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It's all about access

by Michael Humphrey

A recently released report warns that America's persistent disparity in access to postsecondary education is eroding the country's competitive edge in the world. Do Catholic colleges and universities deserve to be a part of these criticisms? Or can they provide a map toward improvement?

"Measuring Up 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education," the fifth such report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education since 2000, predicts that a lack of access for the poor and some minorities will affect the whole country.

"To make significant headway in increasing the educational attainment of its population and thereby its comparative standing internationally, the United States must address disparities in educational opportunity and achievement among Americans," writes Patrick M. Callan, the center's president. "These persistent gaps must be closed if the United States is to meet its workforce needs and compete globally."

The report grades the United States and each individual state on six criteria: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits and learning. In certain categories, some states are doing pretty well. In preparing students for college, for instance, Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Vermont each received an "A." On the other hand, every state except California received an "F" on affordability. Completion of college was a mixed bag, with Iowa leading the nation while Alaska and Nevada each received an "F."

Grading states' performances is a good way to gain media attention, but it's the report card's statistics on economic and race disparities that highlight the main issue.

Some examples:

- The national high-school graduation rate was 77.5 percent, but only 69.1 percent for African Americans and 72.3 percent for Hispanics.

- White students complete a bachelor's degree six years after high school at a rate of 59 percent, while Hispanics lag at 47 percent, African Americans at 41 percent and Native Americans at 39 percent.
- State-by-state disparities can be even more shocking. For instance, 50 percent of white adults age 18-24 are enrolled in college in New York, compared to 34 percent of African-American students. Forty percent of white adults age 18-24 in Arizona are enrolled in college, while a mere 18 percent of Hispanics and Native Americans are.

"Given our relative decline internationally and the gaps in higher education performance within our borders," the report says, "no state can afford to maintain the status quo."

Private schools are pinpointed as part of the problem when it comes to affordability. In New York and Pennsylvania, for instance, families would have to pay 69 to 87 percent of their annual income to send a student to private school. That's after financial aid, and the remainder is most often covered by using savings or taking out loans.

According to the Department of Education, Catholic institutions enroll about 25 percent of all private college and university students. So the correlation might seem clear that Catholic schools are part of the affordability problem.

On the other hand, Catholic colleges have traditionally been very cognizant of the needs of the poor and underrepresented. Many schools were founded to educate immigrants, mostly Catholic at the time, who had few options for an education. That mission continues, said Richard A. Yanikoski, president and CEO of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

"Catholic colleges and universities have a long history, based on their Catholic mission, of preferential option for the poor," Yanikoski said, "and often more specifically on the charism of a founding religious community, to address persistent disparities in access."

When you get past the numbers, you see a dedication by Catholic institutions to address disparities at the ground level, said Yanikoski.

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"For example, institutions founded by the Sisters of Mercy have a historical focus on providing educational opportunities to women from first-generation college families," he said. "Many institutions, most notably Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, have a special mission to serve Hispanic students. Other institutions, especially Xavier University in New Orleans, have a special focus on serving African-American students. In each of these categories, many other colleges and universities are doing excellent work in providing access and education to at-risk students."

A recent report by Moody's Investors Service verifies that statement. While all private colleges, include Catholic ones, have steadily increased tuition over the past 20 years, Catholic schools have been less aggressive.

"Compared with non-Catholic peers," the report says, "the Catholic institutions tend to be larger in terms of enrollment and charge a generally lower net tuition per student, reflecting their mission of access and affordability for Catholic higher education."

Yanikoski also warns that simplifying the issue of access and affordability won't necessarily solve the

disparity problem. He listed several factors that can't be quantified easily, but have a major impact on any given student's ability to succeed in college.

Geographic location, for instance, is a key factor.

"If colleges are available particularly in areas of concentration, and a student can live at home while attending college," Yanikoski said, "there are considerable efficiencies. Many Catholic colleges historically placed themselves in urban areas and remain in those areas. But there's a concentration of those types of schools on the East Coast, whereas in the Phoenix area, for instance, there is no postsecondary Catholic institution."

Effective transition programs for incoming students, relevant majors, a good mix of demographics, personalized mentoring -- these are some of many factors that assure success of students from families that have not traditionally attended college.

"The point I am trying to make is access is an extremely complex issue," Yanikoski said. "You would never know it from some of these reports."

The studies would have to be done almost school-by-school, he said, to understand what could be done better from the collegiate side of the equation. And even then, there's only so much one college can do.

"To be blunt about it," Yanikoski said, "the failure of secondary education is so dramatic that no college or university has the resources to make up for that."

But many schools keep trying. As Yanikoski stated, often colleges in the heart of urban areas, where a large portion of the disparity is found, are Catholic.

Xavier University in Cincinnati is a prime example of a school surrounded by the issues of poverty and race disparity addressed in the report.

"The neighborhoods around us see lots of challenges," said Aaron Meis, dean of undergraduate admissions at Xavier. "Poverty, drugs, a struggling school district, that is all part of the reality around here. And our president, Fr. Michael Graham, has stated repeatedly that we want to be a part of these neighborhoods, we do not want to wall ourselves off."

Xavier is considered a medium-sized school at 6,646 students with nearly 4,000 undergraduates. The pre-aid tuition of \$25,270 is very close to the private-school average. But 96 percent of enrolled students receive financial aid, including 89 percent receiving institutional support.

That commitment to aid landed Xavier on Kiplinger's "100 Best Values in Private Colleges" list, along with highly endowed schools such as Harvard, Stanford and Notre Dame. But unlike those elite schools, which admit anywhere between 9 and 24 percent of applicants, Xavier admits 76 percent.

"We are certainly committed to reading every application that comes into our office thoroughly," Meis said. "It's important that we're accessible to traditionally underserved students based on race and income, but also to students where we see potential for success beyond the standardized tests."

Non-white students make up 21 percent of Xavier's enrollment, which is one measurement of its success at diversity. Eleven percent of all enrolled are African-American, just 1 percent lower than the University of Cincinnati, a public school.

Another important statistic, Meis said, is the number of first-generation students, which is 20 percent for

Xavier.

"That's important, because that is the beginning of the upward mobility cycle," Meis said. "Those students graduate, move on to better jobs and raise families where it's expected the children will attend college."

Yanikoski's point about retention is not lost on Xavier. Students who don't have a history of college graduates in their family, as well as students who show potential but perhaps have weak spots in their academic record, are enrolled in a program that will help them excel academically. Xavier was a leader of its peers by establishing a retention office in 1990.

"They keep an eye on every freshman that comes in," Meis said, "with the sole goal of getting students from their freshman to their sophomore year."

This is the critical year, according to research. And successful passage has as much to do with social, emotional and financial issues as it does academics. The office of retention puts all faculty and staff on alert, looking for signs of students who are struggling with any aspect of collegiate life. Xavier's retention rate is 88 percent, about 20 percent higher than the national average.

"We can really address a range of issues that a student might face," Meis said. "We're very proactive about keeping our students on the right track."

Meis' focus is getting those students to come in the first place. He says in his work there is a misunderstanding among many students about admissions.

"Some are intimidated by the numbers and just don't try," he said. "They see college admission as a game. It's not a game -- we want for those students what their parents want. But parents and students both need to understand it's an investment, and one that still proves to pay off very well."

Online resources

"Measuring Up 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education"
measuringup2008.highereducation.org

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