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Group Calls For Deeper Focus On Student Success In Higher Education

~New report highlights “opportunity gaps” and a framework of essential elements to improve student success~

Tampa, FL- A report released today by ENLACE Florida calls for institutions of higher education to double their efforts to improve student success rates and to not rest on their laurels following recent justifiable praise from national organizations. On June 24, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) ranked Florida’s community college system first in the nation with a three-year graduation rate of 30%, 10 points above the national average. About the same time, the National Academic Advising Association awarded its prestigious Pacesetter Award to Larry Abele, Provost and Vice President of Florida State University, in recognition of his leadership and commitment to student support programs that have boosted graduation and retention rates at FSU. “While Florida’s College System and the State University System have earned these high marks by making student success a priority, the challenges and opportunities we face moving forward require all institutions to reexamine their student support strategy and to maintain focus,” said Dr. Paul Dosal, Executive Director for ENLACE Florida. Only three institutions in the Florida State University System posted six-year graduation rates higher than the national average: University of Florida, Florida State University and the University of Central Florida. Moreover, behind the great news that the Florida College System leads the nation in graduation rates, one should note the broad range of graduation rates statewide, from a high of 50.9% at Chipola College to 22.1% at Broward College. The new report by ENLACE examines the data on graduation rates and other indicators of student success in the Florida College and State University Systems while highlighting “opportunity gaps”—disparities between institutions and student groups that show significant room for improvement statewide. For example, 72% of African American students graduate in 6-years from Florida State University—34 percentage points higher than Florida

Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University, and University of West Florida. At the University of North Florida, the African American female graduation rate is 24 points higher than the African American male grad rate on the same campus. And at Lake City Community College, African Americans graduate at a rate of 34.4% in three years while whites at Lake Sumter Community College graduate at a rate of 9.3%. “By any number of measurements, our colleges and universities have done a first-rate job in helping students earn their degrees, however, high graduation rates at a few selective institutions, or an above average time-to-completion rate do not necessarily indicate that our higher education systems are doing everything possible to promote student success,” said Dosal. With an emerging national consensus that institutions of higher education must increase the rate of college degree completion if the U.S. workforce is to remain globally competitive, the report urges the Florida Department of Education, the Board of Governors, colleges, and universities to apply a comprehensive and coordinated student success strategy that uses all the tools available to it, including housing, curriculum, financial aid, support services, campus life, recruitment, and even athletics; the strategy should be built on the principle that deep and broad institutional commitments and change, driven and informed by student achievement data, is critical to the success of all efforts to boost graduation and retention rates. The new report provides a list of essential elements, produced by Watson Scott Swail of the Educational Policy Institute, that all colleges and universities should consider when developing a student retention program. “Every administrator, professor, counselor, advisor, or office manager must act on the premise that the institution places such a high priority on student success and timely graduation that the failure of any student is unacceptable,” said Dosal. “To any skeptic who argues that we cannot raise graduation rates of poorly-prepared, limited-income minority students, let them take a careful look at the experience of CARE at FSU.”

For a copy of the complete report and for more information on ENLACE Florida, visit www.enlaceflorida.org

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ENLACE Florida is a statewide network promoting college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African Americans, and other underrepresented students through research, communication, advocacy, and support.