
Regional

U.S. lags behind in many areas of higher ed

Data can help make clear many of the important – oftentimes confusing – issues confronting the state of higher education in this country. One useful source of information is the annual report titled “Comparative Indicators of Education in the United States and Other G-20 Countries.” The 2015 issue was just released by the U.S. Department of Education.

The G20 is an informal group of 19 countries and the European Union. These countries, which include some of the United States’ largest economic partners, are among the most economically developed, representing 85 percent of the world’s economy and two-thirds of its population.

Here are some of the report’s most relevant findings:

When it comes to school age population (from 5 to 29 years of age), the U.S. has 34 percent of its residents engaged in some form of formal schooling. Although that is better than very aging countries such as Italy or Japan, which have 25 percent of their people going to school, it is much lower than countries like Saudi Arabia and South Africa, which have about 50 percent of their school age people engaged in education. Additionally, as a percentage of the total population, this age group continues to decline in the United States. One major consequence of that for higher education is that there will be fewer high school graduates, leading to increased competition among colleges and universities to attract them.

When it comes to graduation rates and educational attainment, data from 2011 show graduation rates from upper secondary education (high school) were above 90 percent in four of the G-20 countries.

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Japan was at 96 percent, the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom both were at 93 percent, and Germany was at 92 percent. The lowest graduation rate was in Mexico, at 49 percent. In the United States, the graduation rate was 77 percent. Again, bad news when it comes to the main source of students for colleges and universities in this country.

And these problems start early. For example, in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in pre-primary or primary education programs in 2011 was above 90 percent, whereas in the U.S., the rate was 64 percent. In fact, in our country it is not until children reached age 6 that at least 90 percent of the population was enrolled in formal education. That means students less prepared academically and socially to succeed in primary school and going forward.

Higher education in the U.S. continues to be the most expensive in the world. In 2010, the total expenditures per student and the portion of these expenditures devoted to core education services were higher in the United States than in all other reporting G-20 countries. Expenditures per student averaged \$19,700 in the U.S., while in the other G-20 countries annual expenditures per student ranged from about \$5,900 in Italy to \$15,100 in Canada. In 2010, the Republic of Korea and the United States spent a higher percentage

of gross domestic product (GDP), 6.8 percent, than any other reporting country in education in general.

We also find bad news in the data regarding gender. Differences in graduation rates between males and females were generally small for the G-20 countries with the largest differences in Mexico and the United States, where females had a 7 percentage-point higher rate of graduation than males. Graduation rates from higher education below the doctoral level ranged from a low of 18 percent in Saudi Arabia to a high of 55 percent in the United Kingdom. The graduation rate in the U.S. was 39 percent.

Other gender issues include employment rates. In the United States, for example, the employment rate was 86 percent for men with academic higher education and 76 percent for women, 72 percent for men with upper secondary education and 62 percent for women, and 61 percent for men with lower secondary education or below and 40 percent for women.

When it comes to favorite majors, in 2011 a greater percentage of first university degrees were awarded in the fields of social sciences, business and law than in any other field in all G-20 countries reporting data, except Germany and the Republic of Korea. They awarded the highest percentage of their degrees in the fields of mathematics, science and engineering. Saudi Arabia awarded the highest percentage of its degrees in the fields of arts and humanities. In the U.S., 41 percent of first university degrees were awarded in the fields of social sciences, business and law, whereas 16 percent were awarded in the fields of science, mathematics and engineering (among the

lowest percentages of any of the G-20 countries). What this means is that the U.S. is lagging behind other countries in areas linked with progress in technology.

For those – including some politicians – who assert that higher education is an unnecessary luxury need to pay special attention to this data. In all reporting G-20 countries, higher levels of education were associated with higher income. At both the lower secondary education or below and upper secondary education levels, the United States had the lowest percentages of 25- to 64-year-olds who earned more than the median income. For U.S. adults with higher education, 68 percent earned more than the median income.

In this political year when campaigns are using fear about external or internal, real or imaginary enemies for political advantage, we are failing to see that we are falling behind other countries in the field of education in general and higher education in particular. And that fact will jeopardize the future of this country.

Those politicians who like to cite the Founder Fathers and freedom as one of the original principles behind the birth of the nation while denying financial support to education, need to be reminded of the forewarning words of Thomas Jefferson: “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.”

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