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Michael Novak, *The Fire of Invention*

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With the publication of a new issue paper by Robert C. Dickeson, a consultant to the Department of Education, Secretary of Education Charles Miller may have released the first trial balloon signaling more central control of higher education by the Federal Government.*

In his paper, Dickeson argues that colleges and universities are not sufficiently concerned with the “real quality and impact” of their systems on student outcomes and with the “gaping information void” regarding college performance. Additionally, he worries over the accessibility of higher education for low- and middle-income students.

What is his solution? A national database of information on colleges, their performance and outcomes for students, and a national accreditation body.

This sounds like more of No Child Left Behind or, as my teacher friends call it, No Child Left Standing – the governmental centralization of education.

Let’s look at what’s really going on here: who pays the piper calls the tune! In the last 30 years the Federal government has transferred increasing amounts of money to schools at all levels, from grade to graduate schools, through multiple Title programs, Pew grants and student loans, among other means. The consequence? Ever-increasing problems with our schools and demands for accountability.

For lower schools, No Child Left Behind was introduced to insure that schools were living up to standards. What’s the consequence? Teachers all over the nation focus on test results, not teaching. Are children gaining skills? It’s really hard to tell, since the only measures are the tests, well-known for their limits in reflecting authentic learning.

However, I *do* know that individual children throughout the nation are being squeezed into the same mold – and it is deforming them. Students are leaving public schools in droves, looking for a more humane form of education, a better fit to individual needs. Parents who can are choosing private schools, effectively paying double tuition through high real estate taxes. Those who cannot afford private school tuitions are left with few options.

Is this what we want in higher education, too? Does Soviet-style, top-down control cause our fantastic advances in the market, in technology, in pharmaceutical research? Does the central control of education, like in France or Germany, allow the flourishing of creative individuals, capable of changing careers many times during their lives?

I don't think so. In the U.S. higher education has excelled largely due to its plethora of possibilities. While the University of Oxford was founded in 1167, Harvard was not established until 1636, yet by 1750 the American Colonies had six universities, while England still had only two. Did you know that by 1880, there were more colleges in *Ohio* than in the *whole* of Europe?*** America's vast array of institutions - large, medium and small, urban, suburban and rural, secular and religious – allows it to be highly innovative and fulfill a myriad of student needs. Unfortunately, but predictably, the vast increase in the federalization of college payments in the last 40 years has hurt higher education through many pressures. In a previous newsletter, I wrote about the experience of Hillsdale College and the Feds' threat to withdraw student loans from schools refusing to follow affirmative action guidelines, as one example.

We do not need anymore interference by the Feds – we need less. The need for accreditation to qualify for Federal student loans and grants already puts pressure on schools and private accrediting agencies to meet the demands of the Feds. Anyone who's had to deal with educational overseeing bodies at the state level knows the waste and damage caused by bureaucratic rigidity. Once again, government involvement has been a key cause of the system's problems – but the Feds want more.

The demands for accountability remind me of the history of Medicare and Medicaid: after years of paying doctors whatever they billed, the Feds realized the system was going broke. They institute the DRG's and strict payment systems. Has the healthcare system improved? No! Problems have multiplied like rabbits.

A variety of private accreditation systems, just like a variety of schools, can fulfill our needs. On Saturday, I attended a workshop at the Annual Meeting of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges, which privately and independently accredits schools in this region of the country. Over and over, I heard the HLC commissioners answering questions about what and why with “there's no hard and fast rule for that – you must show us what you do and why you do it in relation to your own mission and principles.” In other words, they seek to evaluate college programs based on the individual college's aims (of course, with reference to general principles of excellence in education). I was surprised and pleased with their principled and rationally flexible approach to the issue of accreditation – and would like to see more of it.

As far as the need for better, wide-ranging and thorough information about colleges and universities, I am sure new forms of publicly available information about performance, outcomes and impact, would not only help students choose wisely, it would encourage healthy competition and innovative ways to evaluate education. However, true usefulness comes through freedom. Rather than a centralized, government-run database, Secretary Miller should be encouraging students, parents and employers to insist on more information from colleges and universities. Websites like The Princeton Review, already rife with information, could start offering even more in-depth analyses of student outcomes, employment and satisfaction. I am sure there are plenty of clever, creative firms who could come up with many more ways to measure and report on colleges than any Federal bureaucracy.

Bottom line: The Federal government needn't – and shouldn't – run a nationwide database of information; running a nationwide program of accreditation is even more frightening.

***Dickeson, Robert C., March 30, 2006. *The Need for Education Reform*.
<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/dickeson.pdf>**

****Novak, Michael. 1997. *The Fire of Invention*. Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
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