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10-Year 'Report Card' on Higher Education Spurs Calls for Reforms

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Washington

Leading education-policy experts called for major reforms in higher education on Wednesday in response to a report showing that the nation has made little progress over the past decade in getting more of its citizens through college.

The impetus for such calls for change was "Measuring Up 2004," a state-by-state "report card" on higher education issued on Wednesday by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, an independent research group based in San Jose, Calif. The center, which in 2000 and 2002 issued similar reports grading states on how well they were providing higher-education services, decided in its latest report to analyze whether states had improved over the decade from 1992 to 2002.

At a symposium held to discuss the report card's results on Wednesday, two dozen of the nation's most prominent higher-education leaders and experts expressed dismay at the findings of the 10-year analysis. Some described the document as the higher-education equivalent of the landmark 1983 federal report, "A Nation at Risk," which played a key role in pushing two decades' worth of efforts to reform the nation's elementary and secondary schools.

"I believe that the results of this 10-year look back are going to come as a surprise, maybe even a shock, to our country," said James B. Hunt Jr., a former governor of North Carolina and the chairman of the center's Board of Directors.

Gov. Mark Warner of Virginia, who is chairman of the National Governors Association, said that states need to rethink how they finance and provide higher education if the United States is to avoid losing ground to other nations in terms of its education levels and economic competitiveness. He called the report's findings "more than a wake-up call."

Like the center's previous report cards, "Measuring Up 2004" graded all 50 states in five broad categories: student preparation, college participation, college completion, college affordability, and "benefits," which relates to the economic and civic gains accruing to states with an educated citizenry.

The center based its grades on 2002 data in most areas (with the exception of the "affordability" category, where it used 2003 data, if available). Its 10-year analysis was based on the same indicators as the report card.

Patrick M. Callan, the center's president, said in an interview that his group had decided to examine state higher-education systems over a 10-year period to gain a firmer grasp of where the states were headed

than was possible by comparing data from two-year intervals.

"We had no idea what the results would be when we decided to do this," Mr. Callan said. "We were surprised at how bleak the 10-year results were."

10 Years of Rising Costs

The analysis found that, for most Americans, college was less affordable in 2002 or 2003 than it had been in 1992. Seventeen states were faring worse than they had a decade before on every indicator of college affordability used by the center, and only two had improved their performance on more than half of the center's indicators over 10 years.

The report concluded that, over the long run, no state had increased financial-aid spending enough to keep pace with tuition. As examples of states where college had become significantly less affordable, it cited New Jersey, where the net cost of attending a public four-year college for a single year amounted to 24 percent of a typical family's income in 1992, and 34 percent a decade later.

David W. Breneman, dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and chairman of an advisory committee that oversaw the 2004 report, said the center's analysis found that it costs more to attend college now than it did 10 years ago, taking all financial aid into account. Other recent reports, including an analysis of college costs published in June by *USA Today*, have concluded that the net cost of attending college has declined in recent years (*The Chronicle*, August 6).

In its snapshot of current state performance, the center gave 37 states worse grades for affordability, and none better, than it had in its 2002 report. It gave 36 states failing grades, and awarded just two C's, to Minnesota and Utah, and one B, to California. No state received an A.

In examining 10-year trends in the area of college participation, the center found that, nationally, the likelihood that a ninth grader would complete high school and enroll in college by age 19 had declined over the decade.

In New York State, for example, a ninth grader had a 45-percent chance of graduating within four years and going straight on to college in 1992, and a 34-percent chance in 2002. In California, students' chances of sticking to such a schedule dropped from 35 percent to 32 percent over the same period; in Illinois, they dropped from 49 percent to 42 percent.

The center's analysis concluded that states had made "modest" progress over the decade in terms of the percentage of their college students who were earning certificates and degrees. But Joni E. Finney, the center's vice president, said most of the progress in this area was in certificate-degree completion, which rose by 50 percent, even after taking into account the growth in college enrollment. By comparison, the number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded rose by 10 percent from 1992 to 2002.

"A lot of colleges and universities don't want to talk about completion and don't want to talk about graduation," Governor Warner said at Wednesday's symposium. Because upper-level courses are generally much more expensive to provide than lower-level ones, many colleges have "economic disincentives" to keeping students around to graduate, he said.

Big Gains in Benefits

The center found that the biggest gains over the decade were in the category of benefits, which takes

into account figures such as the percentage of adults with bachelor's degrees and the differences in the incomes of a state's residents associated with degree completion. Forty-one states had improved on more than half of the indicators used by the center. They included Arizona, where 30 percent of adults had at least a bachelor's degree in 2002, up from 23 percent in 1992; and Kentucky, where the share of adults with at least a bachelor's degree rose to 24 percent from 17 percent during that time.

The center's generally dim view of how states were faring in higher education stood in marked contrast to its overwhelmingly positive assessment of states' progress in elementary and secondary education, which it examined in determining how well states were preparing students for college.

The center found that many states had made significant gains in preparing students for a college education and that, across the country, more students were taking upper-level mathematics and science courses and enrolling in Advanced Placement classes in 2002 than had done so a decade before. Forty-four states improved on more than half of the center's measures of college preparation.

Such improvements in college preparation were uneven throughout the population. Gaps remained in the college-participation levels of young adults in terms of race, and the gaps between low-income and high-income students widened. In New Jersey, for example, the share of young people from high-income families going to college rose from 48 percent to 53 percent from 1992 to 2002, while the share of low-income students going to college declined from 27 percent to 17 percent.

Nonetheless, many participants in Wednesday's symposium cited the center's 10-year analysis as evidence that the movement to reform elementary and secondary education has had a positive impact, while higher education has suffered from neglect by state officials and from the tendency of college leaders to focus on their institutions' interests rather than the broader needs of society.

"We can no longer attribute all of our college access and quality problems to the failure of public schools," Mr. Callan said. "The fact is, high schools have improved over these last 10 years, and we haven't seen commensurate higher-education gains."

Anthony P. Carnevale, vice president for assessments, equity, and careers at the Educational Testing Service, said "higher education is, in fact, becoming a bottleneck to opportunity in America."

Better Grades Than in 2002

Had the center not added a 10-year analysis of education trends to "Measuring Up 2004," the report may have been fairly upbeat.

When the 2002 and 2004 reports are compared, 20 states earned better grades for college preparation this time around, and just 9 earned worse. In terms of college participation, 26 states earned better grades, while just 8 earned worse. And in terms of college completion, 21 states earned better grades, while just 4 earned worse.

As was the case in the 10-year analysis, the brightest spot for states was the category of "benefits." Thirty-five states earned better grades in this area than two years ago, while just three earned worse, and more than three out of five states earned at least a B.

The report gave no overall grade to individual states. But an analysis by *The Chronicle* found that the best "grade-point averages," from highest to lowest and with each category weighed equally, were awarded to Massachusetts, Minnesota, Connecticut, and New Jersey, with California and Maryland

tying for fifth. In 2002, that group included Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Virginia.

At the other end of the performance spectrum, Nevada scored lowest. The next worst, in ascending order, were Louisiana, Alabama, West Virginia, and Mississippi. In 2002, Louisiana scored lowest, followed by West Virginia, Tennessee, Nevada, and Mississippi.

As was the case in its previous reports, the center decided not to attempt to grade states in a sixth proposed category, "learning," after concluding that it lacked reliable data for comparing how well various states were educating their college students. The center's researchers did, however, attempt to gauge learning in five states -- Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina -- and concluded that they had enough success to continue the experiment and extend it to other states.

Results of the report card are given in several reports on the center's Web site at www.highereducation.org

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