

AAG Washington Monitor

Higher Ed Commission Issues Highly Critical Draft Report

On June 26, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education released a draft report listing several stinging criticisms of the American higher education system and urging substantial reforms. The commission, which has been holding hearings over the last year on the key issues facing higher ed, had originally resisted releasing a draft version of the report, but relented after several members questioned the tone taken in the draft circulated by commission staff. Key findings in the draft include:

- Many Americans face insufficient access to higher education, caused by inadequate student preparation, poor alignment between high school and college standards, and informational and financial barriers.
- College costs are constantly driving upwards, driven by "failure to seek institutional efficiencies and by a disregard for improving productivity," and a system of higher education finance that is "increasingly dysfunctional, inefficient, and inadequate."
- "Evidence that the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining."
- A "woeful lack" of publicly available and rigorously accurate information about colleges, most of which "make no serious effort to examine their effectiveness on the most important measure of all: how much students learn."

To remedy these and other shortcomings, the draft urges numerous changes, including:

- Expanding access to college by better aligning K-12 and higher education standards and curriculums and reforming colleges of education.
- Overhauling and streamlining the financial aid system in ways that would increase the availability of need-based aid and eliminate the complex federal financial aid form.
- Improving colleges' productivity by insisting that they better control costs and prices and encouraging competition from community colleges and private for-profit providers.
- Developing a "unit record" system to allow for the tracking of student performance across their academic careers.
- Creating a "national accreditation framework," though the draft does not specify whether this should be in addition to or in place of the current system of regional accreditation.

Panel Chairman Charles Miller has indicated that the draft will undergo "significant" changes before the commission issues its final report this fall. Commissioners will be meeting in Washington soon to begin reviewing the findings and editing the document. We'll keep you updated as developments occur.

Kempthorne Confirmed as DOI Secretary; USGS Nomination Still Pending

On May 26, the U.S. Senate confirmed former Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne as U.S. Secretary of the Interior by voice vote after several senators agreed to drop procedural moves aimed at blocking the nomination. Kempthorne replaces Gale

Norton, who had served in the Bush cabinet since 2001, and will oversee the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and several other federal agencies and accounts that are critical to geography.

Shortly after Kempthorne was nominated by President Bush, several Senate Democrats questioned the nomination and promised to raise questions about Kempthorne's views on arctic drilling and other controversial environmental policies. Kempthorne's nomination hearing was spirited at times and gave Energy and Natural Resource Committee (ENR) members an opportunity to voice their concerns. Ultimately the committee reported Kempthorne favorably to the full Senate, which approved the nomination after it cleared a final procedural hurdle by a vote of eighty-five to eight. All eight "no" votes came from Democrats, and seven senators did not vote. Kempthorne has since been sworn into office.

Meanwhile, former Alaskan oil official Mark Myers's nomination as Director of the USGS has been sent to the ENR Committee, which is expected to hold a hearing on the nominee near the end of July. With Kempthorne's confirmation complete, the Myers nomination is now a priority for the Department of the Interior. Acting USGS Director Patrick Leahy will continue to serve until Myers is confirmed and sworn in. Myers's nomination comes at a time when Office of Management and Budget officials have indicated that "things are going to be tough for the USGS budget in the next few years." ■

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

Attention specialty group competition organizers: If you are organizing a specialty group competition with a deadline before the October 26, 2006, AAG Annual Meeting abstract deadline and wish to run notice of your competition in the *AAG Newsletter*, please send your announcement to Megan Nortrup at newsletter@aag.org by **August 1, 2006**, for inclusion in the September issue of the *AAG Newsletter*.