

06/30/06

Cheryl Oldham
Executive Director
Commission on Higher Education
U.S. Department of Education

Dear Ms. Oldham,

We applaud the commission's recently release draft report and the attention it gives to lifelong learning, innovation and global competitiveness issues. We fully support your efforts to help ensure the accessibility and relevance of higher education for college students in the 21st century.

However we are concerned that the commission's current draft has not fully articulated the skills that college students need to succeed as 21st century citizens and workers. We respectfully submit our thoughts on including more specific references to 21st century skills in the commission's final report.

Like you, we recognize the significance of a high quality and relevant postsecondary education for today's students. As the commission itself has noted in its research, life and work is radically different today than it was even a generation ago:

- The nature of education is changing internationally. The United States is falling behind on critical international comparisons of educational performance, particularly when it comes to higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills.
- The nature of the competition is changing internationally. Although the U.S. historically has been a world leader in offering broad access to higher education, many other countries now provide comparable access—and results. The graduates in these countries are in direct competition for jobs with U.S. graduates. The United States no longer holds a corner on the market for highly qualified workers.
- The nature of the workforce, jobs and skill demands is changing internationally. Industrial workers were measured for their efficiency at getting the job done. The value-add of knowledge workers is effectiveness, which requires a very different skill set.

The good news is that for the last decade, the business and education communities have jointly worked to address such issues through projects ranging from the Business Higher Education Forum (BHEF) to the Partnership

for 21st Century Skills. Together these groups, along with enGauge and SCANS, have established consensus around an identified set of skills that high school and college students must possess to lead effective lives as citizens and workers.

The Partnership advocates for 21st century skills to be an integral part of every student's education. These are the skills all students need to succeed in work, school and life, and they include:

- Core subjects (as defined by NCLB)
- 21st century content: global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health and wellness awareness
- Learning and thinking skills: critical thinking and problem solving skills, communications skills, creativity and innovation skills, collaboration skills, contextual learning skills and information and media literacy skills
- Information and communications technology literacy
- Life skills: leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal responsibility, people skills, self-direction and social responsibility

Today's corporate leaders share our concern that not enough college graduates possess these skills. We believe your commission now has an excellent opportunity to clearly articulate the importance of higher education in producing these skills. While the work of the Partnership has focused primarily on K-12 education, it has proposed several recommendations that focus on higher education. These include:

- **National Leadership:** Traditionally, our institutions of higher learning have been fertile ground for our nation's most cherished innovations. The federal government plays a critical role in supporting these institutions and providing incentives for them to address emerging educational trends and issues. Today the federal government has the opportunity to play a major role in advancing the cause of 21st century skills in postsecondary education environments. The Department of Education should:
 - Elevate the importance and relevance of 21st century skills in higher education through the ongoing work of the commission and the agenda of the Secretary.
 - Encourage higher education institutions to identify the skills that high school graduates must possess in order to be prepared for college and life and work after college —with a specific focus on 21st century skills.

- Identify and disseminate best practices in teaching and assessing 21st century skills in higher education throughout the country.
- **Postsecondary Student Outcomes:** Today's college graduates must be able to think critically, solve problems and communicate effectively to be successful—regardless of their particular job paths. The requirements of entry-level jobs—not to mention participation in civic life—in the 21st century require these skills. Therefore the commission should recommend that states make the following improvements to their postsecondary institutions:
 - Encourage and support all college students in the mastery of 21st century skills.
 - Ensure that all postsecondary institutions are given adequate support for providing relevant internship and/or work study opportunities that enhance 21st century skills.
- **Professional Development in Colleges of Education:** If teachers are going to be effective in today's K-12 classrooms, they need much better pre-service and in-service training that focuses on teaching and measuring 21st century skills. Therefore the commission should recommend that states make the following improvements:
 - Provide financial and other incentives for teachers pursuing continuing education credits to become "21st century skill mentors" within their existing schools.
 - Support higher education institutions in providing teachers with regular evaluations of the best tools and skills teachers need to create information age classrooms that foster 21st century learning.
 - Support higher education institutions in identifying and disseminating the best practices for teaching and assessing 21st century skills
 - Encourage higher education institutions to ensure that all pre-service teachers graduate prepared to employ 21st century teaching and assessment strategies in their classrooms.
- **Funding for Research and Development:** For 21st century skills to gain real traction in the U.S. educational system, the federal government must support a long-term agenda to develop world-class strategies for teaching and assessing these skills. Targeted, sustained investment in research and development initiatives is required to further elucidate these skills and craft teaching practices and assessment approaches that more closely convey and measure what students need to excel in the 21st century. Therefore the federal government should:

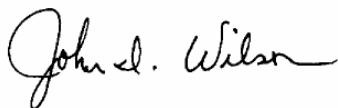
- Provide incentives for students to enter the fields of education and other critical disciplines, such as psychometrics, cognitive psychology and information technology. These are among the most important areas of research in the next twenty years.
- Fund large-scale research projects that are designed to discover the most effective ways to teach and assess 21st century skills.

The commission's work will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in encouraging postsecondary schools to review their practices in light of what can be done to foster 21st century skills in both their incoming students as well as their graduates. This approach has the potential to support a more unified educational experience from high school through college, one that ensures all students will master these skills throughout their educational careers. To date, we do not believe that higher education has defined its role in ensuring these skills for students.

We are pleased to provide these recommendations to the commission. If you have any questions feel free to contact Ken Kay, President, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, at kay@itstrategies.com or 520-623-2466.

We look forward to receiving your final report and participating in your ongoing work.

Sincerely,



John Wilson, Chair
The Partnership for 21st Century Skills
Executive Director, National Education Association



Karen Cator, Vice-Chair
The Partnership for 21st Century Skills
Director, Education Leadership & Advocacy, Apple Computer, Inc.



Ken Kay, President
The Partnership for 21st Century Skills