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New Commission Debates Accountability

By MICHAEL ARNONE

Colleges must develop clearer means of communicating their value to lawmakers and the public if the institutions and the U.S. economy are to remain vital, college officials said last week at the first meeting of a new commission on college accountability.

More than 25 people, including leaders of state-college systems and experts from various college associations, are members of the panel, called the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. The commission was organized by the State Higher Education Executive Officers association to influence public policy and is being financed by the Ford Foundation.

Participants in the meeting discussed how colleges might do better in making high-quality education both accessible and affordable by setting measurable performance goals, rewarding institutions that meet them, and punishing those that don't.

Colleges and lawmakers should work to create accountability standards, participants in the meeting said. But two commissioners disagreed on whether colleges should set standards on their own, or rely on the government to make sure that institutions set high standards.

Because consumers want to attend good colleges, "we will not find it will be a race to the bottom" if colleges enforce accountability standards on their own, said Kenneth H. Ashworth, a former commissioner of higher education in Texas.

Thomas D. Layzell, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, replied, "I don't think you'll find a race to the top, either," if colleges have no incentive to push students to work hard.

The commissioners will meet again over the summer and write a draft report incorporating comments from last week's meeting. They plan to distribute the draft at another meeting to be scheduled for October or November, gather comments, and then write a final version.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Government & Politics

Volume 50, Issue 37, Page A26

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