



News

'One Voice' for Higher Ed

January 31, 2011

SAN FRANCISCO -- The assistant U.S. secretary of education for postsecondary education has been meeting with higher education associations to encourage them to find a way to speak with "one voice" and reshape public understanding of the role of colleges.

Eduardo M. Ochoa, the assistant secretary, discussed this effort here Friday in an address to the college presidents at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Ochoa said that colleges are held back on a range of issues because of the "limited awareness" of the public and of lawmakers about what really happens on campuses and about "the realities" of higher education economics.

At the same time, Ochoa defended proposed "gainful employment" regulations for career-related programs that have divided many in higher education.

'One Voice'

On the issue of a single voice for articulating the value of higher education, Ochoa noted the financial challenges facing most institutions. For funding to be restored to colleges by states and other supporters, he said, "the political and national discourse regarding higher education will have to undergo a major change."

In an interview after the talk, Ochoa said that colleges have not done a good job of communicating their "shared values and shared goals ... whether an AAU institution or a community college."

These values concern the "transformative power of higher education" and the "quiet miracles" that occur on every campus, he said.

As for the exact form that this campaign will take, Ochoa said that was unclear. "It's not for me or the Education Department to orchestrate this," he said. The department wants to see higher education associations "step up to the plate" and lead the effort, he said.

Via e-mail, Terry W. Hartle of the American Council on Education, who was not at the meeting here, said that Ochoa has been discussing this idea with ACE. Ochoa "has told us that he does not think the public is aware of all the important changes that are taking place within higher education and that we need to do a better job speaking with one voice about all the good things we are doing. I think he's totally right."

Many Voices on 'Gainful Employment'

Ochoa also spoke here about an issue on which higher education has not been speaking with one voice: the proposed "gainful employment" regulations that would bar federal aid from career-oriented programs at which large percentages of graduates fail to earn enough money to pay back their student loans.

The proposed regulations have been opposed by the for-profit higher education industry -- which would feel most, but not all, of the impact - and last week Ochoa gave another talk in which he suggested that there would be major changes in the next version of the regulations.

The next version will be "significantly different," Ochoa said in [a talk at the meeting of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#).

But here, Ochoa spoke only positively of the regulations. He acknowledged that the regulations represented "a new direction for federal regulation" of higher education in that they moved beyond reliance on accreditation for quality control. But he said that the additional oversight they involved was appropriate, and was required by statute. In the interview, he sidestepped questions about whether his position had changed since he predicted major changes in the regulations earlier in the week. But he said that the talk here was to a different audience and with a "different context."

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Ochoa also reassured those here that they need not fear that the regulations would be applied to all of higher education – as some advocates for for-profit colleges have suggested would be appropriate. And [recent articles](#) about the high prices and questionable job outcomes for graduates of law and other professional schools have also raised this possibility.

He said he understood that some educators at colleges not covered by the regulations have “a legitimate concern about the danger of conflating the operational definition of quality” with the debt/income ratios in the proposed rules. The concern, he said, is that such a policy would “flatten the definition of quality.” Ochoa said he wanted “to assure you that the department is fully cognizant” of the role of “liberal education as the foundation not only of degrees in liberal arts and sciences but also for professional degrees.” He said that, as a business dean earlier in his career, he was aware of the importance of courses outside the business school to broaden his students’ education.

Educational quality, Ochoa said, “cannot be reduced solely to the ability to get a first job after graduation.” But at the same time, he said, for career-related programs, definitions of quality “must include employability,” and “that’s what gainful employment is all about.”

— **Scott Jaschik**

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