Chairman John Boehner (R-OH) said that education is essential for the U.S. to remain competitive and that the goal of the hearing was to examine the gap between low-income/minority students and other students. He added that the purpose of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act is to address this gap and expand college access.

Testimony:

Dr. Nault of Miami University said that colleges with good graduation rates focus on undergraduate students as their main mission. He stressed the importance of accessibility and that college is not just for the wealthy. He noted that at his institution incoming freshmen are paying less than students who matriculated earlier.

Dr. Lingenfelter of SHEEO told the panel "Higher education is a sea of toes waiting to be stepped on." He emphasized three elements in the recent SHEEO report on the trend in college costs: 1.) state support has kept pace with the growth in college enrollment, 2.) states lose ground during recessions, which is when enrollments increase, and 3.) variation among states and institutions is enormous. State support and tuition could increase significantly in one state and decrease in another. He added that examining total support per student in the nation is misleading.

Dr. Wiener of The Education Trust stressed that the nation is getting more students to college, but not enough through it. Statistics show that lower-income and minority students have a lower graduation rate than other students. He also suggested that institutions that do not accommodate the diversity of the student body do not graduate as many students.

Dr. Law of Tallahassee Community College offered a wide range of reasons why students do not finish college. He pointed out that many incoming freshmen go into remedial courses in their first years, indicating shortcomings in their previous education.

Questions and Answers
Rep. George Miller (D-CA) pointed out that there is a big gap between high school graduates who are ready to go to college and those who are not. He implied that it would be unfair to expect colleges to remedy shortcomings that stem from high school. He asked Dr. Lingenfelter what incentives states have for remaining involved in higher education and how increasing state support would help graduation rates. Dr. Lingenfelter responded that institutions and states need to use their resources more effectively, and states need to be held accountable.

Rep. Robert Andrews (D-NJ) asked how the SHEEO report could conclude that states were keeping up with increasing enrollments if the burden of paying for higher education continues to fall on either federal Pell programs or students themselves. Dr. Lingenfelter pointed out that tuition increases are not uniform: some increase more than others do. In the long run, he said, states tend to make up for what is lost during recessions.

Rep. John Kline (R-MN) asked Dr. Nault why he thought graduation rates were lower at some institutions. Dr. Nault said that a major factor was institutions paying too much attention to status and research, which distracted them from their undergraduates. Later, Rep. John Carter (R-TX) emphasized that no college would survive as a graduate school only.

Dr. Nault pointed out that one factor in the graduation rate is that students do not always make good plans. Some families consider the low admission rate of a school to be a sign of prestige. What happens when the student goes to that school may be a different story, he said.

The panelists offered suggestions on how they thought graduation rates should be measured. Dr. Lingenfelter said that the straightforward but not always effective method would be to keep track of students individually and see how many graduate in six years. He added that it would be necessary to keep track of the institutions they attended and include each institution that contributed to the students’ education. Dr. Law suggested going backwards: examining the academic history of each graduate. Another possibility, he said, was to give each student a tracking number, despite the privacy issues that could arise.

Rep. Karen McCarthy (D-MO) brought attention to Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams!) as a successful program that increases graduation rates. Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) suggested that the subject of the hearing was based on questionable numbers and asked to know the percentage of minority students at Miami University and at Tallahassee Community College.

Dr. Lingenfelter added that student aid was of enormous importance to increasing graduation rates because many students who hold jobs in school are at risk of not graduating.