

# The Washington Post

## Making college work

By Margaret Spellings  
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This month, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) wrote a column [["A better deal on for-profit colleges."](#) Washington Forum] excoriating for-profit postsecondary education. As chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Harkin should be taking a broader view of the challenges facing U.S. higher education. This includes considering how to achieve President Obama's goal of America having [the highest college graduation rate in the world](#) by 2020; Harkin should be among those leading a national dialogue on how to improve college access for all students -- especially those most in need.

Five years ago, as secretary of education, I appointed a bipartisan [Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#) and charged it with crafting a plan to address the critical issues of accessibility, affordability and accountability. The commission heard from dozens of experts and many members of the public and then offered bold recommendations to dramatically improve access to college and raise college completion rates for millions of Americans.

I embraced the proposals, which included calls for increased aid for low-income students, robust accountability and transparency at institutions, and a renewed focus on innovation and quality. I worked to advance these ideas with policymakers and leaders in higher education.

For the most part, the higher education establishment balked, actively working to get Congress to affirm the status quo. Lawmakers obliged and reauthorized the Higher Education Act, largely dismissing the commission's work. Ignored to the detriment of students and families were recommendations to overhaul an outdated accreditation system, to develop a results-oriented model of quality assurance that would lead to greater accountability, to control costs by rewarding innovation and productivity, and to replace a byzantine federal financial aid system with one more in line with students' needs and national priorities.

I was pleased when, in his [first address to Congress, President Obama](#) called for America to once again lead the world in college graduates. He urged Americans to seek out additional education or training beyond high school; for Congress to raise Pell Grant levels to help students gain the means to access that higher education; and called for additional support for community colleges.

Unfortunately, this good start quickly faltered. The Obama administration's tendency to spend more money and support aggressive government solutions began to get the better of it.

First, [the administration federalized student aid programs, eliminating private-sector options for consumers](#). It also walked away from its commitment to community colleges in order to help pay for health-care reform.

Now the administration wants to thwart those in the private sector who are investing capital and spurring innovation to accommodate students who need more convenient and creative educational opportunities than those offered by traditional schools. Efforts to restrict access to a full range of education providers undermine our shared goals of raising graduation rates and increasing

affordability.

This doesn't make sense. At a time when the administration should be focused on job creation and strategies to prepare today's students for tomorrow's jobs, it is targeting private-sector higher-education providers that serve about 3 million students a year. The result could be more jobs lost and fewer Americans getting the education they need to secure good jobs. Many for-profit schools are serving those least well-served by traditional higher education, whose capacity is limited, particularly in tough economic times. It is with low-income and minority students that our nation is failing. Only 30 percent of African Americans ages 25 to 34, and less than 20 percent of Latinos in that age group, have an associate degree or higher. Students from the highest-income families are almost eight times as likely as those from the lowest-income families to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24.

The Education Department's announcement Friday that it will seek additional information recognizes the unprecedented response to its gainful-employment proposal affecting for-profit colleges. Time will tell whether it is really listening. Rather than adding bureaucracy to a regulation-laden industry, the federal government should enforce the rules on the books and weed out those who try, as a recent [Government Accountability Office investigation](#) found, to circumvent the law and perpetrate fraud on disadvantaged students.

Rather than targeting a crucial sector, the administration should take steps to promote innovation so that more students may have affordable access to higher education. It should support accountability and transparency so that students have a better idea about the value of the education they are buying and should oppose efforts to remove educational opportunities to which underserved populations are finally being given access.

*The writer was U.S. secretary of education from 2005 to 2009. She does consulting work for Education Management Corp., a provider of private postsecondary education, and is a senior adviser to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has members involved in for-profit education.*

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