

Background: Postsecondary Success Initiative

Overview

For low-income and first-generation college students, the road to a degree is uneven, marked with detours and speed bumps: inflexible work schedules, remedial education, day care costs, family responsibilities. And while evidence shows that fostering and maintaining “academic momentum” is the key to improving completion rates, our institutions have not responded to their students’ increasingly complex and diverse needs.

That’s why more than half of all college students will not earn a degree or credential¹. For community college and low-income students, the numbers are much, much worse. For example, only about one-quarter of the African-American students who enrolled in a community college in 2004 graduated within three years.²

For 40 years, the United States has worked to ensure all young people had access to college. Since then, we have had astounding success increasing access to higher education—moving college enrollment from 9 million students in the 1980-81 school year³ to over 20 million in the 2007-08 school year⁴. But completion rates are stagnant, and declining in comparison to other countries. We have to dedicate the same attention to improving completion as we did to increasing enrollment, without sacrificing access or quality. Access is no longer enough. We now must dedicate our energies on improving completion rates, without sacrificing quality.

A small, but growing research base indicates several promising strategies: First, decision makers need comprehensive data-collection systems so that they can fully analyze and understand the completion problem, and can effectively redirect the resources to solve it.

Next, students require need-based financial aid packages that feature grants (rather than loans) and money for living expenses. Similarly, to encourage results, lawmakers should tie college funding and student aid to academic progress and degree completion.

Finally, high school and college must be linked by common standards and aligned coursework that will help students earn degrees quicker and at a lower cost. Students today lack the luxuries of time and, often, money.

Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Students

Two barriers to improving completion receive the most attention: inadequate preparation in high school and the spiraling cost of college—according to the Department of Education, three-fifths of those graduating four-year college in 2006-07 had taken out college loans. These students had average debt of over \$22,000.

But, there is mounting evidence that indicates a more fundamental problem beyond money or preparation—it is the simple fact that our college-going students today are nothing like those that the system was built to serve.

¹ NCES, IPEDS 2006-07; this data measures students who earn a degree within 150% of the standard time: within three years for 2-year degree students and within six years for 4-year degree students.

² NCES, IPEDS 2006-07

³ NCES, IPEDS 1980-81 Institutional Characteristics File; ic1980 Final Release Data File.

⁴ NCES, IPEDS 2006-07 12-Month Unduplicated Headcount Enrollment File; efy2007 Final Release Data File.

Most postsecondary institutions have designed their policies for the “traditional” student, a young person who is enrolled full-time in a residential four-year college and who is financially dependent on their parents. Not surprisingly, these types of students are most likely to graduate. But in reality, these young adults make up only about 25 percent of all college students.⁵

Who are the other 75 percent? They are millions of men and women who recognize the value of a college credential but lack a clear path to get there. While often under-prepared academically, their defining common characteristic is that they have to work their way through school. One-third of students enrolled in postsecondary education work full time, and another 44 percent work part-time⁶. Very few of them (only 14 percent) live on campus⁷. Many have additional responsibilities, like children or caring for other family members. On campus, the deck is also stacked against them: classes are offered primarily during working hours; financial aid packages subsidize room and board, but only if you live on campus; it takes years to earn a degree; and credits earned at one school don’t easily transfer to another.

As a result, many students cycle in and out of college, often stopping for a semester or two because they need to work so that they can pay for rent and the next semester’s tuition. Many never go back.

The fact that colleges, largely, have not responded to the kinds of pressures the majority of their students face has added years to a student’s undergraduate “career.” And, given that schools’ revenues are tied to how many students they enroll, they have little incentive to do anything about it.

The need to drop in and out of school has also changed the structure of undergraduate careers: 60 percent of students who earn degrees earn them from different institutions than the ones in which they started.⁸

The cost of the low rates of college completion to students and taxpayers is jaw-dropping. For every \$1 spent on community colleges, more than 50 cents go to classes and activities that never produce a degree⁹. Meanwhile, the institutions most effective in enrolling and graduating large numbers of low-income students are not recognized for their successes, and we do little to study and share their practices, so others don’t get the benefit of their knowledge. As a result, those colleges that are working to solve these problems are doing so in relative isolation.

Due to the current roadblocks in postsecondary institutions, we have made only modest gains in postsecondary attainment as a country over the last two decades, despite enrolling a far larger share of students than ever. That’s why we believe that access, while important, should no longer be the country’s sole focus. We also must dramatically improve completion, and we must do so by exposing colleges to the reforms, policies, and structures that evidence suggests will boost graduation rates among our most challenged populations.

Research and a growing body of evidence suggest there are concrete steps states, policymakers and college administrators can take to put into place a new framework to boost completion rates among our target population, especially at community colleges.

⁵ Attewell, Paul and Lavin, David, “*The Other 75%: College Education Beyond the Elite.*”, 2008

⁶ Ibid, page 2.

⁷ Ibid, page 2.

⁸ Ibid page 3.

⁹ Source: Team analysis; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2006

Foundation Objectives and Strategy

The primary objective of our Postsecondary Success initiative is to demonstrate that evidence-based practices and policies that are focused on completion will improve the postsecondary attainment of low-income and minority students. Our strategic priorities over the next three years are to:

- Convince the country that completion matters.
- Accelerate large-scale, multiple campus innovation and rigorous research about how to improve completion so we better understand what works and what can be adopted at scale.
- Promote break-through institutional innovation, focused in particular on three key barriers: 1) fixing academic catch-up for underprepared students; 2) making it possible for students who work to accelerate their progress toward a degree; and 3) building data systems needed to help us measure progress toward our goals.
- Support state actions to set goals and measure progress, and to change policies to support more needs-based financial aid for students and more completion-oriented funding for postsecondary institutions.

To achieve these goals, our work includes the following activities:

- Create public and political will around a completion agenda by partnering with policy, advocacy, and civil rights organizations to develop policy proposals and remove existing barriers to improve postsecondary practices and policies.
- Support networks of colleges serving the largest number of our target population in adopting completion-focused practices, student supports, and program delivery models.
- Target institutional innovation at the most effective momentum points: reducing attrition by revamping “gatekeeper” courses such as remedial math and reading and supporting credit accumulation and accelerated progress toward degrees.
- Support states and postsecondary institutions in building data systems capable of yielding completion metrics.

Partnerships with states

Supporting states to focus on completion will be a significant priority for the foundation. Our investments fall into three categories:

- **Deep investments in four core states:** Based on a series of criteria (percent of low-income young adults; percent of community colleges; positive state policy environment), we have selected Ohio, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington for priority focus over the next three years. We will concentrate up to half of our programmatic investments in these states, and will invest directly in the development and implementation of state policies focused on completion.
- **Targeted investment in an additional five states:** Based on the same criteria, we selected five additional target states—Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, and New York—where we will invest in planning and early-stage policy development.
- **Support networks of states working together toward common goals:** Together with a group of other foundations, we are creating a new intermediary organization, The National Consortium for College Completion, to work with up to 20 states to build robust

data systems, revamp developmental education and use new technologies to boost access, lower costs and drive up completion rates.

The evidence base suggests that strategic priorities for any comprehensive state plan to achieve dramatic gains in student outcomes should include:

- The implementation of common data definitions and measures, to include cohort graduation rates (2-3 year rates in community colleges; 4-6 year rates in four-year institutions); completion rates for part-time and full-time students; early warning systems that identify students for interventions or remediation; and labor market connections and educational pathways to higher-paying jobs. Collection and reporting of key progression and completion data at both the state and institutional levels will also fold into this work.
- Incentive funding to institutions based on increases in achievement of low-income students at key points, including the completion of developmental education, completion of first year math and English, completion of 15 credits, etc.
- Simplified and transparent transfer and articulation agreements between secondary and postsecondary schools, and among postsecondary institutions.
- Accelerated, condensed course delivery that allows for more rapid progression toward a degree.
- Adoption of flexible funding formulas that recognize differentiated program costs that produce significant improvements in student retention and success.
- A postsecondary marketplace that promotes greater options (and where appropriate, competition) for earning credit and pathways for earning credentials.

Partnerships with networks of colleges

As part of this effort, the foundation is also developing significant partnerships with a number of community colleges who share the goal of transforming outcomes for students by fundamentally altering their current approaches to enrolling, supporting, and educating low-income and minority students. The foundation will work with these partners to measure student progress so we can identify which methods are effective, learn how to help more educators adopt these practices, and provide targeted incentives to expand their reach.

The foundation supports several reform networks focused on creating step-change improvements in developmental education that will boost completion by 10 percent or more among our target population. In addition, the foundation is designing an initiative to enlist a cohort of between four and eight community colleges in each of three states (Texas, Ohio and North Carolina) to design and implement integrated, comprehensive models of reform that reach at least 25 percent of our target student population.

Regardless of their focus, partner sites will need to innovate and tailor their strategies to fit their local conditions. But the foundation believes a set of strategic priorities needs to be part of any comprehensive plan to achieve dramatic gains in student outcomes. These include:

- **Accelerating progress through or around developmental education** (e.g. contextualized developmental education within content courses; intensive, compressed delivery; summer bridge/test prep programs before students matriculate; more consistent and accurate assessment tests)

- **Designing intentional pathways for at risk students** (e.g. accelerated occupational programs that work for working students, mandatory student success courses, intensive first semester for students most at risk, learning communities, supplemental instruction)
- **Changing curriculum and instruction to be more effective and engaging** (integrating technology into instruction, whole course redesign, contextualization of courses to match students' field of interest)

Advocacy

The national work, the partnerships with reform-oriented states, and the networks of community colleges necessitate deeper and more sustained forms of national and state advocacy and communications. There is also a role for existing and new organizations, such as The National Consortium for College Completion. The PS advocacy objective is to further policies that will:

- Dramatically increase completion of low-income young adults by removing obstacles to enrollment and retention, and by increasing alternative routes to credentials.
- Use data and research to identify postsecondary practices that improve student outcomes.
- Build awareness/lay groundwork for evidence-based policies that promote and reward completion-oriented policies and practices with the highest impact on student outcomes.
- Advocate shifting funding toward effective practices and away from less effective and more expensive interventions.

Illustrative Grants

The City University of New York is developing a new community college that takes nontraditional approaches to boost graduation rates. These include intensive pre-college support to prepare students for the college experience; a merging of remedial and credit coursework to help students maintain momentum through their course of study; focused course options that carefully guide students toward graduation and employment; and an Office of Partnerships to develop and manage college connections that will support required student internships and employment opportunities. CUNY officials will finalize planning for the new college this year with the school slated to open its doors to an initial class of 500 students in 2011. Officials hope to enroll 3,000 students by 2014. The college aims to significantly increase the 2-year and double the existing 3-year rate for students earning an associate degree.

The King County (Washington) Workforce Education Collaborative, a partnership of government, industry and philanthropy, is developing six new completion programs designed to dramatically increase graduation rates for low-income working adults. These programs bring together 11 community and technical colleges with employers and community-based organizations to create a coordinated, sustainable and county-wide system of postsecondary education tailored for working adults. Each new program includes: compressed classroom time; reduced complexity of registration, course selection and class scheduling; support services integrated with program structure; and "soft skills" development, labor market knowledge and job placement assistance. The initial investment this year will reach approximately 250 working adults.

MDC will identify the most promising work in remedial education being done by 15 community colleges and five states participating in the Achieving the Dream initiative. A team of seven partner organizations will support the colleges and states as they help more students move on to college-level work by collecting and analyzing student data, developing innovative programs, and creating a network to share what they've learned. The expertise and capacity of the national

Achieving the Dream partnership will provide leadership, infrastructure and support for the work. Selected states are: Connecticut, Texas, Ohio, Virginia, and Florida. Selected community colleges are: Housatonic Community College (CT), Norwalk Community College (CT), Valencia Community College (FL), Guilford Tech Community College (NC), Cuyahoga Community College (OH), Jefferson Community College (OH), North Central State College (OH), Sinclair Community College (OH), Zane State College (OH), Coastal Bend College (TX), El Paso Community College (TX), Houston Community College (TX), South Texas College (TX), Danville Community College (VA) and Patrick Henry Community College (VA).