



## Legislative Commissions and Task Forces: Developing Strategies to Meet Completion & Workforce Challenges

Education Commission of the States (ECS)  
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*ECS' "Boosting College Completion for a New Economy" project, which is funded through a grant from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, moves states from awareness of college completion and workforce challenges to the development, implementation and evaluation of state strategies that improve educational attainment rates.*

### Why States Use Commissions and Task Forces

Many states have set ambitious targets to increase their college attainment rates over the next 15 years to boost the education level of their workforce and better prepare their state for the challenges of the global economy. Unfortunately, legislators must achieve those goals in a time of fiscal retrenchment with most states running significant deficits. With 60% of jobs in 2018 requiring a postsecondary credential and current completion rates at 38%, legislators have little choice but to develop and implement policies that transform the delivery and effectiveness of postsecondary and workforce education with the same or fewer resources. In this environment, legislators are turning to task forces and commissions to devise the best course to take. These bodies are proving to be important tools for meeting the college completion challenge in an era of fiscal austerity. Because commissions are not bound by typical bureaucracies or the time constraints of legislative sessions, they can be nimble, strike the proper balance between expert and citizen perspectives, and take the time to thoroughly explore possible policy options.

While most commissions and task forces study strategies and recommend new courses of action to legislatures, a scan of college completion and workforce development policies identified a trend toward legislators giving commissions more authoritative charges, such as creating, managing and evaluating programs.

## Findings

Using the ECS State Policy Database, the Boosting College Completion project scanned 370 college completion and workforce policies enacted over a five-year period: 2006-10. Nearly one in five policies established a commission or task force. The policy analysis below shows the diversity of approaches to emerging problems and how commissions are charged to address them.

### Commission Types

The initial analysis grouped each policy into one of four commission types by identifying commonalities across the following task force/commission elements: purpose, charge and authority, membership and deliverables. The four commission types appear below, ordered from most prevalent to least prevalent in state policy:

- The Study Group
- The Strategic Planning Council
- The Implementation and Evaluation Board
- The Funding and Administrative Oversight Authority

We divided the four commission types into two categories: commissions with consultative charges and those with authoritative ones. We created this framework to distinguish between commissions that study, recommend and strategize around policy questions and those with a more authoritative role to develop, implement and evaluate.

**Consultative Approaches.** These approaches are time-tested and especially meaningful when legislators want to identify issues, develop strategies to confront state challenges and reach consensus on a plan of action. Legislatures create *study groups* to research policy options, propose and recommend goals and strategies, or examine the feasibility of initiating a change process. While study groups rarely have the authority to initiate a change process, their reports give legislators the expertise and analytical depth on an issue that they cannot achieve through the legislative process. The *strategic planning council* provides legislatures guidance on how policies and programs may achieve a statewide objective, such as improving educational attainment or attracting high-tech industries. Strategic planning councils often lay the foundation for a set of cohesive policies that achieve state goals.

**Authoritative Approaches.** While we make a distinction between consultative and authoritative approaches, the difference is one of function, not of effectiveness or value. In fact, authoritative approaches often adopt more consultative charges like recommending and developing programs or strategies as a part of their overall mission. As an evolution from more traditional, consultative approaches, the authoritative commission types are best suited for meeting the growing complexity of college completion and workforce development challenges. The *implementation and evaluation board* assesses programs and strategies to ensure legislative intent is carried out. In most cases, the legislature charges a board with implementing or evaluating a program that has already received legislative approval. With the goals, funds and strategies for these programs often cutting across multiple state

agencies, the authoritative commission can be the most effective and efficient mechanism for achieving stated legislative goals. The *funding and administrative oversight commission* is the most complex type, often requiring the development of performance criteria, the creation of a performance management system, and the drafting of a plan that details the incentives and mandates used to effect improvements. Oversight commissions resemble a state-level agency, both in terms of authority and legislative intent. With the authority to approve or deny funds, proposals and programs, these commissions often hold grantees and agencies accountable without creating another level of bureaucracy.

## Commission Policy Scope

In addition to categorizing commission types, we analyzed each taskforce/commission element to understand the issues, challenges and strategies that legislatures are asking commissions and task forces to consider and manage. Following is the policy scope for each of the four elements for taskforces and commissions.

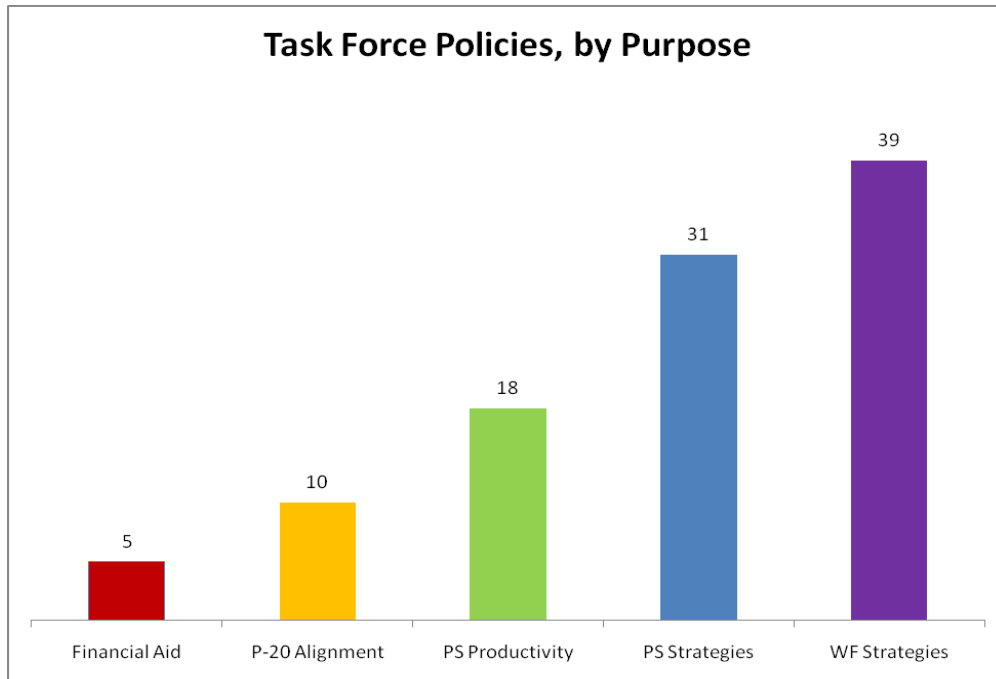
### Purpose

The purpose refers to the issue areas of a task force or commission. In several cases, commissions investigated more than one purpose. Commissions cover a wide range of issues from studying degree and certificate options to redesigning how postsecondary and workforce systems deliver instruction. Table 1 provides a description of the five most common purpose areas and a sample of issues covered.

**Table 1. Five General Completion and Workforce Commission Purposes**

Purpose Area	Specific Issues
<b>Financial Aid</b>	Ensuring fund solvency; merit-based aid; priority for students demonstrating need; simplifying financial aid application, administration
<b>P-20 Alignment &amp; Articulation</b>	Aligning assessment, accountability systems; credit, competency articulation; data collection; drafting strategic plans
<b>Postsecondary Productivity &amp; Efficiency</b>	Accountability, continuous improvement; cost containment; funding formula reform; institutional effectiveness, program evaluations; return on investment (ROI)
<b>Postsecondary Programs &amp; Strategies</b>	Accelerated degree, certificate options; lower-division certificates; remedial and developmental education; responsiveness to labor market demands; retention strategies; strategies to implement best instructional practices; student success tracking; transfer and articulation
<b>Workforce Programs &amp; Strategies</b>	Career and technical education; emergency training for the unemployed; funding local economic development initiatives; industry-specific licensure, alignment with postsecondary credentials; one-stop centers, integrated workforce services; promoting STEM, green careers; public-private partnerships

The chart below shows the distribution of task force and commission policies, according to purpose.



### *Charge & Authority*

While task forces and commissions may have multiple purposes, their charges are usually distinct and singular. The findings suggest five common task force charges. The first two charges are the domain of study groups, while the remaining three correspond to the other commission types. The sample policies contained in the Appendix further distinguish the four commission types.

- Report on the condition of programs and strategies; compile data, literature on topic
- Study the feasibility of adopting new policies or pursuing a course of action
- Draft a strategic plan or design strategies/programs to reach attainment/workforce goals
- Set timelines for implementing programs; embed continuous improvement; or study implementation challenges, cost and outcomes
- Establish guidelines/benchmarks; act as regulatory authority; or monitor programs

In most cases, the charge directly impacts the level of authority granted to commissions by the legislature or governor. We found that three types of authority exist for the policies analyzed: authority to propose, authority to create and authority to regulate.

The three types of authority closely relate to task force charges. The analysis found that the single largest growth area is in commissions created to administer and fund competitive grant programs for workforce-related issues. States have benefited from these commissions types because many have or

will implement workforce programs that borrow heavily from model strategies used in other completion initiatives. The resulting overlap suggests a high level of deliberation and strategic thinking is happening in states to match completion and workforce strategies.

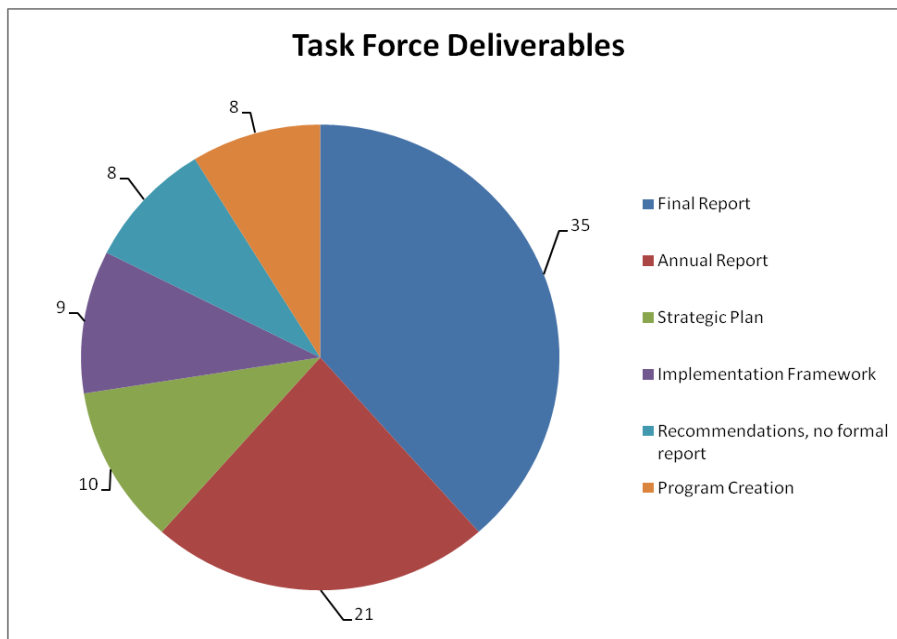
### Membership

Commission membership varies based on purpose and charge. The majority of commissions have less than 25% executive or legislative representation. Study committees focusing on technical subjects, such as cost, productivity and feasibility, as well as workforce commissions, had almost no elected members. Conversely, commissions set up to review state policy goals had substantial legislative representation.

Most policies created a new committee or board, but, in about 30% of the cases, the legislature or governor directed a coordinating agency or cabinet-level department to fulfill the policy charge. In these instances, the charge oftentimes involved the study or evaluation of issues already under the authority of the agency, system or department.

### Deliverables

Deliverables are the products that a commission creates for a legislature or governor. All but a few policies specify the deliverables desired, the delivery date for these products and the commission's termination date. As the pie chart shows, the report is the most often required deliverable. However, the authoritative approaches, with administrative or regulatory charges, require other products, such as implementation and evaluation frameworks and rubrics for program creation and grant-making.



## Lessons Learned

Different circumstances could prompt the use of one or more of the commission types. The study group and strategic planning council are time-tested approaches for states that want to develop clear, measurable goals and make those goals actionable through a master plan. The more novel and authoritative approaches — the implementation/evaluation board and funding/administrative oversight commission — take strategies a step further creating programs and improving them through regular evaluation. The following lessons learned outline the challenges encountered by legislatures and commissions in building momentum for achieving the goals detailed in a state’s completion plan.

### Role of the Legislature

- In creating commissions with multiple charges and issue areas, legislators have recognized the importance of developing cohesive and aligned policies not only within the postsecondary system but between postsecondary and workforce education.
- States cannot meet the college completion challenge without thorough preplanning. By clearly articulating strategies and expected outcomes, commissions can produce recommendations closely aligned with state economic development goals.
- Legislatures are trending toward vesting more funding and administrative authority in commissions, because the complex issues underlying the completion challenge span several operational areas. These arrangements recognize the importance of cross-agency collaboration and of removing policy development from typical, system silos.

### Role of the Commission

- For commissions, ‘form follows function,’ meaning that they have greater capacity for innovation when given more authoritative charges. For instance, a workforce development authority could carry the rank of a cabinet-level department while accessing the expertise of several agencies and systems simultaneously.
- We found that 21% of policies required a report with an implementation timeline or evaluation framework. Although this development could mean that legislatures expect more in terms of deliverables, it could also mean that legislators are concerned with the effectiveness of and return on investment in postsecondary education and workforce development.

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This policy brief is the first of several that will examine strategies that legislatures are developing and implementing to improve college completion and workforce development in their states.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1. Sample Policies for Traditional Approaches**

Type	Sample Policy	Purpose	Duties & Charge	Membership	Deliverables/Outcomes
Study Groups	<a href="#">Arkansas Task Force on Higher Education Remediation, Retention and Graduation Rates</a> (2007)	To study and recommend policies and strategies for the state to reach the median attainment rate in the 16-state SREB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compile research</li> <li>• Summarize data</li> <li>• Create definition of remediation</li> <li>• Identify best practices</li> <li>• Review graduation rates</li> </ul>	<i>15 members</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 legislative</li> <li>• 1 executive</li> <li>• 2 state ed directors</li> <li>• 6 faculty/admins</li> <li>• 3 nonprofit directors</li> </ul>	Develop set of recommendations to present in <i>final report</i> to General Assembly  <a href="#">Legislation</a> created out of recommendations
	<a href="#">Texas Education Code Section 130.0012(k): Engineering Study Group</a> (2009)	To conduct study related to student success in engineering degree programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judge feasibility of offering bachelor degrees in junior colleges</li> <li>• Consider economic viability, workforce needs</li> </ul>	Study Group composed entirely of staff from Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)	Release <i>final report</i> of study results to each legislative committee with jurisdiction over postsecondary education
Strategic Planning Councils	<a href="#">Mississippi Education Achievement Council</a> (2010)	To establish a state achievement plan for reaching national attainment average by 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish goals and benchmarks to measure progress</li> <li>• Draft strategic plan</li> </ul>	<i>23 members</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 legislative</li> <li>• 1 executive</li> <li>• 16 agency, system, institutional heads</li> </ul>	Monitor state progress by releasing <i>annual state report card</i>
	<a href="#">Virginia Governor’s Commission on Higher Education Reform, Innovation and Investment</a> (2010)	To set forth a comprehensive strategy for increased educational attainment, skills development and lifelong learning	Accomplish duties, draft plans related to three major objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase degree attainment, workforce training</li> <li>• Reform funding, service; contain costs</li> <li>• Create regional, economic development strategies</li> </ul>	<i>30 members</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 cabinet secretaries</li> <li>• 26 other gubernatorial appointees</li> </ul>	Interim findings delivered to legislature in <i>final report</i>

**Table A2. Sample Policies for Evolving Approaches**

Type	Sample Policy	Purpose	Charge & Authority	Membership	Deliverables/Outcomes
Implementation and Evaluation Boards	<a href="#">California Occupational Centers Employer Advisory Boards</a> (2009)	To create employer advisory boards that serve as evaluation agents for regional occupational centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommend measures, criteria, methods to evaluate student knowledge and program effectiveness</li> </ul>	<p>No set number enumerated</p> <p>Composition: representatives of trade organizations, businesses, relevant government agencies</p>	<p>Provide recommendations <b>without a formal report</b></p> <p>Yearly <b>evaluation</b> of student knowledge, program effectiveness</p> <p>Develop articulated skills certificates (<b>program creation</b>)</p>
	<a href="#">Rhode Island Bachelor's Degree in Three Program</a> (2010)	To establish program guidelines and implement pilot program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design, undertake and evaluate a three-year pilot program that will serve as model for full-scale implementation</li> </ul>	Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education (RIBGHE) and board staff	<b>Initial report, recommendations and implementation timeline</b>
Funding and Administrative Oversight Authorities	<a href="#">Florida 21st Century Technology, Research and Scholarship Board</a> (2006)	To guide the establishment, administration of centers of excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommend criteria for administering Centers of Excellence program</li> <li>Develop qualifications, standards, requirements for approval of grant investments</li> <li>Direct three separate yet related grant programs</li> </ul>	<p>11 members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 gubernatorial appointees</li> <li>6 legislative appointees</li> </ul>	Provide recommendations <b>without a formal report</b>
	<a href="#">Illinois 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce Development Advisory Committee</a> (2009)	To administer fund intended to support integrated, innovative, emergency workforce development strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review, advise and recommend for approval, denial all grant requests from the Fund</li> <li>Enforce compliance with legislatively set criteria for use of grant funds</li> </ul>	<p>21 members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11 gubernatorial appointees</li> <li>10 state agency, system heads</li> </ul>	<b>Create competitive grant program;</b> no formal legislative oversight, reporting schedule