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Governors Face Challenges in Improving College-Completion Rates

Lack of money, turnover in ranks are obstacles for ambitious goals

By Jennifer Gonzalez

For the United States to have any shot at reaching ambitious college-completion goals, the bulk of the work will have to be shouldered by the states.

The nation's governors appear to be on board with that agenda, pressed by President Obama and others. Last summer the governors decided that no issue was more important than increasing the number of people with a college credential, and they have made it the focus of a yearlong campaign. As part of that effort, the National Governors Association is pushing states to start by collecting data to better track who is succeeding and who is being left behind, and to use that information to develop plans to improve records on college completion.

Some states are making progress under the governors' directive, but it is unclear how much change the group's campaign will be able to make. Many states face large budget gaps, a problem that saps the attention of lawmakers and leaves little money for creating databases or other programs.

The campaigns of the governors group have had mixed results in the past, particularly given their short time spans and the governors' competing legislative interests. Each year the group selects a governor to lead the association, and that person chooses an issue to spotlight.

But the role that states play in the college-completion agenda has taken on greater importance in the wake of the collapse last year of President Obama's plan to provide billions of dollars to help community colleges improve their campuses and graduate more students.

Governors, like other policy makers, say increasing the number of degree and certificate holders is critical to the future of their states. If left unchanged, the gap between degree holders and the number of jobs that require a college credential will leave states three

million degrees short of their labor needs by 2018, according to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. Policy makers say that stark figure represents an opportunity to press ahead on the college-completion agenda, putting in place policies and programs that get more people into college and help more students leave their institutions with a diploma or certificate.

"We've come to a point where there will be tremendous detrimental effect to the states and the nation's well-being if there is no meaningful improvement in the near future," says Daniel J. Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

"Leadership is clearly needed at the top."

Central to the governors association's plan, dubbed "Complete to Compete," is the collection and public dissemination of common higher-education measures, which the governors group developed and to which participating states have agreed. Those gauges focus on tracking students' academic progress, including how well they perform in first-year courses, how many credits they accumulate year to year, and whether they graduate.

The governors group is paying special attention to part-time and transfer students by requiring states to collect information about them. Graduation rates reported by the federal government reflect the outcomes for only half of undergraduates in four-year institutions and a third of undergraduates in community colleges because the official data count only full-time students and those who don't transfer.

Early Changes

The governors' effort already has some early evidence of progress.

As a result of their participation in "Complete to Compete," West Virginia officials began to examine the retention and graduation rates of the state's adult learners at each of its two- and four-year colleges. In recent weeks, members of the state's education-policy commission have visited each institution to present college leaders with the information, with the goal of encouraging them to develop policies to improve their records.

More older adults need to earn college credentials for West Virginia to meet its own college-completion goal, especially given its projected decline in people 25 and under. The state wants 20,000 more residents to hold a college degree, certificate, or credential by 2018.

West Virginia needs a more educated work force to create and fill

jobs. Only 17 percent of its residents have a college degree, and more than half of its college students are the first generation in their families to attend college, a population that traditionally has had low completion rates.

Elsewhere, Arkansas completed the first stage of a project in December that tracks how many of its students remain in the state after graduation and how much they earn. That provides the state with a clearer picture of the marketability of its college graduates and how well academic programs are preparing them for the work force. Future plans include training college staffs on how to analyze the information for their particular campuses.

Long-Term Obstacles

While many states have responded quickly to the governors' effort, it faces long-term challenges.

A hallmark of the "Complete to Compete" plan is the use of a longitudinal database to capture data that states can use to make informed policy decisions. Not every state has a system sophisticated enough to capture all the data required by the governors association's plan, including data broken down by whether students are eligible for Pell Grants and by enrollment numbers for remedial courses. That deficiency places a burden on states to make infrastructure adjustments, such as having to purchase more software or hardware.

Idaho, for example, didn't even have a statewide database to collect information about elementary and secondary education until last October. That turned out to be somewhat fortuitous; it meant that Idaho would not have to buy extra hardware to build a system for collecting postsecondary data, since it was already building one for elementary and secondary education.

The state has agreed to participate in the data-collection portion of the governors group's effort, and has asked Idaho's eight public colleges to be responsible for providing the college-level information for the new database. The state is looking for ways to provide grant money to the institutions to offset the costs of collecting the data, says Mike G. Rush, executive director of the Idaho State Board of Education. The state expects to start collecting postsecondary data in the spring and to begin analyzing the information in the fall.

The six-year graduation rate at Idaho's four-year colleges is 43 percent, putting the state in the bottom 10 of all states and well below the national average of 56 percent. Mr. Rush says increasing the number of Idahoans with degrees is critical to meeting the

state's labor needs, as well as to keeping the United States economically competitive with other countries.

"We can't survive by being the least-educated industrial country in the world," he says.

Another obstacle for the national governors group is the record turnover this year in its membership. Twenty-nine new governors took office this year, the highest number in history. That has forced Gov. Christine Gregoire of Washington, a Democrat who is the association's chair, to reach out to the new cadre of governors and urge them to join the college-completion effort while it is already well under way.

In fact, the turnover caused a change in the leadership of the college-completion campaign itself. While serving as governor of West Virginia last year, Joe Manchin III became chairman of the association and chose to focus on that issue. But he was elected to the U.S. Senate last fall and Ms. Gregoire took over as chair. She agreed to carry on Mr. Manchin's original college-completion effort.

Meanwhile, even governors who are willing to participate in the college-completion effort may find themselves in a quandary. States are facing significant fiscal constraints, with many governors proposing budgets that include deep spending cuts in higher education. To the extent that college-completion efforts require money, governors may simply find them too costly to support.

Despite the obstacles, Jeffrey M. Stanley, associate vice president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, says he is optimistic about the chances the National Governors Association will prompt significant change. The idea of developing common, and better, measures of completion rates across states already has wide support beyond the governors group, he says. The issue, he notes, was taken up at a meeting involving the state-executives group, Complete College America, and the National Center for Education Management Systems. From there it gained momentum.

"It started more as a groundswelling," he says. "Because of that, it has a greater chance of survival."

Improving Data

President Obama has set the goal of having the United States, by 2020, once again lead the world in college completion. Achieving that vision will require a better understanding of where and when students struggle to complete degrees so that leaders can focus resources in the right places, says Travis J. Reindl, program

director at the National Governors Association.

He says current data that show how many individuals progress through, and complete, college are alarmingly poor. That's because the postsecondary graduation rate reported by the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, commonly known as IpedS, accounts for only 48 percent of all undergraduates enrolled in four-year institutions and 32 percent of those enrolled in two-year public institutions.

The IpedS graduation data do not account for part-time students, who represent 37 percent of all college students; more than 40 percent of all black and Hispanic students; and 61 percent of students in public two-year colleges. Transfer students are also excluded from the graduation data, even though 37 percent of students who earn a bachelor's degree attended more than one institution, and 23 percent attended more than two institutions.

Moreover, the federal graduation-rate data do not distinguish students who are from low-income families or who take remedial courses. Efforts focused on those subsets of students are crucial to meeting national college-completion goals because those groups tend to have among the lowest graduation rates.

The governors association's emphasis on collecting more data is intended to help states transcend the limits of IpedS.

"It is paramount that states understand the extent to which their systems currently fall short and identify areas for improvement," Mr. Reindl says.

To measure the progress of the governors' college-completion agenda, Mr. Reindl says the association plans to monitor the volume of phone calls coming from governors' offices about the effort, the types of questions being asked, and requests for technical assistance.

"That should let us know how much of an appetite there is for this type of work," he says.

That 24 states are already participating in the governors association's effort and are committed to collecting and analyzing the data is an encouraging sign, Mr. Reindl says.

Along with the states, philanthropies are also playing a key role in realizing the college-completion agenda.

The Lumina Foundation for Education has set a goal of increasing the proportion of American adults with a college degree to 60

percent by 2025 and has focused its grant making around that objective. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, too, said in 2008 that it would spend several hundreds of millions of dollars over five years to try to double the proportion of low-income Americans who earn a postsecondary credential by age 26.

To begin making significant progress on improving degree attainment, "we have to get everyone rolling in the same direction," says Jamie P. Merisotis, Lumina's president. He says states have a particularly important role to play. They can take the lead in improving the productivity of their higher-education systems, especially by finding ways to help institutions increase the number of degrees and certificates they award without spending more money or sacrificing quality.

"We need to think about different approaches and maximize the resources we do have," Mr. Merisotis says. "States can do that. They have that leverage."

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