

Secretary Vows to Improve Results of Higher Education

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 26 — Saying she hoped to jolt American higher education out of a dangerous complacency, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings vowed Tuesday to help finance state universities that administer standardized tests, establish a national database to track students' progress toward a degree and cut the red tape surrounding federal student aid.

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John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings spoke of beginning “a process of long-overdue reform.”

In a speech, Ms. Spellings emphasized those and a few other measures from among dozens of recommendations issued recently by a federal panel, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

“This is the beginning of a process of long-overdue reform,” Ms. Spellings told a crowd of university presidents, business executives, lobbyists and journalists in a speech that her department billed as one in which she would outline her agenda for change at the nation’s colleges and universities.

The commission, convened by Ms. Spellings, completed work in August on a report that warned that American universities, while still the finest in the world, were losing their edge against heightened global competition.

In one of its most highly debated recommendations, the report called on public universities to measure learning with standardized tests, and listed two by name: the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress. During the panel’s deliberations, many educators opposed the testing proposal, calling it misguided for the federal government to require the nation’s more than 3,000 colleges, universities and trade schools to test and compare learning outcomes among such disparate students as physics scholars at Caltech and dance majors at Juilliard.

In her speech, Ms. Spellings moved forward with the testing proposal, but cautiously.

“No current ranking system of colleges and universities directly measures the most critical point, student performance and learning,” she said. “We absolutely should. And Action 4 under my plan will provide matching funds to colleges and universities and states that collect and publicly report student learning outcomes.”

In response to a question after her speech, Ms. Spellings said, “Nobody envisions a one-size-fits-all test of student ability.”

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, the largest association of colleges and universities, expressed approval for Ms. Spellings’s proposal to provide federal matching money to institutions that already, voluntarily, are experimenting with standardized testing. Mr. Ward declined last month to sign the panel’s report because, among other concerns, he said it could lead to government-imposed testing.

“I thought today’s speech was very important for addressing anxieties,” he said. “Now I can see she’s not going to rush into some simple-minded solutions. I feel much better.”

Ms. Spellings established the 19-member panel last year, including current and former administrators and faculty members from large research universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges and for-profit trade schools as well as executives from Boeing, I.B.M. and other corporations. She asked them to examine the accessibility, affordability and accountability of the nation’s colleges and universities.

In its final report, the commission recommended that the entire federal student aid system, which has 17 programs, be scrapped in favor of one that is more user-friendly.

Ms. Spellings said Tuesday that only Congress could carry out such a fundamental overhaul. But she said the department would seek to streamline the process immediately and cut the application time for federal loans and grants in half. She offered few specifics, however.

At the insistence of former Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. of North Carolina, the panel included in its final report a recommendation for bolstering the program of Pell Grants, which are the basic building block of federal aid, by making them cover a larger percentage of

public college tuition. One university group estimated recently that that proposal could cost the nation \$9 billion to \$12 billion.

Ms. Spellings did not mention that proposal on Tuesday. But Mr. Hunt said she told him and other commission members in a conference call on Tuesday that she was “working with the [Office of Management and Budget](#) to see what could be done.”

“So I think she’s given a strong commitment,” Mr. Hunt said.

Ms. Spellings also promised action on Tuesday on another commission recommendation: that the Education Department collect student data from colleges and universities and use it to create a “higher education information system.”

Such a federal data system, she said, could provide new consumer-friendly information to parents and students looking for the right college. It could also be used to hold colleges and universities accountable for the number of students that they graduate and other measures of institutional performance, she said.

Ms. Spellings suggested that the higher education establishment would consider her proposals to be bitter medicine.

“After some of what I’ve said today, commencement speaker invitations may suddenly get lost in the mail,” she said.

But the reaction from several university presidents and lobbyists who had previously expressed fears that the commission’s work would bring new federal interference in higher education, seemed generally to be one of relief.

Richard Vedder, an Ohio University economist, who also served on the panel and had hoped it would lead to far-reaching measures to control university costs, said on Tuesday that he worried that the panel’s year of study and hearings had produced a fog of rhetoric and little else.

“I’m concerned with a certain vagueness to it all at this point,” Dr. Vedder said. “There’s been a lot of platitudes — ‘increase affordability, control costs’ —

but we’ve not come up with much that’s specific about how to do that.”