

Of all the commission's recommendations, those that would restructure the student financial aid system and consolidate federal grant programs to increase the purchasing power of need-based Pell Grants have received the most positive response from higher education. New England institutions and students would benefit greatly from such policies. In addition, if New England states increased their financial support to public higher education up to at least the national average, institutions could make higher education more affordable by rolling back some of the costs they have passed on to students and their families in recent years.

Student Preparation. The commission report emphasizes the importance of improving student readiness for higher education. This is mostly a charge for high schools, but higher education has a role to play in enhancing the preparation of teachers and creating greater transparency about what it takes for students to succeed in college. New England states have led the nation in K-12 reform, developing state tests of high school performance and increasing graduation standards. Massachusetts, for example, is one of just nine states to receive a grade of "Plus" from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education for developing measures of college learning. Ensuring that students from low-income, rural and urban schools can meet these high standards must continue to be a high priority for New England's education policymakers.

Accountability. The commission's recommendations that colleges and universities become more transparent about cost, price and student success are perhaps the most controversial areas of the report. The report

embraces a "value added" form of evaluation and public reporting for colleges, based more on judgments about what students learn while they're in college than what they know when they enter. This would be a new and potentially demanding standard for a region whose reputation as a higher education leader has rested on the prestige of some highly selective private institutions thought to admit the "best and the brightest."

College Ready New England, an initiative of the New England Board of Higher Education, should go a long way toward improving the overall understanding of what constitutes success for our higher education community. By helping the New England states collect and share key data on issues such as college preparedness, enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, this regional effort should increase the transparency and accountability of higher education. There are, however, no regional plans at this time to require value-added measures of student learning.

To sustain even our current level of prosperity, we must expand college access and affordability and improve performance. The changes that are required do not reside in the recommendations of the Spellings Commission report, but in the commitment and wisdom of New England policymakers, business leaders, education and higher education officials whom the report calls to lead.

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Could Transparency Bring Economic Diversity?

RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

The Spellings Commission report calls for greater access to higher education for low- and moderate-income students, greater transparency in the way higher education works and greater accountability for producing results. These recommendations are all significant in their own right, but the three concepts also converge to provide powerful support for an important new idea: requiring greater transparency and accountability of colleges for whether or not they are honoring a commitment to the American Dream—the ideal that someone from even the most humble background can, through hard work and talent, get a good education and do well in American society.

The report's emphasis on equity for low-income students is welcome. As the commission notes (in more polite language) dumb rich kids in America are as likely to go to college as smart poor kids. The commission's recommendation to boost the purchasing

power of the Pell Grant, which has significantly eroded over time, is vital. Whereas the Pell Grant once covered 40 percent of the total cost of a private four-year college education, today it covers 15 percent.

The problem of access identified in the report is particularly acute at the nation's most selective colleges and universities. Selective institutions have done an admirable job of promoting racial diversity on campus, but according to a Century Foundation study of the nation's most selective 146 colleges, only 3 percent of students come from the bottom socioeconomic quarter of the population, while 74 percent come from the richest quarter. Put differently, one is 25 times as likely to run into a rich student as a poor student on the nation's most selective campuses. Just 10 percent of students at these institutions come from the bottom socioeconomic half, according to the study conducted by researchers Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose.

Carnevale and Rose find further that many more low-income and working-class students could do the

work at selective institutions if they were given the chance. With *economic affirmative action*, the bottom socioeconomic half could almost quadruple its representation—to 38 percent—and graduation levels would remain the same as they are with today’s roster of students.

Part of the reason colleges allow these deep levels of economic stratification is that there is little transparency on the issue. Economic differences among students are less obvious to the naked eye than racial differences, and as a society we are less accustomed to talking about addressing class inequality. Consider the reaction to a recent report that the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) had admitted a freshman class that was just 2 percent African-American. Appropriately, the story was reported heavily in the press. A commission was formed, and action plans were detailed to address the problem.

For black students to be underrepresented by a factor of six (blacks constitute about 12 percent of the population) was rightly considered unacceptable. But according to Carnevale’s research, poor children are even more underrepresented on selective campuses than blacks at UCLA (a 3 percent representation for the bottom 25 percent of the economic population is an underrepresentation by a factor of eight). And the economic disparity is not limited to one campus; it exists at selective campuses nationwide. Better reporting of this problem—perhaps growing out of the Spellings Commission’s call for greater transparency—would help illuminate the issue on various campuses and help the public hold individual institutions accountable for their progress on economic diversity.

In recent years, some light has been shed on the issue of economic diversity as a number of research organizations (including The Century Foundation) have begun publishing a breakdown of the percentage of students eligible for Pell Grants on various campuses. *U.S. News & World Report* now includes a list in its annual rankings issue, using Pell numbers to show economic diversity on individual campuses.

But Pell figures are limited in their utility. Pell Grant-eligibility data provide only a binary snapshot—eligible versus not eligible—and do not provide much detail about the whole economic range of students. This is important because Carnevale and Rose’s study suggests it is not just the lowest socioeconomic quartile that is under-represented, but the two middle quartiles as well. Pell Grant data also do not contain information about some critical socioeconomic criteria such as parental levels of education.

It is important to note not only how many students are white, black, Asian or Latino at UCLA or Princeton, but also how many are poor, lower middle-class, upper middle-class or wealthy. What percentage

“Despite years of funding student aid programs, family income and the quality of high school education remain major factors in college-level access and success ... Low-income high school graduates in the top quartile on standardized tests attend college at the same rate as high-income high school graduates in the bottom quartile on the same tests. Only 36 percent of college-qualified low-income students complete bachelor’s degrees within eight and a half years, compared with 81 percent of high-income students.”

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

are first-generation college-goers? What percentage come from single-parent households? In all the talk about accountability for colleges, it’s time to establish a set of measures to help us know whether or not individual institutions of higher education are doing their part to make the American Dream a reality for students.

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