

**Testimony on the Spellings Commission Report
on the Future of Higher Education**

Department of Education Hearing

Orlando, Florida

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My name is Tom Auxter. I am the president of United Faculty of Florida. We represent the 18,000 faculty members and graduate assistants with collective bargaining contracts in Florida -- at all eleven public universities, eight community colleges, and one independent university. We are affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. I am also a philosophy professor at the University of Florida, teaching and writing on topics in ethics since 1973.

Faculty share the concern of the Spellings Commission for the future of higher education in the United States and have recommendations for what will make higher education viable in the decades ahead. We propose changes in orientation and policy to alleviate the burden of student debt, to address the academic staffing crisis, and to dispel the myth that standardized testing is a solution to problems in higher education.

We have real concerns about what is happening to students under present conditions. We see and talk with students every day, and we follow their progress over time, so we know very well what interrupts their studies and what diminishes the chances they have to make fruitful and productive lives out of their educational endeavors.

At the top of our list of concerns about students is the burden of student debt. Today we find students graduating from college with tens of thousands of dollars in education loans that they must repay. In concrete terms this means hundreds of dollars in monthly payments they must make before they even begin to pay bills for living expenses and the heavy expenses involved in starting families.

Previous generations had no burden that even begins to compare with this. After graduation, they could expect to start a life with a degree and an education as a head start in life – not as an albatross that interferes with everything they try to do for decades. We are not giving the same expectation to our children. As their elders, we seem to be saying that we got the benefit of an education without significant debt, and we got a head start in life given by the previous generation, but we are not willing to incur the expense in giving our own children the same head start.

There is a change in values here. From the earliest times in American society there was a firmly held belief that parents make sacrifices to launch their children into a better future, just as each generation makes sacrifices for the sake of the next. In farms across the country families took extra measures in planting and plowing to enrich the soil so that the next generation would have an even richer earth as a starting point for a life that held promise.

When we are thinking about the future of higher education in general, and about student loans in particular, we need to ask whether we are giving up on the life value that has always made sense to us. As we make choices today, we need to affirm our responsibility to the next generation, not forfeit on the promise of a viable future.

Let me be more specific. The maximum in need-based aid (Pell Grants) per student per year has been flat for over two decades, while the cost of living and educational expenses have risen sharply. The first and most obvious way to address the problem students face is to budget a major increase in Pell Grants.

Another way to immediately address the problem is to implement a need-based repayment of loans program. The schedule and amount of repayment should be adjusted to reflect the amount of income available and the number of children students have after graduation. The Department of Education received a “Five Point Plan for Fair Loan Payments” from the Project on Student Debt which was created and endorsed by a broad range of higher education and civic organizations, along with the major national organizations representing students and faculty. We ask the Department to implement that plan.

Addressing the future of today’s students does not stop there. The most glaring omission in the Spellings Commission Report is the academic staffing crisis. The full time tenure track faculty is now down to 29.2% of the professoriate. A reluctance to spend tax money on higher education means institutions end up exploiting part-time and contingent faculty in order to meet demands for courses that must be taught – making life impossible for the professionals who teach in our classrooms and damaging the learning experience for students.

If professors have to string together six or seven teaching jobs to make a minimum salary that is not even enough to support a family, if they have no health insurance, if they do not have offices to meet students, and if they are vulnerable to and fearful of any sign of disapproval from the one who hires them one semester at a time, what kind of educational experience are we giving to students? Will students get the time they need with a professor who has nowhere to work and is rushing off to a job at the next campus? Will there be time for all the grading and feedback that must occur? How much time will be available to prepare for class when a professor is preparing for a different course at each different institution as jobs are strung together across a region? Will it be possible even to locate a temporary professor

two or three years later when a student desperately needs recommendations for the next stage of life?

Are we truly investing in the next generation when we staff our classrooms with professors who work under these conditions? Would we accept this kind of professional service from any other group of professionals? Would we say it is fine to have surgery from a part-time physician? To have critical rights defended by a part-time attorney? I think not. Why do we think the expert knowledge and skills that higher education gives about how to navigate the treacherous waters of a changing world is a less serious matter and requires less of professionals?

The American Federation of Teachers proposes model legislation to guarantee pro-rated pay and full benefits for part-time and contingent faculty so that there will be an end to this exploitation, and we can firmly establish the preconditions for professional work. Then it will also be possible to move toward a ratio of 75/25 for full-time/part-time faculty so that we can reverse the distortion caused by the incentive for exploitation. We owe nothing less to students

The Spellings Commission opened the door to standardized testing as an accountability measure for higher education. Secretary Spellings has even suggested that accreditation boards, which sometimes bow to pressure from the Department of Education, might enforce a uniform test for institutions of higher education so that parents can rate them and rank them as consumer choices -- depending on how students from each institution score.

This is one of those ideas that sound good to people outside of education, are promoted by politicians bent on “reform,” turn out to be a nightmare for students, and are later regretted by parents and citizens. We have had much painful experience in our state with the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, a form of high-stakes testing that economically punishes schools whose students perform less well on the tests. The consequence is that there is an incentive to teach to the test in a few disciplines and that schools hard pressed for funds eliminate many things, like music, physical education, and the arts, to focus on the task imposed by politicians. The variety, stimulation, and development that come with other activities disappears – creating a school experience that is deadening by comparison. Even worse, in core classes teachers are forced to dummy down the content of the course to make sure that drilling on what is testable for “accountability” is what gets the attention of the students. Education thus becomes doubly-deadly and the topics and activities that would expand and deepen student interest are jettisoned in the mad rush to survive in the game of high-stakes testing.

A colleague from mathematics, Professor Greg McColm at the University of South Florida, comments on the limitations of this illusory model of precision and its implications for the future of democracy: “In the end, students are taught the skills necessary to pass standardized tests, i.e., how to solve long lists of sharply defined little questions rapidly without any error. This is quite different from what is

needed in the world of commerce, industry, government, and community service where employees and volunteers must have the ability to work (often in teams) on large, ill-defined problems within extended time frames while limiting the effects of error and ambiguity. Unfortunately, pushing standardized tests as a priority also communicates the notion that knowledge comes in tiny, slogan-sized bits, which is a bad lesson to teach future participants in a democracy.”

This disaster should not be introduced into higher education. I am pleased to say that in Florida we defeated efforts to introduce high-stakes testing into the universities and community colleges. We pointed out that different institutions have very different missions and also have students with very different backgrounds and current life circumstances. A one-size-fits-all test for “accountability” punishes both institutions and students for their diversity in purposes, goals, backgrounds, and achievements. We should not go down the path of reducing the variety of curriculum and course content we need in higher education so that we can replicate a failed experiment in the schools.

When we make a choice about the future of higher education, we are making a choice about our responsibilities to future generations. We must reduce the burden of student debt, address the academic staffing crisis, and abandon gimmicks like standardized testing if we are to make a serious commitment to the next generation.