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Connecting state legislators to policy resources that support higher education access for women and minorities

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WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT HIGHER EDUCATION TASK FORCE RECOMMENDS STATE POLICY ACTIONS TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS

During a time of fiscal uncertainty, rising college costs, and whispers of diminishing U.S. global competitiveness, access to higher education, particularly for adult learners, has taken a prominent position on the policy agendas of many states. Adult learners, typically defined as those individuals over 25-years of age who are returning to formal education, now make up a significant proportion of all postsecondary education students. This student population will continue to grow according to the National Center for Education Statistics, which projects a 15 percent increase in adult learners by the year 2014.

To assist state legislators in addressing the challenge of increasing adult educational attainment, the Access to Higher Education Policy Research Center facilitated the reconvening of the Women In Government Higher Education Task Force. The Task Force meeting, held following the 15th Annual Midwestern Regional Conference August 2-3 in Indianapolis, Indiana, brought together Women In Government members, nationally recognized leaders in postsecondary education policy,

and higher education practitioners to discuss approaches to increasing adult educational attainment.

A primary outcome of the Task Force was the generation of policy recommendations to guide state postsecondary education legislative activity. The recommendations, which have been approved by the Women In

Government Board of Directors, will serve as the foundation for the work of Research Center in the coming years.

Focusing extensively on policy directed at adult learners, the Task Force got underway with a keynote address by Dr. Paul Lingenfelter, President, State Higher Education Executive Officers. Dr. Lingenfelter provided the Task Force with an overview of the postsecondary education landscape on a national scope, and highlighted the necessity of revising and improving state higher education policy to better support educational attainment levels. Also addressing the Task Force was Dr. Holly Zanville, Senior Program Director at the Lumina Foundation for Education. Dr. Zanville identified several common barriers facing adult education, including aspiration, access, and affordability, and suggested several policy levers available to state legislators to assist the increasing adult student population.

Over the course of the next day, Task Force participants heard from leading national, state, and institutional leaders on topics such as Prior Learning Assessments, Life Long Learning Accounts, state and institutional programs and policies designed to reach adult learners, as well as access and financial aid issues.

The Task Force closed with consensus on five specific policy recommendations for Women In Government members, and other state legislators, to consider when developing postsecondary education policies.

The Task Force, first formed in 2003 and consisting of a national, bipartisan group of state legislators has a mission of increasing access to and success in postsecondary education in the United States for adult learners in general, and women specifically where appropriate. The Task Force will achieve these goals through the identification of sound research, best practices, and innovative policy ideas and programs that serve to inform legislators as they shape public policy and support state economic and social advancement.



Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs)

States should review current practices to ensure that postsecondary institutions have clear policies for the awarding of college credit for knowledge demonstrated both inside and outside of postsecondary education instruction and that state financial aid policies support student use of Prior Learning Assessments. Accepted methods should be used to award credits for equivalent knowledge demonstrated through: courses taken at other in-state or out-of-state postsecondary institutions, knowledge garnered from professional experiences, and knowledge demonstrated through portfolio evaluations in addition to nationally recognized examinations.

Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs)

States should convene working groups to educate employers, employees, and policymakers of the advantages of LiLAs and move toward the enactment of LiLA policies to leverage state, employer, and employee funds to support adult learners in saving for postsecondary education. States should identify specific workforce needs in high-priority sectors and develop pilot LiLA programs targeting these sectors, taking all opportunities to connect LiLAs with existing saving and funding programs. States should work with federal policymakers to ensure continuity between state and federal LiLA policies.

Recruitment & Retention of Adult Learners

In order to remain competitive in tomorrow's global economy, the US must produce 16 million more college degrees by 2025¹. To meet this need, states should create public awareness campaigns aimed at both students and employers. Furthermore, to recruit and retain adult learners, stakeholders should ensure institutions design and implement programs which take into consideration individual circumstances and are consistent with high academic standards. In particular states and institutions should recruit more women into Science,

Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, as well as other in-need and underrepresented fields.

Collaboration of Stakeholders

A comprehensive approach to expand educational programs for adults includes the collaboration of federal, state, and local agencies and policymakers, and the involvement of the entire education community. A myriad of stakeholders should be engaged in these efforts, including: adult learners, financial aid organizations, the media, advocacy organizations, accreditation bodies, higher education institutions, state education coordinating boards, employers and the entire business community. Stakeholders should collaborate to advance policies and programs that support adult learners, such as: hosting a statewide summit, ensuring P-20 initiatives include the recruitment of adults and creating a state strategic plan for adult learning and workforce development.

State Financial Aid Policies

States should make appropriate changes to financial aid policies that reduce procedural barriers and support adult learners in achieving educational goals. States should creatively use resources to fill gaps in federal aid programs; for example, expanding support for part-time and certificate students, or providing aid to students in noncredit courses and programs. States should consider changing funding formulae for adult education, supporting at-risk students, prioritizing expenditures for diverse populations, establishing navigators to help adults through financial aid systems, expanding work study opportunities and examining the oversight of adult education to ensure the most effective placement of these programs.

Additional information on the Higher Education Task Force policy recommendations can be found on the Access to Higher Education Policy Research Center's website at www.womeningovernment.org/highered.

REFLECTIONS OF A HIGHER EDUCATION TASK FORCE MEMBER

The Women In Government Task Force meeting in Indianapolis was very interesting. It took me in a different direction in terms of higher education. Adult learners have been returning to colleges and universities to complete degrees, but they are doing so in greater numbers now, and there is some new funding available for them, which is exciting. I had never heard of some of the funding mechanisms available to those pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Also, some of the statistics about how many people do not have a college degree, or even a high school degree, were astounding. We really need to do a better job of directing students for their future career. After people start having a family and a job, it is so much harder to also become a student and get a degree. It made me think about getting students headed in the right direction at an earlier age.

Finally, there were serious deficits concerning minorities and women, and their opportunity for advancement. We have many more immigrants now without language training who need help to become a contributing citizen. Education is really the foundation for everything in our society, yet all too often it is not funded properly, or change does not happen quickly enough to adapt to the needs in our society.



SENATOR SANDY JERSTAD (D-SD)
REFLECTS ON HER EXPERIENCES AS A
MEMBER OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION
TASK FORCE

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ADULT LITERACY ISSUES REPORT: 90 MILLION AMERICANS UNABLE TO MEET WORKPLACE NEEDS

The National Commission on Adult Literacy (The Commission) released a report, *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, revealing that between 88 and 90 million adults are not prepared to meet the demands of today's global economy or secure a family-sustaining wage job. Of the 88 to 90 million adults who have at least one educational barrier to economic success, 18 million Americans do not have a high school diploma, 51 million have not gone to college, and 18 million are not proficient in their English language and literacy skills.

"Already beyond the reach of schools and lacking the adequate education and skills to obtain a good paying job, our nation's 25 to 34 year-olds are the first generation in U.S. history to be less educated than their parents and unless we do something about it, they face the prospect of a lower standard of living," Commission Chairman, David Perdue, said at the report's release during an event on Capitol Hill.

To help address these challenges, the Commission recommends enacting a comprehensive new federal piece of legislation, the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act, a new domestic "Marshall Plan" that would overhaul and expand adult education and workforce skills training.

As reported in *Reach Higher, America*, 24 of the 30 fastest growing occupations will require workers who possess postsecondary education or training. About 40 percent of job openings over the next decade will be "middle skill" jobs – or jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree.

The Commission, comprised of leaders in business, education, government, and labor recommended the following:

- Transforming current programs for adults into a comprehensive, integrated Adult Education and Workforce Skills System that can effectively serve 20 million American adults annually by the year 2020.

- Set the mission of this new System to focus on readiness for postsecondary and workforce training.
- Increasing public investments in the new System reaching \$20 billion by 2020 plus additional support and involvement from philanthropy and business.
- Calling for strong bold leadership from state government, especially governors, and business.



Current adult education services reach only three million adults annually and were designed for a different time and different challenges. Existing programs cannot meet the urgent national need with our nation's changing demographics. According to *Reach Higher, America*, 1.2 million young people drop out of high school each year; one in five children live in poverty; one in every 100 adults 16 years and older is in prison or jail; and 50 percent of entering immigrants have not completed high school and do not have adequate English language skills.

"If we can make it possible for even four million dropouts to earn a high school diploma by 2020, the net fiscal benefit to federal, state and local governments would exceed \$25 billion annually," says Cheryl King, Commission Study Director. "The potential is there to put less stress on our healthcare system with increased

health literacy, improve our children's learning through better educated parents, reduce crime and incarceration, increase voter participation, and help all adults in America reach higher."

For a complete list of Commissioners, more information on the details of the Commission's findings, recommendations, and projections, and to get the full report in PDF or hard copy, please visit www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy is an independent panel of leaders from labor, business, government, education, literacy, and philanthropy. The Commission is managed by the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL), which works to increase business and philanthropic engagement in adult education and literacy, improve federal and state policy, and raise public awareness.

MORE ADULTS TAKING AND PASSING GED TESTS, STATES FIND SUCCESS IN FLEXIBLE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The number of adults who took GED tests jumped to nearly 729,000 in 2007, with close to half a million of the test takers passing the battery of exams, according to the GED Testing Service (GTS) *2007 GED Testing Program Statistical Report* released in mid-August. The report, published by GTS, an arm of the American Council of Education (ACE), illustrates progress in efforts to serve more adults who do not have a traditional high school diploma and to increase opportunities to secure skilled jobs.

ACE President Molly Corbett Broad noted that 90 percent of the fastest growing occupations through the year 2014 will require postsecondary education.

“In as much as knowledge-based jobs have become the cornerstone of the U.S. economy, the need for an educated workforce cannot be overstated,” Corbett Broad said.

States that exhibited significant increases in the number of adult testers in 2007 were Indiana, Mississippi, Connecticut, Nevada and Florida. Each state reported at least a 10 percent increase.

Ten states reported an above-average passing rate of 85 percent or higher in 2007: Iowa, Delaware, Kansas, Vermont, Wyoming, Alaska, Idaho, Maine, North Carolina and Oregon. Administrators in these states credit flexible program schedules and test preparation materials, such as one-on-one preparation and the GED practice tests, for the higher pass rates.

Some states found increased success rates by combining GED preparation programs with the adult education programs already in place on many community college campuses. In North Carolina, for example, the state demonstrated significantly improved GED pass rates after offering preparation courses on a flexible basis, including weekends, evening, afternoons, and early mornings.



In addition to flexible preparation programs, students also must first pass the practice test before taking the GED test in North Carolina, which the report sites as one way that states have gone about increasing passage rates.

GED officials said they have a strategic plan to continue to increase the number of test takers and successful completers through 2010, noting that U.S. Census data predicts that 30 million

adults—more than 16 percent—of the U.S. population are without a high school credential.

As states continue to grapple with how best to increase educational attainment levels for the adult, often working, population, there will be a continued reliance on the GED as a way to help individuals “catch-up” before making their way to postsecondary education.

The full *2007 GED Testing Program Statistical Report* is available at www.GEDtest.org.

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www.womeningovernment.org

Women In Government is a national 501(c)(3), non-profit, bi-partisan organization of women state legislators providing leadership opportunities, networking, expert forums, and educational resources to address and resolve complex public policy issues.

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