

Major Policy Issue: Keeping Higher Education Affordable and Accessible

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Abstract

Several bold policies have been implemented by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission that seek to further economic growth and community development in West Virginia. The current Master Plan outlines several initiatives that attempt to improve access and affordability to higher education. The social and economic context behind the policy addresses the need to decrease the child poverty rate in West Virginia by increasing the number of advanced degrees to meet the demands of a diverse job market. The time for the investment in higher education has become urgent as West Virginia's economy is on the verge of transformation.

Keywords: access, higher education initiative, affordability, child poverty, West Virginia

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The purpose of this research is to show the primary challenges faced by leaders in education, which is to keep the cost of a college degree affordable and relevant to the changing tides of the job market. Educational opportunities must also be accessible in terms of preparing high school students for the rigors of higher education courses as well as developing resources that enable, often the first generation of college goers, to remain enrolled full time and complete their degrees in a shorter amount of time. An Instructional Designer at Marshall University observes that, “The initial reaction might be by lawmakers (who would be politically correct), say, ‘oh, yes, everybody should have access.’ When it comes down to making that happen we have to have the allocations to acquire this software or tools pay a person to do these jobs, that’s where the problem comes in. If we could just make more people aware that it’s so important to provide education for everyone, we do it so automatically. It’s so strange in a way that special education is a mandate from birth to high school and beyond that. Higher Ed isn’t seen as a necessity, but an option.” (P. Kaplan, personal communication, June 28, 2016)

Policies to address these issues have been implemented and evaluated through several initiatives which will be discussed in the literature review. The results show modest progress but demonstrate more than ever the need for additional funding and the development of more programs that fulfill the mission of higher education and commitment to the investment of America’s future. A poignant anecdote reveals a common scenario of barriers and uphill challenges many adults face while pursuing a post-secondary education in West Virginia.

“Dana decided in the fall of her senior year of high school that she would pursue her dream of becoming a veterinarian. With significant support from a local college access organization, she completed the necessary steps to apply for

enrollment the following year. She was concerned about costs and loans, but was elated when she learned had been accepted to the local public university.

Unbeknown to Dana, many challenges lay ahead. Between receiving her acceptance letter and fall move-in day, she had done little to prepare for her transition to college. From her perspective she had done everything she had to do, unaware that she needed a more detailed plan concerning how she would pursue her degree and career. At orientation she encountered her first obstacle, she tested into developmental mathematics. It was not until she met with her advisor that she came to fully understand what impact this would have on her future plans. Her academic schedule would have to be reconfigured in order to compensate for the non-credit course, and her new trajectory included the crowding together of significant biology and chemistry prerequisites, a situation she had hoped to avoid. Dana had not even sat in her first course yet, and already she was being told that summer school or an additional year of college were on the horizon. With the burden of financing additional time in college on her shoulders, there was no way to account for how other facets of curricular or co-curricular life would impact her success as a student moving forward.” (WVHEPC: Impact 2014. pp.1-2)

Methods

A review of literature was used to compare the findings of the link between social and economic barriers to college preparedness and degree completion rates. The literature includes: present and past policies from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and Community and Technical College System of West Virginia, local and national news articles, interviews from university staff who work in education technology as it pertains to accessibility and affordability issues in higher education.

Literature Review

The Master Plan (2013-2018)

A five year statewide master plan, titled “Leading the Way: Access. Success. Impact” was proposed in 2013 by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and was created to meet eight areas of specific interest; (1) economic and workforce development, (2) education access and affordability, (3) innovation, (4) student preparation, (5) degree and/or program completion, (6) intra/inter system cooperation, (7) collaboration, research, (8) teaching and learning. The plan details how the commission and institutions will work toward achieving the goals and how they will account for progress toward meeting them. The purpose behind the policy is to meet the demands of a diverse state economy and demands of both traditional and nontraditional enrollees. Many of West Virginia’s students are like Dana and the current and future economic climates clearly demonstrate the need for increasing the number of advanced degrees which are vital in moving the state’s workforce into the modern era. The plan also accomplishes the overall purpose of colleges and universities; which is to develop educated citizenry and train well-informed leaders who can meet the needs of and improve upon their communities. The plan also recognizes the necessity for containing the cost of tuition by seeking

new sources of external funding to maintain affordability of education while collaborating across institutions, and external agencies to assess progress and determine future action.

Access to Higher Education Defined

Access to higher education is defined as students having; adequate preparation, accessible information, and feasible cost. Although current efforts allow institutions to reach a population of students who are already academically and emotionally ready for college, there are those who are potentially ready but will need some assistance in a few areas of the college enrollment process, such as completing the FAFSA and college application, and taking the necessary placement and registration tests. Another population of students, who are among the low-income and first generation college goers, often require more comprehensive assistance; such as aspiration building, curriculum planning, and tutoring, mentoring and parental outreach. Data trends show that low-income students will comprise the largest population of in state enrollment and all that postsecondary institutions will have to compete for these students. The plan addresses access through several initiatives including GEAR UP, Degree Now, and other projects funded by West Virginia's federal College Access Challenge Grant. In addition, the Department of Education works with the Division of Academic affairs to help students adequately prepare for the academic challenges of college-level studies. Transition courses are offered in English and math to eliminate the need for developmental courses after postsecondary enrollment. Additionally, institutions have numerous opportunities to reach students beyond the admissions and financial aid processes. Some additional services that would benefit students also support higher education goals such as; providing dual enrollment courses, allowing early course scheduling and creating opportunities for students to experience campus life.

Since many of the same students attend at the local level, additional support services could start as early as middle school. Studies have shown that early outreach efforts have had a positive impact on student academic performance and involvement by local universities creates relationships with parents and communities in which they serve.

A 2012 survey found that 57% of high school seniors overestimated the cost of in state tuition at four-year institutions. The survey also found that the students were better informed about state and federal funding than they were about institutional aid programs. The Master Plan calls for better information about financial aid packages in all three phases; before, during and even after enrollment. The Commission recommends that institutions supply clear and concise information to students and families regarding the cost of tuition and information about financial awards. Any financial information should be explained in detail to avoid confusion and lift one of the biggest barriers to enrollment.

Success in Higher Education Defined

Success in Higher Education is defined by the Master Plan as progress in student retention and completion of degrees. Underrepresented groups account for historical gaps in achievement and are a focus of the WVHEPC efforts to improve equity in opportunities for minority, low income, first generation and at-risk students. Data from the *2013 Higher Education Report Card* (p. 3 Success) demonstrates the continued need to promote and support student success. For example, the average retention rate of first-time freshmen to their second year of college declined to its lowest point in five years, from 76.4 % in 2008 to 73.6 % in 2012. Currently, West Virginia is ranked last among Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states in retention. In addition, the six-year graduation rates have also declined from 48.8 % in 2005 to 46.9 % in 2007. Existing data also correlates high school performance to success at

college. For example, the shows that students who enrolled at post-secondary institutions with a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher earned an average college GPA of 2.91, compared to students with a high school GPA of 2.99 or lower who earned an average college GPA of 1.74. High school GPA also was a significant factor in student retention from the fall to spring semester. Students with a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher were retained at a rate of 94.7 %, compared to a rate of 79.5 % for students with a high school GPA of 2.99 or lower.

To address the issue of student success as it relates to retention and completion, some best practices have been implemented by the Commission, such as, bridge programs that advise and support students throughout their freshmen year, transition courses that help eliminate remedial courses and developing a plan of study for students so they will have a clear path to complete their degree. The *15 to Finish* plan encourages students to take at least 15 hours to complete a bachelor's degree in four years and an associate in two. The rationale behind this initiative is for students to begin their professional careers early and save money on tuition costs in the long run. In addition, fiscal management counseling has also been used to help students create a realistic budget and plan for their financial futures. Studies have indicated an improvement of student retention and graduation rates based on this completion plan.

The Impact of a Post-Secondary Education

The impact post-secondary graduates have in their communities is profound and can often be hard to measure. Whether it is social, cultural or economic, community leaders (many of them college graduates) often form strong bonds with area businesses, government agencies and civic organizations in order to improve and sustain communities. Many of these communities have recently emerged as stand-alone support systems during a regional crisis. For example, the recent flooding in throughout several West Virginia counties challenged community leaders to

acquire and mobilize resources for their citizens. A recent story states that the effected areas have been given \$72 million dollars from FEMA including low interest disaster loans from the U.S Small Business Administration (WSAZ, 2016.) However, the responsibility to rebuild homes and businesses is ultimately shouldered by the communities themselves. Without an educated, skilled population, such efforts would be nearly impossible to accomplish.

Research

Underlying Social Problem

From an historic standpoint, the Appalachian region has been publicized by travel writers as backward, simple, and lacking any education or refinement. Many of them saw it as a country of its own because the population had their own language, dress and lifestyle. The mountains, although beautiful, had created an isolating barrier that few outsiders had an interest in crossing. Due to the popularity of travel journals, Americans living in the diverse and populated cities of the early 1900's were learning for the first time of a people who seemed to be out of step with progress and many felt the need to come to West Virginia to provide a "proper American education" and improve the lives of the "unfortunate and uncivilized people." When these newcomers arrived, they were shocked by the squalid living conditions, widespread alcoholism and unattended children. In their opinion, all that was needed to help these people out were a "few good schools and churches" (Puelle, 2013. pps. 22-24).

Since the early 1900's, the culture of Appalachia had been thought of as distinct and worth preserving because it was not as affected by industrial or commercial development as other areas in the nation. These preservation efforts have left intact the positive aspects of Appalachian culture that promote festivals of Blue Grass and Folk music, homemade goods and agriculture, but in general, West Virginia is still associated more with producing coal rather than scholars.

Since the decline of the coal industry, however, policy makers have sought ways to replace the mining industry jobs that have been lost with new jobs that require a post-secondary education and advanced technical training. A prevailing social problem that many higher education programs have attempted to eradicate is the overwhelming child poverty rates in West Virginia. According to the West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy's research on child poverty (Boetter & Frazier, 2013), more than one in four children in West Virginia lives below the federal poverty line, which is the 13th highest national rate. The research also indicates that 25.8 % of West Virginia children (94,852) under the age of 18 lived in poverty, compared with 22.2 % of U.S. children. Other studies have shown that children are more adversely affected than adults in poverty because they have higher risk for physical, cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral problems. As they mature into adults, they have higher rates of poverty, crime and poor health than children who did not live in poverty. The educational attainment can also play a part in whether a child is living in poverty. More than six of every 10 children whose parents never finished high school live in poor families, compared to 16 % of children whose parents have education beyond high school. Compared to the rest of the country, West Virginia has low levels of educational attainment: approximately 17.4 % of West Virginians over the age of 25 lacks a high school degree compared to 14.6 % nationally. The rationale behind the policies for improving access and affordability for higher education is to make West Virginia more marketable to outside businesses by educating its citizens. It also seeks to improve the quality of life within the state by decreasing the poverty rate among young children and adults. Demand for the policy stems from the historical gaps in achievement for underrepresented groups and adult learners who require geographical access to college campuses. The need for the policy also is evident in the struggling economy-- which is a result of massive layoffs from the steel and coal

industries. Many of the actors in the formation of the policy include but are not limited to: The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, all public colleges and universities and the Council for Community and Technical College Education.

Past Policy: Charting the Future

This 2008 plan gathered data relating to the higher education system, job market and obtained feedback from various stakeholders throughout the state. The Commission sought to renew the best aspects of the old policy into the Master Plan but identified changes that should be made and problems that could be reframed and revisited. Like the Master Plan, the former policy explores how state institutions could serve the needs of the state rather than how the state can serve the needs of the institutions, which may have possibly been the focus of past policies. One notable difference between the two is that the *Charting the Future* plan includes several innovation indicators (p. 12) compared by institution. Marshall University and West Virginia University are listed in the report with information pertaining to the number of invention disclosures, US patent applications filed, license agreements, and the numbers of startup companies are included in the original master policy. The new plan narrowed the focus to accessibility and affordability.

Contemporary Politics

In February 2015, Vermont Senator and then presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, addressed the issue of Higher education in America, a view which has resonated throughout the nation and has made him a popular political figure. He commented that accessibility for our nation's citizens "should be a right." Sanders also directed comments toward government spending and higher education affordability;

If the federal government were to invest \$18 billion a year, with a dollar-for-dollar match from state governments, we would slash college tuition in the United

States by more than half. If we were to reduce the proposed increase in military spending by less than half, and instead invest that money in educational opportunities for today's college students, we could cut tuition by 55 %.

So I challenge all of you; ask yourselves, where should our priorities lie? (Wright, 2016)

The political climate West Virginia has been said to tell the story of shifting politics throughout the nation. According to Gonyea (2015) Democrats have gained support from the growing minority population of Hispanic and African American voters while Republicans are gaining ground among white, working-class voters, a group that was once dominated by Democrats. In the current climate, white, working-class Democrats in West Virginia are abandoning the party over environmental issues such as coal, gun rights and abortion. There has been a similar shift nationally in the Republican Party. The principals behind the initiative, however, seem to reflect the political ideology of the New Democrats because they emphasize the values of economic growth and fraternity. (Fowler, 2012.) Educators believe that progress toward realizing these values are a key factor to achieving greater social and economic equality in the United States. For example, the Clinton era in the 1990's was an administration that strongly influenced education and put forth policy agendas consistent with their beliefs. They were also interested in improved vocational and technical education as a way to stimulate economic growth. Since Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee in this year's primary election, it could be reasonably speculated that support for these educational agendas will continue if she wins the election. One of the taglines from Democratic National Convention speech was, "When any barrier falls in America, for anyone, it clears the way for everyone. When there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit." (New York Times, 2016)

Economic Factors

According to The National Conference of State Legislatures, as of May 2016, the unemployment rate in West Virginia is 6.2% (which ranks 47th in the nation). Supporters of the initiative believe that each award attained through the policy represents mastery of a set of skills and body of knowledge that is valuable in the West Virginia labor market. However, based on the high unemployment rate (which could be seen as the impact left by the mining industry) it appears the economic gap has not yet been completely filled by the initiative, although the Commission reports a promising 8.5 percent five year increase of degrees and credentials conferred from 12,543 to 13,613. (WVHEPC, 2015, p. 41)

Stakeholders

The stakeholders who would benefit from the success of the policy include, but are not limited to: businesses-can expect to hire a more educated population, universities- can profit (and offer more courses) from the increased enrollment and retention of students and faculty, communities and citizens-will have educated, informed citizens who are capable of leading struggling districts out of poverty by recruiting private companies to the area.

Analysis

The 2015 data collected by the WVHEPC indicates that the initiatives have been successful in meeting some of its objectives within the last five years but others remain unmet. The report contains the following information related to the original goals.

1. Increased the college-going rate (among recent high school graduates who begin the following fall semester) The college going rate for this population of students has decreased overall by 4.2 percentage points since 2010. However, over a five-year span from 2010 to 2014, two of the eight institutions with available data saw increases in

adult credit enrollment while six had decreased. The largest gain was within the adult population (25-44) which was 37.2 % at Blue Ridge Community and Technical College. (p.82)

2. Improved student retention- First-time, full-time retention rates have remained steady at four-year public institutions at 74.7 % for both the 2012 and 2013 cohorts. The largest gain from 2012 to 2013 was at West Liberty University, with an increase of 4.4 percentage points. The largest gain over the five-year period was at WVU Institute of Technology, with an increase of 5 percentage points. From 2009 to 2013 seven of the eleven four-year public institutions experienced decreases in their retention rates with the largest of 8.3 percentage points at Potomac State College of WVU. (p.31)

3. Advanced degree completion- Baccalaureate degree production is the largest degree category at each of West Virginia's public four-year institutions (with the exception of Potomac State College of WVU and West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine). Overall, the total number of bachelor's degrees produced increased by 10.3 % over the five-year period. The number of post-master's certificate and doctor's - professional practice granting programs has remained the same since 2010; the number of master's and doctor's degrees awarded in research and scholarship programs has shown some modest increase over the past five years. (p. 46)

4. Affordability of public higher education- The average undergraduate tuition for in-state students increased 6.6 %, from \$5,827 in 2013-14 to \$6,211 in 2014-2015. The five-year trend in tuition and fees shows an increase of 28.5 % for in-state students and 23.4 % for out-of-state students. The 10-year trend in tuition and fees is an increase of 67.6 % for in-state students and 59.8 % for out-of-state students, though the increase

in dollars was larger for out of state students. In-state tuition has increased by \$2,505 since 2005 and out-of-state tuition has increased by \$5,575. (p. 23).

The offset of the tuition increase was in the amount of the financial awards from 2010-2014 which do not include Federal funding. The total amount of state awarded grants and scholarships were given to recipients of the HEAPS, PROMISE, and WVHEG programs during the 2014 academic year, which was \$90,683,731(a 1.3 % decrease from \$91,889,354 in funding for 2013.) The total funding for the HEAPS, PROMISE, and WVHEG programs declined 5.0, 1.5 and 0.6 % respectively. Between 2010 and 2014, awards increased for HEAPS (0.1 %) and WVHEG (9.1 %). The PROMISE Scholarship experienced the only decline at 2.8 % over the same time period. (p.8)

Upon further analysis of the data from the 2015 Report Card, the effects of the initiative seem to have had mixed results. The implications are that tuition increases are out pacing the state's ability to provide funding for full time students, which in turn, leads to an increased time period to complete a four year degree or even longer to attain an advanced level of education. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission has created a new campaign called "15 to Finish" in order to encourage students to earn a bachelor's degree in four years or an associate degree in two years by taking at least 15 credit hours toward the degree per semester or a total of 30 per academic year. Also, efforts have been made by the commission to streamline the credit transfer process for students who transfer from a community or technical college to a four year university.

Discussion

Based on the data from the 2015 Report Card and the current unemployment rates, it seems that the WV Higher Education Initiative has not completely met its primary goals to provide access and affordability to West Virginia's college going population. According to the 2015 Report Card, "the percentage of underrepresented minorities has increased 1.9 % from 6,910 in 2013 to 7,044 in 2014. During the same time period, the percentage of low-income and undergraduate adult students has declined by 3.2 and 7.5 %. The at-risk student population that saw the largest five-year increase was underrepresented minorities which increased from 6,062 in 2010 to 7,044 in 2014, a 16.2 % increase. The percent of low-income students decreased 10.9 % while the number of undergraduate adults declined by 19.7 %. On a national level, underserved populations such as low-income and minority students are less likely than their peers to attend and complete college. In addition, transfer, part-time, and adult student populations have become more important to institutions meeting their enrollment and completion goals." (p.20) Although the data did reveal an overall 8.5 % increase in degree and credential attainment, experts predict that West Virginia will be unable to meet current workforce projections if success among underserved, low income populations remains unmet.

Current indicators point toward a future that will still hold challenges for West Virginia's leaders but will present opportunities for investment. For instance, despite a budget crisis and stagnant economy, the PROMISE Scholarship Program has awarded more than \$548 million to more than 40,000 West Virginia students from all 55 counties since awards first began in 2002. Research has shown that PROMISE funds increase a student's likelihood of completing college and working in West Virginia at higher rates than overall graduates. One study found that 80 % of PROMISE scholars who graduated in 2003-04 were working in the state in 2012. For 2016,

the PROMISE Scholarship and other financial aid programs will provide students with approximately \$92 million in state funds to offset the rising costs of attending a post-secondary institution.

In contrast, state funding for institutions has actually decreased-- which has impacted tuition rates. *The State Journal* (Casto, 2016) reports that Marshall University has lost \$11.5 million in annual funding from the state since 2013; in response the Board of Governors unanimously approved the university's operating budget for fiscal year 2017 and set a 5 % increase to tuition and fees. Beginning with the fall 2016 semester, full-time resident undergraduate students will pay \$154 more per semester, undergraduate students who live in the nearby counties of Kentucky and Ohio will pay \$283 more, and non-resident undergraduate students will pay \$374 more. For graduate students, tuition will increase to \$160 per semester. Mary Ellen Heuton, vice president for finance and chief financial officer, presented the budget, which includes revenue of nearly \$46 million in state funds and approximately \$58.5 million from tuition and fees. The university received \$554,000 in additional funding to help supplement Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) premiums. The budget was also balanced with \$3.1 million from the university's reserves, which will be earmarked for recruitment. Some areas that might be considered during recruitment may be the promotion of online classes. When a faculty member who teaches technology management was asked about changes to online courses within the last five years, she responded:

Well, technology has certainly changed with mobile devices. The ability for the students and faculty to use mobile devices technically is probably the biggest change. People are more comfortable using technology. Well, the faculty and students in the case of teaching. More and more faculty are starting to use online

or virtual type applications. We still have those that are never going to do that. But, for the most part, younger faculty coming in, or those progressive enough to see the value in it, are using it, and certainly students love it! They enjoy sitting at home and doing it at their leisure. I teach two summer classes, and the only reason they go during the summer is because they can say, "Well, I'm going to be at the beach and I can take my class and do it from the beach." They don't have to worry about it. So I think the perception of online, being away from the TV screens that we had 30 years ago to take online classes and the mail booklets, it's come a long way. (T. Christofero, personal communication, June 22, 2016).

Conclusion

Although many positive steps have moved higher education forward, there is clearly more work to be done to keep education both accessible and affordable. Although several companies have committed to bringing jobs to West Virginia- they will require a skilled and educated workforce. As indicated by the Master Plan report and national trends, more investment in West Virginia's higher education programs is needed to supply the workers that will be needed to fill these positions, which will differ in scope and ability than the energy driven industries that have defined the economy (and culture) of West Virginia for decades. The conclusion that can be drawn from the research indicates that state agencies and universities, along with the students themselves, must be ready to meet the demands of a competitive economic and social climate.

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