



## STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

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October 25, 2005

The Honorable Michael B. Enzi  
Chairman, Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
379A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy  
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John A. Boehner, Chairman  
House Education and the Workforce Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
1011 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable George Miller, Ranking Member  
House Education and the Workforce Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
2205 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen Enzi and Boehner, and Ranking Members Kennedy and Miller:

We write as state higher education executive officers to comment on the proposed 2005 Amendments to the Higher Education Act.

Congressional deliberations on the Higher Education Act and similar conversations in every state capitol send a very clear message: Widespread success in higher education has become absolutely essential for the future prosperity and security of our nation. We applaud and fully share your commitment to that objective.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers recently organized the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, co-chaired by Frank Keating, formerly Governor of Oklahoma, and Richard W. Riley, formerly Governor of South Carolina and U.S. Secretary of Education. The Commission report, *Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education*, outlined what institutions, accrediting associations, the states, and the federal government must do in order to achieve widespread postsecondary success. As the report insists – we all must do more, and we must work together in order to succeed.

You have the full Commission report and earlier correspondence from us on other issues. We draw attention here to just two priorities – the need for better data to monitor and improve performance in higher education and the critical importance of student financial assistance.

*Data for improving performance*

The absence of accurate, reliable information is a formidable obstacle to educational improvement. All of us with responsibility for performance – at the national, state, and institutional levels – need facts at the state and institutional levels to identify problems, set appropriate goals, monitor performance, and sustain progress.

The existing national postsecondary data system, however, cannot provide accurate information on graduation rates, transfer, net cost, or success in the job market. It falls short because students move among in-state and out-of-state institutions and back and forth between our institutions and the workforce. These individual students cannot be tracked because the current data system relies primarily on information about groups of students enrolled in individual institutions at single points in time. This outmoded system is increasingly incapable of responding to legitimate questions requiring longitudinal data. Efforts to address such issues within the constraints of that system are burdensome, costly, and inadequate.

The National Governors Association addressed a similar issue in July when virtually every state agreed to develop systems for keeping track of students who transfer among high schools in order to obtain valid data on high school graduation rates. Led in part by the spirit and requirements of No Child Left Behind, many states are developing student identifier systems to help schools, colleges, and universities work collaboratively to improve the success of students served by multiple institutions.

SHEEO and the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education have proposed a national student record data system to improve postsecondary data systems. As you know, this recommendation has been opposed by some who fear a national system could lead to the violation of individual privacy rights or unwarranted governmental intrusions into institutional operations.

While these are serious concerns, we are unconvinced that educators and policymakers must work without the benefit of fundamentally important information about student success and the net price of higher education in order to guard privacy and preserve institutional freedom. We are convinced there is sufficient capacity, trust, and good will in government and higher education to address these concerns and provide the data we need.

A number of states already use data and research systems which diligently protect privacy rights while monitoring the progress of students as they move among institutions. In addition, some states (including Wyoming, Florida, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Maine, and Texas among others) have developed strong cooperative relationships between higher education system offices and state Departments of Labor to learn about the post-college employment of graduates by using both higher education and unemployment insurance administrative data systems.

As explained in the attached statement, the Executive Committee of the State Higher Education Executive Officers has directed its staff to work with the states to improve the consistency and utility of state unit record data systems for higher education. *It would be helpful if the Higher Education Amendments of 2005 directed the Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Department of Education to cooperate with the states in voluntary pilot research projects and feasibility studies for improving administrative data systems to monitor the performance of our educational policies and systems.*

Progress does not require a mandatory national data system. Instead we propose that federal agencies work with the states to develop research projects and enhanced state data systems to address key policy issues related to educational success, while *absolutely protecting* the privacy of information on individuals. Furthermore, no institution would be required to participate in such a program in order to be eligible for any federal program.

*Student financial assistance*

Better data will help improve the effectiveness of federal, state, and institutional financial aid programs, but they also will clearly demonstrate the need for expanding such programs. In important ways our national future depends on the enrollment and success of greater numbers of low and moderate-income students. The need is greater than access to opportunity – we need an internationally competitive workforce, and we cannot afford large numbers of undereducated workers. For low and moderate-income students to enroll and succeed, the states and the federal government must provide larger need-based grants and more awards. We also need more state and federal programs that encourage students to take rigorous academic work. While we understand current fiscal challenges make it difficult in the short run to do all that is required, we remind ourselves and you – if we fail to make need-based financial aid a high budgetary priority in the coming years we jeopardize our future.

In conclusion, we thank you for your consideration of our observations, and we look forward to continuing to work together on national policy issues in postsecondary education.

Sincerely,



Paul E. Lingenfelter  
President

cc. The Honorable Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, Chairman  
Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competitiveness

Senator Lamar Alexander, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development

On behalf of:

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