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Affordability and Access to Higher  
Education: changing demographics,  
economic crisis and investment in human  
capital**

Orkodashvili, Mariam  
Vanderbilt University

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*Mariam Orkodashvili*

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**Spellings Commission Report on Affordability and Access to Higher Education:  
changing demographics, economic crisis and investment in human capital**

***Background***

The Spellings Commission for Future of Higher Education was set up to look into the issues facing the higher education system in the U.S., outline the challenges and offer recommendations to tackle the problems. Most importantly, The Spellings Commission Report raised the issue of the role of federal government in the development of higher education system. ‘From the Morrill Land-Grant Act to the GI Bill and the Higher Education Act, the federal government has played a pivotal role in extending opportunities for higher education to a wider segment of our society. As we enter the twenty-first century, the number of students coming of college age is growing rapidly, and the new cohort is more diverse than ever. Will the federal government sustain its historic commitment to assuring a fair chance of a college education for all citizens?’ (Gladieux, King & Corrigan, 2005: 196).

A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Commission) was established by the Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and was governed by the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).

The purpose of the Commission was to consider how best to improve the system of higher education in the U.S. to ensure that the graduates were well prepared to meet future workforce needs and were able to participate fully in the changing economy. To accomplish this purpose, the Commission considered federal, state, local, and institutional roles in higher education and analyzed whether the goals of higher education were appropriate and achievable. By August 1, 2006, the Commission would provide its written recommendations to the Secretary.

The commission concentrated on four key areas related to higher education: access, affordability, quality, and accountability. The findings were followed by a series of six far-reaching recommendations aimed at all the parties whose efforts would be needed to ensure that reform would take root: colleges and universities; accrediting bodies and governing boards; state and federal policymakers; elementary and secondary schools; the

business community; and parents and students themselves. ‘As we look to the future, it is imperative that we maintain a system of higher education that meets the needs of our diverse population, and in particular the needs of traditionally underserved communities; provides enhanced opportunities for lifelong learning; and addresses the economic and workforce needs of the country’ (Spellings Report, 2006: 33).

### *The Issue of Access*

One of the most important questions that the Commission raised was: what changes were needed to ensure that higher education remained both affordable and accessible to students and their families? ‘Too few Americans prepare for, participate in, and complete higher education—especially those underserved and nontraditional groups who make up an ever-greater proportion of the population. The nation will rely on these groups as a major source of new workers as demographic shifts in the U.S. population continue’ (Spellings Report, 2006: 8).

Therefore, among other issues posed by the Commission access was one of the most significant ones. Rising tuition fees owing to the federal aid shortages and overly complicated federal aid system were named as the major impediments to higher education access, especially for growing numbers of ethnic minority and low SES students. ‘We found that access to higher education in the United States is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers’ (Spellings Report, 2006: 8).

To start with, ‘Access and achievement gaps disproportionately affect low-income and minority students. Historically these are the very students who have faced the greatest academic and financial challenges in getting access to or completing college. Many will be the first in their families to attend college. 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. By age 25–29, about 34 of every 100 whites obtain bachelor’s degrees, compared to 17 of every 100 blacks and just 11 of every 100 Latinos’ (Spellings Report, 2006: 9).

Besides, as the Commission Report stated: ‘There are at least 20 separate federal programs providing direct financial aid or tax benefits to individuals seeking postsecondary education. The system is overly complicated and its multitude of programs sometimes redundant and incomprehensible to all but a few experts. This complexity has the unfortunate effect of discouraging some low-income students from even applying to college. For the

typical household, the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid*, or *FAFSA*, is longer and more complicated than the federal tax return. Moreover, the simplest IRS tax form, the 1040EZ, already collects most of the key pieces of data that could determine federal aid eligibility. The current system does not provide definitive information about freshman year aid until the spring of the senior year in high school, which makes it difficult for families to plan and discourages college attendance' (Spellings Report, 2006: 12).

The Report also indicated that the entire financial aid system—including federal, state, institutional, and private programs—was confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative, and frequently did not direct aid to students who truly needed it. Need-based financial aid was not keeping pace with rising tuition.

The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance estimated that in the first decade of the new century, financial barriers would keep nearly two million low- and middle-income college qualified high school graduates from attending college. Over half of undergraduates took out loans to finance part of their college work. According to the College Board figures, nearly three-quarters of undergraduate students in private, nonprofit institutions graduated with some debt, compared with 62 percent in public institutions. Median debt levels among students who graduated from four-year institutions were \$15,500 for publics and \$19,400 for private, nonprofits. Large majorities of adults—59 percent overall and 63 percent among parents of college students—said students graduated with too much debt. While 80 percent of adults said a college education was more important than it had been a decade before, two-thirds said that affording college was becoming harder—and 70 percent said they expected it to be even more difficult in the future (Spellings Report, 2006: 12).

### ***Recommendations***

The Commission offered the following recommendations to tackle the access / affordability problems.

First, any new federal financial aid system should aim to replace the current federal aid form (the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid*, or *FAFSA*) with a much shorter and simpler application form. The application process should be substantially streamlined by analyzing student need through a simple criterion such as family income. Students should have information about financial aid eligibility (such as need or ability to pay) sooner and with early estimates of likely aid available as soon as the eighth grade.

Second, the federal government, states, and institutions should significantly increase need-based student aid. To accomplish this, the present student financial aid system should be replaced with a strategically oriented, results-driven system built on the principles of (i) increased access, or enrollment in, college by those students who would not otherwise be likely to attend, including nontraditional students; (ii) increased retention, or graduation by, students who might not have been able to complete college due to the cost, (iii) decreased debt burden, and (iv) eliminating structural incentives for tuition inflation.

Third, federal grant programs should be consolidated to increase the purchasing power of the Pell Grant. Whatever restructuring of federal financial aid took place, the Pell Grant would remain the core need-based program. A specific benchmark should be established to increase the purchasing power of the average Pell Grant to a level of 70 percent (from 48 % in 2004–05) of the average in-state tuition at public, four-year institutions over a period of five years. However, even with significant additional federal investment, there was little chance of restoring the Pell's purchasing power if tuition increases absorbed most or all of the new money. This effort required not only federal investment but also strategies by which colleges and universities contained increases in tuition and fees. Additionally, administrative and regulatory costs of federal aid programs should be streamlined through a comprehensive review of financial aid regulations.

Furthermore, Commission emphasized the importance of information delivery to the public regarding college preparation. 'Even though surveys show that most students and parents believe college is essential, numerous nonacademic barriers undermine these aspirations. Many student and parents don't understand the steps needed to prepare for college and the system fails to address this information gap. The commission calls on businesses to partner with schools and colleges to provide resources for early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance. Such efforts should include developing students' and parents' knowledge of the economic and social benefits of college through better information, use of role models and extensive career exploration' (Spellings Report, 2006).

### *Some criticisms of the report*

While the initiative offered by The Spellings Commission Report to reform the higher education system received a general approval, certain criticisms came from public, scholars and policymakers. Some of the

examples below highlight the most important reactions and thoughts particularly related to the access / affordability issue.

The Executive Council of the Modern Language Association of America (Comments, 2007) expressed their views on cost-cutting matter: ‘Some passages in the report, like one that proposes "a focused program of cost-cutting and productivity improvements in U.S. postsecondary institutions", make us wonder if the commission envisions a plan similar to the ill-judged No Child Left Behind, which aims to improve higher education by starving it. Unfunded mandates and cost cutting will only decrease already severely compromised access to higher education. In higher education and education in general, then, such cost cutting will reinforce inequality rather than extend democracy’ (MLA, 2007).

Ignoring the role of humanities was also harshly criticized by the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association of America. While it welcomed the "increased federal investment" in the scientific and technical fields that are "critical to our nation's global competitiveness", it criticized the Commission for ignoring the financial support for Humanities altogether (MLA, 2007). ( Source: [http://www.mla.org/comments\\_spellingsreport](http://www.mla.org/comments_spellingsreport))

Another article offers opinions by different prominent scholars and educators on the Commission Report (Source: <http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0406/Spellings.pdf>). Robert Atwell (Former President of the American Council on Education) connected a lack of coordination between federal and state governments with the problems of financial aid: ‘The fact that federal and state policies on financial aid and other matters affecting colleges and universities are almost never coordinated contributes to confusion and to policy vacuums’. Arthur Levine (President of Woodrow Wilson Foundation) criticized the Report for the lack of clarity, vision and specificity. Bridget Terry Long (Harvard Professor) praised the Report’s recommendation to simplify FAFSA but asked for the concrete steps that the federal government should take in this respect. David Warren (President of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities) raised the issues of security and law regarding the use of student data for financial aid purposes.

Finally, Commission Chairman Charles Miller in his letter to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings blamed the dysfunctional nature of higher education finance for the majority of ‘misfortunes’.

### ***Post-Spellings Report Developments***

Congressional testimonies by a number of scholars, educators or policymakers during the following months and years after the Spellings Commission Report reveal the fact that the access issue has been and still remains on the agenda of the higher education authorities. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point.

Susan Dynarski's oral testimony before the committee of finance mentions the complicated FAFSA application form and urges the authorities to simplify the process (Dynarski, 2006). Bridget Terry Long's testimony stresses the importance of federal government in fostering tax incentives for minorities to increase their access to higher education (Long, 2006), while Sandy Baum talks about the importance of federal student aid in her testimony (Baum, 2007). Besides, Congressional testimonies by James Merisotis (President of Institute for Higher Education Policy), Ross Weiner (Vice President for Program and Policy at Education Trust) and Don Sofier (Executive Vice President of Lexington Institute) emphasize the importance of increase of postsecondary access to higher education for low-SES, and especially, immigrant students (Congressional testimonies, 03/08/07).

Finally, the recently adopted Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 2008 still bears another testimony to the financial challenges facing the access to higher education institutions, and again mentions complicated FAFSA procedures among many other obstacles.

### ***Conclusion***

Today access still remains an issue for higher education in the U.S. Adjusting to changing demographic trends, increased ethnic diversity and increased enrollments with limited federal resources and complicated federal aid system is still a challenge of the future. The question that remains to be answered is: 'Will the federal government sustain its traditional commitment to equalizing opportunities for higher education?' (Gladieux, King, & Corrigan, 2005: 195). Unfortunately, so far education has remained to be an 'intrinsically inegalitarian' domain in Durkheimian sense, 'To find an absolutely homogeneous and egalitarian education, it would be necessary to go back to pre-historic societies in the structure of which there is no differentiation' (Durkheim, 1956. Cited in: Halsey, 1961, p. 457).

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Reactions to the Spellings Commission Report from scholars and educators:

Source: <http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0406/Spellings.pdf>