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Panel Considers Revamping College Aid and Accrediting

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By [SAM DILLON](#)
Published: April 12, 2006

Months after suggesting that standardized testing should be brought to colleges and universities, a higher education commission named by the Bush administration is examining proposals to change sharply how the nation's colleges are accredited and how federal student aid is administered.

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Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times
At a February meeting of the higher education commission, James J. Duderstadt, left, conferred with the panel's chairman, Charles Miller.

One proposal calls for scrapping the current system of accreditation, which has been done largely by private regional bodies, in favor of a National Accreditation Foundation that would be created by Congress and the president. Another proposal calls for streamlining the federal student aid system, replacing some 17 grant, loan and tax-credit programs with just one, or perhaps three, federal aid programs.

The commission, which includes corporate and academic officials, was set up last fall by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to examine college costs and accountability.

Sweeping proposals like the accreditation idea have seemed to turn the commission's deliberations into a tug-of-war between corporate executives and educators over how to solve problems in the nation's higher education system.

"The commission is sending out firebolts, one after another," said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which represents 1,100 postsecondary institutions.

Charles Miller, a former chairman of the University of Texas Board of Regents and a onetime money manager who is leading

the commission, said he hoped to build consensus among the panel's 19 members as they work to issue a final report in August. But he expressed impatience with some academics who, he said, seemed resistant to change and oblivious that they could be overwhelmed by increasing costs and other challenges.

"Those who are squawking the loudest are those who have a private place to play and a lot of money, much of which comes from the federal government," Mr. Miller said. "What we hear from the academy is, 'We're the best in the world, give us more money and let us alone.'"

Mr. Miller backed away from the accreditation proposal in an interview, calling it "sort of a boundary idea" laid out in one of several issue papers he commissioned to encourage dialogue.

The commission's meetings have not been widely publicized. But as word has spread about its deliberations, many college presidents have begun following its moves. Daniel L. Anderson, president of Appalachian Bible College in Bradley, W. Va., said he found the proposal to replace the nation's private accreditation system with one established by Congress especially troubling.

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"The federal government isn't set up to manage the grass-roots affairs of our country," Dr. Anderson said. "Why would the federal government intrude to impose more regulation on higher education?"

Secretary Spellings said through a spokesman that she had confidence in the commission's work.

"We have the finest system in the world, but it is right and righteous for us to ask questions," especially about the affordability, accountability and accessibility of higher education, she said. She has urged the commission to think big and to be provocative.

And the commission appears to be fulfilling that mission. In its public meetings, panelists from Wall Street and elsewhere in the business world have criticized academia as failing to meet the educational needs of working adults, stem a slide in the literacy of college graduates and rein in rising costs.

During a February meeting in San Diego, Trace Urdan, a senior research analyst for the investment banking firm Robert W. Baird & Company, said state colleges and universities "amount to state-run enterprises and suffer from all the inefficiency and poor decision-making of Soviet-style factories."

Charlene R. Nunley, president of Montgomery College in Maryland, introduced herself as a "president of a Soviet factory" and said Mr. Urdan had no evidence for such sweeping claims. "Your criticism is unduly harsh," Dr. Nunley added.

The proposals are laid out in the issue papers, which are available at www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html.

The proposal to expand standardized testing into higher education provoked fervent debate and drew comparisons to President Bush's education law, No Child Left Behind. Kevin Sullivan, a spokesman for Secretary Spellings, said, "While the secretary won't prejudge the work of the commission, there is no intent to suggest standardized tests or N.C.L.B.-style accountability for higher ed."

Mr. Miller has said he does not support a mandated federal test but does favor public reports on how college students are learning as measured through testing.

"There's been this relentless shelling of higher education," said David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, who does not sit on the commission but has attended its meetings.

If included in the final report, several of the proposals "would fundamentally undercut the commission's credibility," he said. "These would include the dismantling of the current accreditation system, the demolition of the federal student aid program, and the demotion of higher education to the role of handmaiden to business needs."

Rick Stephens, a senior vice president at Boeing and a commission member, said the proposals Mr. Warren attacked were intended to be provocative but were not official commission positions. Still, Mr. Stephens said he sympathized with some of the proposals, including the idea of overhauling the college finance system.

"There are more than a dozen grant and loan programs out there, so isn't it time to agree on just one or two?" Mr. Stephens said. "So some might say we're considering blowing up the financial aid system, and well, those words might fit. We need to entertain some bold perspectives."

Another business leader on the commission, Nicholas Donofrio, an executive vice president at IBM, said he was not a strong supporter of proposals that would increase the government's regulatory role.

"But the government has some role to play because it funds the aid programs, so it has some hooks into them," Mr. Donofrio said. "We want these people in academia to get real about the problems and the issues."

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