
Today's News

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Education Leaders Say Financial Barriers to Degree Attainment Require Urgent Response

By [JANE R. PORTER](#)

Higher-education leaders came together on Tuesday to discuss a recent report on financial barriers to college access and degree completion, and warned that a failure to find solutions could threaten not only the prospects of individual students but the status of the nation as a whole.

The session was part of a hearing held by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, a panel that advises Congress and that released last week's [report](#) on financial barriers for students from low- to moderate-income families (*The Chronicle*, September 14).

William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland and one of the presenters at the session, expressed concern with the report's findings about the effects of rising college costs and insufficient financial aid for disadvantaged students. "We as a nation are at risk of creating a permanent underclass," he said.

The report, "Mortgaging Our Future: How Financial Barriers to College Undercut America's Global Competitiveness," has a particular urgency, he said, because of coming mass retirements of baby boomers and the risk of replacing them with less qualified candidates, he said.

Arnold L. Mitchem, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education and one of the panelists, said the report could serve as a way to "galvanize Americans in understanding what the stakes really are" in the persistence of such financial barriers.

Mr. Mitchem, whose organization lobbies on behalf of the federal TRIO programs for disadvantaged students, was among several panel members who expressed alarm at the report's estimate that up to 2.4-million bachelor's degrees will be lost in this decade because of financial barriers.

Another speaker, A. Dallas Martin Jr., president of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, cautioned that the nation's competitiveness could become "an endangered species" if the recommendations presented in the report are not followed.

Panelists focused on the committee's six proposed solutions, the most important of which called for strengthening partnerships on the federal, state, and institutional level to help increase need-based aid.

But controlling the rapid growth in merit-based aid is another critical approach to curbing the problem. Mr. Kirwan said merit-based awards have increased by 240 percent in the past decade, compared with a 56-percent increase in need-based aid.

David S. Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community

Colleges, told the group that the trend toward merit-based aid is a "very dangerous course" for the nation to be taking. Merit-based programs are often poorly targeted, he said, excluding part-time students and those working toward a certificate instead of a degree.

Mr. Kirwan suggested that models already developed by highly selective colleges and universities be applied on a larger scale to all institutions of higher education. Programs that incorporate Work-Study opportunities and federal grants to help offset the cost of attending college have proven to be successful and require collaboration between the government, the state, and the college or university.

Mr. Baime expressed particular concern with the report's findings that only 19 percent of low-income qualified students who completed trigonometry in high school and entered a two-year higher-education program with the expectation of earning a bachelor's degree went on to receive that degree, versus 69 percent of similar students who entered a four-year college. He echoed the report's suggestion that the transition from two-year to four-year colleges be made easier for students.

Mr. Baime also supported another of the report's recommendations, which called for increased support of remedial programs in colleges. More than half of all community-college students receive some sort of remedial instruction, he said, calling that a strong indicator of the need for such programs.

David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, was alarmed at the increasing reliance on loans, pointing out that "25 percent of all students are now going to college on their credit cards." Policy makers should counter that trend with more need-based aid, he said, citing the Pell Grant program as an effective solution that has not received sufficient federal support.

Panelists also agreed that improving early-intervention programs in elementary and secondary schools for students from lower-income families would help ensure that they are better prepared for bachelor's-degree programs. Sarita E. Brown, president of Excelencia in Education Inc., which advocates for programs to increase the educational attainment of Hispanic students, stressed the importance of redefining the notion of higher education as a national rather than simply a private good.

Mr. Warren and other panelists agreed. "Student aid has to be seen as an investment," he said, "not an expenditure."

The morning discussion was followed by a session on the study of college-textbook pricing, which examined how policy options and methods of increased communication can help regulate book prices. The session was the first of a number of such hearings that will be held around the country. Findings and recommendations from those hearings will be delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives education committee next May.

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