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Spellings: Reform Higher Ed From Within, Or Congress Will

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Jul 21, 2008, 02:24

CHICAGO



To keep up with international competition, U.S. colleges and universities need to set a deadline to educate 10 million more people by 2012 and particularly focus on those from low-income and minority groups as well as “nontraditional” adult students, said Education Secretary Margaret Spellings.

She said that if higher education officials don’t act, Congress and state lawmakers may step in and force mandates that could be ill-informed and based on politicking.

“We must change and adapt and respond. And we must do so immediately,” said Spellings, who spoke in Chicago on Friday at the second annual national summit addressing affordability, accountability and accessibility in higher education.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has estimated that the country needs to educate at least 20 million more Americans by 2025, but Spellings said she wants to set a deadline by the next presidential election in 2012.

Spellings said that the main problem in higher education is not the lack of resources. Recently, the Department of Education returned \$500 million in Academic Competitiveness/SMART grants to the U.S. Treasury because it couldn’t find enough college-ready students from low-income families to take them.

“That’s \$500 million dollars that has gone unused, and countless more untapped human potential,” she said.

Spellings recalled that throughout history, colleges have successfully opened their doors to more students after being forced to do so. The post-World War II GI bill, which some universities including Harvard protested, resulted in more than 2 million college graduates in a decade. Russia’s launch of the satellite Sputnik in 1957 spurred Congress to provide more loans for college students pursuing math and science degrees.

“We do not have to wait for an external threat to accomplish change,” Spellings said.

At the summit, leaders from universities and higher education organizations discussed the need to better target resources to low-income students and ways to improve relationships with K-12 educators. Many wanted to develop a national database to organize and publicize information such as college graduation and retention rates.

Dr. David Gardner, deputy commissioner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, said that all too often, colleges have discouraged low-income students rather than encouraging them. Officials need to find a better way of delivering services such as financial aid to students and “not to say it’s all up to them.”

Spellings created the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005. Ideas from the commission and last year’s national summit on higher education have helped spur increases to the Pell Grant Program and the launch of an FAFSA Forecaster online tool to give high school juniors early notification of their financial aid eligibility.

At the opening of this year's summit, Under Secretary of Education Sara Martinez Tucker announced that the department is starting an effort to reform and simplify the financial aid system. She said that the initiative would require support and input from college officials, economists and groups that advocate for students.

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