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Midwest Conference on the Work of the Spellings Commission
on the Future of Higher Education
Remarks by President Richard F. Wilson

March 24, 2006

I would like to preface my remarks with an observation about the juxtaposition of two national efforts focused on the future of higher education, one entitled the Solutions Campaign and sponsored by the American Council on Education and the other, a special Futures Commission appointed by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings. As I understand these two initiatives, I find it ironic that the Solutions Campaign is focused, in large measure, on informing the American public about the societal benefits of higher education. The Spellings Commission, on the other hand, is challenging higher education to demonstrate for the American public what those benefits are. One of these initiatives assumes we know what the benefits are and need to do a better job of communicating them to various publics. The other raises questions about the benefits and the associated costs. Many of us in this room have lamented in recent years that higher education was not part of the national agenda. We have been lobbying for more attention; now we have that attention as well as some anxieties about the implications.

I will turn now to the focus of this panel discussion: whether the current goals of higher education are appropriate and achievable. The first difficulty that I have with this question is the implicit assumption that the goals for higher education are well-defined and broadly accepted. The fact is that there are a few goals like the development of critical thinking skills and effective communication skills that one might assume are embraced by all colleges and universities. Once you move beyond this small set, however, the goals become more institution or sector specific and frequently emerge in response to local, state, or national needs. Most colleges and universities vary considerably in their commitment to such goals as civic leadership, global citizenship, public engagement, diversity, environmental sustainability, social justice, economic development, workforce development, and artistic expression.

This lack of uniformity is actually the strength of the system of higher education in this country. Such institutional diversity not only provides options for students but also provides a competitive environment that is healthy for the system.

My own sense is that some of the goals of higher education today relate to enduring values, ones that have served this country well over a long period of time, while others reflect emerging values tied to particular needs of society at a point in time. I would place critical thinking skills in the former category and environmental sustainability in the latter. Thus, I am reluctant to embrace the idea that there is a common set of goals for all of higher education. We may have a few goals in common, but it would be a mistake to judge our effectiveness on those goals alone.

Having said that, I do believe it is important for institutions to assess progress in achieving the goals they have established for themselves and to make that information available to various constituencies. At Illinois Wesleyan, we have an active assessment program and have used surveys extensively, e.g., Entering Students, End of First Year, and Student Engagement. We also are participating in CAE's College Learning Assessment, a national effort comparing

freshman and senior performance on such key dimensions as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication.

One principle that has served us well has been to rely on multiple measures and to compare ourselves, whenever possible, against our own historical performance and against several national normative groups, e.g., aspirational peers and all liberal arts colleges. Too much reliance on any single measure will often result in misleading or inaccurate conclusions. The literature on assessment is filled with examples of misguided efforts that attribute causality where only correlation exists.

In building assessment programs, there is a natural tendency to move rather quickly to testing. Now, I am not opposed to testing, but I am opposed to testing as the only basis for judgments about value. Such judgments have always been important but have taken on added importance as college costs have risen and increased attention has been given to program effectiveness.

For me, efforts to assess progress in achieving the goals of higher education require much thought and attention and considerable flexibility in approach. To jump quickly to standardized tests as the primary solution trivializes the process and may lead to unintended and counterproductive results, e.g. teaching to the test and ranking institutions based on test results (which will reward those institutions who enroll the best students, not necessarily those who make the most difference). In assessing all matters of importance to colleges and universities, we must turn to analyses that are just as sophisticated as the goals we are trying to assess.