

Press Release

Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers

Commission Says Better Accountability a National Imperative for Higher Education, Cites Low College Completion Rate

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- America's Standing as Higher Education Leader in Jeopardy

WASHINGTON, March 10 /PRNewswire/ -- Citing increasing global competition, low rates of college completion, and a college access and success gap for minority students, a national commission of political, business, and higher education leaders called today for a "fresh approach" to accountability designed to increase access and lift graduation rates for all students.

"For over 50 years, the United States could rightfully claim to have the finest system of higher education in the world in terms of access, graduates, and research," the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education says in its report, *Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education*. "Today, this basic assumption is under challenge."

The Commission, chaired by former Oklahoma governor Frank Keating and former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, said a new system of accountability was needed to "put more emphasis on successful student learning and high quality research, decrease the role of superficial comparisons and rankings, increase productivity, and provide parents, students, concerned citizens and policymakers the answer to reasonable questions regarding costs, what students are learning, and graduation rates."

The Commission called the current system of accountability "cumbersome, confusing, and inefficient," and said it "fails to answer key questions, provides excessive misleading data, and overburdens institutions by requiring them to report it."

Noting that "too often accountability is a battleground between educators and policymakers," the Commission called upon business leaders, state and federal policymakers, educational leaders, faculty and students to set and meet challenging goals, respect the boundaries between different roles, and work at common purposes. It said the "organizing principles for accountability must be pride, not fear, high aspirations, not minimum standards."

"This report underscores a vital but neglected national need -- improving America's performance in higher education," Riley said. "We have a deep-seated structural crisis in American education -- a crisis that is across the board from high school to college -- in terms of getting people through our system of education."

"While I am pleased that the NCAA is focusing on graduation rates for athletes," Riley continued, "this story needs to move from the sports page to the front page and people need to realize we have a crisis on our hands. This crisis has real implications for our standing as a world leader in higher education. If European nations, India, and China can graduate students in a timely manner, surely we are up to the challenge as well."

"Unless we improve our national performance in higher education, we risk the future of our nation and people," Keating said. "When only 18 out of 100 entering ninth graders complete a college education within six years of starting college, that adds up to a great loss of talent on an individual level and on a national level. Better accountability will open up new possibilities for our students and help to provide the skilled and knowledgeable workforce business needs for America to meet the demands of the world economy."

"Too often calls for greater accountability result in a tug-of-war that frustrates everyone," said Paul Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), which organized the Commission. "A guiding principle of this report is that we all need to pull in the

same direction -- pursuing clear goals, insisting on rigorous measurement of results, and working collaboratively for improvement."

The Commission issued a series of recommendations designed to improve student preparation, public investment in educational priorities, teaching and research, cost-effectiveness, and the availability of key data.

The Commission urged the federal government to establish a national student unit record data system with fail-safe privacy safeguards. The report notes that the current system "loses track of students who transfer and graduate, and ignores large numbers of students who begin their studies on a part-time basis." The Commission's proposals also include calling on:

Governors, legislators, state boards and executives for higher education to:

- * create statewide data systems to help inform policy and budgetary decisions that will close achievement gaps
- * make the transition from high school to college a focus of accountability
- * make investments and improvements in teaching at every level a higher priority
- * design state policies for appropriations, tuition, and student aid to maximize successful enrollment in higher education

The federal government to:

- * increase support for financial aid to low-income students, programs to close the gaps in educational opportunities, and research
- * improve the quality of information on higher education given to prospective students by upgrading the COOL Web site at the U.S. Department of Education

Business and civic leaders to:

- * communicate their needs and expectations to policymakers and educators
- * seek and accept the call to serve on statewide boards

Institutional Trustees and Leaders to:

- * set goals and monitor progress on priorities aligned with public needs for student success and high quality research and service
- * set and communicate to students explicit learning goals for each academic program and for general education
- * use external and internal assessments of learning and publicly communicate the results to monitor and improve performance
- * re-examine priorities and increase productivity

Accrediting Associations to:

- * set learning goals for different degrees and certificates
- * provide more publicly available information on findings of accrediting reviews

Faculty and Students to:

- * get engaged in establishing public and institutional priorities and giving advice to policymakers and institutional leaders
- * exert the effort and commitment needed to achieve personal and national goals for higher education.

The report is available at <http://www.sheeo.org/>. The members of the Commission are listed below.

Members of the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education:

Co-Chairs:

The Honorable Frank Keating
President, American Council of Life Insurers
Former Governor of Oklahoma

The Honorable Richard W. Riley
Senior Partner, Nelson, Mullins, Riley & Scarborough, L.P.
Former U.S. Secretary of Education
Former Governor of South Carolina

Commission Members:

Kenneth H. Ashworth
Adjunct Professor, University of Texas, LBJ School of Public Affairs
Adjunct Professor, George Bush School of Government and Public Service,
Texas A&M University
Former Texas Commissioner of Higher Education

Dwight Evans
President, External Affairs Group, Southern Company

Stanley Ikenberry
President Emeritus, Professor of Education, University of Illinois
Former President, American Council on Education

Roberts Jones
Former President, National Alliance of Business

Thomas D. Layzell
President, Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

The Honorable Carol Liu
Chair, California Assembly Committee on Higher Education

The Honorable Dave Nething
Senator, North Dakota Legislature
Former President, National Conference of State Legislatures

The Honorable Lana Oleen
Former Kansas Senate Majority Leader
Former Chair, Midwestern Higher Education Compact

Richard Pattenaude
President, University of Southern Maine

Martha Romero
Founding Director, Community College Leadership Development Initiatives
Claremont Graduate University
Former President, Siskiyou Joint Community College

Blenda J. Wilson
President & CEO, Nellie Mae Education Foundation
Former Executive Director, Colorado Commission on Higher Education

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