

## Strengthening Higher Education

### Simplify Student Aid & Emphasize Vital Science, Math, and Language Skills

Peter Berkowitz

#### Summary

The importance of higher education to the future of the nation cannot be exaggerated. Economic growth and responsible political participation increasingly depend on a well-read and scientifically literate citizenry. Social mobility and higher incomes are closely tied to the acquisition of a college diploma and the communications skills and critical thinking that higher education fosters. And, for many, a liberal education, which introduces students to the many dimensions of their own civilization and to the diversity of human civilizations, and enlarges sensibility and understanding.

American universities are strong in many ways. No nation on earth can boast universities of greater overall quality or diversity. Millions of American students compete for admission. In fact, undergraduate and graduate students from around the world eagerly seek enrollment.

Yet, today, higher education in America faces formidable problems: unaffordable tuition, lack of accountability, students ill-prepared for college, declining enrollment in math and science, and too few graduates fluent in critical foreign languages. The next President can take several specific steps to strengthen U.S. higher education:

- make college education more attainable for low-income students by simplifying the grants process and reducing inefficiency in the distribution of financial aid
- encourage universities that receive federal dollars to fashion responsible ways to measure student progress and track college costs



- create federally funded fellowships in biology, chemistry, and physics that require recipients, after graduation, to teach high school for one to four years
- create a signature program of federally funded fellowships not only to support students who study critical foreign languages, but also to build much-needed capacity within the Departments of State, Education, and Defense

## Context

In September 2006, the Department of Education issued *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*,<sup>i</sup> authored by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which included leaders in the worlds of U.S. business and education. The bipartisan reach of the report was reflected in the assertion of Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass., and Chair of the Senate Education Committee) that it “laid out a promising agenda to keep our colleges and universities strong in this demanding age.”<sup>ii</sup> The Commission’s work provides a useful point of departure for examining higher education policy in America.

The report affirmed the common observation that American higher education is in many ways the envy of the world and stressed that, in the 21st century, higher education would serve more than ever as an engine of social mobility, of innovation, and for creating a knowledgeable democratic citizenry. At the same time, it noted that the United States has fallen to 12th place among major industrialized countries in overall higher educational attainment and 16th in high school graduation rates.

The report highlighted several specific causes for concern. Many students, it said, particularly poor and minority students, do not obtain a college education because they lack information about college, it is too expensive, and the financial aid system is confusing. High schools fail to provide many students—again, especially poor and minority students—the skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic that they need to do college-level work. Little reliable information is available about the actual cost of higher education or its quality, or about the intellectual skills students develop in college and the knowledge they acquire.

Nor are these the only challenges American universities face. Since the tightening of immigration procedures in the aftermath of 9/11, many foreign students who would benefit from exposure to America and who would benefit Americans by exposing us to their culture have been denied visas. While science and technology play a larger role in all areas of our lives, scientific and mathematical literacy is on the wane. At a time when America's involvement in the world is rapidly growing, American colleges and universities produce a meager number of readers and speakers of critical foreign languages, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindi, and Chinese. And America's elite universities, which set the tone for universities around the nation and train many of the next generation's leaders, have retained the rhetoric but abandoned the content and aims of liberal education.

To meet these challenges, the report recommended that the federal government:

- increase financial aid for low-income students, make financial aid programs simpler and more straightforward, and engage in outreach to make information about financial aid more readily available to high schools students and guidance counselors
- renew efforts to improve the quality of high school education because of the dependence of college performance on basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic
- improve transparency and accountability: for parents and students, by creating a consumer-friendly information database dealing with the cost and quality of individual institutions; for policymakers, researchers and the general public, by collecting and publishing better information on the quality and cost of higher education; and, generally, by encouraging creation of tests to measure student performance
- undertake new initiatives to improve the quality of instruction, especially in math and science
- expand opportunities for adult education, to enable citizens to participate in higher education opportunities throughout life

- enlarge federal investment in fields critical to global competitiveness and security, including science, engineering, medicine, and foreign languages

The report was greeted with three major criticisms. First, it was faulted for not adequately dealing with the challenge of providing greater financial assistance to needy students. Second, creation of a national database tracking student performance from kindergarten through college was deemed an intolerable threat to privacy. Third, the attempt to develop national testing would impose a “one-size-fits-all” framework on higher education, encourage teachers to “teach to the test” rather than to students’ needs and subject matter requirements, and shift power over education from college administrations and faculty to distant government bureaucrats.

The emerging politics of higher education reform reflect an altered policy landscape. In contrast to the Reagan Administration, which considered abolishing the Department of Education, the Bush Administration has sought to expand the role of the federal government in education, first in relation to K-12 schooling with its signature “No Child Left Behind” program and now in relation to higher education with the Commission’s report.<sup>iii</sup> Some of the criticism may reflect partisan posturing, but the objections raise serious issues and must be addressed. It won’t be easy. Although low-income students need financial help, proposals for increased funding take place against the backdrop of increasingly severe budget constraints created by growing military and homeland security expenditures, rising Social Security and health care costs, an already sizeable deficit—plus concern that increases in financial aid only encourage colleges to charge more. National databases, though a potentially valuable tool for tracking student performance, as well as university costs and effectiveness, do create the potential for serious abuse. And, while government certainly can provide incentives to encourage colleges and universities to pursue particular lines of study and research, a majority of Americans probably believes that it is not government’s place to legislate the meaning of an educated person or to establish a single goal for U.S. higher education.

This last point must be stressed. The great strengths of higher education in America—its vastness and its variety—also make it challenging to develop effective federal policy. As Peyton R. Helm, president of Muhlenberg College, observes,

American higher education has more than 4,200 institutions, including public, private, for profit, technical, secular, and faith-based schools with enrollments ranging from fewer than 10 students to more than 115,000. Four-year graduation rates range from less than 1 percent to more than 97 percent. Costs range from a few hundred to more than \$45,000 per year. Teaching styles range from the intimate student-faculty interaction of residential liberal arts colleges like Muhlenberg to the on-demand (if less personal) on-line programs of the University of Phoenix. Colleges and universities prepare future engineers, scientists, rabbis, farmers, journalists, bankers, accountants, doctors, nurses, artists, technicians, dancers, lawyers, and teachers.<sup>iv</sup>

Federal policy must respect this diversity of higher education's forms and goals, while establishing priorities among the nation's needs and constantly keeping in mind the limits of the federal government's role in higher education.

## **Clearly Articulate Policy Goals**

Currently, U.S. lawmakers in both parties agree on two goals. First, priority should be placed on policies aimed at improving the educational attainments of poor and minority students. And second, support for science and math education is crucial to developing the skills Americans need, in order to compete in the global marketplace. Public opinion converges in significant measure with these goals: a majority of the public favors strengthening math, science, and foreign language requirements and making college more affordable. However the majority also believes "it is more important to raise education standards and accountability than to increase funding."<sup>v</sup> Our new President, therefore, will have an opportunity to take advantage of a developing

consensus on improving higher education through the careful crafting of initiatives that will most effectively achieve shared goals.

The most urgent issues that stand the greatest chance of winning majority support are improving financial aid to low-income students who need it, enhancing university accountability, strengthening math and science education, and promoting foreign language study. Additional support for community colleges and technical schools is another worthy goal, but much of the support that the federal government is in a position to provide comes through loans and grants to the neediest students. And, while the number of foreign students studying in the United States declined sharply in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the government has made significant strides in overcoming security-related delays in processing student visas and restoring the former numbers.<sup>vi</sup>

## **Improve Financial Aid**

College education is expensive, and costs continue to rise. According to a College Board study released October 2006, average 2006-2007 tuition costs are \$5,836 to attend a state school and \$22,218 to attend a private college. At elite private universities, the yearly price tag can approach \$50,000. While the rate of increase has slowed recently, in the last five years state school costs have risen 35 percent and private college costs have increased 11 percent.

Currently, the federal government administers some 20 aid programs for post-secondary education. Pell Grants, the single largest source of support, are based on need and do not have to be repaid. Congress made available \$12.75 billion dollars for the program in FY2006, with an average new award of \$2,445 (minimum, \$400; maximum, \$4,050). Extremely needy students are eligible to receive grants also from the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant Program, for which Congress made \$975 million available in 2006. In addition, through aid totaling \$1.172 billion in

2006, the Federal Work-Study Program offers students jobs, and the Federal Perkins Loan Program provides \$1.135 billion in low-interest loans.

In July 2006, the Bush Administration made available \$790 million in new SMART (National Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent) grants and Academic Competitiveness Grants, programs expected to total \$4.5 billion over the next five years. SMART Grants supplement the Pell grants with up to \$4,000 for college juniors and seniors. Academic Competitiveness Grants provide \$750 for freshmen and up to \$1,300 for sophomores who are Pell Grant recipients and who completed rigorous high school coursework. Overall, in its FY06 budget, the administration called for a \$28 billion increase for student aid programs through 2015, and these programs overall will help more than ten million needy students cover the costs of college.

Despite this substantial federal support, the average student borrower graduates from college with \$17,500 in student loan debt. To reduce this burden, many Democrats want to increase the federal funds available for outright grants and decrease the interest that students pay on their loans from 6.8 to 3.4 percent. Notwithstanding the Commission's recommendation to increase federal funding, many Republicans will resist a further increase, and even the Bush Administration is likely to resist one of the magnitude that Democrats will support.

In part these reservations stem from concern that more government support might be counterproductive:

(A) large share of the cost of higher education is subsidized by public funds (local, state and federal) and by private contributions. These third-party payments tend to insulate what economists would call producers—colleges and universities—from the consequences of their own spending decisions, while consumers—students—also lack incentives to make decisions based on their own limited resources. (This) provides perverse spending incentives at times.<sup>vii</sup>

In other words, there is reason to believe, rooted in economic analysis, that increasing federal financial aid will not ultimately help students, because it encourages colleges and universities to raise tuition, enriching universities at the expense of taxpayers, while leaving students no better off financially.<sup>viii</sup>

However, one policy initiative that should attract support from the new President and majority in both houses of Congress would be to simplify and streamline the process by which students apply for financial aid, to improve the quality of the information that reaches low-income high school students, and to clarify the terms under which universities receive federal dollars in support of low-income students. Specifically, the Department of Education should undertake a major review and reduction of the hundreds of pages of regulations that currently govern the distribution of financial aid, eliminate unnecessary paperwork, and reach out to high school principals, guidance counselors, teachers, and students themselves through programs designed to keep them informed on new and existing programs. This would ensure that a larger proportion of current funds finds its way to the students most in need.

### **Establish Accountability**

The national Commission proposed to improve college and university accountability through the establishment of a national database and the development of standardized tests to track student and university performance. Both sets of proposals respond to serious problems, while raising serious concerns. However, carefully crafted reforms—advancing core educational goals while avoiding trampling on other important national goals and goods—should have the backing of the new President and can win majority support.

On its face, testing is an appealing way to hold universities accountable and determine what students are learning. Test scores provide a tangible and relatively objective measure of at least some of the intellectual skills and some of the knowledge that universities purport to teach. Furthermore, grades have become an increasingly

unreliable measure because of an epidemic of grade inflation sweeping the nation, particularly at elite schools.<sup>ix</sup>

Yet new national tests are not the answer. Numerous tests designed and administered by private companies are already in use. Achievement tests are available in many disciplines for those going on to graduate school. Tests to measure analytical abilities are available for graduate school in the arts and sciences (GRE), and for professional education in business (GMAT), law (LSAT), and medicine (MCAT). Moreover, a single national test, or even a set of national tests, fails to reckon with the variety of disciplines and the interdisciplinary and special majors that have for decades been springing up around the nation. In addition, one can expect a bitter and protracted debate concerning who should devise the exams and what they should contain. Indeed, as long as the nation lacks a common higher education curriculum—and there is none to speak of, nor is there any likelihood of one emerging any time soon—debates about the authorship and content of national exams are doomed to be angry and inconclusive.

In general, tests used to evaluate student performance can be implemented in a “high stakes” version or in a “low stakes” version. The stakes in question are the students’. The high-stakes version provides information about individual students. The low-stakes version is anonymous and provides information about aggregate outcomes. As a result, the low-stakes version does not impose another nerve-wracking hoop for students to jump through, and it does not threaten student privacy. But it would still provide students, parents, companies, donors, and the public information about the progress students in general are making at particular colleges and universities. Similarly, the proposal to establish a national database—containing narrowly tailored information about financial aid, student progress, and graduation rates—could be valuable.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Such a database is not unprecedented. The Clery Act, signed in 1990, requires all universities participating in federal financial aid programs to report on crime statistics on and near their campuses. Information available at <http://www.securityoncampus.org/schools/cleryact>.

## **Strengthen Science and Math Education**

In the United States, science and math education is on the decline, with American students ranking 24th out of 29 developed nations in math. The number of students studying math and science is falling, and less than half of high school students are prepared for college math and science. Science courses for non-majors are often unserious, which signals students that learning about science is both difficult and unnecessary. These developments are disadvantageous for the nation. Science and mathematics provide rigorous intellectual training. And knowledge of biology, chemistry, physics, and advanced mathematics is increasingly valuable in many fields.

In FY06, the federal government allocated \$790,000,000 for Academic Competitiveness Grants and SMART grants. For FY07, the Bush Administration proposed a \$60 million increase, which would enable grants for an estimated 541,000 students. These programs, however, are not enough. To begin to reverse the decline, Congress should allocate an additional \$60 million to create a new Department of Education-administered fellowship program designed to encourage students to study science and math in college, as well as to improve high school science education. Students who maintain a B+ or better average in their science and math courses would remain eligible for fellowship support. Strings should be attached: in particular, in exchange for each year of support to study biology, chemistry, physics, or mathematics, students should be obliged to give back one year in teaching this discipline to high school students. In this way, the fellowship program both increases the number of science and mathematics graduates and improves the number and quality of high school teachers.

## **Encourage Study of Critical Foreign Languages**

Initiatives to promote the study of critical foreign languages make sense whether one is hawkish or dovish, Democrat or Republican, and so have the chance to command wide and deep bipartisan support. *Indeed, such an initiative could become a signature program of our next President.*

More than five years after 9/11, even highly educated Americans know little about the Arab Middle East, and universities have made few changes to educate the nation and train experts on the wider Middle East. According to the 9/11 Commission report, in 2002, U.S. colleges and universities granted a sum total of six undergraduate degrees in Arabic; similarly, the State Department reports that less than 1 percent of U.S. high school students are studying any of these critical languages: Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Japanese, Korean, Russian, or Urdu. No surprise, then, that the Commission found the government has too few translators and those it does employ lack, in many cases, the requisite proficiency in Arabic and languages of the regions they serve. Finally, according to the recently released Iraq Study Group report, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq employs only six fluent Arabic speakers.

The nation's security depends on acquiring knowledge of critical foreign languages.

This was once well understood. As Stanford political scientist Mike McFaul observed:

To fight a sustained battle against communism, the United States also invested billions in education and intelligence about the enemy. The U.S. government sponsored centers for Soviet studies, provided foreign-language scholarships, offered dual competency grants to compel graduate students to gain expertise in both security issues and Russian culture. Such programs aimed to combat the new "ism" exist today but are underdeveloped. We lack "human intelligence"—covert agents, spies, and informants—in the Middle East. But we also suffer from shortages of nsa [National Security Agency] linguists, academic scholars, and senior policymakers trained in the languages, cultures, politics, and economics of the Middle East. In the departments of political science at Harvard and Stanford—the two highest ranked programs in the country—there is not one tenured faculty member who is a specialist on the Islamic world.<sup>x</sup>

Those who prefer to emphasize America's commercial and diplomatic engagement with the world also should see foreign language study as a high priority for our colleges and

universities. The study of language opens doors to culture, history, and politics. It disciplines the mind. And it allows people to reach out to foreigners by showing them the respect that inheres in addressing them in their mother tongue. Knowledge of foreign languages is an invaluable asset in an era of globalization in which the United States must cooperate and compete in myriad ways and at many levels with nations around the world.

On January 5, 2006, the Bush Administration announced a National Security Language Initiative intended to improve America's "ability to engage foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical regions, to encourage reform, promote understanding, convey respect for other cultures, and provide an opportunity to learn more about our country and its citizens."<sup>xi</sup> The initiative, for which the President requested \$114 million in FY07, involves cooperation among the Departments of State, Education, and Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence.

The initiative has three broad goals: to expand the number of Americans mastering critical-need languages and encourage students to begin language instruction at a younger age; to increase the number of advanced-level speakers of foreign languages, especially critical-need languages; and to increase the number of foreign language teachers and the resources available to them. In pursuit of these goals, the Administration will:

- allocate \$51 million to revamp old programs and create new ones for language training from kindergarten through university levels
- provide State Department scholarships to enable high school students to study critical-need languages abroad
- establish new programs to increase the number and quality of language teachers
- provide \$13.2 million through the National Flagship Language Initiative to produce 2,000 advanced speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Persian, Hindi, and Central Asian languages by 2009
- create new summer immersion programs
- increase support for foreign language study abroad

- establish a National Language Service Corps whose members, adept in critical foreign languages, will work both as school teachers and in the federal government
- create web-based distance learning resources for critical foreign languages
- expand teacher-training programs

These programs represent a good start in responding to urgent commercial, diplomatic, and national security needs. Yet they should be seen as only the beginning. The National Security Language Initiative draws upon the combined resources of the Departments of Education, State, and Defense. For FY06, the President's budget for these three departments was \$489 billion. Thus the \$114 million earmarked for supporting the study of critical foreign languages represents a meager .02 percent of the departments' combined budgets.

By 2009 the country should triple the resources allocated to higher education in support of the study of critical foreign languages, from today's \$114 million to \$342 million. Though a drop in the bucket of the combined budgets of Education, State, and Defense, these investment in critical foreign language study would, by the administration's own analysis (and as the U.S. experience in funding critical foreign languages during the Cold War suggests), bring huge rewards.

The most efficient and effective way to invest this money is directly in college students. A substantial portion of the funds should be channeled into fellowships awarded and supervised separately by the Departments of Education, State, and Defense. Recipients of critical foreign language support should be required to maintain a B+ average in their language courses to maintain eligibility. They should be encouraged to spend a summer or semester in intensive foreign language study, preferably abroad. And they should be obliged to take at least one course in the history, politics, or religion of the people who speak the language they are studying. Students who receive more than two years' support should be required to work for one to three years in the Department granting and supervising their fellowship. So, for example, students receiving Department of Education support might be required to

work as high school language teachers, students receiving Department of State support might be required to work in the Foreign Service, and students receiving Department of Defense support might be required to work for the Pentagon. Such a fellowship program has several advantages. It is more immune to politicization than most other strategies. The acquisition of vocabulary, the conjugation of verbs, and the mastery of cases and tenses provide relatively few opportunities to push partisan agendas. It prepares students not only for careers in government but also for careers in business, law, medicine, and the non-profit sector—crucial as American interests become increasingly bound up with a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic world. It is entirely consistent with the highest ideals of liberal education in America. Indeed, the decline of serious study of foreign languages at American universities and the concomitant ignorance of other peoples and the diversity of nations, are an academic scandal. Such a program will make the job of America's diplomats easier. For when the Secretary of State and the thousands of State Department officials and U.S. ambassadors around the world undertake, through traditional and public diplomacy, to explain American aims and principles to citizens of other countries, they will be able to point to this country's funding of foreign language study to illustrate our democratic commitment to understand better the peoples and nations with which we share the planet. Finally, such a program transcends partisan differences and, with suitable adjustments here and there, should appeal to voters across the political spectrum.

## Concluding Observations

The next President will inevitably face challenges with respect to improving Americans' social mobility and economic prosperity, enhancing the nation's competitiveness in the global marketplace, cultivating informed and engaged democratic participation, and bolstering national security. *Strengthening higher education is essential to all of these*, and it should be a top priority for the people, their representatives in Congress, and our next President. Broad consensus exists about many of the most pressing problem areas in American higher education, which should enable a committed President to make substantial progress.

## About the Author and the Project

### Peter Berkowitz

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and an associate professor of law at George Mason University Law School. His research focuses on the interplay of law, ethics, and politics in modern society. His current research is concerned with the material and moral preconditions of liberal democracy in America and abroad.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, September 2006. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Kennedy, Edward M. "What Spellings Got Right and Wrong." In *Inside Higher Ed*, October 3, 2006. Available at <http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/2006/10/03/kennedy>.

<sup>iii</sup> This has prompted hard-hitting conservative criticism of the Bush Administration's higher education policy. See, for example, Arnn, Larry P. "Why the GOP is Flunking Higher Education" in the *Claremont Review of Books VI*: Fall 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> "Spellings Report would Weaken Higher Education." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 27, 2006.

<sup>v</sup> Friel, Bryan. "No Funding Left Behind." *National Journal*, Sept. 9, 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> "Open Campuses." *Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 2006. Available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/15/AR2006111501343\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/15/AR2006111501343_pf.html)

<sup>vii</sup> *A Test of Leadership*, p. 10.

<sup>viii</sup> Vedder, Richard K. *Going Broke by Degrees: Why College Costs Too Much*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2004.

<sup>ix</sup> Mellow, John. "Grade Inflation: It's Not Just an Issue for the Ivy League." Available at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/sub.asp?key=245&subkey=576>.

<sup>x</sup> McFaul, Michael. "The Liberty Doctrine." *Policy Review*, April & May 2002. Available at <http://www.policyreview.org/apr02/mcfaul.html>.

<sup>xi</sup> U.S., Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson. "National Security Language Initiative." *Fact Sheet*, January 5, 2006. Available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>.