



Alliance for Research on Higher Education

October 2006 Policy Updates

Policy Paper: NC Board of Governors Needs Tune-up

The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (www.nccppr.org) has released a new report suggesting that the NC Board of Governors should receive a “tune-up” in certain areas, while continuing to endorse the governance structure overall. The Center recommends placing an overwhelming majority of Board appointments in the Governor’s hands.

The Center says the legislature is not doing its homework to understand the qualifications of the candidates for the Board or to find out candidates’ views on higher education policy. In addition, the process is tainted by Board candidates making campaign contributions to legislators. Finally, the legislature is failing to meet the statutory goal of diversity.

Additional comments include better long-term planning, limiting tuition increases, improved oversight of college athletics, and keeping the research universities from undermining the System.

The Alliance is pleased to present its inaugural edition of a regular policy briefing. It is intended to provide leaders with a brief review of national policy papers, Alliance projects, a calendar of events, and other issues that can assist higher education constituent leaders in decision making.

Questions and suggestions should be directed to Alliance Director, Catherine Watt (cwatt@clermson.edu).

The Alliance made its first formal presentation to the Commission on Higher Education October 5th, during their meeting at Clemson University. The Institute’s project leaders presented information on current initiatives that can contribute to discussions of SC higher education goals. The Alliance’s potential role in analyzing questions related to affordability, workforce management, and enrollment modeling were introduced.

Thank you to CHE Chair Dr. Layton McCurdy and to the other Commissioners for their interest. The meeting was very positive, and we look forward to the Commissioners becoming active partners in the Alliance and to collaborating with the CHE staff.

Presentation materials are available upon request.

Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities (A report by the Education Trust, August 2006)

“Today, our highest-achieving low-income students actually go directly on to college at rates about the same as our lowest-achieving students from wealthy families.” Echoing concerns noted in South Carolina, results from this policy analysis strongly condemn choices made at the state and federal level to assist middle- and upper-class students rather than make proportional increases in need-based aid. If the goals of programs that exist in South Carolina and in other states are to increase the educational opportunities open to students, and college costs continue to increase, then need-based aid should be a priority.

Recommendations include the following: 1) Placing the needs of low income students first; 2) Change the metrics we use to determine “quality” in higher education; 3) Radically simplify the federal financial aid process; 4) Provide incentives in other federal programs to increase service to low income students; and, 5) demand that accrediting organizations consider who institutions serve and how well they serve them.

The Alliance strongly recommends this report and will expand analysis of its data for implications in SC.

Congressional Notes: the Spellings Commission Report

US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is on record stating that “time is of the essence” in carrying out recommendations from the new **Commission on the Future of Higher Education** report released in September. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Secretary Spellings questions college costs and repeatedly states the need for more data about institutional expenses, efficiency, and outcomes. She suggests that institutions should be accountable for student learning in a manner similar to that of elementary and high schools, placing the learning burden on institutions rather than on students.

One of the largest changes is related to unit-record reporting of student records, a process already in place in South Carolina, where institutions have reported student-specific data to the SC CHE for more than a decade. Proponents of unit-record reporting argue that it will validate enrollment, retention and graduation rate numbers, while improving abilities to analyze transfer rates. Critics argue that while some data may be useful, the massive infrastructure required to gather, edit, and maintain the system far outweigh limited benefits. Secretary Spellings refused to suggest a dollar figure that it would take to create this new reporting system or how accountability would be determined.

Another anticipated aspect of the report is the call to restructure the federal financial aid process. The FAFSA has long been recognized as cumbersome and intimidating, and the data gathered has lacked reliability and validity due to confusing questions. Finally, Commission’s report is expected to articulate calls for a federal accreditation process, which would be a dramatic shift away from the powerful regional accrediting agencies.

New Study Planned: A Survey of General Assembly Members’ Perceptions of SC Higher Education

MUSC Associate Provost & Alliance Affiliated Scholar Dr. Tom Higerd has proposed a new study to assess the perceived strengths, weaknesses, and needs of higher education.

Through surveys and interviews with members who sit on several committees, the Alliance hopes to gain insight into priorities as seen from Legislative perspectives. Research questions pursued in this case study will focus on perceptions of planning, growth, and economic development.

Surveys conducted in 2006 will serve as a baseline that coincides with the Governor’s Higher Education Task Force Report. As implementation of the report’s recommendations commences, follow-up interviews related to progress made will be conducted.

Grant Proposal in Preparation: Alliance submits to Department of Education to study Costs, Subsidies, & Outcomes

The unique confluence of higher education activities in SC is the subject of a proposal submitted to the US Department of Education by the Alliance. The two-year, \$450,000 proposal seeks to study the relationships among the Lottery Scholarships, tuition increases, state appropriations and student outcomes.

Questions related to the study seek to analyze the subsidy structure of higher education, both from the state and returned to it. Also, long term benefits to students are questioned in terms of actual fees paid compared with “sticker price.”

The SC CHE will be a significant partner in providing the data for the project; institutions wishing to participate should contact the Alliance office.

The Alliance for Research on Higher Education is a newly formed and unique organization dedicated to research on higher education and its relationship with the economy. South Carolina institutions of higher education, state agencies, and other non-profit organizations are eligible to be members or partners in the Alliance.

Partners in the Alliance will receive detailed policy papers, such as the *Closer Look* series, participate in Alliance Board activities, and have access to additional higher education policy research.