

Recommendation **Nine**

College Completion

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**The
College
Completion
Agenda**
State
Policy Guide

Produced in Collaboration with:



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES

One

Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families

Two

Improve middle and high school college and career counseling

Three

Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs

Four

Align the K–12 education system with international standards and college admission expectations

Five

Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention

Six

Clarify and simplify the admission process

Seven

Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent

Eight

Keep college affordable

Nine

Dramatically increase college completion rates

Ten

Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs

Background

The United States must educate more of its citizens for an increasingly competitive and complex workplace. Significantly increasing the number of students who earn postsecondary degrees and credentials is not only the cornerstone of several recent national reports issued by the College Board (*Coming to Our Senses; Winning the Skills Race*), it is also a central objective of the Obama administration. This increased focus on college completion (not simply college access) is reflected in, for example, the president's goal for the United States to be the world leader in the percentage of citizens who are college graduates by 2020.

College graduates gain significant advantages in today's economy. They are more likely to have better career opportunities, earn higher salaries, and live healthier and longer lives. It is estimated that people with bachelor's degrees earn 61 percent more during their lifetime than those with only a high school diploma.¹ Higher earnings translate into higher tax revenues for states and the federal government.

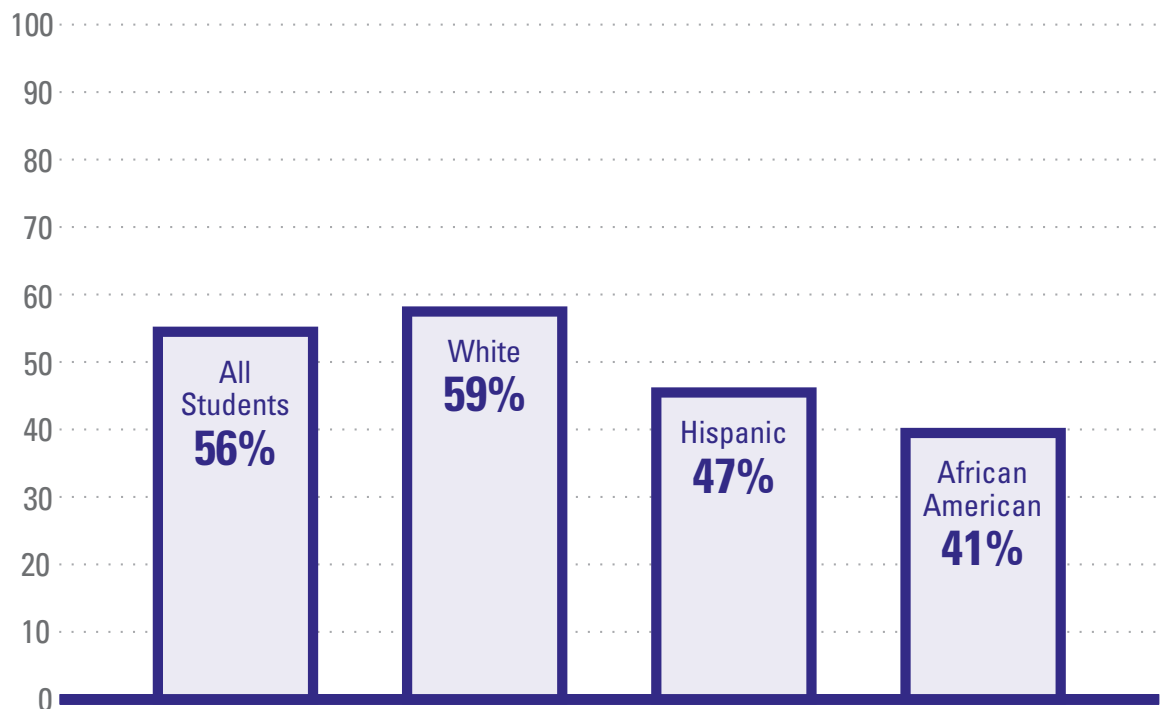
Unfortunately, just a little over half — 56 percent — of students who enroll in four-year institutions earn a bachelor's degree within six years. Only 28 percent of associate degree-seeking students earn their degrees within three years.² The statistics for students of color are not any better — just 41 percent of black and 47 percent of Hispanic college students attain their bachelor's degree in six years, compared to 59 percent of white students (Figure 1).³

Several factors increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of college. Full-time employment, dependent children, weak academic preparation, off-campus residency and college affordability can hurt student retention and graduation rates. Low-income, minority and first-generation students tend to face one or more of these factors. Low-income students, for example, are more likely to work full time during college. This places them at a disadvantage; research shows that working more than 20 hours per week is detrimental to student academic performance.⁴

Poor academic preparation is another reason students do not complete a college degree. Each year, one million students fail college placement tests, and more than one-third of all students enroll in remedial education. At community colleges, 43 percent of students enroll in at least one remedial course to learn what they should have learned in secondary school.⁵

Successful state policies and programs recognize and address the many factors that cause students to drop out of college. Thoughtful policy analysis can track the leading drop-out factors for particular institutions, and for the state as a whole, and can target solutions to those problem areas.

Figure 1. Six-Year Graduation Rates for Four-Year Institutions, by Race



Sources: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009;
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008

What Legislators Need to Know

To evaluate the state's college completion performance, legislators may want to seek answers to the following questions:

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- What is the percentage of adults in the state who have earned an associate degree? A bachelor's degree?
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- What are the retention rates at state institutions? Is there a common definition of retention? Often there is not, which makes comparing and analyzing retention rates among institutions difficult.
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- What are the college completion rates in the state? How are the completion rates calculated?
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- What is the percentage of first-time students who require at least one remedial course? Of those, how many successfully complete the remedial course? What is the success rate in entry-level, first-year college courses for students coming out of remediation? How many of these students complete a degree?
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- What are the college retention and completion rates for various categories of students (e.g., by race, gender, ethnicity, age)?
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- How long is it taking students to complete their degrees?
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- When are students dropping out (e.g., first year, second year)?
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- Why are students dropping out? For example, are more students dropping out because of finances or because of remediation? Are students dropping out because of institutional behavior, such as not enough courses or services in the evenings and on weekends? Are students dropping out because they do not feel that their college is a cultural fit? Do all the institutions in the state administer exit surveys to track the reasons students drop out?

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- What are the transfer rates between two- and four-year institutions in the state? Currently, transfer data are not collected very well. Can data processes and systems be improved to measure transfer rates accurately?
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- What are the transfer rates for students who transfer out of state? Does the state keep track of these students? Are there border institutions where it would be helpful to assess transfer numbers for students coming in and going out of the state?
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- What are the transfer and articulation policies in the state? Do they make the transfer process easier for students? Can the policies be improved to better facilitate student transfer?
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- What programs and practices are institutions using to increase retention and graduation rates? Are institutions using programs that evidence shows have a high impact on retention and graduation (e.g., research with faculty, service learning and internships)? Are institutions measuring the comparative effectiveness of retention programs and investing in those that are the most effective?

Research

College completion improves if students are academically and socially engaged.

As discussed above, college completion rates are around 56 percent for bachelor's degrees⁶ and 28 percent for associate degrees. Most students drop out during their first year of college. The reasons for dropping out vary, but students who are low-income, minority or first-generation are the most likely to drop out.⁷ Today's students who do complete their degrees are taking longer to do so than in previous generations.

In the research community, the consensus is that students who are academically and socially engaged during college are more likely to graduate. A student is academically engaged when he or she interacts with faculty and finds learning meaningful. Social engagement refers to participation in campus activities and multiple connections with other students.⁸

High-impact practices can help students.

Research conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that certain institutional policies and practices can have a significant effect on retention and graduation rates. The research identifies "high-impact practices," including service learning, faculty-guided research and internships. These practices increase both social and academic engagement. Students who participate in these activities not only have higher rates of persistence and graduation, but also gain more personally, intellectually and culturally from their education. These positive results apply to all students, but appear to be even more evident in minorities and low-income students. Compared to non-Hispanic students, Hispanic students who participated in "high-impact" activities had better grade point averages, and African American students who participated in "high-impact" activities had higher chances of staying in college than white students.⁹

Redesigning first-year courses can improve student success and cut costs.

Research indicates that students who return for their second year of college have a higher chance of graduating. Sixty percent of low-income and first-generation students who do not complete their college education drop out after their first year.¹⁰ To increase the retention of first-year students, the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) conducted research on redesigning introductory courses to improve student success.

About 25 introductory courses serve one-half of the students at community colleges and one-third of the students at four-year colleges. These 25 courses have high drop-out, failure and withdrawal rates, and the rates can vary dramatically across institutions and institution type. At four-year institutions the

drop-out, failure and withdrawal rates average from 22 percent to 45 percent, while at community colleges the rates average 40 percent to 50 percent, but can be much higher. Since this small number of courses affects such a large proportion of college students, restructuring them to improve student success can have a significant effect on retention and graduation rates.¹¹

The National Center for Academic Transformation led a project that redesigned one introductory course at 30 postsecondary institutions. After evaluating the newly designed courses, the center found that 25 of the 30 colleges showed significant improvement in student performance in class, and all 30 cut costs by an average of 37 percent. According to the project report, “Collectively, the 30 redesigned courses affect more than 50,000 students nationwide and produce a savings of \$3.1 million in operating expenses each year.”¹² Half of the institutions were studied closely to evaluate the effect on low-income and minority students; of those, 90 percent improved student learning.

Articulation policies ease transfer.

Transfer rates between two- and four-year institutions often are not accurately or consistently measured, especially for students who transfer out of state. It is hard to evaluate how states are doing in this matter. Many states have adopted articulation policies to make the transfer process easier. Transfer and articulation policies that ease the process do so by creating a coherent, systemwide procedure for transferring, by establishing a common course numbering system throughout the state’s higher education system and by identifying a general education core that is accepted by all institutions. These policies are important and necessary, but there is little research available on how articulation policies affect transfer and graduation rates. The studies that have been conducted indicate that articulation policies in and of themselves are not enough to increase transfer or graduation rates. Other efforts, such as fostering a “transfer-going culture,” are needed to improve completion rates.¹³

Institutions can foster transfer-going and receiving cultures.

The movement to create a “college-going culture” within high schools has increased college enrollment rates. This movement focused on increasing academic rigor and college preparation and fostering a belief that all students can achieve a college education. Researchers have taken that model and applied it to colleges. Fostering a “transfer-going culture” can encourage community college students to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Four-year institutions need to promote a positive “transfer-receiving culture” that accepts and supports incoming transfer students. As in the high school model, transfer-going and transfer-receiving cultures provide students with the necessary information and resources, offer academic rigor, ensure that all students are supported, and make transfer and completion institutional priorities. This research has been led by the College Board’s Stephen Handel, who states that “the transfer policies and practices of community colleges and four-year institutions that link the success of their institutions to student transfer and completion of the baccalaureate degree are more likely to see increases in overall transfer rates.”¹⁴



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State Policy Approaches



Low Cost

Require regular reporting.

Reporting requirements are one way states can signal to institutions that student retention and success are priorities, and that institutions will be held accountable for results. State laws can require that institutions annually report to the governor and the legislature on enrollment, retention and graduation rates so the state can track and monitor progress.

In **Massachusetts**, public two-year and four-year colleges are required by law to report annually to the governor and the legislature on a variety of higher education performance measures, including student success.

Improve the transfer process between two- and four-year institutions.

Progress from community college enrollment to bachelor's degree attainment is an increasing concern. Many students who make the effort to apply, gain financial aid and attend a two-year college still do not graduate from a four-year college. The reasons for this include the longer hours that students are working, their family demands and the students' inability to pay for their education. Still, one significant barrier to the smooth movement of students through the educational pipeline is the difficulty of transferring from a community college to a four-year college or university. This has the effect of slowing the movement of students, particularly minority students, toward a baccalaureate degree. Policymakers can strengthen the pathway between community colleges and four-year colleges by developing effective state transfer and articulation policy and by providing financial incentives for transfer.

In **Florida** and **North Carolina**, "2 plus 2" articulation agreements guarantee admission with junior standing at state universities to community college graduates who earn an Associate of Arts degree. Florida's statewide articulation agreement, for example, guarantees that the 60 credits students earn as a part of their Associate of Arts degree will transfer to a state university. Students are guaranteed to have met all general education requirements as part of their degree and are admitted as juniors. Most of the independent colleges and universities in Florida recognize the transfer policy. Additionally, Florida has a common course numbering system in place to ease the transfer of students among state institutions. Courses with similar content are given the same number throughout the state college and university system. When students transfer, a course must be credited if the school they transfer to offers that course. North Carolina also has a detailed articulation agreement that includes a 2 plus 2 transfer policy and a common course numbering system.¹⁵



“Competency-based” articulation agreements in **South Dakota** and **New York** require community college students to demonstrate that they are academically prepared for upper-level course work. The benefit of this policy is that it monitors academic progress and ensures that students are acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge across all institutions in the state. In South Dakota, community college students must take a proficiency exam before transferring to a four-year institution. Students take the same exam that all students applying for admission to the four-year system take. Students who pass the exam can register for upper-level course work. The City University of New York (CUNY) system also implements a similar program, requiring transfer applicants with fewer than 45 credits to take proficiency exams.¹⁶

New Jersey’s Student Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship (STARS) program covers tuition and fees at state community colleges for students who take rigorous course work in high school and who graduate in the top 15 percent of their class. Students must enroll full time at the community college and graduate on time. Students who maintain a 3.25 grade point average at the community college and wish to transfer to a New Jersey public four-year college or university are eligible for the program’s STARS II scholarship, which awards \$6,000 to \$7,000 per year for tuition. Students must maintain a 3.25 GPA at the four-year institution and earn their bachelor’s degree on time to receive the full scholarship.¹⁷ New Jersey created the STARS program to help students afford the large increases in college tuition. The program seeks to increase the number of high school students who earn an associate degree by covering the costs of tuition and fees at community colleges. The program also provides financial incentives for community college students to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree.

Take leadership on student success.

College and university presidents have the power to make student success a priority and to foster a college-completion culture on campus. They can create strategic plans focused on data usage and can assign responsibility throughout the institution for implementing the plan. Strong leaders can coordinate efforts by administrators, faculty and staff to increase student success.

State legislators do not have to relegate all leadership on completion to college presidents, however. Legislators can take leadership to improve college completion by letting institutions know that student retention and success are state priorities and that the institutions will be held accountable for results. A state agenda on college success can send that signal. This agenda identifies priorities, sets goals, and recommends policies and practices to improve college completion. Several legislatures have created task forces that bring together policymakers and higher education stakeholders to articulate state agendas.

In 2007, the **Arkansas** General Assembly passed Act 570, creating the Legislative Task Force on Higher Education Remediation, Retention and Graduation Rates. The task force consisted of the governor, legislative leaders,



college administrators, faculty and state education board members. It was charged with researching and analyzing Arkansas trends and data on student success, and compiling best practices for decreasing remedial education and increasing student retention and graduation. In 2008, the task force released a report of its findings with a set of recommendations.¹⁸

The **Illinois** General Assembly adopted House Joint Resolution 69 in 2007, which created a Public Agenda Task Force and directed it to study higher education challenges and opportunities. As in Arkansas, the task force consisted of policymakers, state education leaders, and administrators and faculty from postsecondary institutions. It held six formal meetings and conducted regional forums and special briefings. The final report, *The Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success*, lays out the state plan and serves as a guide for policymakers and higher education institutions as they consider policies, priorities and funding. It defines four main goals for Illinois: to increase access to postsecondary education; to make affordability a priority; to increase the number of degree holders in the state; and to use education, research and innovation to meet economic needs.¹⁹

In **South Carolina's** FY 2007-08 Appropriations Act, the Higher Education Study Committee was authorized to create a plan to improve the state's higher education system and increase the number of college graduates. To accomplish that task, the study committee developed a project plan involving participants from the education, business and government sectors. The result, a comprehensive report titled *Leveraging Higher Education for a Stronger South Carolina*, includes detailed analysis and recommendations.²⁰

The **Tennessee** General Assembly took a different approach in creating a state plan for higher education. The "Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010" (Senate Bill 8 2010 Extraordinary Session) was signed into law on Jan. 27, 2010. The act contains different provisions, one of which requires the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to develop a statewide master plan for public higher education. The master plan will consider input from higher education stakeholders and will address how to improve economic and workforce development, how to increase degree production, and how to promote institutional collaboration and efficiency through mission differentiation. The commission must present recommendations for implementing the master plan to the General Assembly. As part of developing the master plan, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission is required to create an outcomes-based funding formula that rewards institutions for meeting goals set forth by the master plan, such as increased student retention and degree production. The Complete College Tennessee Act also includes other low-cost reforms such as developing a fully transferable 60-credit curriculum, establishing a statewide articulation agreement, requiring remedial education to be taught only at community colleges and establishing a statewide community college system.



Ensure state or federal funding for student support services.

Student support services are crucial for improving college completion rates, particularly for low-income, minority and first-generation students. If students receive the information and support they need when they need it, they have a greater chance of attaining a degree. Support services can provide students with help through academic advising, career counseling, mentoring, tutoring and financial aid guidance. Funding student services and programs that demonstrate effectiveness is a way states can support student success.

States can use their own funds or can leverage available federal funds, such as those offered by the TRIO Student Support Services program. The federal TRIO Student Support Services program helps low-income, first-generation and disabled students attain a college degree. Of the students participating in TRIO, two-thirds must be both low-income and first-generation. Institutions of higher education can apply to the Student Support Services program for competitive grants to fund student support projects on campus.

Research indicates that Student Support Services programs have had a positive effect on student retention and persistence. Overall, the 950 programs nationwide serve more than 200,000 students. According to the U.S. Department of Education's analysis of the program, those students are more likely to persist through college and attain a degree than other low-income and first-generation students.²¹

The state-funded Educational Opportunity Programs in **California** and **New York** help low-income, academically disadvantaged youth succeed in college through financial aid and comprehensive student support. Implementation varies by college; some require participants to enroll in summer bridge programs or orientations, while others require a specific course load. Overall, institutions provide Educational Opportunity Program students with individual attention and extensive academic and personal counseling. Nyack College in New York testifies that it has seen noticeable positive effects from the program. Many of the students in its program have become leaders on campus, have made the dean's list and have graduated with honors.



Consider performance-based funding.

Promoting college completion can be done through state higher education funding formulas. For nearly all states, funding for higher education is largely based on student enrollment. This funding formula provides incentives for institutions to enroll students, but provides no compulsion for institutions to graduate students. Several states have modified their higher education funding formula to provide some incentive funding based on performance indicators such as course completion, the number of degrees awarded, or the number of low-income and minority graduates.

Florida has used performance-based funding since 1997 to reward colleges for the number of graduates, particularly the number of graduates with degrees from programs that are in high need. Funding is also allocated to colleges based on efficiency — the time it takes students to earn a degree — and on the transfer rate of students from two- to four-year colleges.

Oklahoma has been rewarding colleges for high retention and graduation rates with funding since 2002. Florida and Oklahoma provide performance-based funding as a small percentage of the overall budget for higher education. Colleges and universities still receive the bulk of their funding based on enrollment. In Oklahoma, for example, performance-based funding averages only \$2.2 million a year.

Indiana first implemented incentive funding in 2003, rewarding research universities that receive federal grants. In 2007, Indiana expanded performance funding to provide incentives for institutions to increase degree completion and improve on-time graduation rates and transfer rates. These incentives were provided on top of the base funding that institutions receive, which is tied to enrollment. In 2009, Indiana approved a new formula that begins a shift in the way base funding is allocated. Starting in 2010, 10 percent of the base funding will be allocated according to credit hours completed, and 90 percent according to credit hours enrolled. By 2014, all base funds will be tied to credit hours completed. In addition, the 2009 legislation created new performance measures to reward degree completion by low-income students and to provide funding for noncredit workforce training courses.

Ohio's legislature approved a new funding formula in 2009 that allocates money to colleges and universities based on course and degree completions, with extra funding being provided for at-risk students and students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The funding formula will be implemented over time, and eventually all state colleges and universities will receive funds based on course completion, instead of course enrollment.²²

Take Action

<p>1 Evaluate transfer, retention and completion rates for the state. How do they compare to other states?</p>	 Short-Term
<p>2 Know what the transfer and articulation policies are and evaluate whether they can be improved.</p>	 Short-Term
<p>3 Start a discussion around financial policies that encourage institutions to focus on student success, such as performance-based funding or funding targeted to student support services.</p>	 Short-Term
<p>4 Form a legislative task force and bring stakeholders together to discuss student success policy options.</p>	 Mid-Term
<p>5 Reform transfer and articulation policies, if needed.</p>	 Mid-Term
<p>6 Fully leverage federal funding such as the TRIO programs, which award grants to institutions for student support.</p>	 Mid-Term
<p>7 Foster a culture within the state that is focused on college completion. The movement to create a “college-going culture” within high schools has increased college enrollment rates. States can focus on creating a “college-completion culture” to encourage students to finish their degrees. This includes fostering a “transfer-going and receiving culture” to support community college students on a path to a bachelor’s degree.</p>	 Long-Term

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