

From Access to Success:

A Funders Guide to Ensuring More Americans Earn Postsecondary Degrees

INTRODUCTION

College attainment rates are increasing in every industrialized and post-industrialized nation in the world—except ours. Stagnating postsecondary graduation rates in the United States leave millions of Americans cut off from economic prosperity and impede our nation’s ability to compete globally. Education philanthropy, which has long worked to improve college access through scholarship programs and other efforts that have increased the number of students enrolling at postsecondary institutions, must now shift its sights to college success by providing support to ensure postsecondary students graduate.

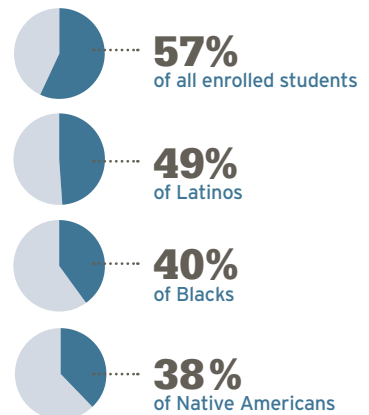
In May 2010, Grantmakers for Education convened funders from across the country along with prominent researchers, higher education leaders and officials from the U.S. Department of Education to examine the most promising strategies for dramatically increasing the number of Americans earning a postsecondary degree. This brief summarizes key themes from that gathering to delineate current barriers to college completion; examine critical intervention levers at the student, institutional and policy levels that can drive increases in graduation rates; and identify the role grantmakers can play in promoting college success.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

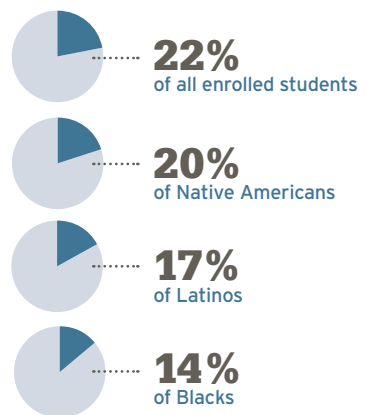
Funders, policymakers and educators might well assume that their efforts to improve Americans’ postsecondary opportunities have been successful: Today, nearly seven in 10 students enroll in some form of postsecondary education within two years after leaving high school. But getting students to enroll is just one step. A large proportion of students are underprepared—academically, financially and in terms of their own assumptions and expectations—for college. As a result, only about 57 percent of students who enroll in a bachelor’s degree program graduate within six years, and only one-fifth of students who begin at a community college graduate within three years. The disparities for students of color and students from lower-income households are even starker.

“Persistence is a persistent problem. We spend a fortune recruiting freshman but forget to recruit sophomores.” —MICHAEL MCPHERSON, *The Spencer Foundation*

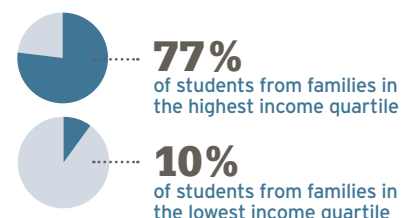
Students earning a bachelor’s degree in six years:



Students earning an associate degree in three years:



Students earning at least a bachelor’s degree by age 24:



UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS

Driving a dramatic increase in post-secondary success requires addressing numerous barriers that exist at the student, institutional and policy levels.

At the student level

Inadequate academic preparation

at the K-12 level leaves scores of students ill-equipped for college. As a result, students spend precious—and costly—college terms taking pre-college level classes. One-third of all first-year college students take at least one developmental (i.e. remedial) course. At community colleges, some 60 percent of students must enroll in a developmental math or reading course. Math is the most difficult academic hurdle: one estimate indicates that only 31 percent of community college students who take developmental math are able to successfully master the skills necessary to move onto college-level math. The delays, discouragement and dearth of adequate developmental courses take a huge cumulative toll on students: only a quarter of community college students who enroll in a developmental course earn an associate degree within eight years.

Incomplete information about college leads students to make decisions that impede their chances to graduate. For example, a lack of understanding



60%
of community college students enroll in at least one developmental math or reading course



25%
of community college students who enroll in a developmental course earn an associate degree within eight years

about the advantages of attending a competitive school can lead to undermatching, whereby students do not attend the most highly selective institutions for which they are qualified. Many students and families choose less-selective institutions because of the price of attendance, proximity to home or similar factors that may seem reasonable—yet graduation rates are actually lower for individual students who enroll in less selective schools, rendering a seemingly cost-effective choice ultimately quite costly. Undermatching is only one example of how lack of information hurts students, especially students who are the first generation in their family to attend college. Without adequate information and soft-skills preparation, students may not understand how to study effectively, access campus resources such as tutoring services or manage their time in the relatively unsupervised postsecondary setting.

Difficulty understanding the costs and accessing adequate financial aid

has particular impact on low-income and first-generation college students. These students may be unaware of how to access financial aid and scholarship programs that could dramatically lower the amount they and their families pay for college. Moreover, these programs are inadequate to meet these students' needs. A growing proportion of private and public financial aid goes to students who need it the least, through merit-based programs, tax incentives and institutional aid policies that favor higher-income students. Over a quarter of state financial aid is not need-based. At the federal level, Pell grants cover only 36% of the cost of a public four-year college, down from

77% a generation ago, and only 62% of the cost of attending a public two-year college, down from 99%. Savings from the tuition tax deduction goes disproportionately to wealthy families: 59% to those with household incomes over \$100,000, compared to only 11% to those with household incomes under \$50,000. At both public and private colleges, aid to students from families earning over \$100,000 a year is increasing at a rate four- to five-times faster than aid to students whose families earn under \$20,000 a year. The cumulative effect of state, federal and institutional aid policies is devastating to students who need financial aid most: the current unmet need for students whose family income falls within the lowest-quintile is \$10,445—nearly 70 percent of total household income for that quintile.

At the institutional level

A general lack of emphasis on completion pervades a surprising number of campuses. Faculty, staff and even administrators and trustees may pay little attention to what percentage of students actually complete their degrees. Even as schools spend tremendous resources to recruit students, they often remain unaware of what they need to do to retain students and ensure timely degree progress.

Insufficient data collection and analysis regarding student degree progress

remains a chronic problem in higher education. While initiatives at the federal and state levels are improving the use of data in K-12 systems, most postsecondary institutions lack the capacity and the sense of urgency for using data-driven practices to engage students more effectively, better structure coursework and improve policies to support college completion.

Inadequate assessment tools and practices hinder students' ultimate degree progress. Assessment tests taken by entering students are not typically designed to diagnose specific areas of weakness and pinpoint what developmental instruction is required. These placement tools are generally unable to distinguish between students who have been out of the classroom for multiple years and may just require a brief refresher of skills, those for whom language is a barrier and those who have never had instruction in a particular subject. The result is that institutions do not have accurate, actionable information about individual students, developmental courses are not matched to students' needs and students can end up spending unnecessary hours in basic skills instruction that delay their time-to-degree or fail to provide what they need for continuing success across courses.

At the policy/systems level
An absence of large-scale data systems leaves policymakers without comprehensive information about postsecondary education, making it difficult to identify where public policies can target effective solutions. Variations in data collection render even the most basic state-by-state comparisons challenging. What data systems do exist are not aligned with those at the K-12 level, making it difficult to track student progress across the education pipeline.

Arcane financial aid policies and procedures serve as barriers rather than supports for low-income students. The effects of the shift in public aid dollars to wealthier families (detailed above) are further compounded by the fact that the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is so complicated and

Community Colleges in the Postsecondary Landscape

Community colleges play a critical role in the higher education landscape, educating over one-third of all postsecondary students. Geographically more accessible and relatively more affordable, community colleges can serve two critical functions: training students for living-wage careers and preparing students for transfer to bachelor's degree-granting institutions. Funders should not underestimate the value of these schools within the larger postsecondary landscape: nearly one in five Americans earning a Ph.D. in 2008 attended community college. Community colleges provide an especially important entry point for students who are low-income, first-generation to attend college, older, working while in school and/or students of color.

But community colleges face considerable challenges ensuring that students earn a certificate or degree, in part precisely because of the students they serve. Inadequate assessment and ineffective developmental coursework take heavy tolls on these campuses, as does a lack of adequate financial aid. Programs like the federal Pell Grant do not support students enrolled in developmental education—and even those community college students who are not in developmental courses have fewer aid sources. Moreover, state budget cuts hit particularly hard on these campuses, where reductions in faculty

and courses mean delays in students' degree progress and, for increasing numbers of potential students, a de facto disruption of open-access postsecondary education.

But community colleges also serve as crucibles for coordinated interventions that can dramatically drive student success. With support from education grantmakers, institutions like El Paso Community College (EPCC)—which serves a predominantly Latino student body on the Texas-Mexico border—are developing effective new strategies, from early assessment to accelerated developmental curriculum. At EPCC, leaders created the College Readiness Consortium, a citywide entity working to ensure high school students, parents and teachers better understand what students need to know before they enroll in college—from an academic, financial and time-to-degree perspective. Students in El Paso now take college entry assessments while still in high school—giving high school teachers time to work with students to build the skills they need for college. The momentum has led to the creation of dual-enrollment programs and early college high schools that allow students to earn college credit while completing their high school diplomas. On the EPCC campus, better assessment tools and accelerated developmental courses mean students who need help get help early, keeping them on track to graduate.

difficult to complete that a significant number of low-income students do not submit it. Furthermore, the poor timing of the FAFSA application process leaves students without accurate information about their aid eligibility at the critical point when they are deciding where, or whether, to apply to college.

WHAT CAN GRANTMAKERS DO TO EFFECT THE GREATEST IMPROVEMENTS IN POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES?

Grantmakers are uniquely positioned to raise a sense of urgency around education reform issues, asking critical questions and challenging public and private entities to take on issues of vital importance. Funders can bring crucial perspective and pressure to make college completion a priority for postsecondary institutions, policymakers and public higher education systems. Innovative programs and partnerships already exist, and philanthropy can play a critical role in developing promising strategies and scaling proven practices.

Areas for action include:

Ensuring High School Graduates are College- and Career-Ready

- Convene K-12, higher education and private industry leaders to align how college- and career-readiness is defined across these sectors.
- Support efforts to align K-12 coursework with skills and subject knowledge needed for postsecondary success, including expansion of early assessment processes that allow high schools to address specific students' needs, thereby reducing the number of students enrolling in developmental courses at the postsecondary level.
- Invest in community- and school-based models targeting low-income students, students of color and students who would be the first-generation to attend college, to provide a rich combination of soft skills such as time management and study skills; early financial education; academic enrichment in core competencies (especially math); and early exposure to career opportunities.

Proven Strategies to Drive Graduation Rates

Comprehensive national research by the Education Trust reveals that even schools with similar missions and student populations can have dramatically different graduation rates. Postsecondary institutions that graduate significantly higher percentages of students share several key characteristics:

- 1. They use data consistently and from the start,** reviewing performance data starting in the first six weeks of the semester. They act quickly on the data to get students (and faculty and staff) the support they need, from the first moment it's clear they need it.
- 2. They're redesigning the courses where they lose a lot of students,** often introductory classes that have become early barriers rather than early entry to college success.
- 3. They require what matters:** anything that contributes to student success—such as attendance in lectures, labs and tutoring sessions—becomes required. When students know they are held accountable for particular activities, they are more likely to complete those activities, and thus more likely to graduate.
- 4. They clearly assign responsibility for student success.** At the department level, at the advisory level, at the leadership level—people look at, talk about and act on student progress, because they know they are accountable for it.
- 5. Their leaders focus on student success as an institutional priority,** with presidents and provosts making it clear in their speeches, in meetings and throughout the institution's activities that improving graduation rates is the very core of their institutional mission.
- 6. They don't give up on students,** which keeps students from giving up on themselves. Schools reach out to students who have left, asking them to come back and providing the supports they need to succeed once they return.

- Partner with schools and districts to strengthen the quality of counseling, particularly for students least likely to have family knowledge about applying to and selecting a college, with a focus on making sure students are not undermatched at matriculation.
- Support the development of dual enrollment programs such as the Early College High School model, which allow students to earn postsecondary credit (and in many cases associate degrees) while still in high school.

Financial Education

- Invest in financial education models that reach students early—ideally at the middle and high school levels—preparing them to understand the costs and benefits of postsecondary education.
- Provide funding to test new models of financial education that pair asset-building training with college financial information, scholarships and intense advising, so students acquire a full portfolio of tools and resources to save and pay for college.

Developmental Education

- Partner with institutions to test new or expand promising models that focus on diagnostic assessment.
- Work with policymakers in states whose public institutions are required to administer placement tests that are not diagnostic, such as the widely used ACCUPLACER assessment, to reform policies to allow the use of diagnostic placement tools.
- Promote curricular reform in developmental courses to shift the focus from remediation to preparation for postsecondary success. One promising approach involves accelerated developmental education curricula, which can help many students achieve or re-establish mastery of pre-college level work more quickly than standard semester-length developmental education courses.
- Collaborate with workforce funders to examine new ways of reaching adult workers who require basic skills instruction.
- Support research scans to identify additional promising practices and bring them to scale.

Community Colleges as Points of Transfer to Four-Year Institutions

- Convene leaders from community colleges and four-year institutions to align curriculum and identify areas where transfer policies and procedures can be streamlined.

“There is an implementation gap. We need to pay attention to how systems apply the research, to use what we know works to improve practice.”

—MARTHA KANTER, *United States Department of Education*

- Work with policymakers to foster policy environments that encourage associate degree completion prior to transfer, because earning an initial associate degree correlates with higher rates of bachelor’s attainment.
- Build will among policymakers and the public to support adequate funding of community colleges as entry points into the larger postsecondary system, particularly for underserved students.
- Support the expansion of new models for student services, including student success courses and technology solutions that enable students to identify whether they are on track for degree completion.
- Invest in approaches that engage key subject-area faculty in pedagogy and course reform efforts focused on student success, so that instruction and curriculum consistently support timely degree progress.

Institutional Accountability and Capacity

- Convene postsecondary leaders and trustees to examine what institutional policies, practices and curricular reforms can increase postsecondary success on their campuses.
- Make college success a priority in institutional support. Institutional funding based on course completion and degree completion rather than enrollment will push schools to focus on increasing timely degree progress.
- Support the development and use of systems that enable schools to better track, analyze and act on data about student degree progress, particularly at early intervention points.

“Putting money into effective practices isn’t enough. We need to take on the underlying issues of institutional transformation and change.”

—KAY MCCLENNEX, *Center for Community College Student Engagement*

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