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CPE leader says mediocrity not acceptable path Education president makes Bowling Green stop

JOANIE BAKER

Council on Postsecondary Education President Bob King told the Bowling Green Rotary Club on Wednesday that saying Kentucky is poor isn't an excuse for underperforming in education.

With a slide show full of statistics and suggestions, King outlined how other countries, which have lower gross domestic product totals than the United States, have increased their number of bachelor's degrees awarded in recent years at exponential rates compared to Kentucky's fairly stagnant numbers.

"We can show lots of other places that are much poorer than we are who have made the commitment and progress that allow them to be on par with the competition in a global economy," he said.

King, who became the third CPE president in January after serving as president and CEO of an Arizona foundation that emphasizes education and economic development, said Kentucky needs to continue building its standards to increase the number of graduates and high school students prepared for college work.

"In Kentucky, for every 100 ninth-graders, 72 will graduate, 44 will enter college, 29 will enroll in their sophomore year and 18 will graduate," King said. "Kentucky ranks among the lowest of states with bachelor's degrees."

King emphasized the importance of educational organizations coming together to meet the goals of Senate Bill 1, which calls for redesigning standards for education in an effort to increase college readiness in high school students.

The goal, set by CPE, for Kentucky colleges and universities to double the number of enrolled students by 2020 is also important, King said, and requires encouraging more students to attend college, to then stay in college or transfer from a community college after receiving an associate degree to continue their education.

But part of the challenge of meeting growing enrollments is funding the programs with uncertain state funding and rising costs of health care and pensions, King said.

King said while the state and students have picked up some of the burden with rising tuition costs, he pointed out that students receive a substantial amount of financial aid in Kentucky to offset the load.

In fact, King showed that students in the lower economic brackets are getting enough financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants and loans to cover the cost of tuition, fees and books and have some left over.

He showed that even students whose family falls in the income bracket at or above \$100,000 a year are still getting about \$36,000 in financial aid annually.

"We would like to get to a point when we can say if you are motivated in Kentucky (to attend college) and are a resident, money will not be a problem," King said.

King encouraged the room full of Rotarians at the Bowling Green Country Club to communicate to policy makers the need to apply resources and support to public education.

Western Kentucky University President Gary Ransdell said King's presentation helps people understand the global challenges universities face and the "quality and numbers game" of increasing enrollment and maintaining good programs with limited funding.

"We are at a point where over 90 percent of our students receive some type of financial aid ... and that's a significant factor," Ransdell said. "We need to be mindful of the debt students incur but if you look at the earning potential of a college graduate, that debt is quickly offset by future earnings."