

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

FACT SHEET

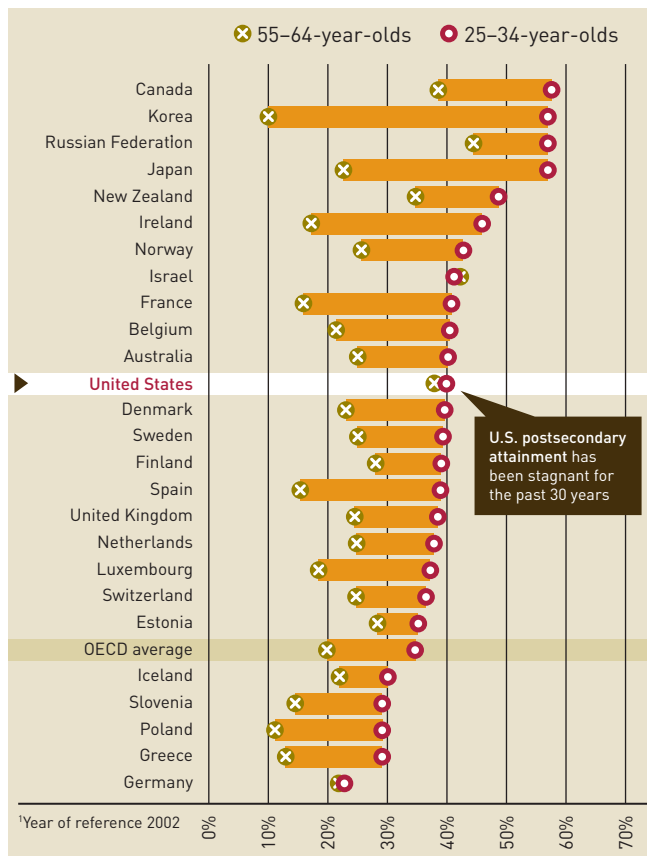
FOCUSING ON COMPLETION

In the United States, the key to opportunity is education—it enriches our lives, informs our choices, and prepares us for meaningful employment.

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

U.S. POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT REMAINS FLAT

Percentage by age group, ranked in descending order of 25–34 year-olds who have attained at least a postsecondary education.



Over the last 30 years, the average industrialized country has increased postsecondary attainment by about 75 percent; more than double that of the U.S.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Education at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators, September 2009

OUR CHALLENGE

For generations of Americans, a high school diploma delivered on the value of an education. It meant a steady job to support your family and a chance to launch a career. But high school is no longer enough. The median wage for a worker with no college is now close to the poverty line for a family of four.

That leaves only one path out of poverty: college education. Whether it comes as a certificate, associate degree, or 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. 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 enrollment; it comes when students get postsecondary degrees that help them get jobs with a family wage—and that's not happening nearly enough. The college completion rate in America has been flat since the 1970s. Where once we were first in the world in postsecondary completion rates, we now rank 10th.

In the United States today, there are millions of young adults—especially those who are low-income—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 on their time and energy.

Having the will but not the way impedes economic and personal progress, affecting not only the prospects of young adults 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 succeeding in a 21st century workplace and democracy.

It's no longer enough to ensure that young people are *accessing* college; we must ensure that they go on to *complete* college.

What We Do

Improve the performance of the postsecondary education system

From the moment students enroll in college, they should see a clear path to graduation and a career. Despite a growing number of public and private providers in the postsecondary education system, little has changed in terms of how institutions design programs to meet the needs of their students, many of whom lack the skills needed to perform college-level work. Our strategy addresses these issues by scaling evidence-based programs focused on completion while reducing the time and cost required to complete a credential. Our investments support:

- promising programs and initiatives under way in community colleges that address key barriers to completion; our priorities are to build an evidence base of what works and bring the most effective programs to scale
- innovations in performance management and institutional practices that make it possible to get more students through degree- and credential-granting programs; we support efforts to accelerate academic catch-up for poorly prepared students, encourage working students to graduate more quickly, and develop data systems to track progress toward those goals

- new technology products and platforms promising dramatic improvement in learning for low-income and young-adult students that can be implemented at scale

Support young adult success

While most young adults understand the value of education in the abstract, real-life pressures often prevent them from completing a degree. This is especially true for low-income youth with financial constraints, jobs, and family obligations that compete for their time and attention. By closing critical information gaps, reducing the barriers that prevent them from learning, and reinforcing their motivation to learn, we anticipate more young people will complete their degrees. Our investments include:

- efforts to influence student behavior toward activities that promote higher completion rates, such as full-time enrollment, mentoring, and limiting job-related work to less than 20 hours per week
- redesigning financial aid programs to include incentives that better serve low-income young adults, expanding the available aid with an emphasis on grants, and helping students cope with work, emergencies, and living expenses

- organizations and partnerships providing more efficient paths into postsecondary education that will promote academic catch-up and degree attainment

Encourage U.S. leaders to commit to helping students complete their degrees

The foundation is in a unique position to make the case for the importance of getting students not only to, but *through* college. Our investments will focus on inspiring leaders, employers, and communities across the country to embrace the goal and make the commitments necessary to achieve it. To this end, we are supporting research, communications, and policy analysis that:

- increases awareness among opinion leaders, policymakers, and business leaders of low completion rates and instill a sense of urgency to adopt solutions to increase completion, especially among low-income students
- sheds light on promising policy ideas around funding, accountability, financial aid, and successful colleges that shift the system's focus from access to completion for all students
- encourages the implementation of state and federal data systems that link K-12, higher education, and labor market data

OUR APPROACH

We have set an ambitious goal for ourselves and the nation: double the number of low-income youth who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with value in the workplace by the time they reach age 26.

To accomplish this goal, we must connect the millions of young Americans who want a postsecondary education with a way to get there: helping them get further, faster, and for far less money.

Doubling the number of low-income young adults who earn a postsecondary degree will require us to transform not only

students' perspectives but also our postsecondary system, so that all students can overcome obstacles to the education they deserve. We are committed to working with a range of partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to accomplish this goal.

TO LEARN MORE

About the United States Program:

www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states

About Postsecondary Education:

www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

For additional information on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, please visit our web site: www.gatesfoundation.org.

© 2009 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. All Rights Reserved. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a registered trademark in the United States and other countries.