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Study Gives States Low Marks in Making College Affordable

By TAMAR LEWIN

Most states are doing better at preparing students for higher education but are making little progress in helping young people to enroll in, afford or complete college, according to a new study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

The study, which graded each state in five categories, gave the nation's colleges a D in affordability, down from a C-minus when the center issued its first state-by-state report card two years ago.

The report found that many states had improved slightly on such measures as the percentage of family income needed to pay tuition or the average undergraduate's yearly loan. But California, with its network of low-tuition community colleges, was the only state to get an A on affordability. Because the other states have lagged farther behind California since the last report, New York and 11 other states received failing grades on affordability.

What makes the situation particularly dire, education experts said, is that the data on which the grades were based were collected in 2000, before the economy took the downward turn that has forced drastic cuts in state aid for higher education, and, at some state colleges, tuition increases of 20 percent or more.

"We've had a fair bit of damage to access and affordability, and it's going to get worse," said Robert Atwell, president emeritus of the American Council on Education. "What we are seeing, and will see more of, is a situation in which the states have to put so much money into mandatory things like prisons, Medicare and K-12 schools, that there's less left for higher education. Institutions are having to jack up their tuition fees to make up for that. If the federal government and the states don't expand need-based aid, we're going to have lots of people turned away."

At a time when many cities and states have for several years been working on broad school reform efforts, the most positive findings in the report concerned the academic preparation young people get in middle and high school.

The report found that 30 states are providing better academic preparation than they did two years ago. In some areas, the improvements have been dramatic. In Arkansas, for example, 23 percent of eighth graders take algebra, the prerequisite for higher-level math, compared with only 8 percent in the 2000 report.

The report found that where students live still plays a large part in determining the likelihood that their school work will be challenging enough to prepare them for college. In North Carolina, for example, about 61 percent of high school students take at least one upper-level math course, compared with only 31 percent in New Mexico.

Massachusetts ranked highest of the states in academic preparation. But New York, Maine, Tennessee and Virginia all showed improvement on each measure of college preparation, from the number of high school students taking upper-level science courses to the proportion achieving good scores on Advanced Placement exams. Details of the report are available on the Web at www.highereducation.org.

The report found few gains in either the proportion of students who enroll in higher education, or those who complete it. In 10 states, fewer than three in 10 young adults ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college. Here, too, geography matters: in Massachusetts, 54 percent of high school students finish high school and go on to college, compared with only 28 percent in Arizona.

Even if they get to college, many students do not stay long enough to complete a certificate program or degree. In most states, only a minority of full-time college students complete bachelor's degrees within five years of graduating from high school. And in most states, only about half the first-year students at community colleges return for their second year. In 24 states, the report found, there has been either no progress, or slippage, in the last two years on the proportion of students sticking with their studies.

"Completion is the Achilles' heel of higher education," said Patrick M. Callan, the president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which is a nonprofit group based in San Jose, Calif. "It's an area where we're just staying flat."

By producing a report card that grades higher education by state, rather than by institution, the center is trying to shift the nation's attention to the community colleges and local public colleges that provide the bulk of the higher education Americans receive.

"This country is so mesmerized by our huge research universities, which represent 3 or 4 percent of our enrollment, that we lose track of the higher education most people experience," Mr. Callan said. "With all the talk about No Child Left Behind, we've finally gotten to the point where we understand that a school district doesn't succeed unless all its students succeed. Now we need to get to the point where we think about how well higher education serves the vast majority of Americans, which means thinking about community colleges."