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| To: | APLU & AASCU PresidentsAPLU & AASCU ProvostsCouncil on Governmental AffairsCouncil for Strategic Communications and Advancement |
| From: | Peter McPherson, President, APLUMuriel Howard, President, AASCU |
| Date: | February 21, 2012 |
| Re: | Responding to President Obama's State of the Union Address & College Scorecard |

As you know, in his recent State of the Union address, President Obama outlined several ideas that affect public colleges and universities. In our continuing efforts to keep you informed, we’re providing updates about AASCU and APLU activities related to the President’s address—specifically the comprehensive and innovative measures of student outcomes available through the recently-expanded Voluntary System of Accountability and a new cross-sector initiative, the Student Achievement Measure project, that will launch later this year.Not surprisingly, President Obama emphasized affordability, value, and transparent information for consumers in his national address.  APLU and AASCU continue to vigorously communicate with the Administration on the link between decreasing state appropriations and rising tuition rates.  We also continue to work on better demonstrating the value of the educational experience through a robust accreditation process and continuous institutional improvement. We have been and will remain actively engaged with the Obama administration in advocating for improvements to their consumer information tools such as the College Scorecard.  In light of the focus on transparency, we want to take this opportunity to underscore two projects that supplement and enhance the College Scorecard.  We are directly communicating about these initiatives to the Administration.  While AASCU and APLU support efforts to increase transparency in order to help students and families make well-informed decisions about which schools would provide them with the best value to meet their particular needs, we are concerned that the information currently included on the College Scorecard is inadequate, particularly with regard to graduation rates for public institutions.  A project well known to many of you is the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) developed by APLU and AASCU leaders in 2006-07 to provide students, their families, and other consumers with unbiased, straightforward, and comparable information.  With nearly 300 university participants and 3 million annual page views, the VSA College Portrait delivers cost and financial information similar to the College Scorecard while providing a broader context through an expanded set of elements such as out-of-state costs, net price by income band, and typically available grants/scholarships.  Only the VSA College Portrait provides information on student outcomes through the Success and Progress rate and by the common reporting of student learning.  At this point, it is well-established that the federal graduation rates used on the College Scorecard show incomplete and misleading information on college graduation rates by including only full-time college students who are enrolled for the first time at a higher education institution.  The VSA Success and Progress rate provides a more complete accounting of student completion by including students that transfer across institutions.  This year VSA participants can take greater advantage of the Success and Progress rate and can apply the measure to customized student groups such as veterans, first-generation students, Pell-grant recipients, etc., if they so choose.  Also, the VSA College Portrait offers insight into student learning outcomes.  Beginning this year, the VSA Board authorized an expanded set of tools for reporting student learning within the VSA – from the three original tests to eight options, including faculty-developed assessment rubrics.  Let us note an important development: VSA outreach efforts over the next few months will include contacting the six regional accrediting associations to discuss how to better position the VSA as a resource within the accreditation process, specifically related to the requirement for the assessment of student learning.  We also are pleased to report that the Student Achievement Measure project – a joint initiative with the other four major, presidential associations – is moving forward with the application of a measure derived from the VSA Success and Progress rate to all higher education sectors.  The metric will paint a much clearer and more complete picture of student enrollment and completion than the graduation rate reported on the College Scorecard.  We are working to launch a website in 2013 to display this metric with a significant number of contributions from public and not-for-profit, private institutions.  Look for an invitation to participate in this groundbreaking project later this year.Ultimately, we absolutely agree with President Obama on the importance of transparency, but we also believe that any information conveyed to the public must be complete and accurate.  The College Scorecard does not meet that criterion.  AASCU & APLU will continue its advocacy with the administration and others to strengthen transparency initiatives and communicate the necessity of more accurate and comprehensive information.  |
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