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Commission Backs Call for More Accountability in Higher Education


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Washington

Fewer than 20 percent of high school juniors go on to finish college on time, and a national commission is calling for a fresh approach to accountability to counter what it termed a “crisis.”

A report from the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley and former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, says the United States has failed so far to develop and implement accountability approaches that improve performance in the country’s complex, decentralized system of higher education.

FOR MORE INFO

"Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education" is available online from **The State Higher Education Executive Officers.** 

“We have a deep-seated structural crisis in American education—a crisis that is across the board from high school to college,” Mr. Riley said during a March 10 press conference here. “We seem to be very good at getting people into the academic pipeline, but not very good at getting them out on the other end with a college degree.”

The panel is made up primarily of state lawmakers and higher education officials and is a project of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, a Washington-based group of officials who serve state higher education boards.

“Too often accountability is a battleground between educators and policymakers,” says the report, released March 10. “Many educators believe externally imposed accountability is a tool to place blame or avoid responsibility for inadequate financial support. Many policymakers ... believe stronger external accountability is the only way to get improvement.”

The report says that the focus of accountability for colleges and universities must be on learning, widespread student achievement, and high-quality research and service.

The commission sounded a warning knell: As Europe, China, and India make rapid strides in higher education, it says, it is in the United States’ interest to make college more accessible and affordable and to provide students with the skills they need to succeed in a global economy.

While most U.S. high school students aspire to college, the report says, only 68 percent of 9th graders graduate from high school in four years, and only 18 percent get a degree within six years of enrolling in college.

SEE ALSO

See the accompanying item, “Chart: Education Pipeline.”

Mr. Keating called this a “worrisome statistic,” adding that there appear to be two things wrong — “high school preparation for college appears to be inadequate, and a number of high school graduates don’t understand the importance of a college degree.”

Improving student attainment, sustaining and enhancing the quality of research, and increasing productivity, the report argues, are key factors in improving higher education. And better accountability can help in realizing those goals, it adds.

Working Together

One of the recommendations asks for a resolution of the conflict between public priorities—such as improved access to college, higher graduation rates, and the closing of achievement gaps—and the priorities of higher education institutions, such as recruiting students and competing for resources and prestige.

“Institutions, especially those without an explicit public affiliation, may feel less accountable to public priorities than to their students, constituents, and heritage,” the report says.

The report points out that some states already have developed and are refining systems for higher education accountability, including Arizona, Connecticut, Iowa, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Kentucky.

In Kentucky, for instance, the Kentucky Council of Postsecondary Education says it puts accountability front and center in all communications with public officials, including lawmakers and the governor, and with postsecondary education providers.

Thomas D. Layzell, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, pointed out that implementing a strong accountability system requires the cooperation of all parties involved. “We have to work together. This doesn’t mean it will be an easy discussion, but it will be an important discussion,” he said.

The commission made recommendations for various groups involved in higher education.

It urges business and civic leaders to communicate needs and expectations to policymakers and educators, serve on statewide educational policy boards, and provide leadership and support for the public commitment to improving education.

At the state level, the commission asks governors, lawmakers, and educators to help establish statewide data systems to inform policy and budgetary decisions, and to make the transition from high school to college a focus of accountability, among other steps. It also calls on states to create data systems that can provide reliable statistics on student-completion and -persistence rates, student-aid resources, and the “net price” of attending a college or university after grants and loans are taken into account. And it exhorts the federal government to increase support for financial aid for low-income students.

Reginald Robinson, the president of the Kansas Board of Regents, said that the nation cannot allow the gap to persist because embedded in the American dream is the notion of opportunity.

“And increasingly the key to unlocking that door of opportunity is higher education,” he said.

J. Michael Mullen, the chancellor of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, said that the report is helpful because “it does not just make this a higher education or K-12 problem, but an education problem that has to be addressed as such.”

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

“Spellings Backs Accountability in Higher Education,” February 23, 2005.

“Report: Minority College Enrollment Growing,” February 23, 2005.

“Report Faults Colleges on Completion Rates,” January 26, 2005.

“Congress Notes Shifting Trends In Higher Education,” March 17, 2004.

“Barriers to College: Lack of Preparation Vs. Financial Need,” January 21, 2004.

“U.S. Risks Falling Behind In College-Participation Rate,” October 8, 2003.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Accountability** and **College Access**.

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