House Hearing Focuses on “Graduation Gap”

On July 13, the House Education and the Workforce Committee held a hearing on H.R. 4283, the College Access and Opportunity Act. Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-Ohio) said the hearing was to look at “What are we getting in return?” for large investments in higher education.

Boehner expressed his concern about the particularly low graduation rates of low-income and minority students, noting that this “graduation gap” is just one of many disturbing signs that higher education is in need of real change. He suggested that greater transparency about institutional outcomes would empower consumers to choose colleges more wisely.

Testimony

Four witnesses testified. Ross Wiener, policy director of the Education Trust, discussed a report his organization released in May, “A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities.” This report argues that the need for advanced degrees has never been higher, yet graduation rates in general have been “stagnant” and the rates for low-income and minority students are dramatically lower than those of other students.

Wiener said lower graduation rates for low-income and minority students could be explained by a combination of factors, including academic preparation, ability to pay, and institutional practices. Noting that some institutions have achieved substantially higher graduation rates than their comparable “peer” institutions, Wiener suggested that Congress require all states to establish accountability systems. He also said that the Education Trust is currently developing an interactive Web site to allow consumers to compare peer institutions. It is expected to be ready this fall.

Richard Nault, vice president for student affairs at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio), described his institution’s efforts to maintain its 81 percent graduation rate. Miami University was one of the “high-performing institutions” highlighted in the Education Trust report. Nault said teaching is the key to their success—full-time faculty teach 65 percent of all freshmen classes. Other efforts related to student engagement include having all freshmen live in dorms organized by academic themes, training residence hall personnel to be advisors, and providing software to allow students to monitor their academic progress. He said the final piece of the equation is financial assistance to make the institution accessible to all.

William Law, president of Tallahassee Community College, also emphasized the importance of student financial aid in the persistence of low-income students. His institution monitors students closely, and has found that a student’s withdrawal from more than one course generally indicates a problem.

Paul Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), reported on a recent SHEEO study. It found that:

- Since 1970, state appropriations overall have kept pace with increased enrollments and the consumer price index.
- State appropriations decline during recessionary periods and increase during good times.
- Schools raise tuition when state support declines, and tuition has increased faster than state support.

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All states are different, so there is enormous variation in all these indicators.

Regarding graduation rates, he noted that current data collection systems often provide misleading and incomplete data. He suggested that a student unit record system would help address that problem. Many states have adopted such systems and have found “acceptable ways of protecting privacy while providing valuable information for educators and policy makers,” he said. As noted later in the hearing by Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.), more intense student tracking systems would be of concern to many on privacy grounds.

Responses

The hearing was well attended, suggesting broad committee interest in graduation rates. Several Democrats on the committee emphasized the importance of adequate financial assistance in permitting low-income and minority students to complete their degrees. There was also substantial interest in the factors that account for the relative success of some institutions in graduating their students. A few members observed that it was a bit odd to be talking about six-year graduation rates for bachelor’s degrees, noting they emphasized to their own children that a four-year degree should be completed in four years.

The only member to challenge the use of graduation rates as a means of measuring success was McKeon, who observed that many students desire to take only a class or two. He observed, “I’m not sure we should be beating ourselves with switches because we’re not graduating everyone.” He also noted that not everything should be measured in terms of financial success (i.e., the higher incomes resulting from college degrees).

In closing, Boehner expressed regret that there was not sufficient time remaining in the session to complete the reauthorization bill, but indicated his intention to move a measure promptly in the 109th Congress.

For more information, please contact Susan Hattan at NAICU, (202) 785-8866, or susan@naicu.edu.

The House Appropriations Committee approved the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill on July 14, with no changes to the subcommittee mark for student aid. Of the 13 appropriations bills, eight have passed the House. The District of Columbia and Military Construction spending bills are slated for House passage before the summer break begins July 23, leaving Labor-HHS-Education, VA-HUD and Transportation for floor consideration the first week of September.

The Senate has passed only the Defense Appropriations bill. To move the process along, Appropriations Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) added a provision to the Defense conference report to enforce the $821 billion spending cap and the Senate subcommittee allocations, because the Senate never approved the FY 2005 budget resolution.

Stevens has indicated that if appropriations action continues to be delayed, the Senate may package the Foreign Operations bill with the other spending bills into an omnibus bill to be considered on the floor the week of September 13. One way to speed up action would be for the Senate to take the bills passed by the House, substitute the Senate version, and send an omnibus bill to conference with the House by September 21. This omnibus strategy may not include Labor-HHS-Education, VA-HUD, and Transportation-Treasury, and could leave them funded at last year’s levels through a continuing resolution. This strategy will mature after Labor Day.

For more information, please contact Stephanie Giesecke at NAICU, (202) 785-8866 or stephanie@naicu.edu.
Senate Holds Hearing on Pell Grant for Kids

On July 15, the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families held a hearing on the notion of “Pell Grants for Kids.” While Subcommittee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) has not yet introduced legislation, his proposal would provide a $500 scholarship to all middle- and low-income children for them to spend at the K-12 school of their choice.

Alexander clearly understands the Pell Grant and other federal student aid programs, which will be good for us as we work with the Senate on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). But this hearing was about how to apply what works in higher education—the Pell Grant’s portability to the institution of choice—to K-12 education. Alexander believes that the federal dollars in K-12 education do not encourage the same competition as they do in higher education, and that K-12 schools get smothered with regulations.

While everyone was polite, and no one outright opposed Alexander’s proposal, Democratic senators at the hearing called it a federal voucher for K-12 education. That notion is anathema to many Democrats, the teachers’ unions, the National Parent Teachers Association, and many other K-12 organizations.

NAICU does not get into K-12 voucher fights, but it was interesting to hear first-hand Alexander’s knowledge and support of higher education and student aid. (He’s a former president of the University of Tennessee and former U. S. secretary of education.) Support for private higher education also came from other members of the subcommittee.

Reactions

Senator Jack Reed (D-R.I.), who followed Senator Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) to the Senate, argued that comparing a federal K-12 voucher to a Pell Grant is a poor analogy. He explained that K-12 education is compulsory and schools must take all students in their district, whereas colleges choose their students; private K-12 schools have admissions standards, and public K-12 schools do not; and private colleges are different than private K-12 schools in terms of religious curriculum.

Although Alexander says public K-12 schools are overburdened with regulations, Reed noted, public and private institutions of higher education with Pell Grant recipients must follow loads of regulations as well. Pilot programs similar to the Alexander proposal had been introduced in the past, and Pell had voted against them, he said. Reed suggested they be called “Alexander Grants,” instead.

Senator Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), a product of private education, explained how providing money to let students choose a private school over a public school wouldn’t work. He said there are roughly 54 million students in K-12 education, and only 5 or 6 million of them are in private school. There’s no room in the private K-12 structure to move millions more students around.

“Vouchers don’t provide equal access,” Dodd said, because the choice comes from the private school that admits, not the parent who chooses. A $500 voucher for private school won’t get a family very far in paying the tuition. He wants to ensure that federal dollars are there to “make sure pub-

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Private Freshmen’s Attitudes Differ from Nationwide Sample

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA publishes an annual report on each year’s entering college students. According to its most recent report, a greater percentage of students at private institutions consider the philosophical aspects of attending college “very important.” Their reasons include:
• “to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas” (70.4%, versus 65.4% nationally);
• “to make me a more cultured person” (48.1%, versus 40.7% nationally); and
• “to learn more about things that interest me” (80.2%, versus 76.9% nationally).

By contrast, a greater percentage of students nationwide consider material aspects of college “very important”:
• “to be able to get a better job” (70.1%, versus 66.4% private);
• “to be able to make more money” (69.4%, versus 63.3% private); and
• “to get training for a specific career” (70%, versus 62.9% private).

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey is the nation’s largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, and is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. The fall 2003 survey involved 276,449 first-year students entering 413 four-year colleges and universities. Selected findings from the report are listed below.

High school academic achievement. A greater percentage of NAICU students report A’s in high school, compared to the national average. 30% report A or A+ (versus 23.2% nationally), and 26.6% report A- (versus 23.4% nationally).

Volunteer work. A greater percentage of NAICU students performed volunteer work during the past year than the national average (88.1%, versus 83.1% nationally).

Reasons for choosing a particular college. Among the reasons noted as “very important” in influencing the student’s decision to attend a particular college, a greater percentage of NAICU students noted the following:
• good academic reputation (66.6%, versus 55.1% nationally);
• financial assistance (47.1%, versus 33.6% nationally);
• visit to the campus (50.7%, versus 37.6% nationally);
• religious affiliation/orientation of the college (12.1%, versus 5.6% nationally); and
• rankings in national magazines (18.2%, versus 13.0% nationally).

HERI invites your institution to participate in the 2004 Freshman Survey. Participating institutions receive a detailed profile of their entering freshman class, as well as national normative data for students in similar types of institutions (e.g., public four-year colleges, moderately selective Protestant colleges, highly selective Catholic colleges, public two-year colleges).

Participating institutions can also receive separate reports for their part-time and transfer students, and reports profiling students by various subgroups (for example, by intended major or career, by academic ability, by home state) as part of the basic participation costs.

The CIRP Freshman survey and the HERI Faculty survey are currently open for registration. For brochures that detail the surveys and registration process, please go to http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/...