

REVIEW

A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006. Pp. x+51. <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html>.

A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education offers a critical view on the current condition of higher education in the United States. The report provides general recommendations about how to improve U.S. higher education but spends an equal amount of time describing what is wrong with the current system. In this review, I focus attention less on the problems and future of higher education per se than on the implications of the report for academic libraries.

First, this rather short report is must reading for all librarians in an academic environment. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings established a commission of eighteen individuals to study a range of topics and issues that the report details. Overall, the secretary charged the commissioners with producing a report that considered

- How well are institutions of higher education preparing our students, especially nontraditional students and lifelong learners, to compete in the new global economy?
- What must be done to ensure that our system of higher education is able to keep up with the demand for highly skilled workers?
- How can the business community, other public and private sector organizations, and the higher education community work together to accomplish this goal?

Further, the report would address “how best to improve our system of higher education” and “[ensure] that our graduates are well prepared to meet our changing workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the new economy” (p. 31).

Recommendations from the report propose a host of actions, including (pp. 16–26)

- The United States should commit to an unprecedented effort to expand higher education access and success.
- The entire student financial aid system should be restructured and new incentives put in place to improve the measurement and management of costs and institutional productivity.
- Higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance, [including a] . . . database [that would] . . . enable students, parents, policy makers, and others to weigh and rank comparative institutional performance.
- Postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes.
- America’s colleges and universities should embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement.

Other recommendations follow the above themes and stress performance assessment, accountability, quality improvement, transparency, and the ability to doc-

ument performance on a range of indicators. Indeed, those who find serious limitations in such performance measures and quantitative assessment and who might prefer qualitative approaches to demonstrating the impact of the library will be quite disconcerted by the tone of this report.

In reading this report, an important question for academic librarians to ask is, "What is the role of the library and library staff in accomplishing the recommendations offered in this report?" Once this question is asked and then answered, the next step would be to convince the higher education community of administrators and policy makers that these roles are valid, reasonable, and will, in fact, contribute to the overall improvement of higher education in the United States. Such an action plan and its implementation, however, are no small matters.

One might argue that academic libraries face the prospect of being marginalized as they move into the future. Being marginalized could occur (or is occurring?) because of a range of factors such as desktop information sources available to faculty, students, and staff; limited direct involvement in learning and research by library staff; buildings and space limitations; excessive costs to operate the library versus documented benefits from those costs in light of concerns raised in the report; and the inability of the library to demonstrate success in accomplishing institutional and national educational goals. Academic libraries have made good progress in assessing the quality of their library services with such techniques as

- outcomes assessment;
- input and outputs assessment;
- performance measures;
- e-metrics;
- valuation of library services, including techniques such as return on investment;
- service quality, including LibQUAL+;
- balanced scorecards; and
- numerous statistics describing services, activities, resources, and so on.

But academic librarians have made very limited progress in measuring the library's impact on a range of institutional and national higher education priorities specifically noted in the Spellings report, such as impact of the library on

- student learning;
- assisting students to prepare for and be productive in the global economy;
- faculty research productivity;
- collaborating with the business community and other public and private sector organizations to accomplish broader higher education goals;
- student and faculty critical thinking; and
- quality of the academic environment.

While certainly some components of various evaluation approaches do address some aspects of these areas, comprehensive approaches that clearly show, for example, that "if it had not been for the academic library \$X millions of external funded research projects would not have been obtained by the university" are not well-known or employed.

Indeed, the vast majority of evaluation, statistics, and various assessments done by the academic library are used to manage the library better, to determine what programs and services are working well or how to improve them, how to best allocate resources, and generally how well services meet user needs. But simply because the library can show that there were 1,500 journal article downloads from ScienceDirect per week (for example) is not to say that these downloads contributed to

undergraduate student learning or resulted in some number of faculty who received a specific amount in funded research. And while some anecdotes from students and faculty relating library use to student learning, critical thinking, competing in the global economy, or research productivity may be useful, hard evidence is in short supply. How does the library contribute to the overall quality and impact of institutional goals and higher education in the United States?

Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, John Lombardi, in his keynote address at the Association of Research Libraries Library Assessment Conference, in Charlottesville, Virginia, September 2006, challenged the attendees to provide him with data that demonstrated the impact of the library on broader higher education and institutional goals. He stressed the importance of academic librarians taking a bigger picture in assessing what the library does in terms of institutional goals and imperatives—not just describing internal library activities. Further, he noted that how the library enhances institutional success is the key data he needs when comparing current and future funding to various units across campus.

But in fact, there are few agreed-on methods to address the issue of assessing library impacts on institutional and national goals related to higher education. Many academic librarians seem to have little awareness of this problem and continue to point to various input measures to justify funding and campus importance. Yet, it is clear that demonstrating impacts of the library on institutional and national higher education imperatives such as student learning and faculty research productivity is essential for the long-term health of the academic library.

The Spellings report does an excellent job of not-so-politely asking: prove how well institutions of higher education offer quality education and affect the success of students, prove that institutions of higher education are providing cutting-edge research, prove that institutions of higher education are preparing students to success in a new and rapidly changing workplace, and prove that institutions of higher education increase the critical thinking abilities of both students and faculty. The report notes, “Traditionally, institutional quality is measured primarily through financial inputs and resources. In today’s environment, these measures of inputs are no longer adequate, either within individual institutions or across all of higher education. Despite increased attention to student learning results by colleges and universities and accreditation agencies, parents and students have no solid evidence comparable across institutions, or how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one college than another” (p. 13). Academic librarians might also consider (1) the degree to which the library contributes to these and other higher education goals, (2) the degree to which one academic library better supports student learning than another, and (3) the public information available to students and parents that demonstrates this impact of the library.

To what degree are the problems in higher education identified by the report the responsibility of the library? Is the library expected to improve information access to institutions of higher education? Should students and parents be able to determine which library at which institution best contributes to student learning in some type of a national database as a basis for determining where to enroll? Should freshly minted PhDs be able to identify which libraries will best support their research productivity and assist them in gaining tenure? For many academic librarians, their world is within the library and not in dealing with institutional imperatives and national goals related to higher education. Such a stance will likely contribute to academic libraries being marginalized.

Further, various private, professional, and discipline-based information networks

can replace traditional roles of the academic library. Often, faculty and students bypass the academic library as a source for information and prefer to ask a colleague, friend, or known expert for a range of information resources. What is the responsibility of the library to participate, manage, or otherwise be involved in such activities as the world moves to blogging, wikis, and Google-based access to information—all of which do not require onerous authentication, passwords, and special software to avoid institutional firewalls?

The challenges outlined in the Spellings report for higher education in general and for individual institutions of higher education are considerable. Specific strategies for how these recommendations can be implemented, by whom or what, and at what costs are not detailed. Needed next is another report that describes a plan and specific strategies for improving U.S. higher education along the recommendations outlined in the report. Of course, with the devil in the details, developing—to say nothing about implementing—such a plan is likely to be controversial.

An equal challenge is for academic librarians to define their role and responsibilities in addressing the recommendations outlined in the report—despite the fact that libraries are not mentioned at all in the report. The academic library community should organize a coordinated and comprehensive research and development effort that attacks a number of basic problems:

- How successfully has the college or university articulated its educational goals and imperatives, so that they can serve as a basis for the library to mount efforts to assist in accomplishing these goals?
- How successful has the academic library community been in demonstrating the library's impact on institutional and national higher education goals?
- What assessment approaches are available and what approaches are needed for academic libraries to better demonstrate their impact on institutional and national higher education goals?
- What barriers exist to developing and implementing such assessment approaches?
- How can a national system or database of comparative impact assessment data of academic libraries be developed and maintained?
- What skills, attitudes, and knowledge will academic librarians require if they are to address the broader institutional and higher education goals outlined in the report?

Business as usual in the academic library is not an option. The “test of leadership” that the Spellings report notes for higher education is also a test of leadership for academic library professional associations, academic library administrators, and academic librarians. Can the academic library community develop a response to the challenges offered in the Spellings report?

The issues raised in this review are but a beginning set of concerns requiring attention by the academic library community. The concerns and recommendations raised in the Spellings report are significant, and the implications of those concerns and recommendations for the academic library will help determine if the academic library can become a full partner in the higher education enterprise. To become a full partner will require a significant rethinking of the relationship between the library and college/university administration, specific roles and activities of the academic library, and how those roles can have clear and tangible impacts on institutional and higher education goals.

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