

Transforming Higher Education: National Imperative—State Responsibility

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<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2006/pr061127.htm>

More Americans must finish college if our country is to prosper in the global society, and it's up to state legislators to make that happen. Those are recommendations from the final report of the National Conference of State Legislatures' [Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education](#), released today.

There is a higher education crisis in this country, the report says. The American system is no longer the best in the world. Other countries are outperforming us. At the same time, tuition and fees are skyrocketing and financial aid and loan programs aren't keeping up. As a result, a post-secondary education is not accessible to many Americans. Students are falling through the cracks. Nationally, for every 100 ninth graders who enter high school, only 18 finish college within six years.

The report, [Transforming Higher Education: National Imperative—State Responsibility](#), says state legislators must: be at the center of a nationwide movement to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, determine a public agenda for higher education, set clear goals, and hold institutions accountable.

Higher ed can get short shrift in tough budget times because it has the built-in funding source of tuition. But still, states spend roughly \$70 billion a year on higher education. They provide more funding and regulation of colleges and universities than any other level of government. The federal government's limited involvement includes funding academic research and financial aid for low-income students.

The Commission, comprised of six Republicans and six Democrats, spent 18 months examining trends and issues in higher education and specifically the roles and responsibilities of state legislators. The Commission identified four specific ways legislators have contributed to problems in higher education: they have not set clear goals and expectations for higher education; they have not made higher education a legislative priority; they have not exerted strong leadership on the issue; and they have funded higher education reactively, rather than strategically.

The Commission developed the following 15 recommendations for legislators:

1. **Define clear state goals:** States need long-term priorities and a public agenda for higher education that links higher ed to overall state economic goals.
2. **Identify your state's strengths and weaknesses:** Legislators need to carefully study and examine where the leaks are in the student pipeline.

3. **Know your state's demographic trends for the next 10 to 30 years:** Legislators cannot begin to articulate meaningful goals for state higher education systems without good information about upcoming population changes.
4. **Identify a place or structure to sustain the public agenda:** Setting state goals is not a one-time thing. States should find an appropriate place to house ongoing, statewide discussions about how well the system is performing.
5. **Hold institutions accountable for their performance:** Once clear statewide goals are set, legislators can better hold institutions accountable for their performance.
6. **Rethink funding:** Over the years, states have reduced their share of overall higher education costs, and as a result, the share of costs for students, families, and institutions has gone up. Some states may decide to spend more money. All states need to spend money more wisely.
7. **Rethink student aid:** States should examine their merit- and need-based financial aid programs to ensure that they are well balanced, reward students who are efficient, and help adults and part-time students.
8. **Help reduce borrowing and debt:** Two out of three students graduate with debt, and the average debt is \$17,250. Ten years ago, it was \$8,000, adjusted for inflation. Legislators must find a way to reduce this drain on the state economy.
9. **Recommit to access:** States can make college more affordable. They can also see that courses are offered at varied hours, such as in the evenings. And they can make sure a variety of low-cost options like technical schools and community colleges are available.
10. **Recommit to success:** Ensuring that students get into college is only half the battle. States should also ensure that students graduate.
11. **Embrace innovation:** Legislators should encourage innovation within the entire state higher education community—including public schools, private schools, and the for-profit sector.
12. **Encourage partnerships:** Legislators can help communication with business and with K-12 to better articulate expectations and outcomes.
13. **Transform the 12th grade:** Dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment and early college programs can all help prepare students for college and finish faster.
14. **Don't neglect adult learners:** Adults going back to school now represent 40 percent of the student population. They have different needs than traditional students.
15. **Focus on productivity:** Legislators should ensure that state dollars are spent productively and should demand that institutions become more efficient.

NCSL is the bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staff of the states, commonwealths and territories. It provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues and is an effective and respected advocate for the interest of the states in the federal system.