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Highlights of the Final Report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education *A Test of Leadership—Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*

September 19, 2006

Secretary Spellings formed the Commission on the Future of Higher Education to launch a national dialogue on the need to strengthen higher education so that our students and our nation will remain competitive in the 21st century. As a college diploma becomes more critical, higher education must be accessible to all Americans and meet the needs of America's diverse and changing student population.

On September 19, 2005, the 19-Member Commission was charged with examining vital issues central to a quality higher education, **such as accessibility, affordability, accountability and quality.**

Over the past year, the Commission—comprised of public officials, researchers and leaders from the academic and business community—held a series of public meetings and hearings across the country, engaging Americans from all walks of life in a robust national dialogue.

The Commission's **Final Report** determined that while America's colleges and universities have much to be proud of, they are not well-prepared for the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population and a competitive global economy. Our system of higher education has become dangerously complacent despite the fact that, in the Commission's words, "Other countries are passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever."

The Commission found that:

- College access, particularly for low-income and minority students, is limited by inadequate academic preparation, a lack of information and persistent financial barriers;
- The current financial aid system is confusing, complex and inefficient, and is therefore frequently unable to direct aid to the students who need it most; and
- There is a shortage of clear, comprehensive, and accessible information about the colleges and universities themselves, including comparative data about cost and performance.

As a result of these findings, the Commission noted that "Too many Americans just aren't getting the education that they need. There are disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing and thinking skills we expect of college graduates."

Today, the Commission presented to the Secretary of Education a series of recommendations designed to improve the **accessibility, affordability and accountability** of higher education.

- (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 Secretary of Education will consider these and other proposals as she prepares to announce her action plan for the future of higher education on [Sept. 26 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.](#) The plan will respond to key recommendations made by the Commission and 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.