Nation’s Governors to Focus on Higher Education

At the recent Annual Meeting of the National Governors Association (NGA) in Boston, West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin (D), the incoming chair of the NGA, announced that the organization will spend the next year focusing on higher education.

Chairs of the NGA serve a year-long term as head of the organization and pick a lead policy area for their tenure. Manchin selected higher education issues as his focus and has entitled his initiative Complete to Compete. The nation’s governors will discuss this topic at their 2011 Winter and Annual Meetings – as well as in several special sessions on the issue being organized by NGA staff.

Complete to Compete will specifically focus on two areas of higher-ed policy: 1) the need to increase college completion and degree attainment rates, and 2) increasing the productivity of public institutions of higher education. A key subtopic within the initiative is on developing a higher-skilled workforce – a goal that will no doubt resonate with Geography and GIS Departments around the country.

In introducing Complete to Compete, Manchin noted that while the United States was once the global leader in higher education attainment, we have been surpassed by about a dozen other nations. And while we still have an excellent higher-ed system, “far too few of our students complete their education and receive a degree or certificate.”

Manchin also asserted that “in (our) knowledge-based economy, two-thirds of all jobs will (ultimately) require a higher-education credential or degree.” He noted that the NGA and the states have been the leaders in rebuilding the nation’s K-12 education system and that “the time has come for governors, higher education executives, and campus leaders to work together to make marked improvements in college completion and productivity.”

Manchin pointed to costs as a key hindrance to efforts to promote higher-ed attainment. In the last 20-25 years, state support for higher education has grown by $50 billion across the U.S., but despite this, tuition costs have risen more than 500 percent. This has constrained the ability of many students to complete a degree in a timely manner. Manchin blamed this disconnect in part on state policies that generally reward enrollment levels as opposed to graduation rates or institutional performance.

Ultimately, the goals of Complete to Compete include:

- Developing a series of best practices and a list of policy actions governors can take to achieve increased college completion,
- Providing support to states to design policies and programs that increase college completion and improve higher education productivity and serve as models for other states around the country, and
- Holding a learning institute for governors’ senior advisors in education, workforce and economic development focusing on successful state strategies to graduate more students and meet workforce demands.

The death of West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd (D) and Governor Manchin’s resulting political situation could ultimately complicate the NGAs work on Complete to Compete. Under the terms of a new West Virginia law passed after Byrd’s death, an election will be held in November to fill the final two years of Byrd’s term. Manchin currently enjoys sky-high approval ratings in West Virginia and he is likely to run for the seat. If he ultimately departs the Governor’s mansion for the U.S. Senate, the chairmanship of the NGA would go to a fellow Democratic governor to be determined at the time the vacancy arises.

Census 2010: An Update

I recently had an opportunity to talk to Tim Trainor, Chief of the Geography Division at the U.S. Census Bureau, to get an update on Census 2010. Here are the highlights:

- The enumeration was conducted on April 1 – Census Day – but there are still field operations ongoing.
- The last efforts are currently underway to get completed questionnaires from non-responders.
- The participation rate from the mailout was 72%. Subsequently, enumerators have collected questionnaires from most of those who did not respond.
- The Geography Division is currently evaluating higher-level geographic areas, for which statistical data will be available, prior to delineating census tabulation blocks.
- The Geography Division has asked local governments to evaluate their legal boundaries on provided products and inform the Bureau of any necessary changes.
- The Division is also in the process of evaluating “Census designated places” – these are areas generally submitted by planning organizations that don’t have legal boundaries but are known communities.
- By December 31, 2010, the Bureau will deliver the population of each state for Congressional apportionment to President Obama.
- In February 2011, the Bureau will begin delivering Census block population data to the respective states so that the redistricting process can begin. The Bureau aims to get data to states that have earlier redistricting deadlines first. All redistricting data must be delivered by April 2011.
- The ongoing American Community Survey (ACS) has replaced the traditional long-form questionnaire for Census 2010.

Thanks to Tim for taking the time to talk with me, and I will continue to provide updates on key Census 2010 news in this column.

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National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) Conference will be held September 29-October 3 in Savannah, Georgia. www.ncge.org.