

April 14, 2006

Charles Miller, Chair
Commission on the Future of Higher Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-3510

Re: Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Dear Chairman Miller:

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education recently released an "issue paper" on college costs. The paper in question, "Frequently Asked Questions About College Costs," was prepared for the Commission by Robert C. Dickeson. Although Dickeson's paper was intended "to inform the work of the Commission," the American Association of University Professors believes that it cannot successfully achieve that goal. We believe that the paper is seriously flawed for reasons that we shall explain below.

AAUP is a nonprofit, charitable and educational organization with about 45,000 members at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Founded in 1915, it is the only national organization devoted exclusively to addressing the professional interests of those in higher education. Thus, we address Dickeson's paper with substantial knowledge and considerable perspective.

The Dickeson paper employs a problematic and simplistic listing of "what's being done and can be done," without providing documentation or even clear recommendations. The paper fails to consider the need for maintaining quality and effectiveness in higher education, focusing instead on cutting costs without regard to the consequences. (It also appears to confuse the question of the *cost* of providing higher education with its *price*, expressed through tuition.) In doing so, the paper relies on three significantly flawed lines of argument: a mischaracterization of faculty; an incomplete and misleading description of community colleges; and a fundamental mischaracterization of the nature of higher education itself.

Faculty: The paper includes a number of attacks on faculty and their work, attacks strongly contradicted by other studies that have come to exactly the opposite conclusions. For instance, the 1998 Cost Commission report *Straight Talk About College Costs and Prices* directly refutes Dickeson's argument:

Many believe that the labor structure and tenure system of college faculty drive up college costs. It is true that higher education is a labor-intensive industry and that changes in policies that affect the number of faculty required to teach courses as well as the types of faculty hired (part-time vs. full-time, tenured vs. non-tenured) have an impact on an institution's cost of providing education.

There is little evidence to suggest, however, that changes in faculty hiring practices or workload have driven up college costs in the past decade. In fact, there has been movement in the opposite direction. In an effort to control costs, institutions have hired more part-time and non-tenured faculty and increased the number of hours faculty spend in the classroom...

Both trends have continued to the present, as was recently confirmed by Michael Middaugh, assistant vice president for institutional research and planning at the University of Delaware. Speaking to the 2006 annual meeting of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, Middaugh reports that instructional costs have risen more slowly than the Consumer Price Index and that full-time faculty continue to work more than 50 hours per week.¹ His report was based on his ongoing study of detailed instructional costs at some 400 colleges and universities.

Data from the AAUP's "Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession" have consistently indicated that overall faculty salaries are rising more slowly than other components of higher education costs, such as health care benefits, and more slowly than the price of college tuition.² The 2005-06 AAUP report, to be released shortly, indicates that overall average faculty salaries increased less than the rate of inflation for the second consecutive year. It also finds that faculty salaries over the last one to three decades have grown more slowly than have presidential salaries, institutional endowments, or the salaries of other highly-educated professionals.

Moreover, as colleges and universities increasingly move away from tenured and tenure-track faculty in order to control instructional costs, they do so at the risk of lowering instructional quality. Ronald Ehrenberg, professor of labor economics and former vice president at Cornell University has published research, together with his colleague Liang Zhiang, suggesting that when a four-year college or university increases its share of faculty who are part-time or full-time non-tenure-track, its graduation rate declines and its first-year dropout rate increases (other factors held constant). Ehrenberg argues that, as we reduce the number of tenure-track faculty positions, we make academic careers less attractive and contribute to the declining interest of American students in going on for PhD study. This has serious implications for our nation's future scientific and technical work force: who will educate our students in the future? Ehrenberg concludes that proposals to eliminate the tenure system or to reduce the fraction of faculty on tenure track are not in our nation's best interest.³

Community Colleges: Dickeson's paper devotes an entire section to community colleges and why they "cost so much less than traditional four-year colleges." This presentation, however, ignores fundamental aspects of the community college mission. Further, it wrongly implies that the community college model should be expanded to other levels of higher education.

It is vitally important to remember that community colleges provide only a limited postsecondary experience: they offer the equivalent of lower-division baccalaureate courses and preparation for occupations requiring an associate degree. Community colleges do little research, because that is not their primary mission. Research and the generation of knowledge fall within the purview of the research universities. The diversity of higher education in the United States is one of its great strengths: a variety of institutions fulfilling different missions and serving different student populations. Were community colleges to provide sufficient library and laboratory facilities and academic experiences to train students as independent researchers, they would certainly cost a great deal more than they do in their present role. Community colleges focus their facilities on delivering instruction because they are specifically designed to fill that role: they are located near population centers and serve a commuter student population, one that includes many older working adults.

Finally, the fact that community colleges are deriving increasing proportions of their revenue from training provided to meet the specific needs of private corporations is, in fact, one of the dangers in the evolving community college model. To overemphasize narrowly-tailored skills training is to do community college students a disservice, and to depart from the goal of preparing an educated citizenry able to think for themselves. To suggest that the community college model should be adopted by other

sectors of higher education is wrong-headed, both in describing what community colleges do and what higher education should be about.

The role of higher education: Although Dickeson's issue paper does not present clearly framed recommendations about what is to be done about college costs (or price), it seems to rest on a fundamental assumption: that higher education is about providing student (and employer and state government) "consumers" with a "product" (education) at the lowest cost and in the most efficient manner possible. This approach ignores the longstanding agreement about the role of higher education in the United States: that it exists to provide a public good in a democratic society, in the form of an educated citizenry and the free transmission of ideas that lead to discovery, innovation and an improved quality of life. To focus exclusively on lowering the price of college, as does this issue paper, is to present an incomplete consideration of higher education's role in our society—and to place the quality of higher education as an institution in jeopardy.

In conclusion, the American Association of University Professors believes that Dickeson's issue paper is seriously flawed. It relies on unsupported generalizations about the factors driving up the cost of higher education in the United States. It rehashes arguments already discredited by the 1998 National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, and mischaracterizes the costs associated with faculty. The Commission would be better served by seeking alternate sources of information on college costs and the challenges confronting higher education.

Sincerely,
Roger W. Bowen
General Secretary

1. Paul Fain, "Faculty Pay Is Not Part of Academe's Cost Crisis, Expert Tells Trustees' Conference." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 14, 2006, A33. See also Michael F. Middaugh, "Understanding Higher Education Costs." *Planning for Higher Education*, March-May 2005 (33,3): 5-18.
2. "[Don't Blame Faculty for High Tuition.](#)" *Academe*, March-April 2004 (90,2): 20-46.
3. Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "The Perfect Storm and the Privatization of Public Higher Education." *Change*, January/February 2006, 47-53. Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "Graduate Education, Innovation and Federal Responsibility." *Council of Graduate Schools Communicator*, July 2005 (38,6): 1-8.