

**INITIAL REACTION TO THE REPORT OF THE
COMMITTEE ON ACCESS AND DIVERSITY**

Submitted for: Information.

Summary: This item provides information about the initial response to the Committee on Access and Diversity's report, *Gateway to Success: Rethinking Access and Diversity for a New Century* and describes the process that the Committee is following in soliciting statewide comment on this report. The Committee presented *Gateway to Success* to the Board in April 2001. After seeking comment, the Committee will make revisions and present the final report and its recommendations for Board approval at the August meeting.

Action Required: None.

STATE OF ILLINOIS
BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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In April 2001, the Committee on Access and Diversity presented to the Board a report entitled, *Gateway to Success: Rethinking Access and Diversity for a New Century*. The Board received the report and directed the Committee to solicit statewide comment to the report's recommendations, making any changes that the Committee deemed appropriate, and returning the document for the Board's approval at the June meeting. The schedule of meetings with various groups about the report have necessitated extending the period of consultation, and the report will now be considered for final Board approval at the August meeting. This Board item describes the activities that the Committee has undertaken to date, as well as the reaction received to its recommendations.

In April 1999, the Board of Higher Education created the Committee on Access and Diversity to study issues related to rising demands for higher education, the ability to meet those demands, and progress in expanding diversity on college campuses. The committee held five public hearings where 90 individuals presented nearly 13 hours of testimony. The committee also conducted three focus groups on the topics of affordability, students with disabilities, and minority students.

The Committee's report documents that the demand for college is broader and stronger than any time in history. Many more Illinois citizens are going to college and many more elementary/secondary school students hope to go to college. To meet these needs, the Committee proposes a broad array of initiatives that emphasize the importance of student preparation and making a successful transition to college. The report also emphasizes the importance of diversity in higher education in preparing all students to enter a work force and a society that is increasingly diverse.

Gateway to Success can be found at the Board of Higher Education's Web site, www.ibhe.state.il.us. The report contains the following major recommendations:

Access

- Seek legislation requiring all high students to take a college preparatory curriculum.
- Issue an annual Readiness Report detailing the readiness of high school graduates for college.
- Fund "Last Year/First year" programs to make the senior year of high school more productive in preparing students for college and the freshman year of college more successful in reducing attrition rates.
- Create a Web-based Consumer Information System that has the capability to expand access for disabled, adult, limited-English proficiency, and minority students. Also,

make community colleges the focal point for information about educational opportunities at all levels.

- Begin a process of more actively addressing the needs of two often overlooked groups, students with disabilities and students with limited-English proficiency. Convene conferences in the coming year that focus on the potential benefits and risks that educational technology presents to these populations.

Diversity

- Support the continued use of race/ethnic criteria in admissions and financial decisions, as permitted under the U.S. Supreme Court Bakke decision. Work with higher education institutions in advancing diversity and defending legal challenges to the use of race/ethnic criteria.
- Resist use of percentage plans (guaranteed college admission to the top percentage of a high school graduating class) in favor of a more comprehensive approach that considers multiple factors—class ranks, test scores, rigor of high school coursework, participation in special academic programs, and effects of a student’s learning environment—in admissions decisions.
- Strengthen existing financial aid programs and create a new program to foster greater diversity on campus to extend access to ethnic and racial minorities, students with disabilities, and women in fields where they are underrepresented.
- Create a grant program to build partnerships with private sponsors to encourage and assist disadvantaged elementary and high school students to prepare for college.

The Committee on Access and Diversity has received varied responses to its report and its recommendations. Written responses have been received from Southern Illinois University, the University of Illinois, the Faculty Advisory Committee, and from interested individuals. Committee members and staff have met with members of the Illinois General Assembly, the Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education, and the Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education, and a meeting has been scheduled with persons representing the disabled community. The Faculty Advisory Committee and the Student Advisory Committee are providing feedback on the report. Other meetings to discuss the report also are anticipated.

While most respondents have generally lauded the report, all have found something upon which to critically comment. Initial reaction suggests the most controversial part of the report is the recommendation to introduce legislation that requires all high school students to complete a pre-collegiate curriculum. Some persons believe that such a requirement might increase the number of high school drop outs. Others are concerned that school districts are not prepared to support such a curricula shift and propose the recommendation be phased in over a period of years. The *Chicago Sun Times* has written a critical editorial questioning the possible effect of this recommendation upon vocational education students.

Given the attention that the national media has given to higher education’s use of race/ethnic criteria in college admissions, the lack of public criticism of the Committee’s support for the Bakke decision is surprising. Only two individuals expressed their dissatisfaction with this recommendation, one stating his preference for the use of “percentage plans” as a mechanism to advance diversity. The lack of substantial criticism may be due to the fact that the Committee’s report eschewed use of the words “affirmative action”, a controversial term with

different meanings. Instead, the Committee pursued an approach that carefully articulated its position: support for use of race/ethnic criteria as a plus factor in admissions decisions.

Gateway to Success proposes enhancing student access and success by strengthening academic and support programs in the last year of high school and first year of college. A number of respondents have commented upon the types of “Last Year/First Year” programs they believe are most effective. In regard to high school preparation and college admission, some respondents see a contradiction in the Committee’s support of the Prairie State Exam and its advocacy of broad admissions criteria. Some support the test as a diagnostic tool while warning that over reliance upon this test in admissions could have a chilling effect on campus diversity. Another comment is that the success of the Prairie State Exam will ultimately depend upon having in place similar achievement tests in lower grades to guide pre-collegiate academic preparation.

In regard to the first year of college, some advocate focusing more intently upon improving the campus climate as it is perceived and experienced by minority, female, and disabled students. It is also argued that the number of underrepresented faculty directly contributes to a favorable campus climate and that institutions should intensify their efforts to hire such faculty. It should be noted that the Board has directed that faculty representation be addressed in a follow up report. Incorporating diversity programming in the general education curriculum is also advocated, as is improving the evaluation of student support programs serving underrepresented students.

Gateway to Success proposes that public universities should increase the development of Internet-based baccalaureate degree-completion programs and community colleges should advise students at all educational levels, if Illinois higher education is to position itself to meet rising off-campus instructional demand. Some have argued that public universities will need greater state support in order to provide such programs. Also, questions have been raised about whether community college staff are trained to assume broader advising responsibilities and whether it is appropriate to expand the community colleges’ role in this way.

The Committee’s recommendations pertaining to technology also have received general comment. Some criticism has been cautionary advising the Board not to rely too heavily upon technology as a delivery mechanism. These respondents believe that instructional technology is only effective with highly motivated students and may not promote access among disadvantaged urban and rural populations. Some ask the Board to further study this issue before undertaking efforts to expand technology-based distant learning.

Finally, some respondents have stressed the importance of the Board providing leadership and direction in the implementation of the report’s recommendations. Ongoing evaluation will be required, as well as the development of quantitative measures, that will enable the Board to track progress in achieving results and to modify programmatic efforts with changes in student outcomes.

