



State Council of
Higher Education for Virginia

SAC MINUTES

Student Advisory Committee Minutes April 25, 2008 Panel Discussion

Members Present: Laura Castro (JSRCC), Todd Eley (UVA), Jung Kim (VCU), Jacqui Newman (UMW), Bobby Roach (substitute from DCC), and Ryan Stamper (WCC).

SCHEV Staff Present: Kathleen Kincheloe, Kirsten Nelson, Jim Alessio, Joe DeFilippo, Alan Edwards, and Dan Hix. Also, Dietra Trent from the Office of the Secretary of Education.

Kathleen Kincheloe called the meeting to order at 10:05 am in SCHEV's main conference room. Student representatives were asked nine questions about affordability that had been submitted by members of the SCHEV staff. (See attached questionnaire, which was sent to student participants prior to the panel.) Time was also set aside for audience questions.

The discussion focused on the cost of a college education and the perception of affordability. All students on the 6-person panel indicated that they were receiving help financially from scholarships, grants, loans, or a combination of the three to attend their respective institutions. Five members indicated that they were holding down at least one job to supplement the financial aid and loans they receive.

Tellingly, all students on the panel indicated that cost was a significant consideration in their choice of institutions. The three community college students on the panel indicated that it was a deciding factor for their families, while Jung Kim mentioned that he was attracted by the number of on-campus jobs VCU offered.

Many representatives suggested that affordability is not only being able to pay for tuition, books, and living expenses, but to also have the financial ability to enjoy co-curricular activities and the social aspects of going to school. A majority of the panelists seemed to have a micro (as opposed to macro) view of affordability issues, meaning their concerns revolved around the costs of day-to-day activities. For example, several students mentioned the rising cost of gas as an additional concern, especially for those who commute.

The general consensus among the panelists is that most students believe that living off campus or graduating early can help students and their families save money. Students cited mandatory and expensive meal plans for freshmen or on-campus students that made moving off campus an attractive option. Several representatives mentioned that other fees could be deducted if the service is not needed. As examples, Todd cited Student Health Center fees even if students do not use the facility, while Jung mentioned printing fees when students do most of their printing off campus.

SCHEV Director of Higher Education Restructuring, Jim Alessio, asked about affordability as it relates to students who do not maximize their course load, who drop classes, or fail courses. He stated it costs the state, as well as the student, additional money when a course is taken again at a later date or a student does not graduate within 4 years.

Panel members responded by suggesting that more information be disseminated to students to let them know that 15 credits a semester are needed to graduate on time. Several students mentioned

that their friends or advisors suggested a fulltime course load of 12 hours, which only works if additional credits are made up through summer school or AP credit. Laura Castro and Jacqui Newman indicated that it was important for them to prepare a course plan in advance, which they did the summer before their first year. This allowed Laura to graduate in 2 years with 3 associate's degrees and Jacqui to graduate early.

When asked if they had suggestions for how to increase affordability or the perception of affordability, Todd mentioned that it is difficult for students and families to prepare for the costs of college when tuition may change during the years a student attends. He thought it would be helpful if students could lock in a tuition rate or be given some parameters for how much the institution expects tuition to rise over the next 4-6 years.

All representatives agreed that more information should be given to students and parents to help them plan before students enter college. Ryan and Bobby both stressed the importance of making materials accessible to high school students, while others believed that students don't read brochures and need to have information "forced on them." Jung suggested that students should take responsibility for educating themselves about college costs and financial aid options. He said that his first resource was the web site of the institutions he was interested in. All agreed that up-to-date brochures and information should be available at college fairs, guidance departments, and career centers.

Students also mentioned how difficult the FAFSA form is to fill out and how important it is to have guidance about obtaining federal aid. Two of the six students on the panel grew up in homes where their parents do not speak English and they were forced to navigate the complex FAFSA process alone. (This is fairly representative of demographic data which indicates that one in five entering freshmen nationally is the child of immigrants.)

SCHEV staff members asked whether a rebate of some kind would serve as an incentive for students to graduate early or on time. Several panelists agreed that this was a good plan, but cautioned that many students view college as a vacation from the real world and wouldn't want to graduate early. Todd also mentioned that many students may tack on summer courses or an extra semester because of the length of their lease agreement.

Kathleen concluded the meeting by thanking members for their service on the Student Advisory Committee.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 a.m.



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SAC Affordability Questionnaire

1. What does “affordability” mean to you?
2. When you think about “affordability,” do you think only about tuition, or do you think of the full cost (e.g., fees; room & board; books; etc.)?
3. How important are student loans as part of your financial aid plan?
4. Do you know anyone who didn’t attend, or dropped out, because of an affordability issue?
5. Have you noticed an increased difficulty in getting loans? Do you know anyone who has been told their student loan will not be renewed or has had their loan cancelled?
6. Would rebates for graduating early motivate you to do so? If so, how large would the rebate need to be?
7. Do you have any suggestions to increase affordability or the perception of affordability?
8. Do you think students understand the financial aid that is available?
9. Where did you go for information about financial aid?