulating the higher education sector. A representative of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, stated, “If they’re going to have a national strategy, who is going to implement it other than the federal government? My fear is that they’re going to duplicate what they have in K-12 in higher education”, a reference to the federal government’s passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which imposed on states a requirement that they test students in primary and secondary schools annually (Field, 2005). A representative of an advocacy organisation for private colleges criticised the composition of the panel because it did not “include anyone from historically black, women’s or faith-related schools” (Haurwitz, 2005). The American Federation of Teachers, one of the two national teachers’ unions in the United States, asked Secretary Spellings to include “the perspective of people who work on the front lines with students, day in and day out” (Field, 2005).

The Commission’s deliberations

Over the course of approximately a year, the full Commission met nine times at which it invited testimony from a number of experts in higher education from across the country. These meetings included two open hearings, where in addition to invited presentations, members of the public were allowed to step forward and address the Commission.

Even though the initial charge to the Commission was focused fairly narrowly on higher education's role in preparing Americans for the 21st century workforce, this mission was interpreted rather broadly. A list of the topics on the agendas of the Commission meetings includes:

- accountability;
- affordability;
- accessibility;
- quality;
- innovative financing;
- innovative models of delivery;
- innovative public/private partnerships;
- innovative teaching and learning strategies;
- articulation;
- accreditation (US Department of Education, 2006a).

But the Commission discussions were not limited to these topics. One meeting, in December 2005, included invited testimony from Lamar Alexander, an individual perhaps uniquely qualified to discuss the intersection between public policy and higher education. Alexander was at the time of his testimony (and still is) a United States Senator, a former Secretary of Education (under President George H.W. Bush), a former governor of Tennessee, and a former president of the University of Tennessee. Alexander exhorted the Commission to

put a spotlight on the greatest threat to broader public support and funding for higher education: the growing political one-sidedness which has infected most campuses, and an absence of true diversity of opinion. [...] There is more to this charge of one-sidedness than the academic community would like to admit. How many conservative speakers are invited to deliver commencement addresses? How many colleges require courses in US history? How many even teach Western Civilization? How many bright, young faculty members are encouraged to earn dissertations in the failures of bilingual education or on the virtues of vouchers or charter schools? (US Department of Education, 2005c, p. 143)

It is interesting to note that Alexander in his testimony did not present any evidence for his charges of liberal bias in the academy. While this has been a charge that has received much publicity and discussion of late (see for example American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2005; Horowitz, 2007; Horowitz and Laksin, 2009), it seems far-fetched to justify it as being within the scope of the Spellings Commission's responsibilities. This was confirmed by the fact that even though Alexander was one of the most prominent speakers at any of the hearings, the final report made no mention of the "problem" he identified.

Another speaker spoke about the problem that “two-thirds of all college students today, male and female are reporting incidents of sexual harassment in their college experience” (US Department of Education, 2006b), but again, the Commission never took up the issue in later discussions or reports.

The Commission also had much discussion about the role of for-profit providers in the American higher education system. This is not surprising given the growth and prominence of this sector in recent years. Between 1990 and 2007, enrollment grew 24% in public colleges and universities and 29% in private, not-for-profit institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, Table 188). Enrollment in for-profit institutions (only those that are accredited by an accrediting body recognised by the US Department of Education) grew 455%, with these institutions increasing their market share of students from 2% to 7% over this same period.

At the meeting held on 2 and 3 February 2006, in San Diego, California, the Commission heard from analysts from the venture capital and banking industries who followed for-profit higher education providers, as well as from the chief executives of two of the nation’s largest for-profit providers, Kaplan Inc. and Capella Education. One analyst pushed the Commission to

encourage state lawmakers to allow institutions to privatize while directing greater resources to individual aid. State colleges and universities, particularly community college systems, amount to state-run enterprises and suffer from all of the inefficiency and poor decision making of Soviet-style factories. (US Department of Education, 2006c)

Other speakers spoke about the almost-exclusive focus of for-profit institutions on job placement and the vocational needs of their students, and the market-responsiveness of these companies in comparison to traditional colleges and universities.

One subject that was noticeably absent from the Commission’s deliberations (as well as its final report) was the role of intercollegiate athletics in contributing to the rising cost of college, an issue directly related to the topic of affordability. This is a topic that has received much attention from the popular press, scholars, and policy makers in recent years (see for example Bowen, Levin and Shulman, 2003; Shulman and Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2000; Suggs, 2004; Wieberg and Upton, 2007; Wolverson, 2006). At the first meeting of the Commission in October 2005, one member – Arthur Rothkopf, Senior Vice President of the United States Chamber of Commerce, a lobbying organisation for business and industry in the United States – raised the issue of the potential problem with spending on athletics, but the topic was taken off the table by the Commission’s Chairman:

ARTHUR ROTHKOPF: ... Intercollegiate athletics, except for a handful of institution is one of the great money pits for schools and I think it would

be well for many institutions to talk about deemphasizing intercollegiate athletics even though it is a very nice thing for people, for Michigan, and Penn State, and Oklahoma, and Miami, but for those of us.

CHAIRMAN MILLER: I am not going to recognize any more athletic discussion during this commission's meeting.

ARTHUR ROTHKOPF: What I'm saying is, I think it is a cost-driver that adds tremendous added costs which.

CHAIRMAN MILLER: Well, it does. Let's put that in the amenities department and say we are not an amenities commission, but that is a cost-driver that we will look at in a model of our education. But that is an accurate statement. But, we could not deal with that here and do anything in that nine months. (US Department of Education, 2005b, p. 107)

After this exchange, the subject of athletics was only briefly raised in other Commission hearings, and does not appear in the final report.

As one way of informing its deliberations, the group commissioned a series of 15 papers from experts around the country on a variety of topics, ranging from quality assurance, to affordability, to accountability. A reading of the topics does appear to be beyond the scope of the Commission's initial charge from Secretary Spellings, but one could make an argument that *any* topic could be found to be related to the improvement of higher education. Chairman Charles Miller clearly allowed the Commission to focus on a broad range of topics, rather than keeping it narrowly-focused on a small number that would be, at least by outward appearances, more germane to the Commission's charge.

The Commission's report

After the first five meetings, the Commission members met for two days in Washington in May 2006 to discuss the contents of the final report, to be informed by the earlier hearings along with the discussion papers written by the higher education experts. Given the breadth of the topics covered in the public hearings and consultant reports, the discussion meandered over a broad path (Lederman, 2006a, 2006b). Commissioners bantered over definitions – “higher education”, “20th century education”, “post-secondary” or “tertiary” as the demarcation of the sector of education that was within its scope, in addition to what is meant by “access” and “affordability” – as well as discussing the trade-offs inherent in promoting the policy goals of initial access to higher education *versus* progression toward degree attainment (US Department of Education, 2006d). Chairman Charles Miller pushed the group to be “bold” in its recommendations and not to shy away from any that may be uncomfortable or difficult for colleges and universities to accept. The Commission members wrestled with the challenge of distilling the many issues and challenges discussed in their meetings – along with proposed

solutions – down to a manageable number that would be memorable to the report’s audience. The second day of the May meeting closed with Miller’s promise to send to the members a draft of a final report, to be written by the Commission’s staff from the Department of Education, along with the assistance of a consultant engaged for the task.

A little more than a month later, the draft report was sent to the Commission members and released to the public. The tone was set early on, when the first page of the report stated, “US higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways. As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the glaring deficiencies that remain. [...] We have found equal parts meritocracy and mediocrity” (Secretary of Education’s “Commission on the Future of Higher Education”, 2006, p. 1).

The key findings of the body were grouped into four categories:

- access to higher education;
- affordability;
- quality and innovation;
- accountability.

Each of these was expounded on, providing details from the hearings held by the Commission and the experts’ reports.

The report laid out a series of six broad recommendations grouped under the findings as follows (pp. 18-21):

- Access to higher education
 - ❖ expand college access by increasing student aid and improving academic preparation of students
- Affordability
 - ❖ overhaul the student financial aid system to provide more need-based aid and make it less complex
 - ❖ control costs in colleges and universities and improve their productivity
- Quality and innovation
 - ❖ implement “continuous innovation and quality improvement” in higher education institutions (p. 20)
 - ❖ improve opportunities for lifelong learning for non-traditional (*i.e.* adult) students
- Accountability
 - ❖ create a “robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education” (p. 21)

It is reasonable to conclude that the recommendations were far from the “bold” initiatives urged on the Commission by Chairman Miller at its May meeting. All of these are ideas had been fairly widely discussed both within and outside of the academy in recent years.

Nevertheless, the draft report generated quite a bit of controversy as it circulated among the members of the Commission. Much criticism was raised regarding the negative tone toward the current status of higher education in the country. Commissioner Robert Mendenhall, president of the Western Governors University, a not-for-profit Internet-based institution – and certainly one Commission member far from the mainstream of American higher education – said, “I don’t think it’s about blame. The report was more negative than it needs to be about the academy, but not as alarming as it needs to be in shining a light on the challenges in American higher education” (Arenson, 2006). Robert Zemsky, an education professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and another member, decried the tone of the report, saying, “The most distressing thing to me is that it’s just mean-spirited. Critiques can be very effective, but mean-spirited critiques just don’t go anywhere” (Lederman, 2006c).

Other Commission members complained that the draft report reflected not so much the views and deliberation of the members, informed by the public hearings held, but rather those of the consultant hired to draft the report and the expert papers submitted to the Commission. David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, the umbrella lobbying organisation for higher education institutions in the United States, and a member of the Commission, commented that the report was “based on a highly selective reading of testimony and in no way reflects the candid and creative discussions we have had during our yearlong process” (Field, 2006). James Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, complained that “This really reflects what the consultants put in the papers and what they would like the commission to say. It doesn’t have any relationship to the kind of deliberations we had at the May meeting” (Field, 2006).

One of the key recommendations in the June draft report was that Secretary Spellings implement a database that would track the progress of the nation’s millions of college students. Because of the decentralised (to the 50 states) and mixed public-private model of higher education in the United States, there is no central system for tracking students longitudinally. The challenge was compounded by the fact that many students attend college sporadically, part-time or with periods of stopping- or dropping-out before returning to continue their studies, often at a different university than where they had started their postsecondary careers. The standard of an 18-year-old recent high school graduate enrolling in college full-time and attaining a bachelor’s degree from that institution four years later has become less and less the norm in the United States.

This recommendation for creating a student tracking database was met with much resistance as the draft report was released beyond the Commission, with opponents citing privacy and other concerns. The president of a private college questioned, "Is there some reason to reverse three decades of [privacy] policy and go down this Orwellian road?" (Romano, 2006a). The president of a private college association in one state added, "It's cradle-to-grave tracking. It can easily be connected to other databases and be connected to basic freedoms" (Romano, 2006a, p. A15).

Responding to the concerns raised both inside and out of the Commission, Chairman Charles Miller shepherded the report through three more drafts before reuniting the members for a meeting in Washington in August 2006. These changes ameliorated the concerns of many of the members, because overall reaction to the revisions was positive as they assented to the most recent draft. There was one important exception, however: David Ward of the American Council on Education (ACE). Ward was the lone dissenter to acceptance of the latest draft, stating his concerns to his fellow Commissioners at that meeting:

I guess I may be providing the rain on this unanimous reaction to the report. [...] Where I think I have apprehension is that I wish that we could have built our arguments more on the strength of higher education than on the idea that there may be a crisis or even an emerging crisis. [...] I think in this report there is a slight tendency, and I'd just say a slight tendency, to attribute some problems almost entirely to higher education when there are multiple factors involved in creating those problems. (US Department of Education, 2006)

Ward's resistance to endorsing the report was no doubt complicated by his role as, in some ways, the chief spokesperson for higher education institutions across the United States. The ACE represents not just the individual institutions, but also acts as an umbrella organisation for lobbying and advocacy organisations in Washington that represent most specialised sectors of the industry (e.g. community colleges, private not-for-profit institutions and large public universities). The president of ACE has the challenging task of trying to represent institutions and organisations that have very different missions and characteristics.

A "pre-publication" version of the final document was released in September 2006, and contained the signatures of 18 of the 19 members of the Commission, all but Ward (US Department of Education, 2006f). A careful analysis of this version, as compared to the first draft released the prior June, finds some subtle and not-so-subtle changes that were made throughout the

summer (the Department of Education released a “final” version of the report that was largely unchanged from the pre-publication version). Table 1 highlights some of these key differences.

Table 1. Examples of differences between first draft and pre-publication reports

First draft, 22 June 2006	Pre-publication report, September 2006
1 As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the <i>glaring deficiencies</i> that remain (p. 1).	As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities thus far in our history to note the <i>unfulfilled promise</i> that remains (p. vi).
2 Among the vast and varied institutions that make up US higher education, we have found <i>equal parts meritocracy and mediocrity</i> (p. 1).	Among the vast and varied institutions that make up US higher education, we have found <i>much to applaud but also much that requires urgent reform</i> (p. vi).
3 We want colleges and universities to be productive and efficient in order to be affordable to the students, taxpayers, and donors who sustain them (p. 2).	We want postsecondary institutions to <i>provide high-quality instruction</i> while improving their efficiency in order to be more affordable to the students, taxpayers, and donors who sustain them (p. viii).
4 We want post-secondary institutions to be accountable to the American public for their performance and transparent in their operations (p. 2).	[dropped]
5 Employers report repeatedly that <i>the new graduates they hire</i> are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces (p. 6).	Employers report repeatedly that <i>many new graduates they hire</i> are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces (p. 3).
6 While higher education prizes transparency of information, precision of data, and rigorous analysis in its own scholarship, as an enterprise it has failed to apply the same standards to itself. Some colleges are beginning to experiment with new assessment tools, but most make no serious effort to examine their effectiveness on the most important measure of all: How much students learn (p. 6).	[dropped]
7 The Secretary of Education should take the lead in developing a national strategy to keep the US at the forefront of the knowledge revolution, creating a system that encourages knowledge and skills to be obtained and continuously updated on a regular basis through a lifetime of learning (p. 21).	The secretary of education, <i>in partnership with states and other federal agencies</i> , should develop a national strategy that would result in better and more flexible learning opportunities, especially for adult learners (p. 25).
8 At the state level, one promising approach that should be encouraged is placing increased emphasis on empowering consumers by redirecting assistance to individual students instead of institutions. The same effect could occur with a well designed expansion of the Pell Grant program (p. 20).	[dropped]
9 States should require public institutions to measure student learning using quality-assessment data from instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CSSE), which survey undergraduates about key aspects of their college experience; the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which measures how much student learning – and growth – takes place in colleges; the MAPP, The Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning, and/or graduate and professional entrance exams (pp. 21-22).	[dropped]

Note: Key differences highlighted in italics.

Certain changes were clearly designed to address some of the members' concerns regarding the negative tone of the report. Examples 1 and 2 in Table 1 demonstrate this, with substitution of "unfulfilled promise" for "glaring deficiencies" (example 1) and "much that requires urgent reform" replacing "meritocracy and mediocrity" (example 2). Example 5, in its replacement of a single word, greatly changes the Commission's view on the quality of the graduates produced by American colleges and universities; rather than all of the graduates being unprepared for the workforce, only the more ambiguous "many" of them are deemed inadequate.

Other differences were more substantive and demonstrated major changes to the findings and/or recommendations in the report. Example 6, which criticised most institutions for doing nothing to assess student learning, was dropped. Some sections of the final report talked about the efforts institutions made to assess student learning, but the language was much gentler. And the related recommendation shown in example 9, that states require public institutions to conduct standardised learning assessments of all undergraduate students, was also dropped.

Example 8 is a recommendation that, if carried out, would fundamentally change how the states provide funding to higher education. The majority of the funds appropriated by states to support higher education is targeted at the support of individual colleges and universities, rather than supporting students in the form of financial aid. In fiscal year 2006, states provided USD 58.7 billion in direct support to public colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, Table 352).^{*} In that same year, the states provided USD 6.8 billion in financial aid to students (National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs, 2007). Thus, a change that would encourage (or require) states to shift their resources from funding *institutions* to one of funding *students* would put more market power in the hands of students and potentially threaten the viability of some institutions. It is not surprising that this recommendation was ultimately dropped from the report.

Example 9 is another telling illustration of the pressures under which the Spellings Commission worked. As described earlier, during the formation of the Commission there was a concern that it was going to advocate for a national college student testing scheme, based on the Bush administration's implementation of the No Child Left Behind law for primary and secondary schools. While the recommendation for mandated testing of students in public institutions made it into the initial draft report, objections to such a strong requirement led it to be dropped from the final report.

^{*} Some states also provide funds to private institutions, but these amounts are small in comparison.

Reactions to and outcomes of the report

Outside of the Commission members themselves, reactions to the publication of the Spellings Commission were mixed. Secretary Spellings pronounced herself quite pleased with the results, announcing her plans to carry out the Commission's recommendations that were under her purview at a speech shortly after she received the report (US Department of Education, 2006g).

Commentators, while recognising some of the shortcomings about the American higher education system documented in the report, supported some of the findings and recommendations and criticised others. The president of a community college felt that her sector of American higher education received short shrift (DiCroce, 2006). A private college president complained that while some of the recommendations were good ones, the report is one "that wants to improve higher education on the cheap" by not pushing forcefully enough for more funding (Bennett, 2006). A public university president was critical of the potential for more government intrusion into higher education, stating, "The irony of these periodic bursts of regulatory enthusiasm is that the conservative, free-market political enterprise appears most eager to see this educational free market socialized into government mandated homogeneity, often based on simple, one dimensional measures" (Lombardi, 2006).

The report called for an increase in funding for the federal Pell Grant, the largest student aid programme targeted at financially needy students. But one influential Senator, Edward Kennedy, ranking Democrat on the Senate Education Committee, criticised Secretary Spellings for not stepping forward to more forcibly support that recommendation (Romano, 2006b).

As with any complex social system, documenting a causal relationship between the Spellings Commission report and changes to the higher education system in the United States is difficult. The report made a number of recommendations, very few of which have been implemented by either the state or federal governments through legislative action. Granted, some of the recommendations are fairly complex, would have to be accomplished over a stretch of time and require the co-operation of multiple players (*e.g.* the federal government, state governments and higher education institutions themselves), so it may be too early to measure the report's impact based on this standard. The political and practical viability of the recommendations may also have been undermined by the fact that there were little more than two years left in the Bush administration for them to be championed, as well as that the Democrats gained control of both chambers of Congress in the mid-term elections of 2006. This change in political control made it more difficult for the Bush administration to carry out any changes that would require legislative approval.

Secretary Spellings and the Department of Education did take some actions in response to the report in her remaining 28 months in office. In September 2008, the Department of Education announced the “College.gov” website, designed to provide earlier information to potential college students, particularly those from low-income and minority families that historically had been underrepresented in higher education in the United States. There has also been a flurry of activity both in the Department, as well as in Congress, related to simplifying the financial aid system, though few of these activities have resulted in substantive changes to what most observers agree is a highly complex and inefficient system.

The Bush administration and Congress agreed on a relatively large increase in the maximum Pell Grant award, from USD 4 050 in fiscal 2007 to USD 4 731 in fiscal 2009, taking a step toward implementing at least in part one of the Commission’s recommendations. Again, it is difficult to determine how much of this increase should be ascribed to the influence of the Commission, rather than to the fact that the value of the Pell Grant had been raised only USD 50 in the prior four years and was well overdue for an increase.

In summary, it is fair to conclude that much of the *Sturm und Drang* caused by the formation of the Spellings Commission and its subsequent deliberations and report was never realised. Higher education in the United States will likely be little reformed on a macro scale because of the Commission, not a surprising result given the size, diversity, power and autonomy of the industry.

The future of higher education under the Obama administration

While it is still the first few months of the new administration of President Obama, and his attention has been dominated by dealing with the financial crisis engulfing the United States, it is still possible to speculate on what changes – if any – his administration is likely to bring to higher education. From his campaign statements as well as his first actions since taking office, it is apparent that his early focus is on problems relating to access and affordability of higher education – two key issues taken up by the Spellings Commission. In spite of the financial situation facing the country, President Obama has submitted a 2010 budget request to Congress that calls for large increases in Pell Grants. He has also called for simplifying the financial aid system, another key recommendation of the Spellings Commission that has garnered support elsewhere (Baum and McPherson, 2009).

The nearly USD 800 billion fiscal stimulus bill introduced by President Obama and passed by Congress early in his administration also provides funding for higher education, both directly from the federal government as well as with funds funneled through state governments and earmarked for education purposes. As of this writing it is unclear how much of the latter

funds will go to colleges and universities, however, rather than being used for primary and secondary schools.

As for the rest of Obama's perspective on higher education, it is still too early to tell whether he has any interest in taking on some of the issues and recommendations addressed by the Spellings Commission. Unlike his predecessor as president, who was often disdainful of higher education and liked to proclaim himself as just a "regular guy" (even though he was a graduate of two of the country's most elite institutions, Harvard and Yale universities), President Obama has spoken eloquently in his books and other public pronouncements of the importance of what a college education meant for him. He has also been a professor, having taught at the University of Chicago law school before beginning his political career.

Given his background and public statements about higher education in the past, under ordinary circumstances one would expect Obama to have it as an important topic in his domestic policy agenda. But these are clearly not ordinary times. The President will likely be dealing with challenging economic and fiscal conditions during at least his first term and, if he is reelected, the difficulties may continue into a second term. Even if he were interested in championing an expansion of access to higher education, and a closing of the gap in college participation between various groups (such as rich and poor, and white and Asian American as compared to black, Latino, and Native American students), he may find it difficult for the federal government to muster the resources required to help promote such an endeavour.

In addition to the fiscal constraints under which he is going to be working, it is unlikely that Obama will suggest any kinds of reforms to college and university governance – through the policy "carrot" of federal funding – that would substantively shake up the higher education establishment in the United States. As described above, he has generally been supportive of colleges and universities in his public pronouncements, in contrast to the attacks on the industry undertaken by many Republican politicians in recent years. Thus, while he may try to address public and media concerns about the rising price of college, he is unlikely to do so in a manner that would impinge on either state or institutional autonomy.

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