

SCHEV Policy Discussion – July 7, 2008

The State Council's new policy-issue discussion series resumes at its July 7 meeting. This session will focus on student and institutional success, with success defined as persistence/retention and completion/graduation rates. The July 7 discussion involves a presentation by Elizabeth "Betty" D. Capaldi, provost and executive vice president at Arizona State University, with panel responses from VCCS vice chancellor for academic services Monty Sullivan, VCU vice provost for academic and faculty affairs Laura Moriarty, and VT university provost and vice president for academic affairs Mark McNamee. Following the guest speaker presentation and the panel responses, the Council will engage the speaker and panelists in a dialogue about the facilitation of students' persistence through to graduation, discussing efforts, challenges, and results.

These topics are not new to the State Council; its Academic Affairs Committee reviewed exemplary institutional models and strategies for student success in 2006. The current discussion will continue that review, as well as broaden the scope to encompass the Council's recent policy focus on affordability and its ongoing advocacy for access.

Such discussions are timely, if not critical. The expectations placed on higher education have intensified as the college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the standard necessary to compete in the modern workforce. Often, these expectations center on "front end" issues – expanding access, improving college-going rates, and maintaining affordability – to the exclusion of important "post-admission" issues.

Enhancing a student's ability to attend and afford college is very important; however, doing so does not guarantee that the student will succeed academically and complete a degree. Moreover, the promotion of access and affordability on the front end, without equal promotion of learning/success in the middle and degree completion on the back end, does a disservice – perhaps an injustice – to students and to the Commonwealth.

Therefore, it is in this spirit of broadening the conversation from "affordable access to higher education" to one centered on "affordable opportunity for success in and completion of higher education" that the Council is undertaking this policy discussion of persistence/retention and completion/graduation rates.

Via the Restructuring Act, the state, through the obligations it places on its public colleges and universities, has committed itself statutorily to keeping public higher education accessible and affordable. The Act also requires public institutions to improve student retention and to increase the number of degrees conferred. But challenges abound. The populations of Virginia and the nation grow more and more demographically diverse; Baby Boomers are retiring in ever-greater numbers; other nations are experiencing significant growth in postsecondary attendance and educational achievement; and the perception of higher education as more of a private good than a public one is growing.

Whether we, as a nation or as a state, are meeting these challenges is a matter of perspective and debate. Graduation rates, which appear to have been making modest improvements in recent years, continue to be perceived by some as unacceptably low – for most institutions and states and the nation as a whole.

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Information from the most recent SREB Fact Book indicates that, of the Southern Regional Education Board's 17 member states, Virginia ranks first in first-year persistence rate and second in both progression rate and graduation rate for its public four-year colleges and universities. Conversely, retention and graduation rates vary greatly – from comparatively high to comparatively low – among Virginia's institutions, as well as among different categories of students within our individual colleges and universities. While Virginia higher education appears to do a relatively above-average job of retaining and graduating students, an unfortunately large number of students, especially in-state students from underrepresented groups, are not retained through to timely completion – or to completion at all.

Contributing to improved student and institutional success – without sacrificing or compromising academic quality and integrity – will be a focus of the Council going forward (such is already reflected, at least indirectly, in the Council's 2007 statewide strategic plan).