Editor's Column: Earning A's in Access, Affordability, and Accountability

Earlier this year, the Secretary of Education received a final report from the Commission on the Future of Higher Education—a group who was charged with evaluating the current state of higher education in America and providing recommendations for the future. The final report, released in September 2006, centered on three fundamental concepts: college *A*ccess, *A*ffordability, and *A*ccountability. The Secretary now hopes to use this report as the basis for a nationwide discussion. This dialogue will focus on a number of Commission's findings, including the challenges of the global economy and changing demographics of our country, the clear struggle facing low income students in achieving access to educational opportunities, the overly complex financial aid system, and the serious lack of information about college costs and financial aid.

The Commission recommends that several steps be taken to expand access and success: restructuring the student aid process; creating a robust culture of transparency, innovation, and quality improvement; and achieving global leadership through a more educated society. These recommendations were delivered at a time when Congressional leadership has changed, reauthorization of the Higher Education Act continues to be postponed and families feel more anxiety than ever about rising costs and affordability of college.

What is encouraging is the Commission's clear recommendation that not only college *access* but also college *success* is needed. A student enrolling in higher education is only the first step. As noted by Tom Mortensen in *Postsecondary Opportunity* (August 2003), if students are not adequately prepared from K-12, persistence even to the second year is in jeopardy. And according to Michael McPherson and Morton Schapiro in *College Access: Opportunity or Privilege?* (2006), 50% of today's students require at least one remedial course upon enrolling in college. Further, as reported by Tom Mortensen (*Postsecondary Education Opportunity* May 2001; March 2003), if first-year traditional students enrolling in a four-year school are less than 40% likely to complete their four-year degree on time in four years, this trend needs to be considered in terms of its effects on the cost and affordability of college.

If institutions become more transparent in providing basic performance data in their informational materials to prospective students, we will indeed have moved closer to the Commission's accountability recommendations for better informing our consumers. This transparency could include areas such as persistence rates from first to second year; on-time graduation rates; placement rates within one year of program completion; acceptance rates for advanced education degrees; median debt amounts of graduates; and the institution's student loan default rate.

Part of the Commission's suggestions in this regard refers to shifting the accreditation process to focus more on outcomes in addition to the current review criteria. Consumers need to be able to see likely results of former students as they weigh their choices, their need to sacrifice, and their chances for success.

Surely every institution has its own special role and mission. Schools have significant responsibilities for providing students with opportunities for success. According to the Commission, this includes making such opportunities reasonably available, affordable, and likely to be successful. While many may feel that being "successful" can be measured in many ways, we can no longer simply accept just any measure. Billions of taxpayer dollars and the future of our country demand a more defined, accountable response.

In light of this goal of providing more and better means for helping to evaluate and measure the success of our efforts through professional research and dialogue, we are pleased to provide our readers with a number of fine articles.

The first of these, authored by Kristan M. Venegas, focuses on the Web-based resources available to low-income students as they build perceptions of higher education, make their college decisions, and engage in financial aid activities. One of the conclusions reached suggests that access to computers by low-income students is not as great a problem as their need for help and guidance in navigating the financial aid process electronically.

Katherine Baird's article, made possible by NASFAA's Sponsored Research Grant Program, examines the impact of the rapid tuition increases in recent years in the public sector and whether these have made public-sector education less affordable. The study considers how these increases have affected enrollment decisions and whether any differences could be noted by race, income, and their influence on the student's life and society in general. Her study raises questions about whether the current policy emphasizing low tuition is the most efficient use of public subsidies.

The final article is a book review by Rupert Wilkinson on a recent publication, *Going Broke by Degree*, by Richard Vedder. Wilkinson's research for his own 2005 book, *Aiding Students, Buying Students: Financial Aid in America*, provided a sound basis for his insightful analysis and comments.

We hope these articles foster additional thought and analysis on these and other issues affecting the financing of postsecondary education.

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