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Ohio already meeting many of federal plan's objectives

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Ohio's colleges and universities are already been addressing many of the objectives of an Action Plan for Higher Education, released earlier this week by Secretary Margaret Spellings of the federal Department of Education.

The Secretary's Action Plan centers on improvements in accessibility, affordability and accountability. The plan was based upon recommendations published Aug. 9 by her Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

The plan proposes to "strengthen K-12 preparation and align high school standards with college expectations." Governor Taft's Ohio Core proposal calls for a more rigorous high school core curriculum to better prepare Ohio students for work, college and life. Also, the Ohio Board of Regents has been working with the Governor's office and the Ohio Department of Education to develop college readiness expectations through the American Diploma Project.

To address related access issues, the Ohio College Access Network is the nation's first statewide coordinating body for local and regional college access programs in the nation. Federally funded GEAR UP Ohio's eight lighthouse programs are guiding Ohio communities to comprehensive strategies for increasing the number of students who aspire to, prepare for and successfully experience college.

The Secretary aims to "simplify the [financial aid] process by partnering with states to use existing income and tax data to help students complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in half the time." Currently, the Board of Regents does not require students to fill out a separate, complex application for the Ohio Instructional Grant or for the new Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG), but instead uses FAFSA data to determine eligibility. In addition, the Regents staff has been working methods for providing earlier notification to students regarding their financial aid status.

Beyond the applications process, the OCOG program expands upon the earlier Ohio Instructional Grant program, providing more financial aid to more of Ohio's neediest students.

The plan seeks to "explore incentives for states and institutions that collect and report student learning outcome data." Ohio is in the process of implementing methods of assessing accountability in higher education that support institutional autonomy and empower students, schools and policymakers to continuously and effectively monitor and improve student learning. This month, stakeholders are attending regional accountability workshops that focus on increasing student success and measuring learning outcomes. The approaches being explored offer stakeholders

something better than a “one-size-fits-all” standardized test for college and university students. The benefits of the proposed state-to-state comparisons are at best dubious, and do not justify the considerable cost involved or make up for the subsequent loss of institutional autonomy and innovation.

The Regents staff continues to study the report to determine what additional recommendations might help improve higher education participation, quality and accountability in Ohio.

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Editor's note: A copy of the Secretary's Action Plan for Higher Education is attached.