



NATIONAL CONFERENCE *of* STATE LEGISLATURES

The Forum for America's Ideas

BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION



BIG QUESTIONS
PRACTICAL ANSWERS

New Strategies for Setting
and Moving a Higher
Education Agenda

WHAT WE WANT

HIGHER EDUCATION IS ONE OF EVERY STATE'S BIGGEST AND MOST IMPORTANT INVESTMENTS AND IS THE ENGINE OF OUR ECONOMY.

Our investment in students and campuses — now nearly \$90 billion a year — helps states build strong economies powered by good jobs. The investment ensures that states have vibrant communities with an educated and involved citizenry.

But today, we need to get better results from the dollars we spend. Out of every ten 9th graders nationally, only three will obtain an associate's or bachelor's degree on time. These results simply aren't good enough. We need more people attending and finishing college with a certificate or degree in order to keep up and move up in the global economy. And we need more college access and success at a time when resources are tighter than ever.

To accomplish these things, legislators must change how they view higher education. For too long, legislatures have viewed higher education as a collection of institutions rather than a system, as a laundry list of needs rather than a focused set of priorities, as a budget to be wrangled over rather than an investment strategy for meeting state goals.

NCSL created the **Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education** to help legislators think and act strategically to make the most of our investment. The Commission has worked for three years to understand the challenges and opportunities facing states, state legislators, and their colleges and universities, listening, talking and reflecting. This guide aims to help legislators begin to put what we have learned into action for the benefit of states, students and citizens.

WHAT THE WORLD DEMANDS

THE TRENDS WE SEE ARE SENDING A CLEAR MESSAGE — A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA IS NO LONGER ENOUGH TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN TODAY'S WORLD.

Now more than ever, higher education is the key to building and maintaining a competitive economy and the benefits it brings. In the last century, states stepped up and made the commitment to provide every child a basic education. In this century, we must step up again and make a commitment to increasing the share of our population that is educated beyond high school.

Today, economic development is as much about having adequate talent as providing adequate tax breaks. We need a more educated workforce to fill the openings left by retiring Baby Boomers, meet the increasing skill requirements of today's jobs, and jobs for tomorrow. Nations that have figured this out have become our strongest competitors in the global marketplace.

States that do not realize this will see shrinking economies, disappearing jobs and lost opportunities for their residents.

Voters are echoing the call for a more educated population. In just the last 10 years, the percentage of Americans who believe that a college education is necessary for success in the working world has nearly doubled.



THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

DELIVERING ON OUR COMMITMENT TO A MORE EDUCATED POPULATION MEANS THAT WE MUST CONFRONT A NUMBER OF IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES:

Demands for state services are growing faster than revenues. Even in good economic times, legislators must wrestle with how to square the growing list of mandates and needs with available funds. The current financial crisis will only tighten the squeeze. We must be more strategic than ever in budgeting for higher education, making tough choices about priorities, providing incentives for campuses to collaborate rather than compete and avoiding short-term fixes like across-the-board cuts. The issue is less about how to invest more money than about how to invest money more wisely.

Our students are changing. The groups that are growing the fastest in our states are the same ones that have too often faced the greatest obstacles to college access and success — students of color, low-income and first-generation students, and working adults. We're not meeting these students' needs — ensuring college readiness, providing adequate financial aid, supplying information and academic support and offering flexible courses and programs.

We are spending more and not getting the results we need from higher education. The United States spends more per student than any other nation on earth, but has the lowest college completion rate. As a result, we are now one of only two nations whose young population (25-34 year-olds) is less educated than its older population (35-44 year-olds.) This trend is not acceptable. We must make getting through college as much of a priority as getting to college.

Tuition, debt and anxiety are growing. College prices continue to rise faster than family incomes or grant awards. Loan debt is piling up, forcing many students to rethink their decisions about majors, starting a family or buying a home, or even whether to go to school or stay in school. Polls show that Americans are more worried than ever that students are being shut out of college because they can't afford it. We must make sure that the students who need financial aid the most are getting it, and stop relying on tuition increases to balance the higher education budget.

With these challenges in front of us, we can't keep doing business as usual and hoping for the best. We need to work with governors, campus and system leaders and business and community leaders to create a policy agenda for higher education that uses the resources we have to fulfill our commitment to a more educated population.

WHAT WE CAN DO

A REAL AND LASTING POLICY AGENDA REQUIRES PERSISTENT AND CONSISTENT LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP. TO MOVE THIS AGENDA, LEGISLATORS AND THEIR STAFF MUST:

ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS. The legislature must be a key partner in shifting the higher education conversation from inputs to outcomes, from what institutions need to what states and students need and from what we've always done to what we could do.

Defining the Need. What is the educational attainment of our state's population? How does that relate to current and future workforce needs? What do we need to do to improve student success? Having an ambitious and realistic goal for an educated workforce is a critical first step, and is a good way to bring the higher education and workforce communities together.

Looking at Spending and Results. Where do we spend our higher education dollars — and what are the results? Legislators need to ask for and look carefully at these data. Developing a smart investment strategy for higher education requires looking at how we use resources, not just at how much we have or need.

Improving Efficiency & Success. What are campuses doing to increase success rates and reduce the time it takes to get a certificate or degree? How can we do more of what works? Our colleges and universities have developed innovative programs that help reduce dropout rates and accelerate completion. Many of these programs should be expanded and supported so that they do not become the first casualties of budget cutbacks.

Understanding Policy Signals. What signals does state policy send? For example, funding models may provide strong incentives for enrollment, but weak — or no — incentives for completion. Similarly, accountability measures provide incentives for institutions to focus on the students who are most likely to succeed, rather than at-risk students.

Focusing on the Students. What's best for students? Discussions of proposed changes in funding and regulation often focus more on how these changes will impact institutions' bottom line than how they will affect students' ability to get to and through a program.



WHERE WE START



DO BUSINESS DIFFERENTLY. We face incredible demands on our time as legislators, but we can take a number of simple steps to make the most of the time we do have to build a strong and lasting strategy for higher education.

Set the agenda. Too often, the legislature's agenda for higher education is reactive rather than proactive, and deals with individual issues rather than the big picture. Leaders and committee chairs need to take the initiative to sit down with each other and with the governor to identify a targeted set of priorities for the year ahead. For example, states are targeting these priorities: raising the percentage of adults with certificates and degrees; increasing the number of degrees awarded, focusing on high need areas such as teaching and engineering; and improving enrollment, transfer and graduation rates for all students, especially those most at risk.

Build the bench. Legislators, committee chairs and staffers come and go, which makes it difficult to maintain a consistent focus on goals and priorities for higher education. Legislatures should consider creating an education and workforce study group, where legislators and staff from key committees can meet to discuss issues and priorities, and where newer legislators and staff can get up to speed on issues they will face as they move toward leadership positions. This provides an ongoing forum for K-12, higher education and economic development leaders to come together around state priorities for building a strong workforce.

Adjust the focus. The priorities, interests and needs of individual institutions consume much of the time legislatures spend on higher education. Legislators and staff responsible for organizing hearings, briefings, campus visits and interim studies should use these opportunities to focus on the big picture questions. What does our state need from our higher education system? How does a particular issue or proposal help to meet that need? What is each institution's role in meeting that need?

THE NEXT STEPS ARE OURS AS LEGISLATORS TO TAKE.

We must start by sending a clear signal to our legislative leadership, legislative colleagues and our constituents that higher education is a priority, even as we tackle the challenges of K-12 education, public safety and health care in a slumping economy. We must follow that up by starting and leading an honest public conversation about the return on our higher education investment — where we are, where we need to be and how we can get there.

We cannot afford to wait. If we do, we risk not having the talent we need to grow our economies, turning public anxiety into anger or letting the federal government step in with one-size-fits-all solutions.



As legislators, we must take the next steps. We have met the challenge of change in higher education before. We can — and must — do it again.

NCSL is ready, willing and able to help support legislative leadership on higher education reform. NCSL can help convene policymakers in your state and provide speakers and presentations. The annual NCSL Legislative Institute on Higher Education and the annual Legislative Staff Institute on Higher Education deliver vital information on policy issues, trends and solutions. NCSL also holds regular forums for state legislators on higher education issues and strategies. If you have questions or would like to request in-state support please contact:

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For more information and resources, please visit www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/brcoverview.htm.

ABOUT

THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

NCSL established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education as a multi-year effort to elevate the awareness among state legislators of their roles in the higher education fiscal crisis and their responsibilities in providing an accessible and affordable public higher education; and to equip them with skills, information and strategies to improve current conditions.

COMMISSION MEMBERS

- ▲ Representative Denise Merrill, Co-chair (Connecticut)
- ▲ Representative Geanie W. Morrison, Co-chair (Texas)
- ▲ Senator Ben Altamarano (New Mexico)
- ▲ Senator John H. Chichester (Virginia)
- ▲ Senator Lyle Hillyard (Utah)
- ▲ Representative Phyllis Gutierrez Kenney (Washington)
- ▲ Senator Ken Lavalle (New York)
- ▲ Senator Teresa Lubbers (Indiana)
- ▲ Senator Evelyn Lynn (Florida)
- ▲ Senator Robert O'Leary (Massachusetts)
- ▲ Senator Robert Plymale (West Virginia)
- ▲ Assemblyman Craig Stanley (New Jersey)



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