

December 1, 2000

Looking at Higher Education, Report Finds Vast Differences Among States

By JACQUES STEINBERG

High school students in Nebraska are twice as likely as those in Alabama to take mathematics courses designed to prepare them for college. Young people in North Dakota are twice as likely as those in Nevada to enroll in college. And because of differences in state tuition, Vermont families must spend nearly 40 percent of their annual income to send a child to a state university, compared with families in Utah, where the figure is 17 percent.

A new survey packed with statistics like these has found wide disparities in how states prepare students for a college education, help them pay for tuition and ensure that they graduate.

"Your chances of getting to college are enormously dependent on where you live," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, the nonpartisan organization that released its findings yesterday.

The report pointed to factors that have long been known to cause discrepancies in access and achievement, including students' race, family income and a state's relative wealth.

In Illinois, for example, which sends a higher percentage of its students to college than most other states, 41 percent of white residents 18 to 24 are enrolled in college, as compared with 24 percent of young people of all other races, the survey said.

The report also suggested that the federal government has done little to ensure that a student in one part of the country receives the same educational opportunities as a student in another.

Indeed, the report made clear, the states that bear the primary responsibility for higher education, with 78 percent of American college students enrolled in state colleges and universities. And those states differ greatly in how much they help their residents pay for higher education.

"While higher education is so good for so many people, an awful lot of people aren't getting to it," said James B. Hunt Jr., the departing governor of North Carolina and the chairman of the organization that released the survey yesterday.

"My own state," said Mr. Hunt, who is completing his fourth term, "gets a very poor grade on college participation."

The survey found that only 34 percent of North Carolina high school freshmen went on to apply to college after four years, one of the lowest rankings in the country. That compares with New York and Connecticut, where the figure is 44 percent, and New Jersey, where it is 54 percent, the best in the nation.

"I'm not really certain why," Mr. Hunt said of the disparity. "I think it has a lot to do with the fact that we have been historically poor, we have a high number of minority citizens who have not been given good opportunities, and I don't think a lot of our people have valued higher education."

Still, those students who do attend colleges in North Carolina, both public and private, are more likely than those in many other states to graduate, with 56 percent completing a bachelor's degree in five years, the survey said.

Drawing on figures from throughout the 1990's, the survey found that the highest percentage of students in any state who take at least one college-preparatory mathematics course was in Nebraska (61 percent), while the lowest was in Alabama (27 percent).

A spokesman for the Alabama Department of Education, Tom Salter, disputed Alabama's ranking, saying, "it may have

been true 10 years ago, but it's not true now."

Mr. Salter said that beginning with the class that graduated from high school last spring, all Alabama students must take geometry to graduate, a subject that is considered upper level, or college preparatory, by the authors of the survey. Mr. Salter acknowledged, however, that Alabama spent less per student in kindergarten through 12th grade than almost any other state.

The survey found that the state with the highest percentage of residents who graduate from high school was North Dakota, with 95 percent.

Gaylynn Becker, the assistant director of approval and accreditation for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, attributed the state's success to many factors, most notably "the expectation of parents here that you will graduate from high school and you will go on to college."

Moreover, Mr. Becker said, the percentage of students in the state who have at least one parent who graduated from college is among the highest in the country. He also cited the sparseness of the state's population -- at about 600,000, among the smallest in the nation -- and the relatively high number of public and private colleges that serves it, at least 10.

Evaluating how well states make it possible for students to afford college, the survey gave its highest grade to Utah, where 17 percent of a family's annual income is required, on average, to pay for tuition at a public university. That compares with Vermont, where the average portion of family income required to pay the average tuition at a state university or college was 39 percent. The figures do not include financial aid.

In explaining those differences, Joni Finney, the vice president of the organization that produced the survey, cited the relatively low average tuition at four-year state universities in Utah -- \$2,100 -- and the relatively high average cost in Vermont, \$6,479.

Ms. Finney also said that far more students in Utah than in Vermont attend public colleges, as opposed to private colleges, allowing the Utah to achieve economies of scale that drive down the cost of tuition.

Chart: "REPORT CARD: Grading the States" Measuring Up, a report on higher education, assigns scores of A through F to states in various categories. Categories include preparation (how well a state's schools prepare students for college), affordability (whether students and families can afford to pay for higher education) and completion (whether students earn degrees in a timely manner). Here are the best and worst performers. PREPARATION: "A" Alaska Connecticut Illinois Massachusetts Nebraska New Jersey Utah Wisconsin "F" Alabama Louisiana AFFORDABILITY: "A" California Illinois Minnesota North Carolina Utah "F" Maine New Hampshire Rhode Island COMPLETION "A" Iowa Massachusetts New Hampshire New York Pennsylvania Rhode Island Vermont "F" Alaska Nevada (Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education)