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The Flawed Metaphor of the Spellings Summit

By [Daniel F. Chambliss](#)

By the conclusion of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' recently-convened [Test of Leadership Summit on Higher Education](#), I finally understood why her proposals are so ... well, so ill-conceived. They rest on a faulty metaphor: the belief that education is essentially like manufacturing. High school students are "your raw material," as Rhode Island Gov. Donald Carcieri told us. We need "more productive delivery models," economies of scale, even something called "process redesign strategies." Underlying everything is the belief that business does things right, higher education does things wrong, and a crisis is almost upon us, best symbolized by that coming tsunami of Chinese and Indian scientists we hear so much about. Time for higher ed to shape up and adopt the wisdom of business.

But the whole metaphor is wrong. Education is nothing like business, especially not like manufacturing. Consider the Spellings Summit's faulty assumptions:

1. *"If it isn't measured, it isn't happening."* This slogan we heard in formal talks and casual conversations. Therefore more testing, more reporting, more oversight, as Spellings is proposing, should improve colleges and universities. The one certain result of the Spellings initiatives will be a mountain of new reporting by colleges and universities, funneled to the Federal government via accreditors. Without formal assessment, this view holds, nobody learns anything.

But for human beings, it's obviously wrong, unmeasured good things happen all the time. Left alone, a 5-year old will explore, discover, and learn. So will a 20-year-old. They get up in the morning and do things, for at least a good part of the day, whether anyone watches and measures them or not. Many people read even if they aren't forced to. The professor does nothing; the student learns anyway. Medical doctors live by the dictum *Primum non nocere*: first, do no harm. Sometimes the best treatment is to leave the person alone. That's because — unlike steel girders — students are living creatures. (We'll return to this point.)

2. *Motivation is simple.* "Rewards drive behavior," said several speakers with no more thought on the matter, moving easily to the use of money to guide institutions. Students and professors alike were considered to be easily directed. If tests are "high stakes," students will automatically want to do well, and if colleges as a whole do poorly, they should just be punished. Nowhere did the Spellings Commission report, or the "action plan" presented at the summit, consider that students might not like standardized tests, that administrators find report-writing onerous, or that professors could resent the nationalization of educational goals-and quit teaching altogether. Coercion, it is believed, is a simple and effective method for directing people. After all, if you put a steel girder on a flatcar, it will stay there until moved. And if you melt a steel girder to 4,000 degrees F., it almost never gets angry and storms out of the room or broods.

Consider one of the immediate results of No Child Left Behind, the resignation of hundreds of fourth-grade teachers. Coercion costs; people will try to avoid it. They'll quit their job, for instance. They'll get angry and sulk in the back of the room. "Getting tough" is not the answer.

3. *Clearly stated goals at the outset are a prerequisite for success.* In machining, or the production of microchips, precise

specifications, measured to the nanometer, are necessary. Everything must be planned, laid out in advance, then rationally carried through to completion. As several speakers said, "We all know what needs to be done," as if that were a simple thing.

But in fact, serendipity — the occurrence of happy, if unpredicted, outcomes seems to have no place in this scheme. The great Peter Drucker recognized that in business, unplanned outcomes can be better than planned outcomes. Post-it Notes and Viagra, for instance, were not intended outcomes in planning; they were huge successes.

People set their own (often conflicting) goals; they resist coercion; they often surprise us. Admittedly, that makes working with them (healing them, leading them to salvation, encouraging their curiosity) a messy process. But I've seen no evidence that business people are better at it than educators.

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