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A Nation's Colleges at Risk

American higher education, long the envy of the world, faces such serious problems -- especially with graduation rates -- that its position is vulnerable, says a report being released today.

The report calls for the creation of new accountability systems in higher education to track problems and progress, and to help lawmakers focus necessary attention on weaknesses. At the same time, the report says that many current accountability systems do little good and end up wasting time and money.

"At its best our system of higher education continues to set a standard for excellence and research that remains the envy of the world," the report says. "But the foundations of our system are too weak to sustain our economy and quality of life."

The report was issued by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, a panel of politicians, business leaders and educators charged with the task by the State Higher Education Executive Officers. Notable members of the panel include Richard W. Riley, the former U.S. education secretary and South Carolina governor; Frank Keating, the former governor of Oklahoma; Stanley O. Ikenberry, former president of the American Council on Education and the University of Illinois; and Carol Liu, chair of the California Assembly Committee on Higher Education.

While the report notes many problems with American higher education, it focuses on issues of graduation rates and related questions of college-going rates and the preparation of students or would-be students for a college education.

In a graphic called "Our Leaky Educational Pipeline," the report notes that for every 100 9th graders:

- 68 graduate from high school on time.
- 40 enroll immediately in college after graduation.
- 27 are still enrolled for their sophomore year.
- 18 graduate from college on time.

Other countries are doing a better job, the report says. Fifteen countries have higher graduation rates from high school than does the United States, where the rate is 73 percent. At the higher education level, countries like China and India are making significant progress in educating thousands of scientists and engineers at a time that many programs at American colleges struggle to find qualified applicants.

The report identifies other key problems:

- 4 of 10 college students fail to graduate within six years.
- One-fourth of low-income students in the top quartile of academic ability and preparation fail to enroll

in college within two years of their graduation from high school.

- While the percentages of minority and low-income students who enroll in higher education is increasing, a majority of minority students fail to graduate.

Many of these problems could be fixed, the report says, with good accountability systems. Currently, however, many accountability efforts -- efforts that include state and federal reporting requirements, accreditation, and individual institutions' studies and research -- lack broad support and are ineffective. Accountability fails, the report says, when it does little more than generate "reference-sized books of information," when professors think of it as "administrative work," and when it "feels like coercion or bribery."

Good accountability systems, the report says, require a partnership between colleges and lawmakers "through which shared goals are explicitly established, progress is measured, and work to improve performance is motivated and guided."

Those goals, in turn, must reflect goals for public policy, not just institutional goals. "Fundamental public priorities recede to the background when institutions compete for status on national rankings based on student selectivity, faculty prestige and similar measures," the report says.

Good data is also essential for developing good goals and measuring them, the report says. And the commission says that many data systems cannot currently answer such key questions as how many students who enter higher education emerge with a degree, how long does it take students to reach different levels of attainment, are student aid resources sufficient to help low-income students enroll and graduate, and are students learning what they need to know.

Some states do a good job creating the right kind of accountability systems, the report says. It praises the "Closing the Gaps" effort in Texas, which aims to increase college-going and graduation rates in that state by 2015. Kentucky is also praised, for using five key measures -- such as whether more Kentuckians are prepared for higher education, and the extent to which local communities benefit from the state's colleges -- to review the state's higher education system.

States that set up good accountability systems should then use them to help set priorities and budgets, the report says. But it also warns against inflated expectations about how accountability will change the budget process.

"It is wishful thinking to imagine that additional public investment will make it easy to achieve state and national higher education goals. The most important financial resource is not 'new money,' but existing investments," the report says.

Similarly, the report adds: "It is wishful thinking to imagine that productivity gains can make quality higher education substantially less expensive or eliminate the need for additional investment. Educating more people to a higher level is valuable; it will not miraculously become free."

The report may be ordered from SHEEO's [Web site](#).

— [Scott Jaschik](#)