

Arkansas Project Graduation Commission

Donnie Whitten, Chair

Annual Report 2011



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Arkansas Project Graduation Commission Members 2011

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Statutory Authority

The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission was created by Act 1306 of the 87th General Assembly in 2009 with the purpose of investigating and analyzing high school dropout prevention strategies in Arkansas and the relationship between high school graduation rates and the state's economy. In addition, the Arkansas Project Graduation Commission is charged with creating an annual report with suggestions of best practices and an overview of important data from the Arkansas Department of Education, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, and the Arkansas Department of Career Education, concerning high school graduation rates and postsecondary degree completion rates in Arkansas.

The Commission received input from key stakeholders and state leaders and studied the research of national and state experts. Representatives of the Arkansas Department of Education, Arkansas Department of Higher Education and Arkansas Department of Career Education presented information and data to the Commission. In addition, local school districts, legislators and key stakeholders were invited to present information to the Arkansas Project Graduation Commission and participated in discussing various topics.

The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission is supported by the Arkansas Department of Education, which provides the Commission Coordinator and reimburses commissioners' travel expenses. The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission agendas, minutes, and other documents are posted at:

<http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/HigherEd/Pages/ProjectGraduationCommission.aspx>

The Problem

"To be competitive in the 21st century, Arkansas students must have the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college and in today's knowledge-based economy. All Arkansas students deserve an education that prepares them for college and careers. Access to a college and career ready education shouldn't be determined by a student's ZIP code. That's where Common Core comes in."— Arkansas Education Commissioner Dr. Tom W. Kimbrell

The Commission reviewed the state's current educational practices, demographics, graduation and completion rate data and researched models of best practices in Arkansas and the nation.

The state ranks at or near the bottom on every measure of post-secondary attainment despite the fact that post-secondary enrollment has increased by over 40 percent the last decade including a 72 percent increase in two-year college enrollment. With this explosive enrollment growth also came some increases in Arkansas's certificate and degree production levels, but the growth falls short of larger increases seen across the country. Currently, 18 percent of two-year students complete any award within three years and only 32 percent of four-year students seeking a baccalaureate degree complete it within six years. Few Arkansas students graduate and fewer still graduate if they are members of a minority group.

Arkansas must act boldly to raise the educational level of its citizens. Key stakeholders have worked diligently to increase educational attainment and to establish an increase in college completion as a top priority. In terms of economic needs and demographic trends in the state, we know that there are too few educated citizens at all levels and in all regions of the state.

Arkansas has joined 42 states and the District of Columbia to participate in the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an effort to improve college and career readiness across the nation. The Arkansas Board of Education voted in July 2010 to adopt the Common Core, which is a set of shared learning expectations from state to state in English Language Arts and Mathematics. The move began in the 2011-2012 school year for kindergarten through grade 2.

The Impact of High School Dropouts on the Arkansas Economy

High school dropouts affect state revenue because of their reduced income and therefore reduced taxes paid to the state. Dropouts have an increased chance of going to prison and are more likely to have teen pregnancies. All of these issues affect the state's economy.

High School Dropouts are twice as likely as Graduates to Live in Poverty

- High school dropouts earn \$200,000 less over a lifetime and pay \$60,000 less in taxes. (Staying Power Dropout Prevention is Worth the Effort)
- An intervention advancing 600,000 dropouts by one grade would save the government programs for the uninsured an additional \$248 million. (Staying Power Dropout Prevention is Worth the Effort)
- Improved cognition helps students make choices that may decrease their risk for teen pregnancy.... (Staying Power Dropout Prevention is Worth the Effort)
- If all Arkansas students in the class of 2005-2006 had graduated, the state could have saved \$8,222 in Medicaid expenses and \$93,711,844 total lifetime health savings. (Staying Power Dropout Prevention is Worth the Effort)
- In Arkansas, the cost to taxpayers (federal, state, and local) associated with teen childbearing is estimated to be at least \$112 million in 2004. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy)
- Arkansas is home to 278 high schools; 10 of these are considered among the nation's lowest-performing high schools (i.e., schools where fewer than 60 percent of freshmen progress to their senior year on time). (Alliance for Excellent Education)
- In Arkansas, 31 percent of high school students do not graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma. (Alliance for Excellent Education)

Outline of Recommendations

Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 Recommendations

1. Increase Access and Funding for High Quality Early Childhood (Pre-Kindergarten) Programs in Arkansas
2. Establish Community Partnerships to Improve Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 Parental Involvement
3. Implement Early Intervention for Targeted Students (Middle/High School)
4. Continue Emphasis and Funding for Arkansas Works

Higher Education Recommendations

1. Reduce Graduation Barriers by Targeting Math Requirements
2. Increase Job Placement Assistance
3. Target and Support Non-Traditional Learners
4. Improve Retention Strategies

Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 Recommendations

1. Increase Access and Funding for High Quality Early Childhood (Pre-Kindergarten) Programs in Arkansas

Increasing graduation rates starts with a successful foundation that now must be emphasized through high-quality early childhood / pre-kindergarten programs in Arkansas. The Commission recommends increasing access to and creating additional funding sources that will allow school districts to create and/or expand early childhood / pre-kindergarten programs in Arkansas.

The Commission recognizes the impact these actions could have in Arkansas and supports the work of the Arkansas Early Childhood Commission and National Governors Association position on early childhood education. Suggestions from these organizations include:

- a. Develop a vision and strategic plan for school readiness that considers the role of children beginning before birth through kindergarten and beyond.
- b. Ensure that all young children from birth to age five have access to high-quality care and learning opportunities at home and in other settings.
- c. Provide comprehensive services for infants and toddlers.
- d. Expand high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten opportunities for three- and four- year-olds.
- e. Support parents in their primary role as their children's first teachers.

2. Establish Community Partnerships to Improve Pre-Kindergarten Through Grade 12 Parental Involvement

Currently, Arkansas teachers are required to meet with parents two times per academic year for parent-teacher conferences. Although many teachers communicate more frequently with parents, it is not required by statute. The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission spent a great deal of time discussing the importance of parental involvement in improving the quality of education and graduation rates among Arkansas students.

The Commission recommends that school districts increase the number of parent interactions by teachers. These contacts may be through email, written correspondence, surveys, conferences or school-sponsored parent nights and would be documented by teachers and administrators in each building. The recommendation should specifically target secondary schools

and would require all schools to report the percentage of parents who attend parent-teacher conferences and other parent activities in both the fall and spring semesters.

The creation of Mobile Parent Centers equipped with multi-media technology (to be available to parents who do not have immediate access to the Internet or their individual schools' data system) is one example of a method for Arkansas schools to reach out to families who are typically not involved in the education process of their children. By creating these mobile centers, all parents will have the chance to access their students' assignments, grades, and records with the provided technology found in their local community sites. Schools will partner with local Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, churches, civic centers, etc. to provide the necessary equipment and resources to allow parents a place to obtain information that will help them better assist their students throughout the school year.

3. Implement Early Intervention for Targeted Students (Middle/High School)

Early Intervention (after-school, before-school, summer and weekend) learning opportunities have been available to Arkansas elementary students for some time through 21st Century Community Learning Centers and Boys and Girls Clubs. The Commission recommends expanding these services and encouraging secondary schools to create or pursue programs that will focus on individual student progress as it relates to academic achievement and ACT readiness.

For example, Henderson State University in Clark County is working to make higher learning a realistic goal for high school students through the Southwest Arkansas College Preparatory Academy (SWACPA). The program utilizes specialized testing (8th grade EXPLORE test) to identify students who have a desire to pursue college, but may need additional preparation before taking the ACT. The students participate in the academy as an intervention to eliminate the need for remediation once in college. All ninth-grade students in Clark County are eligible to apply for the Academy and courses are taught on Saturdays and in the summer utilizing both university and high school faculty. Each student's progress is monitored regularly to create a seamless transition between middle and high school and high school to college. There are currently 184 Clark County high school students being served by the SWACPA and the program is in its fourth year.

Funding for these programs has recently been established through Act 879 of 2011 – the College and Career Readiness Planning Program. In addition, private funding has been secured through foundations and financial institutions in Arkansas for pilot programs and scale up programs at Arkansas State University and Henderson State University.

4. Continue Emphasis and Funding for Arkansas Works

Arkansas Works is an initiative of Governor Mike Beebe and was adopted by the Governor's Workforce Cabinet. The initiative is a three-year pilot comprised of three components, which includes College and Career Coaches, an On-line Based College and Career Planning Internet Tool (powered by Kuder), and ACT Academies (Summer and Academic Year). Arkansas Works was introduced in Arkansas' 21 most economically challenged counties in January 2010 and was expanded to three Little Rock high schools considered "Dropout Factories" in the Fall 2011. Currently, 49 College and Career Coaches work in 56 school districts and 19 adult education centers and provide services to 27,147 students and adults. Arkansas Works is in year three of the three-year grant cycle. The Commission recommends continuing the College and Career Coach program beyond the conclusion of the grant within the 21 counties with future consideration of expansion to the remaining 54 counties.

The purpose of the initiative is to complement and enhance assisting college and career planning efforts of school districts, postsecondary institutions, and adult education centers. College and Career coaches are employed by two-year colleges and work directly with middle/high school students and adults to assist with their college and career planning needs. Students begin working with their Career Orientation Instructor and College and Career Coaches in the 8th grade through their Career Orientation courses with the development of their career plans. Each year thereafter, students work with their School Counselor and College and Career Coach to revise their college and career plans, as needed. High school students are also given the opportunity to participate in college visits, job shadows, ACT academies and internships. Through these activities coordinated by the College and Career Coach, students are educated on the importance of a high school graduation and postsecondary education. Arkansas Works is evaluated on the following performance measures: increase high school graduation; increase enrollment in Smart Core; increase college-going rates; increase ACT scores; reduce remediation rates and increase applications for financial aid.

The Arkansas Works initiative is currently funded by two funding sources. The Arkansas Department of Workforce Services provides funding for the Kuder system, College and Career Coach Program and ACT Academies through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. In addition, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has provided funding to support the three additional College and Career Coaches in Little Rock.

Higher Education Recommendations

“We have a much bigger hill to climb, however, when it comes to higher education. Our woefully low rates of degree completion must change if we are to truly claim educational success.”

Governor Mike Beebe 2011 State of the State Address

1. Reduce Graduation Barriers by Targeting Math Requirements

While high school students must be prepared for at least a college-level Algebra course, the Project Graduation Commission has determined that College Algebra should no longer be the default math requirement for non-science/ technology /engineering/math (STEM) majors. Instead, institutions of higher education will adopt a common non-STEM math course that will meet the state minimum core requirements. Non-STEM student majors will be required to take a Quantitative Reasoning (QR) or similar course which will seamlessly transfer from one Arkansas institution to another. For students seeking a STEM-related baccalaureate, College Algebra (or a higher level course) will remain the required math course, because it typically serves as the pre-requisite for all higher-level math courses relevant to STEM majors.

Math remediation courses at the postsecondary level will be redesigned into module based learning to accommodate all non-STEM and STEM majors and accelerate time-to-degree. STEM majors placed in remediation will be required to master all modules through an Intermediate Algebra level in order to be prepared for College Algebra; however, non-STEM majors will only be required to master those modules that have the greatest relevancy for preparation for their required math course, QR.

Faculty teaching non-STEM college math will work with developmental education faculty to identify appropriate modules that must be mastered in order for a student to be successful in QR. Upon mastery of required non-STEM developmental math modules, students will have the requisite math skills to succeed in QR. All public two-year colleges are revising their remediation sequences in a similar manner with use of a three-year federal Department of Labor grant called Path to Accelerated Completion and Employment (PACE).

2. Increase Job Placement Assistance

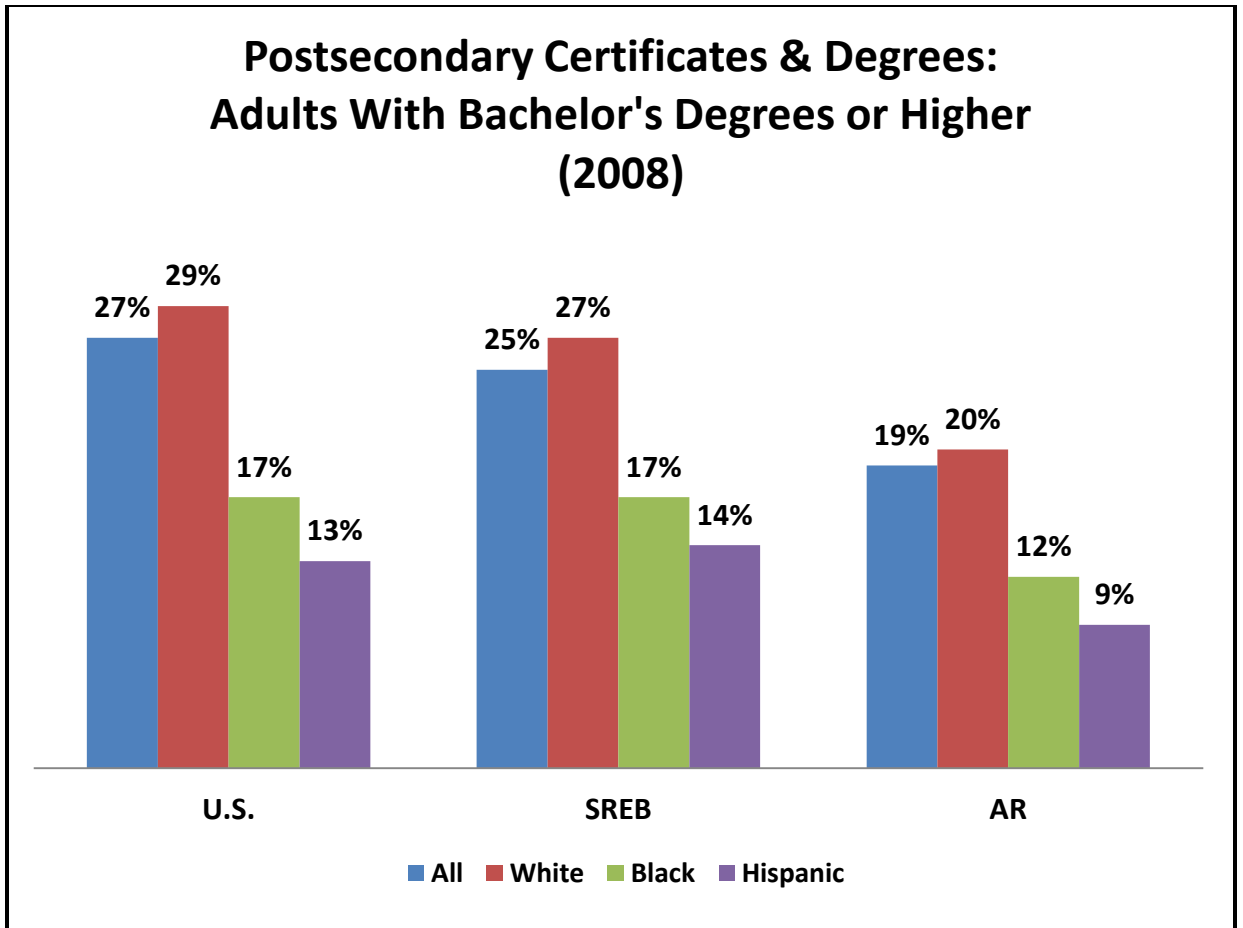
Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) should be encouraged to link appropriate degree programs to internship opportunities in the surrounding communities. Additionally, IHEs should continue to build bridges between degree tracks and job placement by reaching out to local/regional chambers

of commerce and businesses to develop stronger partnerships which accomplish internship and job placement.

Through the united efforts of the twenty-two two year colleges in Arkansas the Path to Accelerated Completion and Employment (PACE) Grant was awarded to improve placement rates and requires the development of online Virtual Career Center for each college. It is recommended that each campus will create a Virtual Career Center for students and alumni which will enhance employment opportunities, facilitate the transition between academics and careers, provide industry-relevant career information and job leads, and foster resume development and interview preparation.

3. Improve Retention Strategies

As digital resources proliferate, and citizens become increasingly more reliant upon online records and transactions, so should the state and Arkansas's IHEs. Nearly all high school transcripts are now online and available as a digital medium with the ability to transmit to IHEs automatically and seamlessly. However, as students transfer from one institution to another and/or apply for financial aid, not all paper transcripts and aid applications have been converted into a digital medium. Project Graduation recommends identifying retention and transfer barriers and implementing a statewide electronic transcript and transfer system similar to an electronic medical record that follows the patient, or in this case the student, wherever s/he goes. Progress has been made with the online YOUiversal financial aid application and the Arkansas Course Transfer System (ACTS). Additionally, the Arkansas General Assembly has investigated a common course numbering system, and has passed legislation making it easier for students to transfer general education credits, but more needs to be done to make sure all aspects are coordinated, barriers are identified, and retention strategies aligned with the technology.

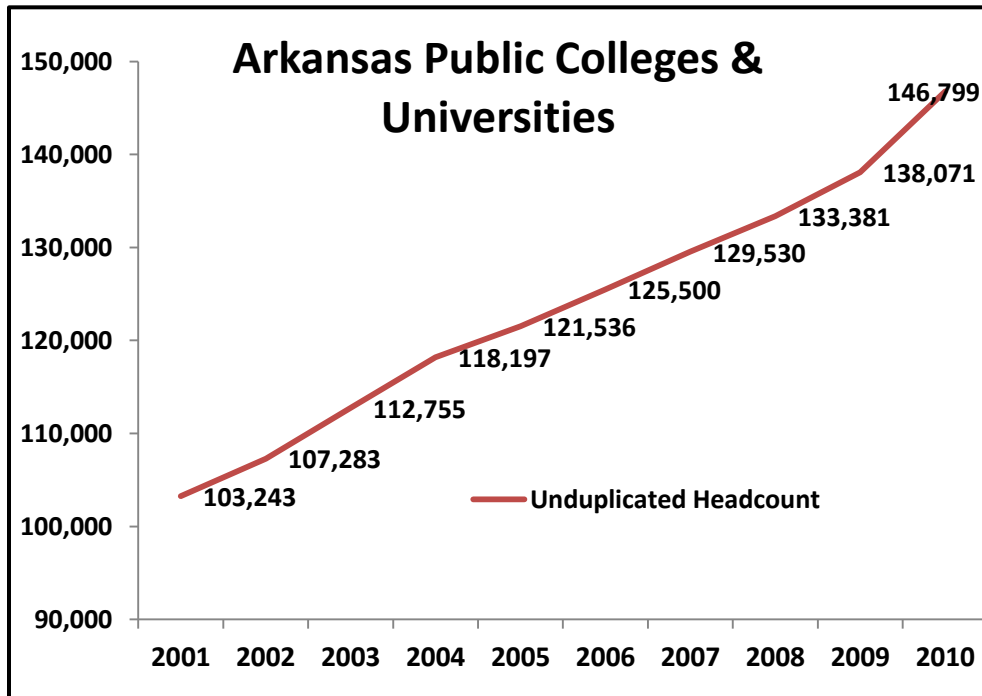


4. Target and Support Non-Traditional Learners

Nearly one-half of the adult population of Arkansas have attended college but did not obtain a degree. The state has a goal of doubling the number of college graduates by 2025. In order to accomplish this goal, the state must invest not only in traditional (right out of high school) students but also in non-traditional or “adult learners” where a large population represents significant opportunity to get people back to college and complete a degree. Project Graduation Commission suggests a state-wide, coordinated implementation of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in helping adults progress towards a degree. Project Graduation supports the combined efforts of the U.S. Department of Education’s \$1.5 million College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) project, Complete College America’s \$1 million Completion Innovation Challenge grant program, and the Arkansas Association of Two-Year College’s U.S. DOL \$14.7 PACE initiative, each of which will be exploring how best to implement this type of goal for the state. Further policy support from entities such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) are encouraged in order to: 1) Gain an understanding of the principles and value of experiential learning; 2) become familiar with the steps, tools and procedures in the PLA process; 3) learn the principles of best practice in prior learning assessment; 4) be able to articulate to various audiences the value

of prior learning assessment; and 5) understand how PLA can benefit students, post-secondary institutions, and the state of Arkansas.

The Arkansas Project Graduation encourages the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, the state, and related IHEs to find funding for and promote additional scholarships and student grant opportunities for returning non-traditional learners.



Acknowledgements

The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission would like to thank the Arkansas Department of Education, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and the Arkansas Department of Career Education for hosting the regular meetings of the Commission. In addition, the Commission would like to express its sincere appreciation to Ms. Ann Wirth, Commission Coordinator, for the support and organization she provides on a regular basis.

Conclusion

The Arkansas Project Graduation Commission fully understands the relationship between the educational attainment of Arkansas' citizens and economic development across the state. The recommendations published in this report include examples of successful P-20 partnerships and private business support that are critical to improving the graduation and degree completion rates in Arkansas. It is the goal of the Commission to seek input from the business sector and facilitate partnerships that allow for more effective collaboration at the state and local levels.

The Commission continues to underscore the goal established by the Arkansas Task Force on Higher Education Remediation, Retention and Graduation Rates that Arkansas will meet the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) average of percentage of citizens holding bachelor's degrees by 2015. In order for this goal to be achieved, Arkansas must see more collaboration between public school and higher education leaders and faculty in the development of policy initiatives and researched-based strategies that will decrease remediation rates and increase the degree completion rates at Arkansas' colleges and universities.

References

Staying Power Dropout Prevention is Worth the Effort, Arkansas Criminal Justice Institute

Staying Power Helping Students Reach Graduation, Arkansas Criminal Justice Institute

Issue Brief August 2009, The Alliance for Excellent Education

Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Arkansas, The Alliance for Excellent Education

Education in Arkansas The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, National Chambers Foundation

Arkansas Department of Correction 2010 Annual Report

2011 Presenters

- March 10, 2011 Representative James Word
Dr. Charity Smith
- June 9, 2011 Representative Johnnie Roebuck
Linda English, Director of Academic Operations K-12
Felicia Hall-Bunting, Arkansas Greater Graduation
Commission Member
Destiny Bowie, Rising 8th Grader, Helena-West
Helena School District
- September 8, 2011 Steve Sparks, Director of Existing Business
Resources, Arkansas Economic Development
Commission
James H. Smith, Deputy Director of the Adult
Education Division, Arkansas Department of Career
Education
- November 15, 2011 Commissioner Sonja Wright-McMurray served on a
panel at the AETN Dropout Prevention Workshop.
The workshop was filmed and excerpts were added
to the broadcast, website, and social media outlets.

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Arkansas Project Graduation Commission 2012 Meeting Schedule

February 9, 2012	Arkansas Department of Career Education
March 8, 2012	Arkansas Department of Higher Education
April 12, 2012	Arkansas Department of Education
May 10, 2012	Arkansas Department of Career Education
June 14, 2012	Arkansas Department of Higher Education
July 12, 2012	Arkansas Department of Education
August 9, 2012	Arkansas Department of Career Education
September 13, 2012	Arkansas Department of Higher Education
October 11, 2012	Arkansas Department of Education
November 8, 2012	Arkansas Department of Career Education
December 13, 2012	Arkansas Department of Higher Education

Time: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Location:

Arkansas Department of Career Education
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Four Capitol Mall
Little Rock, AR 72201

Arkansas Department of Higher Education
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