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Remarks of U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander
“A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the
Future of Higher Education”

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-As prepared-

Thank you for the time you are giving to this Commission’s work, and thank you for inviting me to testify.

I’ve seen higher education from many sides, so I’m sometimes asked, “What’s harder: being governor of a state, a member of a president’s cabinet, or president of a university?”

My answer is, “Obviously, you’ve never been president of a university, or you wouldn’t ask such a question.”

I have six suggestions for recommendations you might make.

First, I hope you will urge the Administration that appointed you to make the National Academies’ “Augustine Report” a focus of the President’s State of the Union address in January and of his remaining three years in office.

This 20-point, \$10 billion a year report is the National Academies’ answer to the following question that Senator Pete Domenici, Senator Jeff Bingaman and I posed to them in May: “What are the ten top actions, in priority order, that federal policy makers could take to enhance the science and technology enterprise so the United States can successfully compete, prosper and be secure in the global community of the 21st century?” The report was written by a distinguished panel of business, government and university leaders headed by Norm Augustine, former CEO of Lockheed Martin.

As 2005 ends, we Americans – who constitute just five percent of the world’s population – will once again produce nearly thirty percent of the world’s wealth.

Most of this good fortune comes from the American advantage in brainpower: an educated workforce and our science and technology. More Americans go to college than in any other country. Our universities are the world’s best, attracting more than 500,000 of the brightest foreign students. No country has national research laboratories to match

ours. Americans have won the most Nobel Prizes in science, and have registered the most patents. We have invented the Internet, the automobile and the computer chip, television and electricity. From such advances have come a steady flow of the world's best paying jobs.

As one scientist has said, we don't have science and technology because we're rich. We're rich because we have science and technology.

Yet I am worried that America may be losing its brainpower advantage. Most Americans who travel to China, India, Finland, Singapore and Ireland come home saying, "Watch out."

The Augustine panel found I am right to be worried:

Last year, China trained 500,000 engineers, India 200,000, while the U.S. trained 70,000.

For the cost of one chemist or engineer in the U.S., a company can hire five chemists in China or 11 engineers in India.

- China is spending billions to recruit the best Chinese scientists from American universities to return home to build up Chinese universities.

They also found signs that we are not keeping up:

- U.S. 12th graders performed below the international average of 21 leading countries on tests of general knowledge in math.
- In 2003, only three American companies ranked among the top 10 recipients of new U.S. patents.
Of 120 new chemical plants being built around the world with price tags of \$1 billion dollars or more, one is in the U.S. and 50 are in China.

Among the Augustine Report's twenty recommendations were:

Recruit 10,000 new science and math teachers with four-year scholarships and train 250,000 current teachers in summer institutes.

- Triple the number of students who take Advanced Placement math and science exams.
- Increase federal funding for basic research in the physical sciences by 10 percent a year for seven years.
- Provide 30,000 scholarships and graduate fellowships for scientists.
- Give foreign students who earn a PhD in science, engineering and computing a "green card" so they can live and work here.
- Give American companies a bigger research and development tax credit so they will keep their good jobs here instead of moving them offshore.

Some may wince at the \$10 billion a year price tag. I believe that the cost is low. America's brainpower advantage has not come on the cheap. This year, one-third of state and local budgets go to fund education. Over fifty percent of American students have a federal grant or loan to help pay for college. The federal government spends nearly \$30 billion per year this year on research at universities and another \$34 billion to fund 36 national research laboratories.

Just this year, Congress has authorized \$75 billion to fight the war in Iraq, \$71 billion for hurricane recovery, \$13 billion in increased Medicaid spending and \$352 billion to finance the national debt. If we fail to invest the funds necessary to keep our brainpower advantage, we'll not have an economy capable of producing enough money to pay the bills for war, Social Security, hurricanes, Medicaid and debt.

Aside from the war on terror, there is no greater challenge than maintaining our brainpower advantage so we can keep our good paying jobs. That is the surest way to keep America on top.

have attached an executive summary of the Augustine Report to my comments.

Second, I suggest that you recommend that presidents of the United States appoint a lead advisor to coordinate all of the federal government responsibilities for higher education.

My greatest regret as U.S. Education Secretary was that I did not volunteer to be that lead person. Secretary Spellings, with the appointment of this commission, has assumed at least some of that responsibility. But the authority of the Secretary of Education over higher education is somewhat like the authority of the U.S. Senate majority leader or a university president: overestimated. Almost every agency of the federal government has something to do with higher education, tens of billions of taxpayer dollars are invested every year and someone should be looking at all of this in a coordinated way.

Third, I urge you to join me on the bandwagon for deregulation of higher education.

The greatest threat to the quality of American higher education is not underfunding. It is overregulation. The key to the quality of our higher education system is that it is NOT a system. It is a marketplace of 6,000 autonomous institutions. Yet, thanks largely to the last two rounds of the federal Higher Education Act, each one of our 6,000 higher education institutions that accepts students with federal grants and loans must wade through over 7,000 regulations and notices. The president of Stanford has said that seven cents of every tuition dollar is spent on compliance with governmental regulations.

I have attached to my testimony remarks I made to the U.S. Senate in June when I introduced the Higher Education Simplification and Deregulation Act of 2005, much of which was incorporated in the Higher Education Act reauthorization bill this year.

Fourth, I urge the Congress to overhaul the Medicaid program and free states from outdated federal court consent decrees so that states may properly fund colleges and universities.

You have two charts before you that tell the story. Nationally, during the five year period from 2000 to 2004, state spending for Medicaid was up 36 percent, while state spending for higher education was up only 6.8 percent. As one result, tuition was up 38 percent.

The story in Tennessee was worse. Medicaid spending was up 71 percent, while higher education was up only 10.5 percent, and tuition was up 43 percent.

By the way, during this same four year period, federal spending for higher education was up 71 percent.

When I left the governor's office in 1987, Tennessee was spending 51 cents of each state tax dollar on education and 16 cents on health care, mainly Medicaid. Today it is 40 cents on education and 26 cents on health care, mainly Medicaid.

To give governors and legislatures the proper authority to allocate resources, Congress should give states more authority over Medicaid standards and more ability to terminate outdated federal court consent decrees that remove decision-making authority from elected officials.

In addition to the two charts on spending trends, I have attached my remarks when Senator Mark Pryor of Arkansas and I introduced the Federal Consent Decree Fairness Act.

Fifth, I hope you will put a spotlight on the greatest disappointment in higher education today: colleges of education.

“At a time when America's schools face a critical demand for effective principals and superintendents, the majority of programs that prepare school leaders range in quality from inadequate to poor.” Those are not my words, but those of a new report by Arthur Levine, the president of Teachers College, Columbia University. Or ask Richard Light, the Harvard professor, who is working with university presidents trying to find and inspire a new generation of leaders for our colleges of education. Sometimes colleges of education are even roadblocks to the very reforms they ought to be championing. In 1983, when I asked colleges of education to help me find a fair way to pay teachers more for teaching well (which not one state was doing at the time), they said it couldn't be done. So we invented our own system for thousands of teachers, with virtually no help from the very people who are in business to figure out such things. And still today, despite the good work of Governor Hunt and others, the lack of differential pay is the major obstacle to quality teaching.

I have attached an executive summary of Dr. Levine's report, “Educating School Leaders.”

Finally, I hope you will 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.

To describe this phenomenon, allow me to borrow some words from the past, which may sound familiar to your chairman, Charles Miller, who was once Chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas: “systematic, persistent and continuous attempts by a politically dominant group to impose its social and educational views on the university.” This was what the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) called it in its censure of Texas Governor Pappy O'Daniel's Board of Regents when the Board fired University of Texas President Homer Rainey in the 1940s. This is

reported in Willie Morris' book, "North Toward Home." Then the AAUP was talking about one-sidedness imposed by the right, instead of by the left – but political one-sidedness is political one-sidedness, no matter from what direction it comes.

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 U.S. 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?

I am not surprised that most faculties express liberal views, vote Democratic and that most faculty members resist authority. That is the nature of most university communities. But I am disappointed when true diversity of thought is discouraged in the name of a preferred brand of diversity. This one-sidedness is not good for students. It is not good for the pursuit of truth. And it undermines broad public support for higher education. The solution to this political rigidity lies not in Washington, D.C., but in the hands of trustees, deans and faculty members themselves.

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Last year Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas invited former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to join a small group of U.S. senators in the majority leader's office for a discussion. Dr. Cardoso was completing a residency at the Library of Congress.

"What memory of the United States will you take back to your country?" Senator Hutchison asked Dr. Cardoso.

"The American university," he replied immediately. "The uniqueness, strength and autonomy of the American university. There is nothing like it in the world."

I salute Secretary Spellings and this Commission for undertaking to preserve and improve higher education, America's secret weapon for its future success. In coming to your conclusions, I hope that you will urge the President to adopt the Augustine Report and to designate a lead advisor for higher education, that you will jump on the bandwagon to deregulate higher education and preserve its autonomy, that you will urge Congress to overhaul Medicaid and federal court consent decrees so states can properly fund higher education, and that you will urge trustees to revamp colleges of education and ensure a campus environment that honors true diversity of opinion.

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