

nothing in the Spellings Commission report provides a traditional, full-time faculty member with a reason to buy into its vision of “innovation,” including its call to change the academic calendar. The business mentality that is prominent in the commission’s discussion of productivity is suspect in much of the professoriate and would be actively resisted. We have to figure out a different way of talking *with* college faculty, rather than *at* them, if productivity is to be enhanced.

The commission also assumes that providing data will make higher education more accountable and allow colleges to be judged on performance, rather than reputation. Providing more data so students can make more informed choices about how to spend their tuition dollars make sense. But all the data in the world will not convince someone that it is better to attend a community college or a state university than it is to attend Harvard or Yale, regardless of the cost. People strive to belong to groups that are difficult to get into. The belief that high cost equates to quality education keeps many students in debt unnecessarily.

Although the commission wisely calls for better alignment with K-12 as a way to address the learning gap between high school and college, the final report says little about teacher education—arguably the most important topic higher education can address in determining how well students are prepared when they reach college.

In the end, while the Spellings Commission is right in recommending that higher education become better aligned with K-12 systems and that a college education remain accessible and affordable, its findings and recommendations may have little relevance to the future of New England higher education. The commission focuses significantly on the economic value of higher education, and indeed students want a “reward” from college education and training. They want their college credential to open up new opportunities. So why should young

*“Colleges and universities have few incentives to contain costs because prestige is often measured by resources, and managers who hold down spending risk losing their academic reputations.”*

—A Test of Leadership, Commission on the Future of Higher Education

*“It is especially regrettable that the commission’s report focuses almost exclusively on workforce preparation, narrowly defined. The longstanding and distinctively American goal of preparing students for engaged citizenship is ignored entirely by the commission.”*

—Statement by Association of American Colleges and Universities

people go to college in a region where at the end of the line they will find fewer jobs that pay them enough to keep up with the region’s monstrous cost of living?

The data already show that the New England states in which jobs are being created (Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire) are seeing college enrollments go up. The states in which jobs are not being created to the same extent (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island) are experiencing either flat or lower enrollments. Educators need to start demanding that our states do a better job of planning for the future. We must help address issues such as transportation, health care, and housing as well as the educational standards that will help meet the needs of an increasingly complex world. In other words, if the sweeping national higher education reforms recommended by the Spellings Commission are to have any impact in New England, the economic and social problems facing New England must be resolved too.

---

**Cathryn L. Addy** is president of Tunxis Community College. Email: [caddy@txcc.comnet.edu](mailto:caddy@txcc.comnet.edu).

---

## Resist Simplistic Measures of Success

JACK M. WILSON

**W**hen I testified last year before the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education created by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, I congratulated the commission for training a spotlight on the key issues of affordability, accessibility and accountability, while pointing out what I felt were some of the shortcomings of the metrics that purport to measure these.

I particularly object to the notion that college is simply high school for older kids. Approaches that

have been used widely in the schools—such as high-stakes testing of general achievement—have limited utility in colleges where our academic aims and programs are far more diverse.

Furthermore, metrics that are often cited in discussions of where higher education needs to improve may have exactly the opposite effect to that intended. The Spellings Commission and others speak of a need for universities to improve their graduation rates, but the metric often cited to measure this aspect of college success is outmoded and could actually lead to much lower accessibility, affordability and completion.

How can that be? The old model of the 18-year-old heading off to college, remaining there for four or more years, and then graduating, is no longer the norm. The typical student today attends two or more institutions before graduating. Yet “graduation rates” are a measure of the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen graduating in five or six years. The typical student today cannot possibly meet this old-fashioned metric of success. Worse, if such a metric were to become the standard for enforcement and funding, one must expect that colleges and universities would reduce their intake of transfer students, community colleges would try to avoid having students transfer to other institutions prior to finishing an associate degree, older students and part-time students would find reduced opportunities and there would be fewer continuing education and on-line degree programs.

I am completely in favor of accountability on college success but fully opposed to simplistic application of “graduation rates.” We can and must design a better metric.

As for accessibility and affordability, colleges and universities have to know their communities and make sure the programs they create are affordable and accessible for the communities they serve. Understanding that the rising cost of education presents challenges for Massachusetts families, the University of Massachusetts has held increases in student charges under the rate of inflation for each of the past three years.

One vital aspect of higher education that received comparatively less attention in the Spellings Commission report is university research. This is an area where our efforts must be much more closely connected to the needs of the community. It is vitally important that our research involve students and enrich our communities in multiple ways: by producing discoveries and breakthroughs that improve the quality of life but also by producing the ideas and products that create new businesses and new jobs.

We work hard to attract research funding, in part motivated by academia’s time-honored and intrinsic desire to ask why and to expand the boundaries of human knowledge, but also because we understand that research is the rocket fuel that keeps New England’s economy hurtling forward. We have enjoyed many

recent successes at UMass, winning major competitions to locate three national research centers, bringing a \$40 million atmospheric sensing center and a \$16 million nanotechnology center to UMass-Amherst, and a \$12 million nanotechnology center in UMass-Lowell, the latter in partnership with Northeastern University and the University of New Hampshire. These public and private university partnerships involve companies like Raytheon, IBM, TIAX, Lucent, Bay State Medical Center, GE, EMC and many others.

While I advocate for an explicit community focus, I am, of course, mindful of the fact that we live in an ever-smaller world and, in many ways, our “community” is global in nature. We need to fully appreciate the realities of globalization and, while doing so, maintain our view of the local community.

**Approaches that have been used widely in the schools—such as high-stakes testing of general achievement—have limited utility in colleges where our academic aims and programs are far more diverse.**

It is clear that what happens in Beijing enormously affects what happens in Boston. UMass has launched a number of international programs, three of the most recent establishing very close ties with China, Germany and South Africa. In November, we opened the first Confucius Institute in New England in partnership with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Our closer ties with China will surely open the door to two-way economic activity that will benefit the citizens of Massachusetts.

While I believe in close integration with the community and its many sectors—business, governmental, voluntary and community service—I am not advocating an abrogation of academic independence or of higher education’s traditional practice of charting its own course. UMass Medical School research professor Craig C. Mello’s recent Nobel prize-winning discovery of RNA interference, or gene silencing, would not have been on the “to do” list that any external group would have provided to us. Rather, it was the fruit of a brilliant researcher being allowed the freedom to pursue his own course of investigation.

Ultimately, Dr. Mello’s work may yield enormous benefits for the community by eradicating terrible diseases and stimulating economic activity. If the latter occurs, it will occur in part because we have so consciously and energetically established mechanisms to convert innovation into economic benefit for our community and Commonwealth.

That is where higher education should be going, heading out into the community and forging alliances that ultimately make the term “ivory tower” an archaic expression.

---

**Jack M. Wilson** is president of the five-campus University of Massachusetts System. Email: [jwilson@umassp.edu](mailto:jwilson@umassp.edu).

*“The secretary’s commission expressed some unease about credit transfer in the United States, where nearly 60 percent of your daughter’s friends will attend more than one school, and 25 percent will pack up the apartment, call the movers and formally transfer. Had it looked at the Bologna Process, the commission might have offered a creative proposal for rethinking the very value system of our credit currency, and, in the process, added to our tools for judging institutional performance.”*

—Clifford Adelman, who spent 27 years as a U.S. Education Department analyst before moving last year to the D.C.-based Institute for Higher Education Policy, writing in *Education Week*.