AACC WELCOMES INCREASED FOCUS ON FINANCIAL AID ACCESS
New Report Highlights Steps to Help Students Apply, Succeed

WASHINGTON, DC – With the release today of The Financial Aid Challenge, the College Board provides both a service and a challenge to the nation’s almost 1,200 community colleges.

The new report, developed in collaboration with the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), focuses on an unfortunate dynamic of the federal financial aid system among community colleges: Students of low and moderate means who could most benefit from receiving federal aid dollars apply for that aid in significantly lower numbers than do their peers at other types of postsecondary institutions. For the 2007-2008 academic year, that number was 58% of community college students who were eligible for a Pell grant who applied versus 77% of eligible students at four-year institutions.

Many of the reasons for the lower rate of application are well known: higher enrollments of low-income students; more first-generation students and families unfamiliar with the college application process; a higher percentage of working students who have difficulty getting to campus during daytime hours; a perception that the forms required to apply are too complex; fewer institutional resources to do robust outreach and tracking of individual applications and follow-through; a lack of awareness of the availability of aid; and others.

The report puts these barriers in useful context and quickly moves on to highlight best practices with demonstrated results at institutional, system and state levels. North Carolina, for example, increased by more than 50% the number of students in the state applying for federal aid by providing statewide training programs, financial aid process overview, financial literacy courses, and other information. Kentucky’s Bluegrass Community and Technical College established a comprehensive Department of Multiculturalism and Inclusion with substantial funding, targeted outreach and intensive on-campus services for its rapidly growing minority student populations.

With the addition of both short-term and long-range recommendations, authors of the report provide a blueprint that the AACC urges all community colleges to review and adapt as appropriate to the individual institution. The College Board has provided a menu of options that are adaptable, flexible, and, in many instances, proven.

The AACC will incorporate the research and recommendations provided by the report into its growing focus on student success and completion, complementing its work through Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count and the recent college completion commitment Democracy’s Colleges: Call to Action, signed by AACC and five other national organizations last month at the association’s annual meeting in Seattle.

“The AACC hopes that this report will catalyze our colleges into actively focusing on the issue of helping more students access the aid they need and deserve. But we also recognize that community college budgets are under great stress and enrollments continue to surge,” said AACC President George R. Boggs. “The solutions won’t be immediate, and they won’t be easy.”

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