

**Testimony from the association of
State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)**

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The association of State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) was created to help its members and the states develop and sustain excellent systems of higher education. From that vantage point, we are especially grateful to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings for establishing the Commission on the Future of Higher Education and developing her action plan to implement the substantive recommendations of its report, *A Test of Leadership*.

Positive changes in the world economy have substantially changed the responsibilities of higher education in the United States. Previously, and as most older adults remember it, the mission of higher education was to advance knowledge and transmit postsecondary knowledge and skills to 25% to 35% of the population, generally those more blessed with advantages and aptitude.

Now, in the global economy, knowledge is more important than geography and natural resources. This shift has created wider opportunities for people around the globe and special challenges to the education systems of developed countries with their higher costs of labor. Today, 50% to 80% of the U.S. workforce needs postsecondary knowledge and skills to be competitive in the global marketplace. Some older adults are not yet convinced this much education is necessary, but high school students are beginning to figure it out. When asked about their aspirations for higher education, 80% of high school sophomores said they intend to get a four-year degree, and half of that group, 40%, said they intend to obtain a graduate or professional degree.

A Test of Leadership makes it clear the facts no longer justify complacency about America's global leadership in higher education. The bottom line is plain: more Americans need to enroll *and graduate* from our colleges and universities, and all adults need to continue learning throughout their lives to upgrade their skills and meet the responsibilities of citizenship. It is obvious what must change. We need to find ways of engaging and assisting those who now are not enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education.

What demands attention?

- High school preparation – Colleges need to be more clear about expectations and requirements for success, and we must increase the motivation for students to take a rigorous curriculum in preparation for college and work. The federal Academic Competitiveness Grants, which employ good ideas field tested in Indiana and Oklahoma, are a step in the right direction. This program needs to be refined and coordinated with state efforts in the rule-making process.

- Early outreach – The students most likely to succeed in college didn't start thinking about it in the 11th grade; most of them began planning for college in grade school. GEAR UP has helped establish promising statewide early outreach programs in many states. These initiatives and other outreach programs need to be expanded and refined so they extend to every state and become even more effective.
- Access and affordability – Aspiration and preparation are insufficient if low and moderate-income students lack confidence in their ability to afford higher education and the means to pay the price. The proper response to this challenge has many parts – adequate support for both federal and state need-based aid, adequate direct support to institutions, and increased productivity in higher education.
- More disciplined attention to learning outcomes – Higher education involves exploration, critical thinking, and acquiring a wide range of knowledge and skills; no individual can become proficient in more than a small part of the curriculum. Consequently, a single standard for higher education learning outcomes would be foolish. But faculties in each discipline and institution owe it to their profession and their students to set meaningful standards for learning and assess progress toward them. States and the nation will benefit from more general assessments of adult learning and skill, much like the National Assessment of Educational Progress for K-12 students.

What should the federal government do?

All of these issues will require sustained work over many years. But we need to begin, and we need to prepare for a long journey. Federal budgets and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act should address the broad issues above and the following specific priorities:

1. Simplify the process for applying for need-based student assistance and provide mechanisms to give low-income students the earliest possible knowledge of their eligibility for assistance.
2. Increase the Pell Grant maximum award as rapidly as possible toward the goal established by the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education – 70% of four-year public tuition and fees.
3. Provide federal incentives for the states to expand need-based student assistance programs by redesigning and expanding the current LEAP program. A redesigned LEAP should not penalize the few states that have established strong need-based programs as long as they maintain their effort. But it should provide meaningful incentives for expanding and institutionalizing strong state student assistance programs.

4. Encourage and assist the states in establishing, refining, and institutionalizing early outreach efforts such as those created through GEAR UP.
5. Improve federal data systems, in partnership with the states, to monitor student progress through K-12 and higher education. It is no longer acceptable to be confused about success rates in higher education, net costs of enrollment, and whether federal and state student assistance programs are adequate in size and well-targeted to achieve their goals. Also, we need better lines of communication among K-12 teachers in various grades and between K-12 and college faculty.

What should states do?

The states, which govern, finance, and set policy for the public institutions who educate three-fourths of American college students, vary enormously in policies and circumstances. In some tuition is relatively high, in others relatively low. Some have strong need-based aid programs, others provide very little financial aid at the state level. Some are growing rapidly, others are losing or barely sustaining their population. But *every* state needs to focus more attention on higher education policy.

While the particular needs of each state will vary, states must:

1. Set explicit, ambitious state goals for improving preparation, participation, and completion in higher education.
2. Use established state policy boards and commissions more effectively to monitor results and focus public policy and public resources on the highest priority public needs.
3. Work with institutions to assess and improve student learning, productivity, and quality.

This agenda is urgent, not because American higher education is weak, but because a changing world requires it to become even stronger in order to sustain its global leadership. With a broad consensus on common purposes and a deeply shared resolve to succeed, we have, without question, the ability to pass *A Test of Leadership*.