

A Public Agenda for Higher Education in Mississippi

Priority One: Mississippi's children, their parents, educators, and the state's communities, will embrace higher educational aspirations as the path to a better future.

Education alone can't solve all of Mississippi's economic, social, and health problems. But it is a necessary element in tackling each of them. While Mississippi's educational trend lines are moving in the right direction, the state needs to significantly boost educational levels to strengthen its competitiveness within the southern region, the nation, and the world.

Initiative 1A: Raise Educational Aspirations.

Mississippi should launch a broad public campaign directed at parents and children to encourage youth to complete high school and attend college.

Mississippi colleges and universities should coordinate this long-term campaign in cooperation with the Institutions of Higher Learning board and the Mississippi Department of Education. Leaders from business, state and local governments, civic organizations, and the news media should partner to market graduating from high school and attending college as the keys to future success. The campaign coordinators should work closely with each of the state's regions and communities of interest to ensure that the broad messages are tailored for maximum impact.

The campaign should include information on the benefits of obtaining a postsecondary education, the types of institutions and degree programs that are available, the academic preparation and other requirements necessary to pursue a postsecondary education, and financial aid information.

The campaign should be staffed and funded through private and in-kind donations by individuals and businesses, supplemented as needed by colleges, universities, school districts, and modest state appropriations. Specifically, IHL and institutions' public affairs staff should partner with school of communications faculty, public relations firms and news organization to develop and implement a campaign that builds on existing educational outreach and communications efforts. The campaign should include exposing students to a broad array of successful individuals as well as opportunities for personal achievement. The target audience should include all parents and elementary and secondary students, with a particular emphasis on underserved communities and populations.

Priority Five: Mississippi will increase its investments in university-based research and development, and the higher education community will redouble its efforts to address state and community economic needs and prepare students for careers in the new economy.

Mississippi's research universities have a strong track record in attracting federal support. Enlightened political leaders and talented scientists bring dollars to Mississippi to conduct applied research. Not only does this work push back the frontiers of knowledge, it contributes to economic development and prepares upper division and graduate students in high tech fields. Mississippi needs to expand this leadership role of using university based research to create new products, processes and services that can be commercialized by Mississippi's business community.

Initiative 5A: Continue to increase the state's scientific, technical, and research capacity to attract and retain high tech industries in the new economy and reenergize Mississippi's traditional industries.

High tech professionals do the creative work in the new economy and reengineered industry and faculty research supplies the ideas and that produce its inventions and innovations. Mississippi has made progress in both increasing these graduates and research but neither is rising quickly enough to remain competitive in the global economy. Public/Private Partnerships have begun to identify the critical economic clusters for the State and its major regions. The Mississippi Technology Alliance has identified five technology clusters: Advanced Materials, Transportation, Life Sciences, Communication/Information Technology, and Remote Sensing. These clusters support existing and expanding industries and also fit well with the educational and research mission of the state's research universities.

Mississippi's research universities do very well in securing federal research dollars, but it is incumbent on Mississippi institutions to

- Increase the dollar volume of sponsored research, especially in engineering, science, technology, and telecommunication; and
- Raise the number of graduates in mathematics, science, computer science, engineering, and technology.

Mississippi colleges and universities should support the recommendations of the Mississippi Technology Alliance to:

- Create science and technology internships for students and faculty with businesses in critical technology fields, helping to attract and retain leading researchers and graduates;
- Subsidize university researchers to work with business and industry on research and development.

In addition, Mississippi colleges and universities should adopt tenure and promotion policies that reward faculty for work with the private sector, and maintain flexible compensation policies that do not penalize faculty for engaging in such arrangements.

The state could encourage greater research capacity and greater private sector investment in research by considering a research matching fund that would match state dollars for every private dollar raised for sponsored research that addresses state economic and resource needs.

Initiative 5B: Develop proactive partnerships with the Mississippi Economic Commission and business and industry that will enable Mississippi colleges and universities to become full partners in economic development.

Mississippi needs to concentrate its research investments at its designated research universities in order to maintain a critical mass of resources. However, the institutions whose primary mission is teaching have an important role to play in economic development. Proven strategies include assigning advanced business and technology students to work with local businesses on practical problems, hosting seminars and workshops relevant to regional economies, and supporting technology transfer and information sharing.

Priority Six: Mississippi’s policymakers, educators, and citizens will have the information they need to gauge progress on this public agenda for higher education—and to focus resources on unfinished business.

The past five years have witnessed a number of serious studies of the relationships between Mississippi’s education, workforce development, and economic development systems. But very few of the very solid recommendations that emerged from this work have been implemented.

What was missing? A framework for sustained statewide policy oversight in order to gauge progress over time—and for academic leaders and program managers to manage for results.

Quick and easy fixes won’t solve Mississippi’s chronic education deficit. And this public agenda for higher education is too important to allow it to fade from view.

Initiative 6A: Create a Mississippi Education Progress Board

The state’s leaders should come together to establish the Mississippi Education Progress Board, through either an executive order or legislation. The board should include the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the House Speaker, the House and Senate education committee chairs, business leaders appointed by the Board of the Mississippi Economic Council, and direct customers of the system—including parents.

The Progress Board should annually assess educational progress at all levels: pre-kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary. The board should have the authority to commission in-depth analyses targeting particular elements that could significantly contribute to the public agenda. These analyses could be conducted by the Education Coordinating Council, ad hoc work groups, or the existing individual boards. To ensure sustained focus at the top leadership level, the board should follow a “principals only” rule: substitutes may not represent board members at board meetings.

For its annual assessment of progress on the public agenda, the Progress Board should hold public hearings and report to citizens on:

- The accomplishments of the new Education Coordinating Council for the Board of Education, Community and Junior Colleges, Institutions of Higher Learning, and private colleges and universities. Each of these entities will detail their individual and collective actions on the public agenda priorities—and on educational progress in general.
- An independent review of progress on the public agenda from a third party such as the Southern Regional Education Board, the Education Commission of the States, or other independent entity.

Initiative 6B: Establish an Education Coordinating Council

The governing boards of the schools, colleges, and universities must continue to address their unique responsibilities—but a coordinating body is needed to enable them to meet their shared responsibilities. They must better align their policies and practices to enable students to move through their systems. Collaboration and coordination can boost efficiency, sharpen missions, create incentives for change, and ensure effective governance.

Accordingly, the board chairs and chief executives of the Department of Education, the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Institutions of Higher Learning should join together to establish an Education Coordinating Council. The Council could choose to formalize its operations as a 501-c-3 public corporation. To help achieve the public agenda, the Council should:

- Develop and update a collective strategic plan that emphasizes new avenues for collaboration and cooperation for achieving the public agenda.
- Review and try to resolve any differences over mission or service area duplication among sectors.
- Review proposals for new off-campus centers involving collaboration of local community colleges, IHL institutions, and private colleges. Any new centers should respond to clearly articulated needs and involve private financial support.
- Regularly review P-16 issues affecting all three sectors, such as core curriculum standards and student expectations, in collaboration with the Progress Board.
- Fund competitive grants to Mississippi colleges and universities for new activities that specifically address the public agenda and result in administrative and programmatic efficiencies. Priority should be given to collaborative projects between universities, the K-12 sector, and early childhood education. Funds for these grants should initially be drawn from a pooled reallocation within each board's budget. Once these efforts show measurable results, the systems should submit a request to the legislature for a general fund appropriation that would be matched by existing system resources.