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Utah students shine in math but writing is dim

Higher education: On affordability, only Utah and California receive a nonfailing grade

By Sheena McFarland
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Correction: The current generation's educational level is declining from that of older generations only in Washington County, not the state as a whole. A Thursday story on the status of higher education nationwide implied otherwise.

Utah fares better than other states in college affordability and preparation for college math, but lags in writing preparation and ethnic student college enrollment, a report to be released today shows.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education report, "Measuring Up 2006," compares Utah's system of higher education against systems in other states in six areas: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits and learning.

Only Utah and California earned a nonfailing grade for affordability - a C minus - while all other states earned a D or F.

Utah fared well on preparation, as more eighth-graders are enrolled in algebra than any other state. But eighth-graders performed "very poorly" on writing exams.

The report also dinged Utah for its 11 percent decline in college enrollment of 19-year-olds, compared with a 2 percent national decline. College enrollment is down overall from 1992 as well, dropping from 41 percent to 34 percent.

"There are several theories out there about why college enrollment is down, but they're only theories," said Amanda Covington, spokeswoman for the Utah System of Higher Education. "When the economy is good, people go to work, and affordability is an issue for some students."

Internationally, many countries surpass Utah on a per capita basis in the number of college students who complete degrees or certificates, including New Zealand and Portugal.

"In a knowledge-based economy, the demand for a highly skilled and educated work force has never been greater," Patrick Callan, president of the the nonprofit nonpartisan group that released the report, said in a statement.

That worries Covington, who sees this generation's education level declining from that of older generations. About 30 percent of 45- to 64-year-olds have college degrees as opposed to only 16 percent of 24- to 35-year-olds, she said.

"That number should be alarming, and it's something we're taking action to fix," she said.

The Utah System of Higher Education today will launch the Utah Scholars program, which encourages students from ethnic and low socioeconomic backgrounds to take higher-level courses in high school.

The "Measuring Up" report stated that Latinos in high school are only half as likely to enroll in high-level math courses as whites.

"We're telling these students that if you want to be a self-sustaining adult, you have to have a higher education," she said.

She points out that gaining a higher education has several benefits.

"It affects the type of income you earn, which affects economic development," Covington said. "It also affects what type of citizens you have. If you have a degree, you're more likely to volunteer and vote. It touches every single person in the state."

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Good news

* Utah leads the nation in the proportion of high school students enrolled in upper-level math courses and in the number of eighth-graders enrolled in algebra.

* The proportion of high school students enrolled in upper-level science courses has increased during the past 12 years, and a high percentage of high school juniors and seniors have scored well on advanced placement tests.

Bad news

* Eighth-graders performed poorly on national writing tests.

* Latinos in high school are half as likely to take upper-level math courses as whites.

* Utah high school graduates are less likely to go to college by the time they're 19 than graduates in other states, and overall college enrollment is down.

* Among college-aged students, a significant gap occurs between whites and nonwhites in college enrollment.

- Source: *"Measuring Up 2006"*

Utah's report card

* Preparation: A

* Participation: B

* Affordability: C-

* Completion: B

* Benefits: A-

* Learning: Incomplete*

*insufficient data