



# In Brief



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## A Community College President's Perspective on the Spellings Commission: A Conversation with Charlene Nunley

BY JUDITH SUNDERMAN

In 2005 Dr. Charlene Nunley was appointed to the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, better known as the Spellings Commission. In this brief, Dr. Nunley offers candid insights on the activities of the Commission and the final Spellings report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, specifically four themes of the report: accessibility, accountability, affordability, and quality. Dr. Nunley retired at the end of January 2007 as President of Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland. She intends to continue working as an advocate for community colleges.

**UPDATE:** You were one of only eighteen individuals appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to the Commission. What was your role as a member of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education?

**Dr. Nunley:** I was one of the only two sitting college presidents that served on the Spellings Commission, although there were several retired college presidents. I was the only community college person on the Commission. It is important to remember that we were all equal members bringing our perspectives together and trying to shape an agenda. In my role on the Commission, I felt it was extremely important to ensure that the interests of community colleges and community college students were represented. In addition, I wanted to make sure that the issue of increasing access to higher education for underserved populations was adequately addressed. Those two goals were in my mind as the Commission went forward.

**UPDATE:** What is your sense of the administration's perspective on the role of community college education in the U.S.?

**Dr. Nunley:** The Administration is supportive of community colleges. I think the members of the Commission are supportive of community colleges. Most people I talk to are positive about community colleges, even though they tend to forget we are in the higher education system. I am not saying that to be harsh, but the Commission had a tendency to focus on elite, selective, research universities. Those institutions are very important to higher education in America, but 46% of the students in my state begin their higher education in community colleges.

Across the country around half of all students begin their higher education in community colleges. Still, community colleges seem to be a best kept secret. When we remind people about the community college role in higher education, the response is, "Oh yes. We love community colleges. You are doing a great job." The business people on the Commission would say that over and over again. Then a conversation would follow about the amount of time faculty spend teaching versus the amount of time they spend doing research or something similar. I had to remind them again that those rules don't apply in community colleges . . . The state director for community colleges in my own State of Maryland said it best, "When it comes to community colleges, they love us but will they give us the ring?" I think the public has good positive feelings about community colleges, but we tend to be the forgotten element in conversations about higher education.

**UPDATE:** Earlier, you mentioned that accessibility is a key issue for higher education. You have been a staunch advocate for the open access mission of community colleges, and you served on the Spellings Commission subcommittee for access. In an April 29, 2004 article in the *Wall Street Journal* you observed that community colleges in Maryland are "on the brink of a capacity crisis." The AACC echoed this concern recently observing that the *Spellings Report* "does not adequately address the role that state and local funding ... play in the health of community colleges." Other higher education leaders have expressed similar views about the financial strain inherent in serving more students. For example, Douglas Bennett, President of Earlham College, expressed concern in a Sept. 1, 2007, article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* where he questioned the ability of colleges and universities to meet the needs of more students without government commitment for supplementary funding. What is your response to this concern? What do you consider the most significant hurdle relating to increasing access to community colleges?

**Dr. Nunley:** That is my only serious concern with the *Spellings Report*—the fact that it did not more strongly ask the States to raise public support for higher education to a higher priority in their funding decisions. There is some language in the report

recommending states restore their historic commitment to higher education. That language wasn't in the final draft until a few people like me, former Governor Jim Hunt from North Carolina, and some people at AACC proposed language to acknowledge the importance of public support for higher education. I would have liked for that language to be stronger. This is particularly crucial for community colleges.

I spoke at an emerging issues forum at North Carolina State University [recently]. Some of the speakers supported the concept of raising tuition levels and letting people who can afford to attend college pay the higher price while subsidizing students with the most need. I am not enamored of that concept although I understand why universities may feel it is appropriate. If American universities prefer that approach, then I think community colleges need to reinvest in the access mission. The reason why community colleges need to focus on affordability is that so many of the students who begin in community colleges are first generation college students [who] don't understand the difference between sticker price and discounted price . . . or how to navigate the complexities of the financial aid system. Tuition is the decisive factor in whether they will attend.

Demographically, the fastest growing segments of the population are those with historically lower college going rates. These groups tend to begin their education in community colleges. This is why I believe the capacity to serve our students is going to become more challenging. These groups need to be served by higher education. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) just released a new publication called *The Perfect Storm*. [It] addresses converging forces that will shape the future of America. The population that will replace retiring baby boomers will be largely from groups that have had historically lower college going rates. In order to avoid an economic crisis, we need to educate a broader base of people. America's community colleges have to be front and center in that challenge. That's why I say access is the number one issue for the future of higher education in America. If you look at that report from ETS I think it will lead you to the same conclusion.

**UPDATE:** What advice does the Spellings Commission report offer to community colleges about keeping open access a top priority?

**Dr. Nunley:** The importance of need based financial aid has to be carried to our state legislatures, our local governments, and our communities. As the Spellings Commission looked at data it became very apparent that the financial aid system in America is serving the rich better than it is serving the poor and the middle class.

We need to carry the message that distance education will help relieve the strain on facilities at community colleges, but it is not the whole answer. The students that we will serve in the future have less family preparation for higher education, more family challenges, and more economic challenges. Those students need classroom environments [and] programs that address their challenges. We need capital investment in community colleges just to keep the doors open. We need classrooms, laboratories, and support centers. We need counselors, advisors, and mentors. The truth of the matter is that the rate of progression through

higher education is not good enough. We've got to improve it. We've got to make our case strongly.

Finally, I would say that we need to convince individuals and businesses to support us. Community colleges are relatively new into the fund raising game. Montgomery College has been doing it rather well for the past seven or eight years. We have a very compelling case to make to donors about the impact they can make in lives with relatively small levels of investment. So, we need to carry our message forward and let others know how important community colleges are to the future of America.

**UPDATE:** What ideas stand out in your mind about the Spellings Commission perspective on accountability and community college education?

**Dr. Nunley:** Some of the Commission had intense feelings that higher education is not accountable enough. Those feelings were much stronger than I expected. The fact that tuition is going up rapidly drives the desire for more transparency in higher education. Families, businesses, and others are seriously questioning the return on investment in higher education. I am in a state where we have a Unit Records Tracking System for students from 2-year and 4-year public colleges. I am surprised by how reticent some in the higher education community are about trying to track our students. I'm involved with *Achieving the Dream* which is funded by the Lumina Foundation and others. This initiative is tackling ways to pull more students through the system. The participating colleges are using a tracking system to get a better sense of student progress. I am so encouraged and proud of the community colleges involved in the *Achieving the Dream* initiative because they are not running and hiding from the data. The information doesn't paint a pretty picture. These institutions are facing the difficult issues, putting data together, proposing solutions, and evaluating their effectiveness. This is what accountability means to me. It means using a much more evidence-based approach to determine our successes.

I would rather not see this driven from outside of education—by the institutions [through] processes like accreditation. I believe that good databases are important. In my home state we have a tracking system, but it only tracks full time students in public colleges and universities in Maryland. My college, Montgomery College, only gets credit in our performance accountability report for the students who have been full time and transfer to public colleges or universities in-state. We gathered data using the Federal Student Loan Clearinghouse and discovered that we transfer students to 46 states and to a number of private colleges in Maryland. When those data are counted our success rates for transfer go up by about one-third.

As a college president, that information is helpful. But, it doesn't allow me to determine how student performance at my institution affects performance at a transfer institution. I can't determine how income level might relate to college progress. These are things we need to know to be better at doing our jobs in higher education. I felt good about the recommendations on accountability in the *Spellings Report*. I am very pleased that the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, and

the American Association of Community Colleges are all undertaking efforts to define what should be measured, and what information would enhance the effectiveness of each kind of institution. If institutions take a serious look at these measures, governmental agencies will be less tempted to do it for us. I am really hopeful that we can come together on this issue of accountability.

**UPDATE:** There seems to be some concern about the unit record system. Can you explain why you think that is?

**Dr. Nunley:** Yes. I think the concerns are worthy. Privacy is a concern. There is absolutely no way the unit record system should go forward if we can't have absolute assurance of privacy. I have heard NCES talk about ways to address that issue. Some are concerned that the database could be used inappropriately. Again, I think we must have protections to prevent that from occurring. In Maryland the data have only been used for the intended purpose. Other states have unit record systems. Florida has one of the best and most elaborate. In the public colleges and universities I know there hasn't been any indication that people would use the data inappropriately. On the other hand, my colleagues in private higher education have reservations about the unit record system. Private to them does mean private! I think those concerns deserve very thoughtful consideration. But, I think if we work together we can find ways to address all the concerns. We need to do this in the interest of producing better results for students and colleges.

**UPDATE:** Issues of affordability always seem to come back to student aid, college tuition, and the cost of higher education. What response would you give to community college leaders who are looking for guidance on these issues from the final report of the Commission?

**Dr. Nunley:** First of all, I think the most important recommendation in the *Spellings Report* is that Pell Grant funding be restored to levels that support 70% of the average 4-year public college tuition in America. At one time 70% was the standard. Now, it is closer to 40%. My advice to community college leaders is to support the legislation in Congress raising the maximum Pell Grant award. Support the President's budget that calls for increasing Pell Grant maximums. We also need to be very careful that added dollars to Pell Grants don't come at the expense of other important financial aid programs. We need to advocate for financial aid systems that support the students in college today. Financial aid needs to address issues of part time students. Community college transfer students need special consideration because they are disadvantaged in the aid race at their transfer institution. Universities tend to use their financial aid dollars to attract students consistent with a target profile. By the time transfer students arrive little money remains to support their transition. Unfortunately, these students tend to be the least financially able.

I think we also need to be very responsible about doing all we can do to manage our expenses in a way that will keep tuition as affordable as possible. Education can't always be about more money. It also has to be about responsibility and fiscal accountability. In conversations with people on the Commission there is a sense that community colleges really try hard to make the most

of their resources. Our faculty are in the classroom a lot. Our facilities are used all day, all evening, often times on weekends. We are adding classes earlier in the morning and later at night. I didn't get the feeling that there is any fundamental concern about community college efficiency. We need to stay focused and keep letting people know we are doing everything we can to be careful in the use of public resources. People need to know that in community colleges they get a lot of bang for the buck.

**UPDATE:** What are some of the most critical ideas that the Spellings Commission offers surrounding quality and the community college?

**Dr. Nunley:** As a community college president I have learned to defend what we do. When people say too few students have graduated or only this many students are completing a particular program, I can explain why. There are many reasons for the pattern of student progression in community colleges. Our students work. They face family challenges. They leave the system; they come back. But all the reasons can't explain all the loss. What's more, I am convinced that we can find some interventions that will help more students progress and complete. One of the clear messages from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement is the importance of relationships in determining student persistence higher education. Students need to feel connected to a faculty member. They need to feel somebody cares about them. They need someone to call them on the telephone if they miss class, and someone to offer support when things get tough. I think there is more we can do to improve progress to degree. I also think we need to help people understand that degree achievement is not the sole, and perhaps not even the most important, quality measurement for community colleges. Many of our students come for workforce development. Many don't intend to get a degree; they come for skill enhancement. Quality for community colleges can also be measured by the response to labor force needs. It can be measured by how quickly we act when a local industry goes under and people are out of work. Quality is about providing English language education to immigrants who need fundamental language skills to get even the most basic kind of employment. That is why I am so excited that AACC is trying to define what quality means for community colleges. Narrowing the focus to degree achievement will not even come close to telling the community college story.

**UPDATE:** You have demonstrated an interest in issues of quality and student preparedness for college and have spearheaded public school partnerships during your tenure. What do you see as the biggest hurdle in the establishment of a "seamless pathway" through a PK-16 system as recommended by the *Spellings Report*?

**Dr. Nunley:** The broad-based statement on access in the *Spellings Report* identifies college readiness as a key factor in access. Access without preparation is an empty promise. The State of Maryland started releasing data on the rates of remediation in community colleges by county. Montgomery County has a premier school system, but people were really upset about the data that were picked up by the media and publicized. They got very angry at the college. So the local school board and the Montgomery College board got together. We had some heated

conversations, but at the end of the conversation we agreed that this is really about the students. If we focus on the students, we can find ways to work together and make things better. The *Spellings Report* calls for college readiness to be assessed in grade 11. I think that is a good idea. In Montgomery County we administer the 10<sup>th</sup> grade PSAT to every student. It is a relatively good diagnostic tool. Montgomery College cooperates by helping identify students who need to be in more challenging courses based on their PSAT scores. Some students move into honors and AP courses. We also intervene with students who are falling behind in college preparation. More partnerships like this are needed.

The other really important dynamic involves bringing faculty together. For example, the mathematics faculty at the university, the community college, and the public schools need to have conversations about expectations for basic college mathematics preparation. When we brought the faculty together in Montgomery County, it was amazing to find that the public schools didn't quite understand what the colleges expected in terms of student preparation. The colleges didn't quite understand what the public schools were teaching. Faculty to faculty conversations have the power to align course content. As a result the students are able to progress more readily. We need to do a better job coordinating the school systems. In the future 80 or 90% of jobs will require at least some college preparation. It is hard to get 90% of the young people coming out of high school ready for college. We are laying a big challenge on our public schools. Our colleges and universities have experts that can help. We just need to step up and do it.

**UPDATE:** Commenting on the future of higher education post-Spellings (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2006), commission member and former governor of North Carolina, James B. Hunt Jr. noted that the final report from the Spellings Commission is "one of the most important reports in the educational and economic history of our country, if we act on it." What do you feel is the next step in implementing the recommendations of the report?

**Dr. Nunley:** There is an on-going effort to move forward. For example, Secretary Spellings convened accreditation organizations and asked them to take an active look at accountability and assessment of learning outcomes. There is a lot of apprehension about that, but Secretary Spellings has people listening. She asked Sarah Martinez Tucker who headed the Hispanic Scholarship Fund to be Undersecretary. Sarah's assignment is

to see that the recommendations from the *Spellings Report* are implemented. Secretary Spellings has convened a summit to identify top priorities for going forward. In preparation for the summit, she organized five working groups and asked them each to name four or five possible priorities. I am chairing the group on adult and nontraditional students. Another group will address accountability and transparency. Another will deal with affordability and so on.

The fact that there is legislation in Congress to improve funding for the Pell Grant is certainly related to recommendations from the *Spellings Report*. The process of applying for federal financial aid is so complex. The FAFSA form is more complicated than the income tax form. The plan is to simplify the FAFSA process and get the word out earlier about eligibility. Students and their parents need to know the amount of financial aid and be confident with the level of support. Things that can move forward without legislation or regulatory change are already carrying forward. I am encouraged by what I see and look forward to the summit and subsequent initiatives.

**UPDATE:** As you think about the next five years, what should be highest on the agenda of community college leaders?

**Dr. Nunley:** Protecting the open access mission is the most important thing we can do. We need to continue to widen the base of people in community colleges. American community colleges transformed the concept of who goes to college. We've got to do that again. We need to reach out to underrepresented groups and do more to help students complete—doing everything we can to help students stay in college until they achieve their educational goal. We need to create connections that facilitate degree or program completion. The future of the economy is absolutely dependent on it. I don't think I am overstating either the issues or the challenges. I see community colleges continuing with the same fundamental mission, but I see it expanding. The job of community colleges is to change the lives of people for the better. Our job is to offer opportunity where it wouldn't otherwise exist. ♦

**Editor's Note:** Additional information about this topic may be obtained through the U.S. Department of Education.

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