

How to make higher education affordable topic of discussion at Stockton forum

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GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — New Jersey’s system of funding colleges is broken, and a new center at Richard Stockton College has been formed to help guide how to put it back together.

As parents and students toured the campus during freshmen orientation Wednesday, members of the Policy Steering Council for Stockton’s Center for Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance discussed how to make it easier for them to attend and pay for college.

Participants said everyone involved in the process — including state and federal governments, businesses, colleges, parents and students — have a stake in the future of higher education. While the issue is national, they said, the impact is very local, affecting every student’s ability to attend college.

“There has been strong state disinvestment in higher education which has shifted funding from the states to families,” said Daniel J. Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. “We have to address how to maintain affordability for the middle (class).”

That message struck home for parents interviewed at orientation who said finances are their primary concern. Anita Prettelt of Erial, Camden County was heading to the financial aid office at Stockton with her daughter Gabriella.

“She didn’t qualify for the federal work study program, or TAG (a state Tuition Aid Grant),” said Prettelt. “I was really surprised that she couldn’t get some aid. She’s already getting loans. There are other issues, but all comes down to the cost.”

The meeting was closed to the public, but participants talked during lunch about the need for better coordination of higher education policy. Darryl G. Greer, former executive director of the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities is heading the new center and said he will pick one or two issues crucial to New Jersey and focus on driving public policy to achieve them.

“We want New Jersey to be part of the national discussion,” he said.

Access and affordability were common topics. New Jersey sends more students out of state to college than any other state in the nation, partially because there is not enough space in the state’s college for all who want to attend. State businesses must then recruit them back for jobs, a practice that will get more challenging as other states compete to keep those graduates.

“There is a gap between what we have and what we will need,” Dennis P. Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems said of New Jersey colleges. “That means colleges can be more selective, and charge more. But parents are also asking the value question. They want to know what the job prospects will be for the future.”

He said while New Jersey is viewed as a wealthy state, there is an income gap, especially among minorities who are more likely to attend a less-expensive community college and less likely to attain bachelor degrees. As the minority population grows, that could affect the availability of workers for jobs that require more advanced degrees.

Jones said New Jersey should do a better job of using data to connect the K-12 education system, colleges and the workplace.

“Everyone has data, but it doesn’t bridge between the sectors,” he said.

New Jersey just received \$5 million in federal grants to expand the state’s NJSMART data system, to track students from preschool through the workforce.

Jane Wellman, founding director of the Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs, Productivity and Accountability said the economic crisis has put colleges under more scrutiny. Issues include the colleges’ ability and willingness to cut costs, and students who are not prepared for college and require expensive remediation.

John B. Wilson, president and CEO of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in New Jersey said there are 14 private colleges in the state that must be included on policy issues. He said he has seen some commitment from Gov. Chris Christie for higher education, but when there is no willingness to pay taxes, it’s hard to get financial support.

Gov. (Thomas) Kean was the last governor to really support higher education,” he said.

A recent Stockton/Zogby poll of parents of high school students found while 76 percent said state colleges should get more funding, only 19 percent were willing to pay higher taxes.

Wilson said families also need to be more educated about college costs, and the importance of saving money for college through such venues as tax-free college savings plans.

Speakers said higher-education policy is typically driven more by politics than data on what is actually needed to maintain a steady revenue stream and control costs. John Walda, president and CEO of the National Association of College and University Business Officers said public/private partnerships should be encouraged to help defray costs. But, he said, colleges are also important for their larger benefit to society and their communities.

“There must be a change in the relationship between colleges and the government,” he said. “There must be some sharing of responsibility for funding.”

Richard Novak, senior vice president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges said Stockton’s center could gather data and be an objective voice for positive change in the state. He said the college’s new polling institute could help gauge public opinion of the issues and advocate for change.

“No one else is really doing that right now,” he said.

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