Rationale: West Virginia will need to produce over 40,000 more Associate and Bachelor’s degree holders by 2025—an average annual increase of around 17 percent or about 2,000 more degrees per year—to reach the U.S. average educational attainment of 55 percent of age 25-65 year olds having an Associate’s degree or higher. To achieve this goal, West Virginia must improve attainment for those groups whose access to education is often limited—working adults, first-generation students, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, Veterans, and more. Tending to the access and success of our diverse (see working definition below) student groups is a matter of equity, but also a demographic necessity and economic imperative. The make-up of West Virginia’s citizenry is changing to reflect the shifting demographics of the nation. Those that comprise the majority of West Virginia’s people and form its economic and democratic bases have the lowest levels of formal education. Consider the following examples.

Race & ethnicity. The number of Whites in West Virginia will continue to decline whereas the numbers of Blacks, Latinos, and Asian American/Pacific Islanders will increase. Although Whites are projected to continue comprising the majority (just over 90%) of public high school graduates each year (2009 to 2021), as a proportion of total graduates they will decline by nine percent. By comparison, the number of Latino students is projected to increase nearly 250 percent followed by Asian American/Pacific Islanders at 93 percent (WICHE, 2008). Yet, nearly 30 percent of Hispanics do not complete high school in the State and Blacks lag behind Whites with respect to postsecondary degree completion.

First-generation students. A survey of the 2007 West Virginia senior class shows that about half of all high school graduates are first-generation; their parents or guardians did not attend college (HEPC, 2007). First-generation students are less likely to attend college, less likely to attend a four-year school, and less likely to complete a degree, regardless of the institution type attended (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006).

Low-income students. In 2007 West Virginia ranked 10th in the nation in proportion of students receiving free or reduced lunch—an indicator of economic need (USDA, 2009) and ranked 7th in the nation in terms of statewide poverty rates compared to national averages. In 2006, just over 19 percent of low-income students in West Virginia attended college (Mortenson, 2009) compared to a statewide college continuation rate of nearly 58 percent (NCHEMS, 2006).

Rurality. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that poverty rates are highest in rural counties and, not surprisingly, college-going rates are among the lowest according to West Virginia’s Higher Education Report Card (HEPC, 2009). A number of rural counties in the State send as few as 30 percent of their students on to college each year.
Though these are just a few examples, it is clear that educational attainment varies by important aspects of social and cultural diversity. Therefore, as the statewide coordinating board for all four-year public institutions in West Virginia, the Higher Education Policy Commission has been charged with creation of the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative (CDI) and its coordinating body, the Diversity Council. The Diversity Council is charged with making its first set of recommendations to the Commission by November 2010.

Goals

The goals of the Diversity Council are to (a) provide direction to HEPC regarding how its existing programs and policies can be coordinated and improved to enhance and celebrate diversity; (b) help establish a framework for the long-term continuation of the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative, including a strategic planning cycle; (c) provide recommendations regarding the appropriate roles for HEPC in encouraging and supporting campus diversity initiatives. Particular areas of concern include but are not limited to students, faculty, staff, institutional missions, campus climate, workforce, economic development, and community outreach.

Objectives

- Review and evaluate ways in which existing HEPC policies, programs, and practices can be enhanced to promote diversity system-wide.
- Agree upon a working definition of diversity for CDI reflective of West Virginia and its postsecondary needs.
- Establish mechanisms by which campus leaders, educators, and policy makers can be consistently informed regarding West Virginia’s progress toward helping diverse students get into and through college. Efforts should begin with a baseline assessment of the state of diversity in West Virginia’s postsecondary institutions and HEPC. Development of benchmarks and indicators to assess progress would be beneficial.
- Consider and enumerate ways in which existing HEPC governance mechanisms (e.g., campus compacts) can be used to support and promote strategic diversity initiatives among campuses.
- For those campuses with few resources and less robust diversity initiatives, recommend ways in which HEPC can augment existing efforts and help initiate new efforts.
- Consider and make recommendations regarding the relationship of CDI to Extension and Outreach Services, the Career and Technical Community System, for-profit institution, the Regents Bachelor of Arts, and other programs and projects that help educate diverse students in non-traditional ways.
- Consider and make recommendations regarding connections to P-20 initiatives, remaining cognizant of the longitudinal nature of student success and the need for a P-20 perspective on the part of the Council.
- Develop and recommend system-wide policies and procedures for long-term continuation of the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative, including the on-going role of the Diversity Council.
References


\(^1\) Based on projections done by Patrick Kelly, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.