

**September 27, 2006**

**Remarks before the Cato Institute Forum on the Spellings Commission Report**

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Chairman Miller has called for a national dialogue on what can be done to improve higher education. He has asked those of us charged with ministering to the needs of our students to initiate that dialogue. I am offering these remarks in the spirit of that call and in the language of the Academy, though they may sound a bit foreign to public policy makers. Nonetheless, I intend them to serve as a very brief reflection on how the nation's liberal arts colleges might speak to the concerns we share about access, affordability, quality, and accountability. I will not pretend to address the concerns or challenges of those other two- and four-year colleges and universities that may have very different purposes.

Our liberal arts colleges are communities of learning, first and foremost. We exist to promote learning activity and to protect the conditions of learning. We want classrooms teeming with energy and conversation that come from students who wish to learn because learning is desirable for its own sake.

We distinguish liberal from utilitarian learning. Earning a living (which is the object of utilitarian learning) is about means, and those means can be fairly easily assessed and measured. Making a life worth living (which is the object of liberal education) is about ends, and those ends are measured best by the quality of a life lived over the full span of years – not so easy to assess by any general assessment instrument.

Liberal learning is about foundations and elements. Liberal education is elementary education in the highest sense. For this reason, what we teach is important; curriculum matters. We should give our students material that will give them practice at thinking, rather than pretend we can teach them how to think. Whenever we see colleges having a vigorous conversation about the content of curriculum we should be heartened; it means that something is still at stake for students and faculty alike.

We should promote the desire to learn over the mania to test performance; success in passing tests will follow the former as night does the day. Therefore, we should construct academic programs that encourage the desire to learn for its own sake rather than for the sake of the grade. This requires that we give attention both to the quality of the materials we use to teach from and our ways of giving them life in the classroom. Let us give our students matter that will be worthy of their love. After all, it is love that moves us to the good in this world, including all the good that can be learned. We might even consider using the desire to learn as a criterion for admission to our colleges, for that desire will better determine a student's ability to learn than a high SAT score alone.

We should abandon the language of the marketplace. We are not delivery systems; students are not consumers; and education is not a product that can be bought and sold. The familiar metaphors of our commercial world come easily to all of us. For that reason alone, we should be wary of slipping into such talk; we may come to forget that learning is a cooperative activity, requiring commitment and effort on the part of the student, a far more complicated interaction than the purchase of goods at the shopping mall. Diplomas are not bought and sold; they are earned.

We should own up to our commitment to serving the interest of the individual soul. Our duty is to the health of the individual. Good citizenship and well paying jobs, as good as they are, should never be seen by us as more than useful byproducts of our central activity.

Our colleges nonetheless serve the public good. We do this by helping to bring thoughtful adults into the world — adults who are free to think for themselves, and free to choose paths of action they consider to be best rather than those that are easiest or most popular.

We should embrace institutional self-examination but be wary of external means of assessment. With our students, we accept the wisdom of Socrates, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Another way of putting this is that our students might as well be dead if they are not asking themselves who they are, what kind of world they inhabit, and what their place should be in the scheme of things. The institutional equivalent of death is atrophy and stagnation. We have unlimited ways to come to know ourselves better and to improve our campuses. We should admit this publicly and seek the support we need to improve ourselves. On the other hand, we should not fear to fight those silly rankings and so-called science-based measurements that take no account of the liberal arts we are trying to help our students acquire.

We should champion and fund the cause of broad and affordable access to our colleges, and provide the means to complete the course of study with us. A liberal education does not recognize class or economic distinction. A liberal education should be available to everybody with the desire and the ability to learn. No segment of higher education has done more to provide the economic means to those without the financial wherewithal than our national liberal arts colleges, though this becomes increasingly difficult to do as federal and state financial aid programs are cut. We applaud and support the call for more need based, student financial assistance from federal and state programs.

As for cost, education is expensive because it requires the giving of the life of one well-educated human being to another, a devotion of time that cannot be compromised without being cheapened. We need to help people understand why this education is a veritable bargain. After all, none of us charges what it costs to educate a student, even one who is able to afford to pay the full tuition. Calls for efficiency and cost control are appropriate for our business offices, physical plant operations and administrative services, but not for the classroom.

In the spirit of these principles, I offer the following brief reflections on four elements of the Commission's report:

- (1) The report has forgotten the centrality of the faculty to what we are about in our colleges, and risks leaving on the sidelines of the national dialogue those who most need to be at the heart of the conversation. We will not answer the question about the quality of education by addressing transferability of credits. That only helps us focus on the "degree" as the end of education, rather than the learning itself.
- (2) Learning assessment ought to be an integral part of learning itself. It must be left to the classroom, the faculty, and the local institution. Nothing can be gained by broad, outside measuring instruments that cannot take account of what is going on between student and teacher, student and student, or the student and the books or equipment in the classroom. The report allows for such a solution, but encourages the worst tendencies in us --- to teach what can be measured, or to focus our attention on those things that are of least importance to living a thoughtful, examined life. "Objectivity" in assessment tools is useless or harmful when it measures nothing essential to the kind of learning we seek to foster.

- (3) The report fails to recognize that its aims --- economic competitiveness, efficiency, and productivity --- are not the highest aims of our democratic society, founded on the rights of all to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and that education is a means to these goods too.
- (4) The commission's call for a student unit record database serves none of the purposes I've described. It serves only the interests of the data collection, management and research industry. No one has made a credible argument that knowing the schools attended, classes taken, grades completed, and who knows what else, for each and every person in the United States will lead to improvement in the classroom. The connection is simply too remote. Why then, without a substantial hope of improving learning by collecting all this data, would we want to invest so many millions in such an enormous undertaking, and risk the privacy of our citizenry and the security of such sensitive data? As good as federal agencies are at protecting information, we've seen report after report in recent months of sometimes inadvertent, sometimes intentional, and sometimes illegal release or theft of sensitive data on thousands and thousands of citizens. We need a more compelling argument than we've seen to justify such a project. If the point of collecting the data is to satisfy lawmakers that the investment of taxpayer dollars in financial aid programs is worth the expense, there is more than enough data already out there to answer this question. And if even that data were somehow found wanting, statistical sampling would provide the answer without the need to create a cradle-to-grave catalog of each of our educational records.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. And a special word of thanks to an old friend, Charles Miller, who has given so much of his attention to finding ways for us to do a little self-reflection on how we can be better colleges and universities. He provided generous service on the St. John's College board for nearly nine years in the 80s and 90s, helping us put our financial house in order, before moving on to bigger challenges.