

CONNECTION

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The **New England Board of Higher Education** is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to foster cooperation and the efficient use of resources among New England's approximately 260 colleges and universities. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

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E D I T O R ' S M E M O

Access. If one word captures the range of compelling issues that the New England Board of Higher Education should focus its energy on at the start of the new century, the word is *access*.

That was the consensus of NEBHE delegates who met recently in North Conway, N.H., to discuss NEBHE priorities for the first five years of the 21st century. Their task: to make sense of a year's worth of "focus group" meetings in which NEBHE staff traveled to each of the New England states to ask leaders of education, government, business and the nonprofit sector what they see as the most crucial higher education, economic and social issues facing the region.

That access to college should rate so high is hardly surprising. While New England is the world's most famous importer of young talent from across the nation and around the globe, large groups of New England residents from urban Bridgeport, Conn., to rural Aroostook County, Maine, have little chance of tapping into the region's vaunted higher education enterprise. Without a college education, they are deprived of the fruits of the region's booming knowledge-based economy, which is paradoxically starved for workers. They have virtually no social mobility—no chance of the American Dream.

Access then is the linchpin in another issue that clearly preoccupied focus group participants: the growing economic disparity between New England's distressed rural areas and old industrial cities on one hand and the region's bustling, technology-intensive suburbs on the other.

The stakes are obviously high. But what is the nature of the access problem?

Access is frequently coupled with *affordability*. Focus group participants noted that the price of college—especially in New England—effectively denies access to many nontraditional students and those raising families (and indeed, some suggested a new G.I. Bill is needed to help people pay for college).

Yet many focus group participants echoed University of Rhode Island Professor Harold Bibb's observation that "the notion of access needs to be expanded beyond cost—that students must be *prepared* to go to college."

Several spoke of the particular obstacles facing inner cities where overburdened high school guidance counselors contend with issues such as drugs, crime and teen suicide. Others spoke of rural communities where higher education is considered a luxury, and a live-for-today mentality discourages borrowing for college. Worse, parents steer children away from college, fearing that young people may never return once they've seen the bright lights of Burlington or Orono, to say nothing of Paris.

At a minimum, the access issue encompasses inadequate attention to early childhood education, uneven K-12 preparation, hit-and-miss college guidance and low aspirations—all symptoms of the growing gap between haves and have-nots. As the demographer Harold Hodgkinson has written: "Many low-income, ethnic minority and immigrant children do not get exposed to the folklore of 'how you get into college' in junior high years, while the 'favored' have brothers and sisters in college, parents who are college graduates and lots of advice."

Focus group participants also emphasized NEBHE's capacity to bring New England higher education's considerable policy expertise to bear on complex problems. In this issue of CONNECTION, Northeastern University economists Paul Harrington and Andy Sum begin to tackle the issue of access, suggesting that the problem is first and foremost a function of basic skills—essentially, reading, writing and arithmetic. We trust Harrington and Sum's article will be the first of many on the complexities of access.

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Special thanks also to NEBHE intern Sean Bowditch who contributed greatly to the writing and editing of this issue.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.