

# POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

focusing on completion



## OUR MISSION

At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe that every life has equal value and each individual should have the opportunity to live up to his or her potential. In the United States, the key to opportunity is education. Education is the great equalizer. It enriches our lives, informs our choices, and prepares us for meaningful employment and to contribute to the communities in which we live.

The foundation's U.S. Program is focused on two major initiatives: ensuring that a high school education should result in college readiness and that postsecondary education should result in a degree or certificate with genuine economic value.

## OUR CHALLENGE

For generations of Americans, the high school diploma delivered on the value of an education. It gave you a ticket to the American Dream. That meant a steady job to support your family and a chance to launch a career.

But now, high school is no longer enough. The median wage for workers with no college is now close to the poverty line for a family of four.

That leaves only one path out of poverty: education—a college education. Whether it comes as a certificate, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree, a postsecondary credential is the best bridge between poor students and good jobs.

America has long known about the value of a college degree. For the last forty years, business leaders, philanthropists, educators and civic leaders have encouraged enrollment and access. College enrollment has grown nearly 35 percent since 1970. More young people enrolled in college this year than ever before.

But the payoff doesn't come with enrolling in college; the payoff comes when a student gets a postsecondary degree that helps them get a job with a family wage—and that's not happening nearly enough. The college completion rate in America has been flat since the 1970s. We were once first in the world in postsecondary completion rates, we now rank tenth. That's a danger for the nation's economy, and it's a tragedy for our citizens.

In the United States today, there are millions of young adults—especially low-income young adults—who have both the ability and desire to continue their education past high school. However they are stalled by limited access to affordable, quality options and competing demands for their time and energy.

For these young people, having the will and not the way impedes their economic and personal progress, affecting not only their prospects but those of their children. In the near and long term, this situation

compromises our nation's ability to compete effectively in a global economy—to produce young adults capable of taking on the demands of and succeeding in a 21st Century workplace and democracy.

It is no longer enough to say more young people are accessing college—for the sake of their future and our country's future, we have to make sure more young people go on to complete college.

## OUR APPROACH

We have set an ambitious goal for ourselves and the nation: **double the number of young people who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with value in the marketplace by the time they reach age 26.**

To accomplish this goal, we must connect the millions of young Americans who have the will to get the education they need with a way to get there: helping them get further, faster—and at far less cost in terms of time and money.

Doubling the number of low-income young adults who earn a postsecondary degree—whether a two-year or four-year degree, apprenticeship or credential—will require us to take a leap that transforms not only students’ perspectives but our postsecondary system so that every student can overcome the obstacles that might otherwise keep them from the education they deserve. To accomplish our goal, we are committed to working with partners large and small, including public and private partners, nonprofits, and other foundations.

## OUR PLANNED INVESTMENTS

### IMPROVE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM.

From the moment students enroll in college, they should be guided along a clear pathway to graduation and a career. Despite an increasing number of public and private providers entering the postsecondary education system, there has been very little change in how these institutions design their programs and create support systems to meet the needs of their students, many of whom enter college without the necessary skills to perform college-level work. Our strategy focuses on addressing these needs by stimulating institutional practices focused on completion while decreasing the time and cost required to complete a credential with value in the workplace. Our investments will include:

- Innovations in performance management and institutional practices that make it possible to get more students to and through credential-granting programs. Our early investments will be supporting data-driven efforts to accelerate the rate of academic catch-up for poorly prepared young students, and improve the first year experience
- New technology products and platforms that produce dramatic improvement in learning and completion rates and can be developed and adopted at scale
- Partnerships with business alliances and labor coalitions to develop practices and policies that make it easier for young adults to successfully combine school and work

### SUPPORT YOUNG ADULT SUCCESS.

While most young adults understand the value of education in the abstract, too often real-life pressures get in the way and prevent them from completing a degree. This is especially true for low-income young people who may have financial constraints, jobs, and family obligations that compete for their time and attention. By offering support, reducing the barriers that prevent them from learning, and reinforcing their motivation to learn and succeed, we expect more young people to be able to focus on completing a degree. Our investments will include:

- Tools and consumer information that will ensure young people have the guidance they need, including data that shows which credentials lead to the greatest opportunity, information about where and how they might complete these credentials, and guidance about which institutions have the best track record for getting their students through school and into careers
- Organizations and alliances that will provide new and more efficient on-ramps to postsecondary education that will bridge the preparation gap and keep the focus on completion, whether through large networks of employers, community-based and civic organizations, or new linkages between networks
- Incentives that can reinforce young people’s motivation to succeed

### ENCOURAGE U.S. LEADERS TO COMMIT TO HELPING STUDENTS COMPLETE THEIR DEGREES.

Since 1965, much of our higher education policies, including funding and financial aid, have been focused on college access. We will use our voice and convening power to make the case about the importance of getting students to and through college. Our investments will be focused on mobilizing and inspiring leaders, employers, and communities across the country to embrace the goal and make the policy and financial commitments necessary to achieve it. To this end, we will support research, communications, and policy analysis efforts that:

- Highlight the importance of doubling the number of young people who earn a postsecondary credential
- Shed light on promising policy approaches around funding, accountability, financial aid, and successful colleges that shift the system’s focus to access and completion for all young Americans