



# **The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board**

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## **Report from the Commissioner of Higher Education**



### **Participant Packet**

**February 3, 2005  
3:05 - 3:30 PM CT**

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## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION

by Dr. Raymund A. Paredes, Commissioner of Higher Education

As the next session of the Texas Legislature approaches, we should take a close look at the status of the state's higher education system. Thanks to the hard work of a long line of state leaders, there's much about which we can be proud. But challenges also remain, and there's an urgent need to address them.

We can be proud that the prestigious Times of London recently ranked The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University at College Station among the world's top 200 universities. And beyond these flagship institutions, Texans can take pride in other state colleges and universities. For example, The University of Texas at Arlington is a national leader in study of urban affairs. Sam Houston State University in Huntsville is one of the nation's top institutions for studying criminal justice. And Texas Tech University is well known for its research on water resources and water rights.

Clearly, programs like these, combined with those of similar strength offered by our community and technical colleges, demonstrate the overall high quality of our colleges and universities, offering many opportunities for Texans to have solid educational experiences.

Another tribute to our efforts is the fact that other states look to Texas for leadership in higher education. Our *Closing the Gaps by 2015* initiative, with its goals related to educational equity, student academic success, institutional excellence and research support, is widely admired. The TEXAS Grant program, which pays college tuition for needy students, and the B-On-Time loan program, which provides a no-interest loan – to be forgiven if recipients graduate on time and with a “B” average – are national models for making higher education affordable.

But having noted these positives, we must also recognize the challenges that face Texas higher education. Several need immediate attention:

- **Stronger collaboration with the P-12 education sector.** The higher education community must do more to support academic rigor, especially in high school, which is the key to success in college. It must help high schools expand high quality dual credit and advanced placement courses as well as other academic and informational programs that provide students from all backgrounds and every region of the state genuine pathways to college. Establishing P-16 councils in every region of the Texas would help to promote collaboration between educational sectors.
- **Developmental education.** Approximately one-half of the students entering Texas public higher education do not have the reading, writing, and math skills they need for success in college. All colleges and universities have a responsibility to educate the students they admit and can do better in assisting those who come to campus unprepared to do rigorous academic work. For example, less than 30 percent of the students entering existing developmental education programs successfully complete them within two years. An even smaller percentage eventually complete certificates or degrees. Clearly, there's a need to expand innovative

approaches to developmental education, such as: the creation of learning communities, which involve classes that are linked or clustered and enroll a common group of students; accelerated learning, which allows students to focus intently on areas in which they need to further develop their academic skills; and peer tutoring and academic counseling.

- **Community college resources.** Enrollments at the state’s two-year colleges have skyrocketed over the past four years – up an average of about 29,000 students annually, or equivalent to adding another large higher education institution each year. Community colleges have absorbed this tremendous growth with no significant increases in resources. Although they are supported by local taxing districts, they also provide needed educational services in much larger “service areas” from which they do not receive tax support. Providing adequate resources to community colleges is vitally important for the state’s future, since at least 70 percent of the 300,000 additional students needed to meet the participation goals of the state’s *Closing the Gaps* plan are expected to enroll first at community colleges.
- **Transfer rates.** As noted, most students begin their college careers at the state’s two-year institutions. Unfortunately, too many students also end their college careers at those institutions, before they have fulfilled their academic potential. Within six years of entering a two-year institution, only about 30 percent of students transfer to universities to pursue higher-level degrees. We must encourage more of these students to continue their educations at universities to produce the professional leaders Texas will need to ensure a higher quality of life for our society in the future.
- **Quality of undergraduate education.** In our understandable rush to create more first-rate graduate programs and research institutions, it is important to remember that excellent undergraduate education remains the foundation of great colleges and universities. More must be done to develop students’ expressive and critical thinking skills, perhaps through more undergraduate seminars; through more research activities, including one-on-one research experiences with the most distinguished faculty members; and through honors programs requiring extended and thoughtful analysis of important issues. We need our newly minted baccalaureates to be competitive for places in the best companies and the best graduate and professional schools.
- **Student persistence and graduation rates.** Unacceptable numbers of students leave the state’s colleges and universities before earning a college-level certificate or degree. An analysis of 266,578 Texas seventh-grade students from 1992 indicates that only 44.7 percent enrolled in higher education after high school, and only 13.4 percent earned a certificate or degree within six years after entering a Texas college or university. Most of our four-year institutions have six-year graduation rates of well under 50 percent. This attrition represents a waste of precious human and financial resources.
- **Latino enrollment.** Historically, Latinos have participated in higher education at much lower rates than other groups, a trend that continues today. Beyond the moral imperative for a free and fair society to serve all of its people, this fact becomes tremendously significant when coupled with the knowledge that Latinos are the state’s fastest growing large population group. Unless Texas does a better job educating Latinos, and doing so immediately, our state won’t

have the educated work force it needs to sustain economic and cultural development, and to raise levels of civic participation.

Of course, many of these challenges have received considerable attention in the past. Today, however, we must recognize their full scope and develop comprehensive, long-term strategies for addressing them. We no longer can apply arithmetic solutions to geometric problems.

Fortunately, the challenges in Texas higher education are well understood by political, business, and educational leaders across the state. And a new higher education accountability system, developed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the state's higher education institutions at the direction of Governor Perry, will give the state and its people a valuable tool for clearly discerning our successes and failures as we move into this legislative session and beyond. That type of information is essential for identifying changes needed to ensure that the state achieves its higher education goals in student access and participation, student success, institutional excellence, and research.

Achieving these goals will require an unprecedented and sustained level of collaboration, from one side of the political aisle to the other, from the P-12 sector to the higher education sector, and from community leaders to ordinary citizens, especially parents and students. Our future, and the futures of generations afterward, depend on our success in this endeavor.