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Shifts in Politics and Policies Complicate College-Completion Agenda for States

By Eric Kelderman

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Meeting President Obama's goal of making the United States the nation with the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 will be difficult for colleges but possible. The greater challenge for higher education might be keeping up with the nation's shifting political and economic landscape.

To reach the president's goal will require 3 percent to 4 percent annual growth in the number of degrees that colleges award, Travis J. Reindl, an expert in postsecondary education with the bipartisan National Governors Association, told attendees at the annual policy meeting of the State Higher Education Executive Officers here.

And despite early concerns that college officials thought there was too much emphasis on college completion by the Obama administration, there are signs that higher-education leaders are embracing the president's goal. One reason is that they have come to realize that their future financial support will rely heavily on their performance in getting students to complete their studies. A growing number of states have approved or are considering linking appropriations to higher education to degree and certificate completions.

"The discussion has changed dramatically," said Stan Jones, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit group that is helping 29 states to [improve college-completion rates](#). A year ago, chancellors and college presidents were defensive about discussing their poor graduation rates, he said, but now many more are willing to acknowledge the problem and talk about broad solutions.

Loss of Higher-Education Agencies

Some states, however, lack coherent leadership and policies to move much beyond talk. A study to be released later this year looks at how college degree productivity is affected by higher-education policy in five states: Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington. The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, with support from the nonprofit National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The study, led by Joni E. Finney, director of the Institute for Research in Higher Education at Penn's Graduate School of Education, was highlighted during a session at the higher-education-executives meeting.

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While researchers found a particular set of problems for each state considered in the study, a common theme was that in most cases there was little coordination among institutions, higher-education agencies, and elected officials.

Washington State, for example, has a well-developed master plan, but the Higher Education Coordinating Board was dismantled by the governor this year and institutions were given [greater authority](#) to set tuition. Without coordination, the researchers conclude, the number of baccalaureate degrees is unlikely to improve, and institutional financial aid is likely to decline.

That situation is similar to that of California, where Gov. Jerry Brown used a line-item veto to eliminate the state's Postsecondary Education Commission, raising concerns that more than 30 years of data on student performance [could be lost](#).

The perception has been that those entities are ineffective, says Aims C. McGuinness Jr., a senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a nonprofit consulting group. "But they're really just carrying out functions designed for a different time," he said. And without them, more politically powerful institutions, such as flagships, may gain even more power and wealth at the expense of two-year colleges, which already receive far less state money per student, he said.

That [potential](#) arose recently in Oregon and [Wisconsin](#), where flagships proposed splitting away from state systems and oversight. In Ohio, the state's chancellor of higher education has recently proposed creating a class of "enterprise universities" that would be freed from much state regulation, though they would also have to forfeit a large share of their state appropriations and agree to a number of aspirational benchmarks that measure fiscal and academic stability.

Revenue Slowdown

At the heart of the policy problems is the rapid pace of political change across the country at a time of economic uncertainty. Growth in state revenue is expected to be much slower for the next decade than it has been in recent years.

More than half of the nation's governors were newly elected in 2010, along with some 2,000 new state legislators who are still learning about the complexities of higher education after less than a year in office, Mr. Reindl said.

"We have 29 new governors. We're still playing 'getting to know you' with some of them," he said.

And while the higher-education agendas of many of governors are still unclear, their budgeting philosophy is practically set in stone.

Governors want to know what they will get for every dollar they put into a program, Mr. Reindl said. And if higher-education leaders want a bigger portion of the state budget, they'd better be prepared to explain where the money should come from and how it will benefit the state, he said.

And a promise to raise the graduation rates at colleges won't be enough to answer the governors' questions. Colleges must do a better job of aligning their offerings with the needs of the state, including the kinds of degrees being earned and the areas of research that the institution is focusing on, said Mr. Reindl.

What most concerns Mr. Reindl and others, however, is the possibility that the divisive politics in the nation's capital will spill over to the states and distract lawmakers who have the goal of strengthening higher education.

Some of that has already begun in states like Indiana and Wisconsin, where proposals to undermine bargaining rights of state workers prompted Democratic state legislators to leave the statehouse in protest and to attempt to stall the legislation. And Minnesota's state government was shut down for nearly three weeks when lawmakers failed to strike a bargain with the governor to balance the budget.

That sort of political dysfunction seems all the more likely in the coming year as the 2012 election season gets under way.