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Grading the States

Group's second 'report card' finds some improvement since 2000, but still awards many C's

By JONATHAN MARGULIES

Washington

American students are better prepared for college now than ever before, but the opportunity to engage in advanced study varies sharply across the nation, according to a key state-by-state "report card" on higher education released last week.

ALSO SEE:

[Grading the States: Report Card](#) The report, "Measuring Up 2002," compiled by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education,

is the independent research group's second attempt to grade all 50 states on their ability to prepare students for postsecondary work and how well they deliver it. Two years ago, the organization released its first report, which offered a mixed slate of results organized according to six criteria: student preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits, and learning.

This year's report was no different. States racked up mostly C's, and the average grades remained largely unchanged since the 2000 report, though performance in two categories fell off: affordability dropped from C- to D, and benefits, a measure of what a state gains by having an educated population, fell from B- to C+.

Collectively, the states recorded the same grades in the other four categories as in 2000: C+ in preparation, C+ in participation, B- in completion, and incomplete in learning, a measure of knowledge and skills development. As they did last time, the report's authors remarked that no reliable tool yet exists to compare the level of student learning across different institutions, much less different states.

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 this year to Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Virginia. In 2000, that group included Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Wisconsin.

At the other end of the performance spectrum, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Louisiana scored lowest. Louisiana, which finished last by that calculation, also trailed in the 2000 assessment, after West Virginia, Arkansas, Nevada, and Georgia.

At a symposium here last week, the researchers most responsible for the report said that they viewed it largely as a tool for policy makers and state higher-education officials, and hoped that those individuals would use their states' respective grades to identify problem areas and lobby harder for changes in state financing and education policy.

"Broad educational opportunity is as important for the nation and the states as it is for the individual," said James B. Hunt Jr., a former North Carolina governor and chairman of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. He said the report provides "a real-world standard," and "encourages each state to strive for high and attainable levels."

Authors of the report also said that across the board, states should be pleased with the wholesale gains made in the preparation category. High-school students today, they said, are graduating having taken more rigorous course loads and are generally better prepared to handle college work than just two years ago.

California Conundrum

Despite that improvement, the average grade in the preparation category remained the same as in 2000, a mediocre C+. As such, the report's authors were quick to point out that the grading structure may not fully portray the degree to which a state has improved or faltered in its individual performance -- even in those areas where grades have changed significantly since the last report.

In addition to the questions raised with regard to preparation, the authors referred to the affordability category, in which only one state, California, received an A. Thirty-eight others saw their grade in that category slip from 2000 levels, even though 41 states actually improved their raw performance.

That phenomenon, said David W. Breneman, chairman of the group that reviewed the report, has more to do with the report's statistical methodology than with the shortcomings of any

state.

"What we're catching here is an interesting effect that has more to do with California just knocking everyone else into a lower category," said Mr. Breneman, the dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. "They had just moved off the charts, and because this is a benchmarking exercise, it threw an awful lot of states into lower categories."

The report determines grades according to a 100-point scale. States at the very top of that scale, like California in the affordability category, are assigned a perfect score, and the performance of all others is measured according to that standard. There is no set number of states assigned to any one grade.

Several higher-education leaders in other states, upon seeing their affordability scores drop from 2000, were critical of that methodology. They said it may lead passive consumers of the report -- like parents and students trying to select a college -- to misinterpret its findings.

"I understand their analytical techniques and I'm not taking any issue at all with them, but I'd have to say that if even one student or family used this report card as a basis for a decision to attend the University of North Carolina, they would not have correct information," said Molly Corbett Broad, president of the UNC system. "I think its usefulness is diminished in all categories where the data does not provide a current picture."

In 2000, North Carolina received an A in affordability. This year, following a series of tuition increases at state colleges and universities, it received a C, even though its overall statistical performance did not drop significantly.

Officials in Georgia also reacted strongly to an assessment that they say fails to account for different philosophies in allocating financial aid. Georgia relies heavily on its HOPE scholarship program, which awards aid based on student merit, and does not employ an extensive need-based-aid program. The report does not credit financial-aid programs that are based on merit, and Georgia received an F in affordability for the second time.

"Any report on college affordability that does not include merit-based aid does not report the complete picture for students and families," said Glenn Newsome, executive director of the Georgia Student Finance Commission. "It's not an accurate assessment of a state's commitment to help students attend school beyond high school."

Others echoed Mr. Newsome's sentiments.

"I don't think it's a balanced approach," said E. Joseph Savoie, commissioner of higher education in Louisiana. "[The report] misses the point."

The report's architects acknowledged that many states have reason to be concerned with the methodology used to determine the affordability grades, but maintained that the success of California, which has diverted hundreds of millions of dollars into its successful Cal Grant student-aid program, should be emulated, not scorned.

"There will be some unhappy campers," said Mr. Breneman. "But that's a debate we ought to be having. I personally think many of these [merit-based] programs are poorly designed and aren't a proper use of public funds."

The Report at Work

Despite the debate over grading methodologies, the report's authors say it still provides the most comprehensive and effective mechanism for comparing higher-education performance across the nation. They hope state officials will use the new edition, in conjunction with the 2000 version, to assess performance and establish goals for future improvement.

"In 2000, we saw some states use the template to develop higher-ed policy," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the center that released the report. "We saw other states concentrate on the areas where they were weaker. Some just flew right over them. You have to look at this thing as sort of a tool for leadership."

Several states did rely heavily on the results issued in 2000 as they plotted their future plans for higher education.

In New Mexico, the results led to a movement to establish a statewide secretary of education, a proposal that will be tested by referendum in November. Kentucky officials also based their improvement efforts heavily on shortcomings they noticed two years ago.

"Kentucky's strategic agenda is very closely aligned with the 'Measuring Up' categories," said Sue Hodges Moore, interim president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. The state had organized its higher-education strategy around the same issues highlighted in the nationwide report.

Kentucky's governor, Paul E. Patton, a Democrat, said that

whether or not education officials care to admit it, the competitive energy generated by a report that assigns specific grades can do wonders for a state's improvement efforts.

"None of us enjoys picking up the paper and finding out your state isn't up to par," said Governor Patton. "But it makes you go to work."

Even education officials in low-performing states acknowledged that the report, while imperfect, provides the best direct evidence of which state efforts are falling short. That kind of evidence, they say, resonates strongly with citizens and lawmakers alike.

"I think it's a solid analysis of reality, and it affirms many of our efforts while pointing out our continuing challenges," said Mr. Savoie of Louisiana. In 2000, "I used the report in the legislative session. I used it in many articles and public discussions to demonstrate the seriousness of our circumstances."

Looking Ahead

Authors and observers noted that the report's most crucial finding may be obscured by grades that, since they have gone largely unchanged since the 2000 report, don't tell the whole story about the state of higher education in the United States. Raw data, for example, suggest that the accessibility of college study varies significantly along geographic and ethnic lines -- and conquering such differences is something that will be difficult if state-by-state grades become the sole object of attention.

"'Measuring Up 2002' comes to one salient conclusion: 'College opportunity in America is still at a standstill,'" said Constantine W. Curris, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in an e-mail message. "Much work needs to be done to reverse that trend."

Officials at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education contend that such challenges are readily apparent in its findings, and pledged to spend the next two years focusing on ways to further improve the usefulness of the report -- such as by applying a methodology to finally provide grades on student learning, and supplying raw data that is more recent. Some of the data used in the 2002 report had been collected as far back as the early 1990s.

"Now that we've got two of these under our belts, we're going to take a fairly in-depth look at how the report is and how we can make it more useful," said Mr. Callan.

GRADING THE STATES

Following are the five categories in which the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education awarded letter grades to the states, and explanations of how the center arrived at its grades.

Preparation: Measured by the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds with a high-school credential; percentage of high-school students who have taken upper-level mathematics and science courses; percentage of high-school seniors who have taken at least one upper-level math course; percentage of eighth-grade students who have taken algebra and scored at or above "proficient" on national examinations in math, reading, writing, and science; percentage of low-income eighth-grade students who scored at or above "proficient" on national examinations in math; number of scores in the top 20 percent on the SAT or ACT per 1,000 high-school graduates; and number of scores that are 3 or higher on Advanced Placement subject tests per 1,000 high-school juniors and seniors.

Participation: Measured by percentage of high-school freshmen who enroll in college in any state within four years; percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college in the state; and percentage of 25- to 49-year-olds enrolled part time in some type of postsecondary education.

Affordability: Measured by the percentage of a family's income needed to pay for college expenses, minus financial aid, at both two- and four-year colleges; percentage of state grants awarded to low-income families compared with federal Pell Grants given to low-income families in the state; share of income that poorest families need to pay for tuition at lowest-priced colleges in the state; and average loan amount that undergraduate students borrow each year.

Completion: Measured by the percentage of first-year students who return for their second year; percentage of first-time, full-time students completing a bachelor's degree within five years of high-school graduation and within six years of entering college; and the number of certificates, degrees, and diplomas awarded at all colleges per 100 undergraduate students.

Benefits: Measured by the percentage of 25- to 65-year-olds with a bachelor's degree or higher; percentage difference in total personal income between those with a bachelor's degree and those without a bachelor's degree and those with some college education, including an associate degree; percentage of

eligible residents voting in the 1998 and 2000 national elections; percentage of residents who declare charitable gifts among those who itemize their federal income-tax returns; and percentage of adults demonstrating high literacy skills.

REPORT CARD

	Preparation		Participation		Affordability		Completion		Benefi	
Alabama	D-	▲	D+	▼	F	▼	A	▲	C	
Alaska	B+	▼	D+		D	▼	F		C+	▼
Arizona	D	▼	B-	▲	D-	▼	C+	▲	B-	
Arkansas	D+	▲	D+	▲	C	▼	C-	▲	D-	
California	C-		B+		A		C+	▲	A-	▲
Colorado	B		B	▲	C-	▼	C+	▲	A	
Connecticut	A		A-	▲	C-	▼	B+		A-	▼
Delaware	C+		B	▼	F	▼	B		A	
Florida	C+	▲	D+		D-	▼	B+		C	▲
Georgia	C-	▲	F		D	▼	B	▲	D+	▼
Hawaii	C-	▼	B-		D	▼	C		B-	▲
Idaho	C-	▲	C-	▲	D+	▼	B-	▲	C	
Illinois	B+	▼	A		B	▼	B-	▲	B-	
Indiana	C-		C+	▲	D+	▼	B-		C	
Iowa	B		B+	▲	C	▼	A	▲	C+	
Kansas	B		A-	▼	C-	▼	B-	▼	C+	▼
Kentucky	C-	▼	C-	▲	C	▼	C	▲	C-	▲
Louisiana	F		D	▲	D	▼	D+	▼	C-	▲
Maine	B+		C+		F		B	▲	D+	▼
Maryland	B+		B+	▼	D-	▼	B-		A	
Massachusetts	A		A	▲	D-	▼	A-		A-	
Michigan	B		B+		D+	▼	C	▼	B+	▲
Minnesota	B-	▲	C+	▼	B	▼	B+		A-	▼
Mississippi	D		D	▲	D	▼	C+		C	
Missouri	B-	▲	C+	▲	D+		B-		D+	▼
Montana	A-	▲	D+		F	▼	C		C	▼
Nebraska	B	▼	A		D	▼	C+	▲	C	▼
Nevada	D	▼	C+	▲	D+	▼	F		C-	
New Hampshire	B		B-	▲	F		A		B	▲
New Jersey	A		A-	▲	C-	▼	B-		B+	▼
New Mexico	D-		A	▲	C-	▼	D	▲	C	
New York	B		B	▲	F	▼	B+	▼	C+	▼
North Carolina	B+	▲	C+	▲	C	▼	B	▼	D+	

North Dakota	B		B		D	▼	B		C+
Ohio	C+		C+	▲	F	▼	B-	▼	C
Oklahoma	D+		C+	▲	C	▼	C-		C
Oregon	C	▲	D+	▲	F	▼	C		B
Pennsylvania	B-	▲	B-	▲	D+	▼	A		B-
Rhode Island	C		A		F		A		A-
South Carolina	D+	▼	D+	▲	D+	▼	B		C
South Dakota	C		B-	▲	F	▼	B-		D+
Tennessee	D-	▼	D+	▲	D-	▼	C+	▲	D+
Texas	C+	▲	D+	▲	D+	▼	C-	▲	C+
Utah	A		C		B	▼	C+	▲	B
Vermont	B-		C+	▲	F	▼	A		B-
Virginia	B+	▲	B	▲	B-	▲	B		B
Washington	B-	▲	C-		C-	▼	A-	▲	B
West Virginia	C+	▲	C-	▲	F	▼	C-	▼	F
Wisconsin	A-		B		C	▼	B		C+
Wyoming	C-		B-		D	▼	B		D

▼ = grade dropped since 2000 report card

▲ = grade rose since 2000 report card

No arrow indicates same grade

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