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News from NASFAA

Is Graduate-Level Education Receiving Enough Attention?

Washington, D.C. (April 2007) – The U.S. education system is made up of more than just undergraduate schools, yet lawmakers, business leaders, and college presidents are speaking out about the dwindling emphasis, funding, and access to graduate-level education.

Graduate education is the backbone of American competitiveness and innovation. That was the message – and the title – of a legislative forum held recently in Washington, D.C. by the Council of Graduate Schools. Several lawmakers turned out for the event, along with university presidents and business leaders, to discuss what is seen as a stagnant U.S. graduate-level education system, at least in comparison to other developed nations.

While the number of scientific papers published by Americans has remained fairly constant over the last decade, the number of scientific papers published outside of the United States has risen by more than 30 percent. More and more developing nations are investing substantial amounts of money in their graduate schools, illustrated by the fact that South Korea produces about the same number of doctorates as the United States, but with a population that is only about the size of California, Oregon, and Washington combined.

“There’s a lack of understanding of the absolutely essential role of graduate education,” said Ohio State University President Karen Holbrook.

Undergraduate schools, community colleges, and trade-schools should remain an integral part of this discussion, as lawmakers emphasized that everyone involved in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education has a responsibility to give more credence to access and participation in graduate education.

Congressman Ruben Hinojosa, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness, stated that the push to get more students into graduate-level education was a “kindergarten to college” effort.

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“Opening Doors of Educational Opportunity”

“People need to be told that they have the ability to go to college,” said Hinojosa.

Hinojosa also emphasized the need for more funding from the federal government at all levels of higher education, calling it “shameful” that the budgets at public primary and secondary schools are made up of only 7-8 percent of federal dollars.

Hinojosa restated his commitment to begin and finish reauthorization of the Higher Education Act this year to increase college access through additional federal dollars. Congressman Rush Holt, Chairman of the House Appropriations Select Intelligence Oversight Panel also stressed loan forgiveness and increased scholarships to ensure that students could financially “make it” to graduate and doctorate levels.

Temple University President Ann Weaver Hart reminded participants that the federal government is the largest single provider of higher education funding and that those monies must be targeted towards US public policy goals, specifically to ensure that the United States is providing enough access to graduate-level education.

Participants focused on several target populations, including minority and first-generation college students, as a potential “goldmine” of future graduate students.

“Most Americans have little idea about the potential of minority students,” said Hinojosa. He went on to explain how his region in southern Texas had gone unnoticed by employers, schools, and legislators for several years. But now, after more than a decade of work, his congressional district has become a large contributor to the both the Texas and U.S. economy.

These target populations require proactive solutions according to the University of Houston System Chancellor G. Jay Gugue.

“We’re seeing that first-generation college students are ‘debt averse,’” said Gugue, arguing that we must find increased funding sources to tap into U.S. populations that have historically been underrepresented.

Despite many of the troubling statistics about the lagging education system and apparent lack of competitiveness in the world, the forum illustrated that there’s still hope The United States has the largest economy in the world and many agree that our higher education system remains the envy of developed nations. The United States is still the home of the largest global corporations, many of which spawned out of graduate school research projects, such as Google and Genentech.

As policymakers, business leaders, and higher education officials and stakeholders – including financial aid administrators – unite to advocate for increased funding, access and participation in graduate-level education, we will remain at the forefront of global innovation and competitiveness according to Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools.

By Justin Draeger, Assistant Director for Communications, NASFAA. Justin may be contacted at DraegerJ@NASFAA.org.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) is a nonprofit membership organization that represents more than 12,000 financial aid professionals at nearly 3,000 colleges, universities and career schools across the country. Based in Washington, D.C., NASFAA is the only national association with a primary focus on student aid legislation, regulatory analysis, and training for financial aid administrators. Each year, members help more than 8 million students receive funding for postsecondary education. In addition to its member Web site at www.NASFAA.org, the Association offers a Web site with financial aid information for parents and students at www.StudentAid.org.

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[Editor: A photograph of the author is available for download at www.NASFAA.org/Subhomes/MediaCenter/JustinDraegerPhotoMediaCenter.jpg.]