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SUMMARY

During the 2007 NCSL annual meeting in Boston, the opening plenary discussion dealt with higher education issues and how to transform higher education in the future. Another session, titled “Good Policy, Good Practice” continued the discussion on how to improve higher education.

DISCUSSION

For many years, higher education in the United States has been considered the best in the world. However, in the past few years, this has changed. The United States is now the last of the top 14 countries in percent of increase in student participation. China has committed to increase the number of its graduates by ten times. The United State has not seen any progress in closing the gap of college attendance by low-income individuals. As the current workforce enters retirement, it is being replaced by lesser-educated workers. This is compounded by the fact that 80% of new jobs will require some post-secondary education.

Industry is saying that the gap in skilled workers will prevent the United States from being more competitive. However, where the United States outperforms other countries is in creativity and innovativeness.

Some of the suggestions for improving higher education include:

- focusing more on what students learn, rather than time in the class or graduation rates,
- asking business and industry if graduates are at the level that they need,
- letting secondary students know that higher education is available and possible,
- slowing the rise in tuition rate increases,
- using technology to improve productivity,
- substituting technology for lab work where possible, and
- using time more effectively (using 12th grade of high school more profitably)

In the “Good Policy, Good Practice” session, the speaker mentioned that the group of more highly educated adults, the baby boomers, are now beginning to retire. While the investment in higher education in the United States is leveling off, China and India, for example, are investing heavily in education. Those two countries are now doing what the United States did in the 1950s and 1960.

In comparing increases in costs since 1980, inflation has increased 95%, health care has increased 225%, but tuition has gone up 325%. Even with some increases in financial aid, students are getting priced out of the opportunity to participate in higher education. The speaker mentioned that in the next five years, the United States will realize the limits of higher tuition. He said that we can’t solve the problems without additional state funding, but neither can we solve them with public investment alone.

Some of the ways to increase productivity include moving students through the system faster, limiting the number of times a course can be taken, emphasizing the programs where the institution has its strengths.

