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of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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July 5, 2006

Mr. Charles Miller
Chairman
Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
U.S. Department of Education, Room 5E313
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Miller:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the tone and substance of the discussion draft of the Commission's report that was made public last week. The discussion draft, unfortunately, adopts a relentlessly negative, and, we believe, unwarranted tone, asserting that American higher education is as "mediocre" as it is meritorious and that most of the fault lies in the inefficiency and poor productivity of the people administering and teaching in our colleges and universities. This is of particular concern because education leaders had been repeatedly assured that the report would not be a broadside against the academy.

The report includes a series of recommendations. Some of them are good and grounded in the facts, such as a recommendation to provide much more need-based financial aid to low income students. In other cases, the draft report is off the mark in its diagnosis of what ails higher education (for example, suggesting that students and professors are not engaged in the serious business of teaching, learning and assessment) and then, based on its false diagnosis, offering the wrong prescription for improvement (initiate a great deal of standardized testing at the college level.)

Just as important, the draft report ignores the two most serious threats facing public higher education today. One is the frightening decline in basic state support for public colleges and universities. The other is the wholesale failure of college and university administrators to maintain the corps of full-time tenured faculty, replacing them with a growing body of contingent instructors, such as part-time/adjunct faculty, who are compensated badly and given little to no professional support to meet the needs of their students. The draft report also fails to acknowledge the central importance of university research. The report recommends less research and more teaching, as though faculty research is an illegitimate, self-serving activity rather than a central contribution to the nation's economy, health and culture.

These shortcomings are especially disappointing because AFT, along with many other higher education organizations, are strongly committed to effectuating the goals enunciated earlier by the Commission:

- A world-class education system that educates everyone
- Life-long learning opportunities
- An affordable education for all students
- Quality education

AFT would be pleased to work with the Commission to achieve these goals. A policy resolution is being prepared for the AFT convention in Boston that urges the Commission to: (1) support substantial new funding for need-based financial aid, particularly Pell Grants; (2) call on the states to restore financial support to public colleges and universities; (3) strengthen the voluntary accreditation system and reject the idea of adding more federal control to the evaluation of education institutions; (4) call for protections against fraud and abuse at institutions run for a profit, particularly distance education programs; (5) reject the overuse, misuse and abuse of standardized testing and enhance assessment mechanisms that keep power in the hands of faculty members who know their students, their disciplines and their institutions; and (6) recognize that colleges and universities are too diverse in their missions and goals, as well as their student bodies, for one size-fits all testing to be appropriate.

The Commission could, and we think still can, perform a valuable national service by offering an informative and objective evaluation of the nation's higher education system along with recommendations to improve quality and support the efforts of colleges and universities across the country. It may be a good sign that the chairman has described the draft as a work in progress and that Commission members, some of whom voiced concern about the draft, are now working together to make revisions. We are pleased that the Commission is holding more meetings and we hope that this will allow for greater discussion and comments from the Commission members. However, without substantial changes, the Commission is in danger of producing a document that will appear ideological, one-sided and will undermine its credibility.

Sincerely,



William E. Scheuerman

Chair, AFT Higher Education Program and Policy Council

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cc: Members of the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education Staff