



Higher education stats stir new concerns in USA

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By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

The United States has made incremental improvements in preparing students for college in recent years, but it has made "no notable progress since the early 1990s" in increasing college participation rates, a report says. And, it says, degree-completion rates in the USA compare poorly with those of other countries.

Those and other findings "challenge the notion that the American higher education system is still the best in the world," says former North Carolina governor James Hunt, chairman of the board of the non-partisan National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, based in San Jose, Calif.

The center is to release the report, its fourth in a series, Thursday in Washington. For the first time, it compared national and state performances with those of 26 other countries in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, whose members include many of the world's leading economies, such as Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and Turkey.

The USA does not fare well, the report says. For example, although it still leads in the share of people ages 35 to 64 with a college degree, it ranks seventh among 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees. That suggests that as the large and well-educated baby boom generation retires, the USA faces a drop-off in college-trained workers to replace them.

Though it ranks fifth in college participation rates, it continues to trail other countries in raising those rates, the report says.

Of particular concern, the report says, is the proportion of students who complete a college degree or certificate program. The USA ranks 16th among 27 countries.

The report also suggests that tuition increases, combined with dwindling financial aid, contributes to the flat growth in participation rates. "For most American families, college affordability has continued to deteriorate," Hunt says.

Since the early 1990s, it says:

- **The proportion of family income needed to pay net college costs (after accounting for all student financial aid except loans) at public four-year colleges has grown from 28% to 42% in Ohio; from 18% to 30% in Iowa; from 25% to 36% in Oregon; and from 20% to 31% in Washington state.**
- State support of need-based financial aid improved significantly in Washington, California and Maryland.
- Gaps in college participation between high- and low-income students persist. In Virginia, 58% of high-income and 14% of low-income young adults ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college; in Illinois, the gap is 52% to 23%.
- The likelihood of a ninth-grader enrolling in college four years later is less than 40%, decreasing from 44% to 32% in Hawaii and from 45% to 37% in New York.