

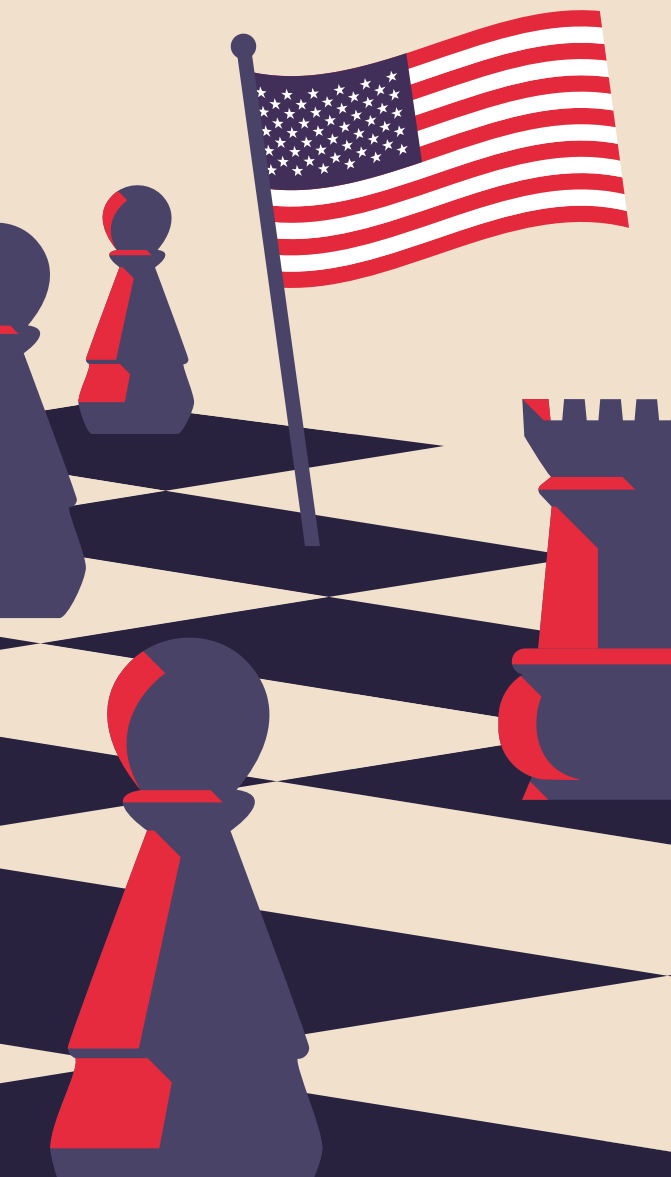
HIGHER



EDUCATION as a Strategic Asset

BY DAVID V. ROSOWSKY

An Emerging National Call to Action



AN ARTICLE in the September/October 2022 *Trusteeship* magazine asserted that American democracy and our country's role as a world leader are in jeopardy. The article laid out specific concerns and challenges that lay before us at the intersection of higher education, our democracy, our economy, and our society and called for college and university governing boards to work closely with their CEOs, administrators, and faculty members to overcome these challenges. This call to action received overwhelming interest and support, inspiring a vision for creating a national strategic response, not just a collection of responses from individual institutions. A clear need was identified for a unified national strategy to address some of the most pressing outcomes-related issues in higher education—those that have both held institutions back (inhibited change and evolution) and led to perceptions of being out-of-touch, of marginal value, or even irrelevant. It was determined that the national strategy must also leverage what higher educational institutions can do well, and uniquely well, to “grow the talent needed to fuel our economy, address gaps across student groups and between the academy and industry, and achieve internationally competitive levels of learning for our students.” (“On My Agenda: Elevating Higher Education as a Strategic Asset,” *AGB Trusteeship* magazine, May/June 2023.) This led to a vision, shared by multiple associations and organizations, for a national council focused not simply on the future of U.S. higher education but also, more importantly, on its future as a strategic asset to the nation—its democracy, economy, society, national security, and global stature.

The existence of national councils and commissions on higher education reform to meet emerging and future needs is not new. Neither are challenges to higher education, nor calls for innovation from U.S. presidents, members of Congress, higher education coordinating boards, and industry or university leaders. But importantly, earlier this year, a coalition of national leaders convened the Council on Higher Education as a Strategic Asset (HESA) to begin a yearlong effort that will result in a cumulative report with recommendations to the president of the United States, Congress, state governors, and lawmakers—in addition to higher education boards and chief executive officers.

TAKEAWAYS

- The Council on Higher Education as a Strategic Asset (HESA) will complete its report in June 2024. The discussions and final recommendations will likely be informed by past reports by the Truman Commission and the Spellings Commission.
- The HESA council will need to strike a careful balance in setting bold goals and making specific recommendations. Each must be informed, actionable, and achievable. They must inspire support and compel action.
- Much like the Truman Commission and Spellings Commission, the work of HESA will serve to deepen and broaden the discussions around higher education as a valuable and strategic asset and as an engine for growth, security, inclusion, and democracy.
- New models, new partnerships, and new ways of linking investments to outcomes will likely be part of the HESA council's recommendations. Higher education leaders, faculty, and boards could be challenged to be more flexible, adaptable, forward-looking, and collaborative across institutions and industry sectors.
- The recommendations of the HESA commissioners will be delivered to President Biden, members of congress, state officials, and both business leaders and higher ed leaders and will form the basis for priorities, commitments, and a framework for change.

The council of 38 commissioners and 12 strategic advisors comprises business, government, higher education, and military leaders with a shared goal of developing an urgent higher education strategy to raise the global competitive position of the United States. Specifically, HESA is charged with developing high-impact recommendations to leverage the strengths of our higher education institutions to “drive global competitiveness, keep our nation secure, sustain our democracy, and propel economic and social prosperity”—bold goals at a challenging time for higher education and our nation.

The HESA policy recommendations are intended to build a national agenda for targeted support (intentionality and resources) to effectively position higher education as a strategic asset. The final report will be published in June 2024, one year after the start of the council's work. Those working in, alongside, or near higher education, are unlikely to be surprised by any of the council's recommendations that will, almost certainly, focus on access and affordability, adaptability and flexibility, innovations and partnerships, clearer ties to economic development and workforce development, demonstrated return-on-investment, and increased focus on social mobility. But we may also see specific recommendations that speak to strengthening our democracy through civics education and co-curricular opportunities, breaking down barriers across institutions as well as within regions, creating greater flow between and among institutions through more robust articulation agreements and shared resources, and launching new university-industry partnerships such as those being modeled by Amazon, Walmart, Starbucks, and others.

Several reports of presidential commissions on education have been published in the last century, including President Harry S. Truman's *Higher Education for American Democracy* (the Truman Commission Report, 1947), President Dwight D. Eisenhower's *Committee on Education Beyond High School* (1956), President John F. Ken-

nedy's Task Force Committee on Education (1960), and President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). The latter commission produced the well-known and oft cited report, *A Nation at Risk*. President George W. Bush's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, also known as the Spellings Commission, as it was led by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, issued its report, *A Test of Leadership*, in 2006.

Unlike earlier commissions and councils, HESA was not the result of a presidential charge or a congressional edict. Rather, HESA has had a more organic and representative genesis. While the original concept and early planning came from AGB, it quickly (and by design) evolved into a council jointly administered and driven by multiple organizations and institutions from both the public and private sectors. The HESA council is chaired by Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University; Linda Gooden, board chair of the University System of Maryland; and Robert J. King, the former assistant secretary for postsecondary education at the U.S. Department of Education. HESA also is backed by many affiliated organizations and associations. It is broadly inclusive, its commissioners and strategic advisors all have held senior executive positions in their organizations, and its ambitious agenda is one that is truly shared.

The HESA council plans to strike a careful balance in setting bold goals and making specific recommendations. Each must be informed, actionable, and achievable. They must inspire support and compel action. Yet, one might ask, since such commissions and councils seem to come around only every decade or two, how often are their recommendations enacted? How often are they enduring? How often are recommendations carried forward to the next generation and the next national commission report? How often are the same recommendations made, perhaps with updated language? Where have past commissions succeeded and where have they

fallen short? And how can all of this inform the HESA commission's work this year and its final recommendations next year? The answers to these questions should serve to both inform and motivate HESA commissioners and advisors in the year ahead.

Truman Report

The report *Higher Education for American Democracy* was commissioned by President Truman in 1946 and completed in 1947. Also known as the Truman Commission Report, the six-volume final report has as one of its primary recommendations the establishment of a network of free public "community colleges," a relatively new term at the time but one that became popular and an important part of the U.S. higher education system in the years that followed. The Truman Commission Report also called for increased federal assistance ("scholarships, fellowships, and general aid") for students.

In effect, the Truman Commission called for tuition-free public education through the 14th grade. Both a product of its time (the atomic age) and ahead of its time (years before others would call for free community college), the report cited technological advances and the need for broader understanding of social processes as the basis for its recommendations, saying that higher education was vital to preparing Americans to unite and save humanity in the atomic age.

The report was also decades ahead of its time in its calls for embracing and leveraging diversity, describing the country as a "union of an indefinite number of diverse groups," a free society that "seeks to create a dynamic unity." The Truman Commission Report followed the conclusion of World War II, a time when U.S. foreign policy was shifting, asserting "Owing to the inescapable pressure of events, the Nation's traditional isolationism has been displaced by a new sense of responsibility in world affairs." To achieve this position of global leadership and model of democracy "requires of our citizens a knowledge of other peoples—of their political and economic systems, their social and cultural institutions—such as has not hitherto been so urgent."

The report's greatest urgency, indeed that of the nation and the world, was the uncertainty (and fears) of the new atomic age with its "ambivalent promise of tremendous good or tremendous evil for mankind." The report anticipated significant social and economic changes that would accompany the application of atomic energy to industrial uses. The authors seemed to point to the need for education and research to both (1) responsibly and safely use atomic energy, and (2) protect democracy and world peace.



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World War II left an indelible mark on the nation and unquestionably helped to shape the commission's three principal goals for higher education: "(1) education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living; (2) education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation; and (3) education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs."

These were very erudite goals focused more on securing our democracy in an age of technological complexity, a shifting world order, new anxieties and uncertainties, and new pressures on and expectations of a society that was becoming more diverse than they were on expanding access to education or job training. The goals were

about protecting democracy and securing the United States' global prominence and primacy.

There are clear parallels to today's challenges, needs, and hopes for higher education. Moreover, one cannot help but be struck by how ahead of its time this report appears to have been. The Truman Commission Report lay the groundwork for a massive community college system and a new model for federally funded need-based scholarships. It called for actions to overcome educational inequity and for the first two years of college to be free to all students. Although progress has been made, one cannot overstate how much these recommendations (some quite radical) have shaped U.S. higher education, political platforms, policies, and legislation in the past eight decades.

Some of the recommendations were adopted and goals realized. Others were not or, more likely, were unable to achieve their lofty goals or create conditions for their endurance. To be certain, democracy, diversity, inclusion, and world peace are not simple matters.

But there were also very concrete recommendations such as doubling the college-going rate in the United States by 1960. This recommendation was based on a social calculus reflective of its time, and certainly not one that would be used today. The commission determined that at least 49 percent of the U.S. population had "the mental ability to complete fourteen years of schooling that should lead either to gainful employment or to further success at a more advanced level," and that 32 percent of the population had the talents necessary to attain a baccalaureate or advanced degree. The doubling figure also recognized the opportunity provided by the 1 million veterans returning to college under the G.I. Bill.

The recommendations for enrollment growth were tied directly to recommendations around access, equity, and affordability. Specific

recommendations, backed by population and enrollment figures, sought to end discrimination based on race (with specific focus on segregated educational systems in the south), religious discrimination (focused mainly on Jewish students), and ending what was called “anti-feminism” (seen mostly in graduate and professional programs).

It was clear to the commission that achieving a doubling in the college-going rate by 1960 would require breaking down the financial barriers facing many students and families. This led to the commission’s recommendation of a federal program that would provide financial assistance for college. This also spoke to the commission’s access position that public education should be equally available to all students regardless of race, creed, sex, or national origin. Affordability and access would now be forever connected in higher education discussions in America. That said, the commission was clear when discussing access that equity did not mean that every potential student should receive the same educational opportunity or degree. They acknowledged the value and need for different forms of postsecondary education and that students brought different “skills, prior training, and capabilities.” Thus, these early access discussions focused more on getting students some form of post-secondary education rather than ensuring all students have access to any post-secondary education, very different from discussions and decisions made in the decades that followed.

The report was controversial and had critics. Looking through the lens of history one can argue that enrollment growth was realized (though it took longer to reach the doubling rate goal), access and equity goals began to be addressed (though this would take decades, an effort that continues today), and federal assistance programs were developed (though they have not kept up with rising costs). It would not be until 1965 that the Higher Education Act would be passed, for the first time defining the federal government’s role in ensuring broad-based access and affordability. What followed during the next years and decades was an array of federal programs, a combination of direct aid to students in the form of grants and loans. Over time, emphasis shifted to loans, likely not what the commission had in mind.

But it was the expansion of a system of public two-year community colleges that was perhaps the most significant and what enabled the commission’s other recommendations and goals to be achieved. Community colleges could be constructed quickly and at modest cost, they could be operated more cost-effectively than larger four-year institutions, and they could employ a different cost structure (the commission envisioned public education through the 14th grade being tuition-free), making them more affordable.

First, junior colleges would be reconceptualized and rebranded as community colleges, and from there a vast expansion of new community colleges would be realized. The commission foresaw that two-year colleges would be “fully integrated into the life of their communities” making the term community college more appropriate than junior college. These two-year colleges would be locally controlled, draw students locally, serve community interests, meet local workforce needs, and be part of a statewide system of higher education. Today’s vast system of community colleges, in every state, is arguably the greatest and most enduring legacy of the Truman Commission.

Critics point to limited success in meeting goals around democracy, equity, and making post-secondary education accessible and affordable to all citizens. But historians and scholars do acknowledge the report’s effect in shifting the national conversation around higher education to a focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. The commission is credited with creating, for the first time, a national rhetoric on higher education policy, in this case focused on two key areas: (1) improving post-secondary educational access and equity, and (2) expanding the role of community colleges.

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Spellings Report

The Commission on Higher Education (also known as the Spellings Commission) was charged with recommending a national strategy for reforming post-secondary education with specific focus on how well colleges and universities were preparing students to enter the 21st century workforce and how well high schools were preparing students for postsecondary education. Then U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings asserted that U.S. higher education was in a state

of crisis. There were growing concerns that U.S. higher education was losing its edge and, consequently, the nation was falling behind in preparing college graduates for a rapidly advancing technological future and at risk of falling behind other countries in the increasingly globalized marketplace. Against this backdrop and growing sense of urgency, the commission’s recommendations focused on strengthening relationships between education, industry, and government. Specifically, the 19-member commission was charged in 2005 with “developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America’s diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country’s future.” The commission’s 2006 report focused on four areas: (1) access, (2) affordability, (3) quality of instruction, and (4) institutional accountability. The focus areas reveal the underlying motivations for the 19-member commission’s

formation and member selection (like the Truman Commission, a mix of executives, leaders, and scholars). The 2006 final report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, called for increasing accessibility, affordability, and accountability of higher education in meeting the nation's workforce needs and contributing to its economic future. The report called for systemic reforms to our financial aid system, federal support for higher education that contributed directly to U.S. global competitiveness, and the creation of a national database to track student progress. It was to serve as a blueprint for U.S. higher education in the 21st century.

The parallels with the Truman Commission Report are obvious, despite the five decades that separated them. This speaks to the enduring nature of the challenges (access, affordability, quality, innovation, accountability) and the inability of the federal government and/or the institutions themselves to effect needed reforms or sustain commitments or resources to realize permanent reforms. Also like the Truman Commission Report, the Spellings Report was met initially with some skepticism, was even launched with some controversy (one high-profile commission member refused to sign onto the final report) and would be viewed through the lens of history as only partially successful. Most scholars and historians would agree that the Spellings Report generated greater controversy than the Truman Report. This likely was due in part to controversy around the commission's namesake, in part due to the lack of unanimous support by all commissioners, and in part due to the nature of media coverage and information dissemination in the early 21st century compared to the mid-20th century.

Speaking to access, the Spellings Commission cited sobering statistics about college preparedness in math, reading, and writing and the lack of communication between high schools and colleges as part of the problem, in addition to lack of rigor and quality of instruction. On affordability, the focus was on students from low-income families and minority groups. They called for simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and holding institutions to account for the ways they were spending resources. On quality, the commission challenged institutions to embrace innovation in teaching and learning and to explore and expand modalities of instructional delivery, such as distance learning; the commission even offered support for a national system for assessment of curricula and outcomes. It proposed a public database of cost, price, admissions data, completion rates, and other standardized data on degree progress (which led to the expansion of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) and learning outcomes (which led to the development and adoption of learning management systems). The Spellings Commission was the first to posit that "colleges might have a more vested interest in the success of their students if this information were made public to prospective students and their parents," a concept that has endured to this day despite fits and starts, challenges and criticism, in creating such a national database.

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Finally, speaking to innovation, the report urged prioritizing innovation and creativity as learning outcomes, to better prepare graduates for the new jobs and challenges of the 21st century, advocating that "policymakers and educators need to do more to build America's capacity to compete and innovate." The commission members also were among the first to recognize that innovation occurs largely at the intersection of traditional disciplines and that long-standing departmental structures (silos) inhibit innovation.

Beyond its clear focus on access and affordability, the Spellings Report may have been the first to look at costs, value (to students), and value added to society—invoking the term "public good." This was a term that would be used frequently in the decades that followed both as an assertion from within of higher ed's value and a criticism or accusation by those outside the academy who would increasingly question higher ed's value, importance, and even relevance. "Public good" became a rallying call, not only for public colleges and universities but also for private institutions, as university leaders pushed for needed changes at these institutions.

The Spellings Report was heavily criticized almost immediately after its release. Some said it attributed too many problems to the declining state of higher education, challenging Secretary Spellings's original declaration (and basis for the commission) of a crisis in U.S.

higher education. Others (including David Ward, president of the American Council on Education) said the report painted higher education with too broad a brush rather than recognizing the distinct challenges, needs, and opportunities for different types of institutions. Concerns were expressed about the national student database, both over privacy and how data would be collected, reported, and used.

As much as the content, the tone of the Spellings Report offended some in the broader higher education community. It was divisive rather than serving to bring sectors of higher education together to solve the challenges identified. The report's tone was viewed as terse and at times harsh, and both overly critical and overtly political. This resulted in blowback from higher education associations and efforts to thwart Department of Education actions in response to the report recommendations. This set up a dynamic with the unfortunate consequence of expanding the divide between higher education and the federal government as well as its other public and private constituencies.

Most agree that efforts to meet the recommendations of the Spellings Commission have fallen short. Whether overly ambitious or out of reach, too politically tinged or entangled, or with too little support from within the higher education community, a look back reveals little progress in transparency, cost, access, or innovation.

Nick Donofrio, former executive vice president of innovation and technology at IBM and a member of the Spellings Commission, has suggested that one of the most important gaps the commission identified (that may not have come across strongly enough in the report) was the lack of rigor and intentionality in the final year of high school. There was a clear case for strengthening the final year of high school and forging stronger “bridging” connections to college in that important, and too often wasted, year. Donofrio still believes enriching the last year of high school is essential for driving students toward postsecondary education, preparing students for academic success in college, reducing the cost of attaining a degree or credential, and creating meaningful pathways to employment and careers after graduation.

In reflecting on the progress made in the years since the Spellings Commission issued its report, Carol L. Folt, a former chancellor of the University of North Carolina (the same university system Margaret Spellings was leading at the time), stated “the disparities are still too great and the startlingly low economic and social mobility we still see will require an acceleration of our efforts to prepare graduates for this knowledge economy.”

Closing Thoughts:

What Can We Expect From the HESA Report?

The work of the Council on Higher Education as a Strategic Asset will not close all remaining gaps or address all of the challenges issued by previous commissions. But its work will serve to deepen and broaden the discussions around higher education as

a strategic asset and an engine for growth, security, inclusion, and democracy.

HESA's recommendations, as with those from past commissions, will be met with criticism. They will fuel debate and may even be seen by some as controversial. Historians and scholars, years from now, will find flaws in the commissioners' logic, question their social or moral compasses, and point to holes in their plans. They will describe their recommendations as being “of their time” and “ahead of their time,” things that are ascribed to all national higher education commissions and councils. One thing they all have in common is that the commissioners and advisors endeavor to speak to both the issues of their day and the anticipated issues of tomorrow, the latter being seen through their present-day eyes with all of the present-day biases, assumptions, social norms, and ignorance.

Will they get it right? No. Responses may be incomplete, unsustainable, or socially irrelevant (or even offensive) in future years. They may miss the mark entirely, anticipating a technological or societal advance that is not realized, or failing to anticipate a system shock they had never imagined. But their recommendations to President Biden, members of Congress, state officials, and both business leaders and higher education leaders will form the basis for priorities, commitments, and a framework for change. A more robust conversation about the role of higher education as a societal driver and a strategic asset for the nation will emerge. New models, new partnerships, and new ways of linking investments to outcomes will surely be recommended. Higher education leaders, faculty, and boards will be challenged to be more flexible, more adaptable, more forward-looking, and more collaborative across institutions and industry sectors.

Higher ed often is called upon to solve what seems at times to be “all that ails us.” It is also accused of being rigid, reticent, and resistant to change—steeped in tradition and clinging to centuries-old values and processes—stubborn and stagnant. In the face and wake of economic challenges, pandemics and global health challenges, resource challenges and inequities (whether food, financial, natural resources, or other), challenges to our social systems, and even challenges to democracy itself, higher ed must once again step up and deliver. HESA's 2024 report can help to motivate and shape that response. It can also help to forge new and stronger partnerships and drive new investments. The goal of the HESA report will be to inspire action, from within higher education and outside of it, that will position U.S. higher education as a public good, an engine for social change and democracy, a strategic asset, and a global leader in the decades ahead.

HESA's final report to the president and Congress, with specific recommendations and action plans, is expected to be completed by June 2024. ■

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