

Renewing our Schools,
Securing our Future



A Report on:

Postsecondary Education: Ensuring Access for All

October 20, 2004 – St. Louis, Missouri

PARTICIPANTS:

Task Force Members:

- John Buchanan, Former Congressman, State of Alabama
- Philip Murphy, Senior Director, The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc.
- James Pughsley, Superintendent, Charlotte-Mecklenberg Public Schools, Charlotte, NC
- Chauncey Veatch, 2002-2003 National Teacher of the Year, Coachella Valley High School, Thermal, CA
- Roger Wilkins, Professor of History and American Culture, George Mason University

Special Guest:

- Francis Slay, Mayor, City of St. Louis, St. Louis, MO

Panelists:

- Dudley Grove, Secretary, Coordinating Board for Higher Education
- Dan Peterson, Director of Financial Assistance and Outreach, Department of Higher Education
- Charles Dooley, County Executive, St. Louis County
- Benjamin Ola. Akande, Dean, School of Business and Technology, Webster University
- Edward P. St. John, Professor, Indiana University

Student Perspectives:

- Kimberly Graves

INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary Education: Ensuring Access for All was the fourth of six public education forums organized by the *Renewing our Schools, Securing our Future* National Task Force on Public Education. It was held on October 20, 2004 in St. Louis, MO at Harris Stowe State College. The forum provided a venue for Task Force members to learn more about the challenges Missouri and many other states face in preparing students both financially and academically for postsecondary education, as well as some of the unique initiatives that have been developed to address these issues. The two-hour event included presentations from local elected officials, financial aid administrators, the dean of a local university and a professor whose research focuses on the impact of public finance on access to postsecondary education. Over 100 people attended the event, and several members of the community shared their thoughts with the panel.

In conjunction with the forum, the Task Force also commissioned a paper by Edward P. St. John, a professor at Indiana University. The paper, entitled *Unequal Financial Access: Work-Loan Burden and Its Consequences Across the 50 States*, explores the public funding issues that contribute to disparities in college enrollment and graduation rates among income groups, racial/ethnic groups and states. To read the paper, visit www.americanprogress.org and www.ourfuture.org.

ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Today's increasingly competitive global economy has rendered postsecondary education a necessity for economic survival, both for individuals and as a nation. According to the Pell Institute (2004), those with a bachelor's degree earn nearly twice as much over a lifetime as those who complete only high school, and the unemployment rate among college graduates is significantly lower than among high school graduates.

Although enhanced awareness of the value of a postsecondary degree has translated into rising college enrollment rates in recent years, too many youth today are underprepared to face the financial and academic challenges of higher education. These problems are particularly concentrated among low-income and minority students. For example, according to the Census Bureau (2001), 79 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds whose family incomes exceeded \$75,000 were either enrolled in or had attended college. The comparable figure for those whose household income totaled less than \$25,000 was only 31 percent.

The soaring price of postsecondary education is one major source of the disparity in enrollment rates. Even with increases in financial aid, the cost of attending college has outpaced growth in family income. Another major source of low college completion rates is the fact that high schools often fall short in their efforts to prepare students academically with the skills to succeed in college. Because postsecondary education has often been viewed as a means by which young people can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," disparities in access to these opportunities should be of great concern to all who believe in the American dream.

WELCOME

St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay welcomed the *Renewing our Schools, Securing our Future* Task Force and panelists, and spoke of the importance of postsecondary education, particularly in a global economy. He noted that postsecondary education is essential in order for individuals to succeed and for Missouri's economic growth.

PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

Participants in this forum discussed programs aimed at preparing students to earn a postsecondary degree, with a focus on Missouri's particular successes and challenges. Panelists spoke of the importance of a postsecondary education and described challenges that students face in earning a degree. They also highlighted programs aimed at reaching out to those populations, such as low-income students, minorities and recent immigrants, that have traditionally lagged in college enrollment and completion rates.

Dudley Grove, Secretary of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, presented a picture of Missouri's higher education system, which is comprised of 193 public and private institutions serving 394,000 students. Unfortunately, Grove said, too few Missouri students are able to access these institutions. Grove provided a statistical snapshot of Missouri to support that statement. Of every 100 youth who enter high school in Missouri, 73 graduate. Of those 73 who earn a high school diploma, 39 enroll as college freshman the following fall, a statistic that Grove called "unacceptable." Of those who enter college as freshman, 27 return for their sophomore year. After 6 years, a mere 18 of the original 100 will have graduated from college.

Grove focused on two major factors contributing to the low college graduation rate. First, many students simply aren't academically prepared for college. Grove suggested that one way to ensure that more students can handle a college course load is to establish the core curriculum as the standard for all high school students. Currently, this is not the case in Missouri. Secondly, many students find it prohibitively difficult to afford a college education, as evidenced by a recent National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education report that graded Missouri an "F" in affordability for higher education. Missouri was not alone with this grade, however; 36 other states received the same failing grade. Grove suggested that Missouri has considerable room for improvement, given that the state has the lowest per capita funding for higher education in the nation and the state-aid-to-Pell-Grant ratio is only 11 percent, compared to the 40 percent national average.

Dan Peterson, Director of Financial Assistance and Outreach at the Missouri Department of Higher Education, discussed several programs available to help Missouri students meet the increasingly vexing financial challenge of paying for higher education. In Missouri, Peterson said, each year more academically qualified students are demonstrating need but not receiving aid grants, resulting in a burgeoning average loan debt for students. In the last fiscal year, the DHE guaranteed \$600 million in loans to 85,000 students.

In addition to directly helping students finance their education, Missouri has addressed the financial obstacles to completing a postsecondary degree in a number of other ways. First, the

state is using a \$7.5 million grant from the federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) to help prepare low-income students to attend college. Second, the state developed a one-day walk-in program called College Goals Sunday, which last year helped 1000 participants at 8 sites across the state complete their financial aid forms. The program will expand to 23 sites this year. Thirdly, the state instituted the A+ program, in which students who graduate with at least a 2.5 GPA from the 180 A+ designated Missouri high schools receive free tuition at any public community college within the state. Last year, this program benefited 13,400 students to the tune of \$12.6 million.

Charlie Dooley, County Executive of St. Louis County, spoke of the importance of a college education in today's economy and also provided a picture of the postsecondary landscape in St. Louis County. Dooley recounted his personal experience of being able to obtain a good job, although he did not have a college degree. He noted, however, that the economy has fundamentally changed since he entered the workforce and that young people today without college degrees will not encounter the same opportunities he did. Dooley reiterated the importance of ensuring that youth are financially able to attend college, and, in particular, spoke of the power of grants. Too many young people choose not to attend college because they fear the burden of repaying student loans. Others try to resolve the funding challenge by working while also attending school, which often places students under great emotional stress as they try to split their time between work and school.

Dooley also provided several statistics about St. Louis County, which includes 24 school districts serving 150,000 students. Students in the county earn an average score of 21 on the ACT, with 25 percent of students taking the test. The average graduation rate from St. Louis County high schools is 88 percent.

Benjamin Ola. Akande, Dean of the School of Business and Technology at Webster University, discussed unique challenges facing minorities, immigrants and low-income populations in completing postsecondary education and outlined steps being taken to address them. Akande pointed out that the annual net college cost for low-income students to attend a four-year public school in Missouri totaled, on average, 40 percent of the parent's income. As a result, the percentage of the state's minorities with a bachelor's degree has decreased in recent years. At Webster University there is a sense of "constructive impatience" about these facts. Akande is active in a program to help first-generation, college-bound high-school students and their families navigate the system of postsecondary education, which may be unfamiliar to them. Akande also spoke of the lifestyle and demographic differences between today's college students and those of a generation ago. Many of today's students are older, hold jobs, or have children. Webster University has been using technology to make classes more convenient for these students, thus making a college degree more attainable.

Edward St. John, Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University, noted that college enrollment rates have increased overall, although significant disparities exist between racial and income groups. This was not always the case. The establishment of the Pell Grant in the early 1970s eliminated the enrollment gap between racial/ethnic groups by 1975, but this gap emerged again as the purchasing power of the Pell has eroded over the last two decades. St. John called for states to adhere to an equity standard of

pricing for higher education by ensuring that the average amount of state need-based grants equals one-fourth the cost of public in-state tuition. Currently, only four states meet this standard, and on average, states fell short of this standard by an average of \$264 per student per year between 1992 and 2001. St. John estimated that 1.2 million more students would have had the opportunity to enroll in college in the 1990s if the equity standard had been met.

TASK FORCE AND PANELIST DIALOGUE

After the panelist presentations, Task Force members asked follow-up questions. Several of the issues addressed during this Task Force and panelist dialogue include: financial challenges, accessibility for non-traditional students and outreach to first-generation college students and English-language learners. A summary of these discussions appears below.

Funding:

Given that the public seems unwilling to stomach increased taxes and that a number of different educational issues demand attention, panelists were asked to comment on how they would prioritize spending or offer unique solutions to fund programs that make postsecondary education accessible to all. Two of the panelists mentioned the importance of universal pre-school education and said that this initiative was at least as important as funding postsecondary education because it provides the foundation for subsequent learning. Technology was mentioned as a potential tool by which costs could be reduced without diminishing the quality of postsecondary education. For example, in Missouri, four different postsecondary institutions use technology to share a nursing program, rather than replicating it across multiple campuses.

Accountability:

A number of panelists mentioned the importance of accountability, in terms of defining and measuring outcomes. This was seen as one thing that makes the public more receptive to spending additional taxpayer money on education.

Pell Grants:

A disparity exists between the amount authorized for Pell grants and the amount actually appropriated. There needs to be greater funding for the Pell grant. Current financial aid policies offer students more in loans than in grants, resulting in students graduating with significant amounts of debt.

Accessibility for Non-traditional Students:

It is important to make higher education available to people whose lifestyles make it more difficult to earn a postsecondary degree. Many of today's college students are older, working or are parents. These people face unique challenges, which universities must address creatively. For example, Webster University uses technology and a "click and brick" educational model to make classes available to people in rural communities and people on military bases.

First-Generation College Students and English Language Learners

For many first-generation college students, awareness and understanding of the importance of postsecondary education, the application process and the possibilities for financial aid can present formidable obstacles. In order to address these issues, high schools must involve both

parents and students in the college preparation process and must display an understanding of unique cultural issues.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Kimberly Graves, who recently completed her bachelor's degree in journalism at Webster University and is now working on her master's degree, spoke of the challenges students face in paying for postsecondary education. Graves financed her education through grants, loans and a part-time job during college. She pointed out that working and attending school at the same time forces students to choose between spending time studying or participating in extracurricular activities and putting in time at a job in order to make ends meet. Graves concluded by saying, "People say that they can't afford to spend more on students, but I ask you as a society, can we afford to give less?"

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Task Force members and panelists turned to the audience to learn more about their experiences, concerns and ideas. Many of the comments were related to education in general, rather than postsecondary education in particular.

Safety:

A local resident spoke of the importance of safety at school. Providing a safe environment that is free from violence is the first step in helping children become educated.

Teacher Quality:

An educational consultant from a local not-for-profit organization offered two examples of problems in teacher credentialing. First, some education students from an area college were restricted in their choice of student teaching locations, because their college did not meet district standards. These women had completed requirements for an education major, but they still lacked proper English grammar. Education schools need to be more rigorous in awarding degrees only to qualified teachers. Second, she discussed certification requirements that seemed illogical to her. While working as an educational consultant, she had let her teacher certification lapse, and has been told that she cannot return to working as a teacher in Missouri without completing an additional 52 hours of undergraduate credit.

Grades K-3:

A former inner-city teacher voiced her opinion that there should be a stronger focus on kindergarten through third grade. She emphasized the importance of smaller classes and rigorous standards for teacher quality, particularly in the younger grades. She also spoke of the importance of preparing teachers and students psychologically because schools in today's society are often expected to meet more than just students' educational needs.

