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Case Study of Utah Higher Education

from The National Center For Public Policy and Higher Education

www.highereducation.org/reports/utah/ind...

In *Measuring Up*, the biennial report card on higher education, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education uses nationally comparable data to look at state performance and to determine how well the people of the state are being served by education and training beyond high school. One of the purposes of the report card is to focus the attention of public policy leaders on issues of performance with regard to five key questions: How well does the state prepare its young people for higher education? What opportunities are there for young people and working age adults to enroll in higher education? How affordable is higher education for students and families in the state? How many students complete their educational programs? To what degree does the state benefit from an educated population? The report card challenges states to compare their performance with other states as well as evaluate their own performance over time.



While the report card provides an assessment of how well states perform relative to one another in the key policy areas, it does not address the relationship between specific state policies and performance in those vital areas. To examine that connection, the National Center conducts periodic in-depth case studies of individual states, and has selected Utah for one such study.

The National Center chose to look at Utah in part because of how the state has addressed issues of growth in the recent past. Higher education enrollments in Utah have almost doubled over the past 20 years, and are expected to grow again over the next decade. In the face of growing enrollments and increases in student participation, Utah has been able to maintain a higher education system that is more affordable for students than is the case in many states, particularly with regard to its four-year institutions. Utah stands out in *Measuring Up 2004: The National Report Card on Higher Education* for its efforts in holding the line on affordability for the past decade, particularly when many other states saw large drops in affordability. Utah is a top performer (relative to other states) in the areas of preparation and affordability, and has significantly improved its performance in the completion area over the past decade.¹ State performance in the areas of participation and benefits has declined over the past decade.

Because Utah has been able to maintain a relatively affordable system at a time when enrollments were increasing, the authors were particularly interested in the relationship between state policies and performance in the areas of enrollment/participation and affordability. Has the state made explicit policy efforts to accommodate enrollments, improve participation, and maintain affordability? What has the state done to address issues of student completion? How have these efforts influenced performance? Where is there more to be done? We asked these questions of individuals who participate in and observe higher education from a variety of perspectives (a list of all individuals interviewed for this study is included in Appendix A), and looked closely at state documents to determine how the data support their perceptions.

While the particular political and cultural context of each state differs, the issues that Utah higher education faces (accommodating enrollment growth, trying to maintain affordability in times of recession, and maintaining an appropriate array of institutions that the state can afford and that will serve students) are not unique. The results that Utah obtains have been influenced by both policy and state context, and there are lessons to be learned about those relationships.

We begin the case with a look at contextual factors, first for the state in general and then for higher education in particular. We then turn to a discussion of performance in higher education, looking specifically at how Utah performs relative to other states on some key performance measures. Next we look at the array of policies that were discussed during our state interviews, and try to understand the relationship between those policies and Utah's results on the various performance measures.

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