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## **STATE EFFORTS TO BOOST COLLEGE ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT FOUND LACKING**

### ***Weak Leadership, Misplaced Financial Priorities Undermine Higher Ed's Role in Boosting Economy***

WASHINGTON, D.C., Sept. 3, 2014 – Despite considerable experimentation aimed at improving access to college and attainment of degrees, the 50 states often have been ineffective in broadening college opportunities and graduation rates for their residents. In many cases, states pursue policies that just don't work, according to comprehensive and ground-breaking analyses by some of the nation's leading experts in the field.

Eleven research papers published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* examine such state policy initiatives as financing for student scholarships, fiscal responses to the Great Recession, the implementation of "performance funding" to allocate funds to state colleges, the use of "P-20 councils" to align high school curriculum with college readiness, and the disparate effects of gubernatorial and legislative leadership.

Taken as a whole, the new research does not paint a pretty picture of the current state of higher education in America.

“It is the actions taken or not taken by state policy-makers that primarily determine the future course of higher education attainment in the United States,” says a summary of the work. “It is they – the 50 state governments – that determine the levels and types of public financial resources to invest in postsecondary education; it is they that oversee the systems that provide oversight and accountability of higher education, and it is they that establish and monitor goals for the performance of campuses.”

In fulfilling these myriad responsibilities, the 50 state governments have emerged as “active laboratories of policy experimentation” since the mid-1980s, the authors found. But the experimentation often goes awry. Among the findings:

- State responses to the Great Recession of 2007–09 have ranged from purposeful action to listless policy drift. The failure of some state policy-makers and campus leaders to respond to fiscal challenges erodes college attainment.
- In the wake of the Great Recession, trends in state funding show declining college affordability in nearly all of the states. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 achieved its intended effect in as much as it forestalled decreases in state general appropriations for higher education. But ARRA did not prevent decreases in state spending on student financial aid, a finding that has important negative implications for college affordability.
- There is little evidence that performance funding – tying a state’s support for its colleges to the institutions’ graduation rates – leads to improved student outcomes. Performance funding is one of the most widespread, controversial, and politically popular state policy innovations, but current policies not only appear to be unrelated to student performance but may, in fact, contribute to lower performance over a longer period of time.
- State “P–20 coordinating councils” – aimed at ensuring a state’s high schools are following a curriculum that prepares students for the state’s colleges – have been a common policy innovation but generally have not resulted in policy change. Lack of policymaking authority, turnover in membership, and political differences with governors limit their effectiveness. One potentially promising strategy for obtaining early information about students’ academic readiness for college is California’s Early Assessment Program.
- Tuition decentralization – an approach taken in Texas in which the legislature delegated tuition-setting authority to college governing boards as it was reducing public appropriations to higher education – has had a mixed effect on the enrollment of under-represented students. Hispanic students as a group have been most negatively affected.
- The policy choices of the states also shape variations in spending on need-based student aid, merit-based aid and general fund appropriations. Notably, as states invest more in merit-based financial aid, they tend to spend less on need-based aid, a condition that can undercut higher education attainment.
- Leadership matters. Different policy approaches yield significant variations in educational attainment across the states and those that work do so because of strong leadership. A unified statewide agenda for higher education helps to ensure that

individual institutions do not act against state interests or undercut efforts to increase access and attainment.

“In the 1980s, the chief executives of several states were known as pioneering ‘education governors’ because of their innovative K–12 and higher education policies aimed at improving their respective state’s economic development and competitiveness,” the researchers concluded. “These leaders, from both the Republican and Democratic parties, included Lamar Alexander in Tennessee, Jim Hunt in North Carolina, Tom Kean in New Jersey and Dick Riley of South Carolina. This type of focused leadership is needed again if states are to confront the challenges associated with improving college preparedness and addressing workforce needs.”

The researchers added that one area requiring leadership today is the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an initiative by the states to establish higher standards for math and English education in grades K–12.

“The implementation of the CCSS illustrates how continuity and change in patterns of state political leadership can shape the effectiveness of policies designed to increase college attainment,” the researchers noted.

“While ineffective policies should be refined or ended, abandoning recently implemented policies simply because of a change in administration or political majority may undermine policy effectiveness. The Common Core could improve college students’ college readiness and reduce remediation, but if the policy is dropped before it has a chance to take hold or be evaluated, we will never know.”

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The American Academy of Political and Social Science (AAPSS), based in Philadelphia, is one of the nation’s oldest learned societies, dedicated to improving public policy through the use of social science.