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**State Strategies for Promoting Access and Retention
in Postsecondary Education**

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Gordon K. Davies

Former President, Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education
Senior Advisor, Education Commission of the States

A society pays for what it values. I think Plato said that, or something like it, but it's been a long time since I knew my dialogues and *The Republic* well enough to provide a footnote. If he didn't say it, he should have.

Much of higher education still tends to think of itself as exclusive, a privilege rather than a public service. Changing the name to "postsecondary" doesn't affect behavior. We haven't caught up with social and economic values that have been changing since the middle of the 20th century. We haven't even caught up with our own rhetoric, which is much improved from what it was only a few decades ago.

I wonder how many of you can recall being told at freshman orientation, "Look at the person to the right of you and at the person to the left. One of you won't be here next year and only one of you will graduate." I don't know if any college or university still tries to strike fear into the hearts of first-year students. I don't know if any mathematics department still sees introductory calculus as an experience to separate the wheat from the chaff. But I do know that a society pays for what it values. Even today we generally do not pay institutions to retain the students they admit.

Here are five steps a state might take to improve access and retention.

1. Create new units of analysis. Traditionally, the units have been the institution and the individual. But institutions never will have enough money to do the good things they want to do and to improve relative to other institutions. And focus on the earning capacity of individuals makes higher education appear to be a private good. Consider the collective well-being of the citizens of a state and the well-being of the state itself.
2. Analyze state data, not just about participation and persistence, but also about the social and economic conditions of the state and its regions. Do key indicators of public health improve as the population becomes better educated? How much additional tax revenue is generated? Do the costs of social services become more manageable? Do high school drop-out rates decline? Are jobs created and retained?

3. Set clear objectives on the basis of your analysis, recognizing that each region of the state may be different from the others.
4. Seek out the people who most need further education. They may not come to postsecondary education even if its doors are open.
5. Reward the behavior you want. We are very good at doing the opposite. Tie funding for enrollment increases to retention from the first year to the second. Consider ways to reward the schools, colleges, and universities in a region if more people finish high school, go on to postsecondary education, and persist in their programs.

The issues of access and retention are, of course, wrapped in the complex relationship between elementary and secondary schools on the one hand, and colleges and universities on the other. Higher education leaders in this country, like Steve Portch in Georgia and Don Langenburg in Maryland, have made great contributions to a P-16 movement that now is widespread and has great potential.

But that potential will not be actualized until the P-16 organizations in the states are given the resources and authority to measure and reward the performance of schools, colleges, and universities. They have to be able to reward the behavior they want – better preparation, and increased participation and persistence – and to do so collectively rather than pitting each sector against the others. If the P-16 movement bogs down at the stage of informal cooperation, it will have been a nice idea but finally a fad.

Access to higher education and completion of a program of study are affected by social factors beyond the world of P-16. We know, for example, that very large numbers of adults in the American workforce cannot read, write, or compute well enough to hold good jobs. This affects their families and especially their children, who do not have the early, informal educational experiences that are important for success in elementary school. Let's look at some numbers from a single state – Kentucky – where I worked from 1998 until last year.

Write these numbers down: 20-13-7-3.

In the late 90s --

- for every 20 students who started the 9th grade, 13 graduated from high school
- of the 13, only 7 went to college or university
- of the 7, only 3 graduated after six years.

Now Kentucky's numbers are poor but they are not unique. Yet there was no concerted, strategic effort to staunch the loss of children from high school, increase the college-going rate, and keep the students who did enroll in college. That's why we needed a major postsecondary reform in Kentucky.

In 1998, we took the state's demographic and college and university data to the RAND corporation with a simple question: "What should be the enrollment in postsecondary education to put Kentucky at the national average?" RAND did a very complicated set of

analyses and came back with a simple answer: “You need to enroll 80,000 more undergraduate students on a base of 160,000 now enrolled.”

It was an excellent job, not least because it stated the objective so clearly. Kentucky owes its gratitude to RAND and particularly to Roger Benjamin, president of the Council for Aid to Education, a RAND subsidiary.

The timeline for postsecondary education reform in Kentucky was 20 years. We set enrollment goals for the universities and the new community and technical college system, and they went to work. By 2002, we were able to announce that the system would meet its goal of 80,000 more undergraduates in 15 years, not 20.

We went further. Typical higher education funding formulae pay institutions for every headcount of full-time equivalent student they enroll. We established benchmarks for each university and agreed to pay for additional enrollment provided that the retention rate from the first year to the second also increased. The standard “revolving door” enrollment policy was replaced by one that placed equal value on getting in and staying in. Institutions got their enrollment funding only if their retention rates improved.

I wish I could tell you that they all lived happily ever after. But this is not a fairy tale. Legislators got involved on behalf of some institutions that did not meet either their enrollment or their retention goals. In the 2002 session of the General Assembly one university whose enrollment decreased three percent and whose retention rate also dropped got as much incremental money as another whose enrollment increased by three percent with improved retention.

Of course, the presidents of non-performing institutions and their legislative patrons pointed to complicating factors that relieved their institutions of responsibility and justified across-the-board budget increases. But here is another example of higher education’s policy confusion: States often reward behavior that they say they do not want.

Pushing the P-16 concept toward its logical outcomes, we asserted higher education’s responsibility for early childhood in Kentucky. *Kids Count*, the annual publication of the Children’s Defense Fund sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, rates the states on how well their children live. Included are measures like children living in poverty, low birth-weight babies, teen pregnancies to unwed mothers, and incidents of child abuse. In 1998, Kentucky ranked 40th among the states.

“Surely,” I thought, “we can improve the living conditions of Kentucky’s children by improving its postsecondary education.” Then I noticed that North Carolina, which has one of the best systems of higher education in the nation, ranked 39th. For the first time, I realized that it is possible to build very good colleges and universities while ignoring the quality of children’s lives. Indeed, it is possible to build very good colleges and universities on the backs of children.

So we took on responsibility, primarily in the community and technical colleges, for preparing early childhood teachers for Kentucky's pre-schools and daycare centers.

We also took on responsibility for administering the state's adult basic education program. Here's why.

As you know, there is a national survey of adult literacy, done every ten years. In the early 90s, we determined that one million adults in the workforce, ranging in age from 16 to 64, scored in the bottom two levels of the adult literacy survey. That means that about 40 percent of Kentucky's workforce has difficulty reading, writing, and doing basic arithmetic. The adult education providers in the counties were serving about 50,000 of that one million – far too few – and we had no way of knowing whether their clients were learning basic skills.

We determined that about 300,000 of the one million challenged adults were in their child-bearing and child-rearing years, so we set that as the adult education enrollment goal we'd meet by 2014. We assigned enrollment objectives to counties and instituted procedures to assess learning performance. County centers that produce get paid. Those that don't can have their contracts revoked. A society pays for what it values.

We focused on this group of 300,000 because of their children. Parents who cannot read to their young children cannot prepare them for kindergarten. Parents who cannot help their children with homework cannot prevent them from falling behind in school. This is an inter-generational issue. But you know that.

By 2004, Kentucky will be serving 100,000 adults. The Kentucky Virtual University has assumed a major role, providing assessment and basic instructional material on-line to county adult education centers. KYVU is tying this material to Work Keys and community college remedial instruction in order to build a smooth path from adult basic education into postsecondary education.

Quite frankly, we knew next to nothing about adult education when we started. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education made a joint appointment with the state's Workforce Cabinet, one person who directs the Department of Adult Education and Literacy and is Vice President for Adult Education at the Council. She knows theory and practice in the field. We just set performance objectives, had money to reward the behavior we wanted, and made adult education seem new and exciting.

To our surprise we found that every year, one-fourth of Kentucky's high school completers – about 14,000 – do not march across a stage to get their diplomas. They get General Equivalency Diplomas, or GEDs. As our universities were working to increase enrollment, they were going after diploma recipients, ignoring one-fourth of the potential market. Once we brought the size of this pool to their attention, several universities began special efforts to reach GED recipients and the community and technical colleges increased their efforts.

As with enrollment and retention goals for the universities, there has been some push-back in adult education. County providers have complained to their legislators and hearings have been held, but so far the state's funding of adult education has been maintained. It may be one of the best-funded adult education programs in the nation.

The other criticism has been that the GED is worth less than the high school diploma and should not be treated as a precursor to postsecondary study. This is not a new argument or one that is peculiar to Kentucky, as you well know. But I met numerous adults in basic literacy programs who already had high school diplomas. While more research needs to be done, I expect that high school standards have been so uneven in this nation that the GED compares favorably to some diplomas although certainly not to all. Some employers have told me that at least a GED tells them what a prospective worker can do, while a high school diploma does not.

The important question is, "Is it good enough?" I say it is, with proper testing upon entry to college and adequate support services. Most GED recipients will not go on to postsecondary education; between 15 and 20 percent do in Kentucky. But 15 percent of 14,000 is 2,100 students each year. That's access. That's opportunity.

Every child who enters kindergarten should graduate from high school. Every adult, young or older, should have opportunities to enroll in postsecondary education. I'm not talking here about something that is nice to have. I'm talking about something that now is essential to women, men, and their children – and to the well-being of entire communities and states.

Try this in any state that interests you. Take a map of counties and shade in those in which *Kids Count* says children live less well. On another map shade in counties in which there are high incidences of lung cancer or cardiovascular disease. Do the same with high unemployment, with poverty, and with high secondary school drop-out rates and low college-going rates. Then lay the maps over one another and see if the counties aren't roughly the same. They are in Kentucky, which led me to conclude that adequate postsecondary education is a public health issue.

I am not engaged in the popular sport of Appalachian-bashing. Every state has its pockets or belts of poverty. When we undertook to describe the "University of the 21st Century" in Virginia almost 15 years ago, a woman speaking to our commission acknowledged that Virginia had a "golden crescent" running from Washington, DC, to Norfolk. But she urged us to remember that there was also the "dark side of the moon" in Virginia, primarily the rural southside and the mountainous southwest. Virginia has its poverty but hides it better than Kentucky, Alabama, or Mississippi.

The major difference between the Appalachian poor of Kentucky and the urban poor of the Bronx is that the people in the Bronx live closer to one another. Other than that, the demographics are remarkably similar.

Access to higher education in the United States is too limited and persistence to completion is too low. We shall succeed in increasing both only if we come to comprehend that colleges and universities now play a new role in our society. It may no longer be a matter of pride for a university to flunk out a bunch of freshman at the end of a special marking period around Thanksgiving break. But neither is it yet a matter of pride – except possibly within a very few universities – to count every lost student a failure. I am sure it has happened somewhere – everything has – but I never have heard of someone objecting to hiring a new faculty member because she or he now teaches at a university with a dismal record of graduating its students.

Without malice, and probably without intent, there still is a pride of exclusion in many, if not most, of our institutions. Perhaps this is better than the horribly vacuous official language of inclusion that characterizes President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” reform of public schooling, an initiative that rivals any political cynicism in recent memory. Surely we are fortunate that this “newspeak” has not made it past the doors of colleges and universities. We talk a vastly better game. Now we have to learn how to do what we say.

Plato is watching.

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For more information, please contact:

WISCAPE
University of Wisconsin-Madison
409 Education Building
1000 Bascom Mall
Madison, WI 53706-1398
Telephone: 608-265-6342
Fax: 608-262-4881
E-mail: wiscapewisc@education.wisc.edu
Website: www.wiscapewisc.edu