

# Essential Steps *for* States

## OVERVIEW

**COMPLETE  
COLLEGE  
AMERICA'S GOAL:**

**By 2020, six out of  
10 young adults  
in our country  
will have a  
college degree or  
credential of value.**

Complete College America is a national nonprofit organization working with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with a college degree or credential of value and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

Five national foundations are providing multiyear support to Complete College America: the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Lumina Foundation for Education.

***Lead, Measure, Act, Innovate:** Complete College America's Essential Steps explain how states can implement systemic reforms and innovative policies to significantly increase college completion.*

U.S. students don't just need to go to college; they need to complete college. Access has improved — we are sending more students to higher education — but success rates have declined, especially at public institutions. Fewer than half of students who enter college today finish with a degree or credential. Those who do complete college are taking longer, paying more, and graduating with more debt. The current system wastes time, money, and potential for students, institutions, and states.

In just 10 years, six of 10 new jobs will require a college education, but currently, only half of all students who enter college graduate.

Complete College America has set a goal that by 2020, six out of 10 young adults in our country will have a college degree or credential of value.

Forty percent now. Sixty percent by 2020. We will not close this gap by standing still or tinkering around the edges. The following are essential steps every state should take to meaningfully improve college completion — and secure our states' and our nation's economic futures.

- **Set a state completion goal.** Establish a state commitment to a specific number of graduates by a certain date.
- **Set campus-level completion goals.** The state completion goal should be the reference point for campus-level and system-level goal setting — which is essential to ensuring everyone has a

clear understanding of their respective responsibilities for achieving their share of the states' completion goal.

- **Uniformly measure progress and success.** Collect and publicly report key data — both statewide and by campus — using common metrics that inform and drive improvement in college completion.
- **Shift to performance funding.** Create new funding models that tie funding to outcomes, thereby providing incentives for student success, not just for enrollment.
- **Reduce time-to-degree and accelerate success.** Significantly increasing college completions is possible only when states and institutions get serious about the problem of time. Simply put, the longer it takes students to graduate, the less likely they are to do so. Smarter scheduling, easier transfers, and new delivery models are just some of the ways to help.
- **Transform remediation.** In spite of best intentions, remediation most often becomes the place where students fall down and drop out, instead of catch up. New, targeted methods have proven that students can quickly address academic needs and move swiftly to more first-year success. It's time to change remediation from just another chance to a sure bet for success.

- **Count certificates.** One-year career and technical certificates can provide significant economic rewards. States should embed industry credentials, seek third-party validation, verify economic value — and count one-year certificates.
- **Restructure delivery for today's students.** Today's college students must balance school, work, and often families. To boost completions, colleges must restructure to offer courses and programs that better fit busy, complicated lives. Continuing to expect today's students to succeed at institutions designed for college students 50 years ago will only result in more of the same: nearly half of students with little to show for their efforts but debt.

These essential steps are the starting point of change. States that take these steps demonstrate that they are willing to do what it takes — shifting funding, raising expectations, restructuring programs, and rewarding innovation — to clearly signal that graduation matters most.

For details about these Essential Steps, key data related to college completion, and other information, visit [www.completecollege.org](http://www.completecollege.org).

## SET A STATE COMPLETION GOAL

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Set a state completion goal: *Establish a state commitment to a specific number of graduates by a certain date.*

**WHY ESTABLISH A STATEWIDE COMPLETION GOAL?**

Setting a goal defines success and challenges key players to attain it.

States should set a goal that focuses on significantly increasing the number of students successfully completing college or attaining credentials of value in the workplace. Many states understand that accomplishing a goal high enough to adequately address future workforce needs will not be possible without focused efforts to graduate more students from groups that traditionally have low college completion rates. Leading states will meet this challenge head on, formulating strategies to inspire more success from *all* student populations.

A statewide goal enables stakeholders to focus time and resources on a common effort, encouraging all to use the same yardstick to evaluate progress and celebrate success. A goal should be ingrained in a state's completion plan, communicated clearly and publicly, and pursued by all institutions and key partners with a deep sense of shared responsibility.

**SETTING A GOAL: CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENCE**

A strong college completion goal:

- **Requires stretching.** A state's goal should be a *stretch goal* — one that cannot be accomplished simply by relying on population increases.
- **Drives increases in the number of degrees and certificates awarded each year.** While many states establish goals to increase the percentage of their populations who have attained college degrees and certificates, the best

approach to translate percentages into meaningful change is to set specific targets for increases in the number of degrees and certificates awarded annually. For example, one state's goal of having six of 10 young adults with college degrees and certificates by 2020 translates into annually awarding 6,000 more degrees and certificates than the previous year, or an increase of 4 percent each year.

- **Is easily explained, with a clear rationale.** A state should set a straightforward, relevant goal. As an example: Six in 10 young adults must have a college degree or credential of workplace value because six in 10 jobs require education after high school — and almost all of the fastest-growing jobs require a college degree. A clear goal that is relevant in the lives of most people is likely to be widely understood, inspiring many to the cause.
- **Consists of a single, easy-to-understand number.** A strong statewide completion goal is a single figure: the total number of additional college graduates a state commits to produce. It should be clear, concise, and easy for any state resident to articulate and understand.
- **Can be measured annually and has a firm deadline.** Each state should tie its goal to a date. The goal is a firm commitment to increase the state's college completions in a finite period of time.
- **Anticipates the state's economic and demographic future.** Each state should

consider its future job base: the number of fast-growing, well-paying jobs that will require a postsecondary credential. States should consider economic development projections and know whether their degree and certificate production goals match projected job needs.

- **Counts certificates of one year or more.** There is evidence that one-year career and technical certificates can provide economic rewards greater than some associate and even some bachelor's degrees. This information also is commonly reported by the institutions to IPEDS. While there are certificates requiring less than one year of study that are of economic or academic value, many are not, and sorting that out is a significant task. States should embed industry credentials, seek third-party validation, and verify the economic value of their one-year certificates.
- **Preserves access.** Stakeholders should focus on access *and* success — both bringing more students into the higher education system and ensuring that those who start finish.
- **Aspires to close educational attainment gaps.** States should know whether students from their ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups are enrolling and succeeding in higher education. Attention should also be given to students from the fastest-growing and largest population segments. Most importantly, states must answer this question: If student groups posting the lowest college completions performed better, would prospects for meeting the state's workforce demands significantly improve?

- **Serves as a reference point for campus-level goal setting.** The state completion goal should be the reference point for campus- and system-level goal setting — which is essential to ensuring everyone has a clear understanding of their respective responsibilities for achieving their share of the state's completion goal.
- **Has the support of influential people and stakeholders.** It's no secret: People are most likely to support what they helped to create. States should involve policymakers and campus leaders — elected officials, employers, civil rights groups, college and university leaders and faculty, and others — in the effort to establish a goal, being certain to honor the input of all and widely communicating the collective commitment.
- **Inspires action by many.** The goal should be embedded in the statewide strategic plan, the state budget for higher education, and the plans of key advocates and partners, including business, labor, civil rights, student, and faculty groups, among others. Accomplishing a meaningful and significant college completion goal requires the deep commitment and sustained focus of many.

**STATES IN ACTION**

Some states already have set statewide goals.

- **Ohio** set a goal to enroll 230,000 more students by 2017 and to boost graduates by 20 percent. Ohio's enrollment goal drives investments and policies in the state's master plan for higher education. Further articulating the state's completion goal in terms of the number of additional graduates needed is an essential next step.

- **Hawai'i** has established a statewide attainment target: 55 percent of its working-age population will hold a college degree by 2025. Hawai'i adopted this goal in 2008 and plans to reach it by increasing the number of degrees 3 to 6 percentage points each year. Hawai'i recognizes it can only meet this stretch goal by boosting attainment among native Hawai'ians, low-income students, and persons from underserved regions. Expressing the target and annual growth rates as simple numbers would help engage the public and assist in tracking and rewarding progress.
- **Vermont** plans to increase the degree completion rate of students at public colleges and universities. Its ultimate goal: boost the percentage of residents who have completed two- and four-year college degrees from 42 percent

to 60 percent by 2019. This goal reflects the state's changing job market and is similar to stretch goals advocated by Complete College America and Lumina Foundation for Education. Like Hawai'i, Vermont can improve on this stretch goal by explaining how many more degrees the state will need by 2019 to reach 60 percent.

- **Indiana** aspires to have one of the top 10 completion rates in the country, a goal that translates to 10,000 more postsecondary credentials produced each year through 2025. In 2008, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education recommended that colleges and universities set goals for improving graduation rates over a five- and 10-year period. Ensuring that campus-level goals aggregate to accomplish the state goal is a necessary next step.

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UNIFORMLY MEASURE  
PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

*Measure progress and success: Collect and publicly report data on students, colleges, and the state using key metrics that can help drive improvement in college completion.*

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WHY MEASURE PROGRESS  
AND SUCCESS?

What we measure signals what we value. When it comes to college completion, common metrics empower leaders to use data to diagnose the obstacles students face and identify opportunities for improvement. And they reveal progress as soon as it's made, encouraging students and schools to stay on track or make adjustments quickly. Most important, good metrics help hold everyone involved — students, institutions, systems, and the state — accountable for success.

Effective information on college completion must be publicly reported, comparable across campuses and states, and consistently measured and collected from year to year. *Common metrics* — uniformly designed and applied — help us frame our data collection to be most useful for driving change. Moreover, adopting and reporting these common metrics unifies us in a shared goal and communicates our commitment to doing the hard work necessary to bring about improvement. Now more than ever, the collective success of our country depends on the mutual pledge to help more students make it to graduation day.

- Policymakers need information about how well the state is educating its future workforce and how the state's investment in higher education is paying off.
- Campus leaders need the tools to analyze patterns in the success of their students, diagnose problems, and develop appropriate interventions.

- The public — including students and their families — needs consistent, straightforward information about how well colleges are serving students like them so they can make informed decisions about where to invest their valuable time and tuition dollars.
- States and colleges need data that enable them to establish a fair baseline, show progress over time, make meaningful comparisons, and provide accountability that helps push all stakeholders to share in the responsibility of wisely spending the tax dollars invested in education.

College graduation and retention information currently collected and reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) falls short of what policymakers need to have a comprehensive picture of college completion in their state and on their campuses. While all institutions report data to IPEDS, critical data are missing, and this inhibits meaningful understanding, diagnosis, and improvement.

IPEDS does not collect and report the following data for all states and campuses:

- **Graduation rates for part-time students.** Even though they make up more than a third of all college students and more than 60 percent of those at public two-year schools, the federal government doesn't count them.
- **Graduation rates for transfer students.** It is impossible to recognize the valuable role of community colleges and branch campuses as effective

and affordable entry points to higher education if we fail to track the success of those who transfer.

- **Graduation rates for low-income students.** Billions are invested each year to improve access to college for low-income students without ever knowing if these students are ultimately successful.
- **Graduation rates for remedial students.** With about 40 percent of all students requiring some type of special assistance to address academic shortcomings — and billions spent each year to deliver it — it is vital that we know if the extra help is producing graduates. If it isn't, we must fix it.

As important, IPEDS does not capture data on critical milestones of students' progress through college: entry and success in remedial education, success in first-year courses, credit accumulation, and the amount of time and credits it takes to earn a degree or certificate.

**WAYS TO MEASURE PROGRESS AND SUCCESS**

States should measure and report outcomes as well as progress toward those outcomes. States and colleges should disaggregate these data — by gender, race/ethnicity, Pell Grant recipients, age group, and full- or part-time enrollment status — to learn how critical subgroups of students are performing.

States and institutions should focus on measuring improvement over time as well as transparently and publicly reporting progress and success. And they should use the data to identify both barriers to student achievement and actions that can lead to improved student success.

Critical metrics that drive improvement in college completion fall into two categories: progress metrics and outcome metrics.

**Progress metrics.** To complete college, students must successfully pass through a series of key milestones. Research has identified a number of interim achievements that are strongly linked to student success, and progress metrics measure these indicators. Measuring and understanding these factors is an essential part of designing interventions that will improve college completion.

Key progress metrics are:

- **Remediation entry and success:** 41 percent of all students enter college needing remedial education, at an annual national cost of \$2.5 to \$3 billion. Yet evidence is mixed on the effectiveness of remedial education, and most states don't have the data they need to diagnose and monitor the tremendous investment states, colleges, and students are making in remediation. States should collect data on the number and percentage of entering students who place into remedial education, as well as their success in completing first-year classes.
- **Success in first-year college courses:** Whether students begin in remediation or in regular credit-bearing courses, first-year gateway courses in math and English are often barriers to success. Research shows that the sooner students get through first-year courses in core subjects, the more likely they are to complete college.
- **Credit accumulation:** The number of credits students accumulate each year strongly predicts their ultimate success in completing a degree or certificate. It's common sense, and it's been substantiated by research showing that the intensity with which students enroll in college courses and accumulate credits correlates with success. States

and colleges should know how many students are moving through courses and programs at a rate that ensures they will be able to complete — and to complete on time without wasted courses and years.

- **Retention rates:** If colleges can identify the students who are least likely to return for a second year, they can actively work to better engage those students during their first year. Retention rates disaggregated by key demographics can be a powerful diagnostic tool for colleges and systems and can give states an annual look at how successful colleges are at keeping the students they enroll.
- **Time and credits to degree:** Excess courses — and often, the unnecessary extra years of college that result from them — waste resources for students, institutions, and the state. For students, the delays mean forgone income and wasted tuition dollars. For campuses, students' taking courses in excess of what students need to graduate results in lost resources, cramped classrooms, and limited capacity for incoming students. For states, credit hours taken in excess of graduation requirements cost taxpayers millions of dollars each year. To help advance policies and practices that accelerate student success, colleges and states need data that show how many credits students are accumulating along the way to earning a degree, which of those credits are necessary, and which are superfluous.

**Outcome metrics.** Ultimately, states and colleges are accountable for the successful outcomes of students enrolled on their campuses. To make meaningful annual progress toward statewide and campus

completion goals, state and campus leaders need to know their success rates, whether outcomes are improving over time, and if so, whether they are improving quickly enough.

Key outcome metrics are:

- **Degrees awarded annually:** Is the state making adequate progress toward its goal of producing more college graduates each year? States need to look at the number of degrees and certificates every campus is awarding each year, by sector and among critical student groups, so that all levels of the higher education system move in the right direction. The focus should be on improvement from year to year.
- **Graduation rates:** The graduation rate is the percentage of students who entered a college or university seeking a certificate or degree and attained that goal. Both states and campuses need graduation rate data that reflect all students — including full-time and part-time and those who transfer — and the data must be disaggregated to show which populations within the state are underrepresented on graduation day. Policymakers should focus on whether their state's graduation rate is high enough for the state to meet its overall education attainment goals.
- **Transfer rates:** A state's economic future depends on having more students complete college and earn credentials of value in the workforce. To make sure state policy is supporting this goal, states and systems must know how many students successfully transfer each year from two-year to four-year campuses — and if some student groups have less success transferring than others.

**Disaggregation.** Most states are facing a simple economic and demographic reality: They cannot meet future workforce needs without graduating more students from communities and populations who have been historically underrepresented among college graduates. States and campuses must have the ability to analyze all of these metrics for specific targeted populations to effectively close achievement gaps and ensure the economic growth that will benefit *everyone* in the state. Data should be disaggregated by:

- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Income (using Pell Grant eligibility as a proxy for income)
- Age groups
- Full-time, part-time, and transfer students

Meeting targeted goals for producing additional graduates with degrees or certificates in specific fields, such as more STEM graduates or graduates with certificates in high-demand health fields, requires that states also can disaggregate annual degree production and graduation rate data by discipline and degree type.

**Available data.** Don't make perfect the enemy of the good: Most of the measures outlined above can be collected from available data. While many states have extensive data systems already in place and can collect these data immediately, others will need to piece together the data from their institutions and use the National Student Clearinghouse to supplement data collection where necessary. Complete College America can provide technical assistance to help states find and collect data to report on these critical metrics.

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SHIFT TO  
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*Shift to performance funding: Implement new funding models that tie funding to outcomes, thereby providing incentives for graduating students, not just enrolling them.*

## WHY SHIFT TO PERFORMANCE FUNDING?

One of every two students who enters a four-year university does not finish and even fewer make it to graduation day at two-year colleges. With most states cutting checks to colleges and universities based on head count alone, there is little incentive to focus on who doesn't show up next semester, next year, or ever again.

State appropriations typically are driven by enrollment: Funding is based on the number of students enrolled at a college or university near the beginning of the semester. As a result, colleges have a financial incentive to boost enrollment at the start of the term, rather than make sure students successfully complete classes and earn degrees.

Performance funding describes a funding approach that values outcomes (e.g., classes successfully completed, credentials awarded). Shifting from a funding system based solely on enrollment to one that includes performance matters because:

- Funding is a powerful incentive. With today's funding priorities, colleges are motivated by head count rather than student success. The result? Decades of increasing enrollments with virtually no increases in completion rates.
- Performance funding allows states to align their fiscal policies with their statewide goals for workforce development and economic prosperity. For example, states can provide funding based on the number of courses completed or the number of degrees and credentials earned. States also

can emphasize more specific goals by providing funding incentives in areas such as the success of low-income students or degrees produced in key industry sectors such as health care, engineering, and technology.

- Performance funding sends a strong market signal, alerting higher education leaders and faculty that state taxpayers expect a greater return on their investment: higher student success and more graduates. Without it, institutions will continue to perceive enrollment as their highest priority.

## WAYS TO SHIFT TO PERFORMANCE FUNDING

States that want to leverage the power of performance funding can learn from both emerging success stories and past missteps. Lessons learned include:

- **Keep it simple.** Having too many priorities is the same as having no priorities. One state experimenting with performance funding included 37 measures as part of its approach. States should start with a small number of explicit, easy-to-understand measures that are laser-focused on completion. These measures should represent the most critical data points, such as courses completed, degrees produced, credentials with labor market value earned, and on-time completions.
- **Involve legislators and higher education officials early and often.** While performance funding systems should be simple to be effective, the process of constructing them is not.

Helping policymakers and higher education leaders fully understand the rationale and mechanics of performance funding, as well as giving them the opportunity to help shape it to meet the state's needs, will be important to sustain it.

- **Count enrollment on the last day of class instead of during the first two weeks of the semester.** This simple change reflects the true goals of higher education — access and success — and ceases to reward schools that don't retain their students. Alternatively, states can base funding on completed courses rather than courses attempted. Either method makes the necessary shift from paying for showing up for class to paying for success.
- **Find the sustainable tipping point.** Modest changes in funding won't lead to a serious shift in focus from enrollment to completion. For example, if 2 percent of funding is based on performance, the 98 percent of dollars that reward enrollment will win every time. However, a modest percentage of performance funding (5 percent or more) that starts now and compounds annually will get institutions' attention. Success comes from finding the right balance. If the percentage of performance funding is too high, policymakers inevitably face political pressure because the institution's budget appears to be at risk. The key to success is sustaining performance funding over time. Designating new money for performance funding — and identifying budget cuts using the same measures — will have a cumulative effect that can be a game changer.
- **Stand strong against “hold-harmless.”** Various states' experiences show that guaranteeing a floor of funding guts a performance funding approach. Failure without consequences is not performance funding.
- **Institute statewide data systems.** States must have robust, student-level data systems that allow for significant data analysis and transparency at the state and campus levels. To be fair to institutions and promote the success of traditionally underprepared students, states should be able to follow students across campuses, disaggregate data, and have access to credit and course completion metrics.
- **Recognize the importance of progress indicators.** Performance funding systems must be anchored by degree completion. At the same time, these systems also can reward progress made in areas that influence completion, often called momentum points or leading indicators. For example, research suggests that completing credit-bearing math and English courses within the first year, returning each semester, and transferring from a two-year institution to a four-year institution positively influence completion. Thus, community colleges shouldn't be penalized when a student transfers to a university before completing a degree or credential. In fact, when their students transfer with significant credits, those colleges should be rewarded.
- **Align funding systems with state economic goals.** Every state has industry clusters and sectors that demand skilled workers. Performance funding that emphasizes degrees and credentials in these areas will further the state's economic development goals, provide trained workers to the industries that most need them, and attract new employers to the state.
- **Explore options to reward closing completion gaps.** Performance funding can include incentives for completion gains among certain groups, such as Pell Grant recipients. Depending on its

demographics, a state may add extra incentives for closing achievement gaps for low-income, African-American, and Latino students. As states' demographics change, this approach is not just an equity issue but an economic imperative.

- **Begin immediately and then build to implementation.** Experience dictates that states should begin performance funding immediately. If a state announces plans to implement performance funding in one year, political pressure can keep it from being implemented. Once performance funding is in place, states can step up the percentage of the budget tied to completion each year. This phased-in approach allows states and institutions to plan for both fiscal and programming changes. It also can mitigate the fiscal shock for poorly performing institutions and allow for policy adjustments in the future.
- **Use authority vested in your governing boards and don't make legislators walk the plank back home.** More than 20 state university governing boards currently have the authority and flexibility to distribute state higher education funding after their state legislatures appropriate it. Using these bodies to allocate funds based on performance can help insulate legislators from difficult local politics. Experience shows that the pressure on legislators to introduce "hold harmless" provisions for colleges and universities is immense. If possible, ask legislators to make the tough vote to enact the policy one time — not every budget session.

**STATES IN ACTION**

Since the 1990s, more than 20 states have implemented some form of performance

funding. Results have been mixed because of inconsistent state commitments and political pressure from higher education constituents. Still, we've learned from these examples about how best to structure funding plans.

Indiana, Ohio, and Washington are states with especially well-designed funding approaches that hold promise for yielding significant gains in completion.

- **Indiana** tied funding to its goals for course and degree completion, graduating more students on time, graduating low-income students, and successfully transferring students from two- to four-year institutions. Moreover, Indiana has used performance funding not just to allocate funds but also to cut them: This year, rather than doling out across-the-board cuts, the state's higher education commission determined institutional budget reductions by examining enrollment *and* cost-per-student and degree production data.
- **Ohio** ties state funding to course and degree completion as well as to achievement of institutional goals that are aligned with the state's 10-year strategic plan for higher education. Funding differs by type of institution and program, and there is extra support for STEM areas and at-risk students.
- In fall 2009, **Washington** introduced the Student Achievement Initiative, a performance funding approach for community colleges. The initiative uses measures related to building college skills, first-year success, math proficiency, and completion. The focus is on intermediate outcomes (momentum points) that signal meaningful progress toward degree and certificate completion.

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# REDUCE TIME AND ACCELERATE SUCCESS

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Reduce time-to-degree and increase the number of students completing on time: *Significantly increasing college completion is possible only when states and institutions get serious about the problem of time.*

### WHY ACCELERATE SUCCESS?

The shortest path to a degree or certificate is the best one. It's common sense: The more time it takes to graduate, the more life gets in the way — especially for students balancing school, work, and families. As months, semesters, and years go by, it becomes more likely that events and demands outside the classroom will complicate college success.

Faster progress matters because:

- When students have to extend their course-taking over too many semesters and too many years, their chances of ever completing college significantly diminish. Today's college students often are struggling with finances, juggling school with work, and caring for their families. The longer it takes to graduate, the more likely it is that they will tire of their rigorous schedules, run out of tuition money, get discouraged, or need to put other responsibilities before school.
- Most often, the longer it takes students to complete their degrees, the more those degrees cost, and the delays can add up to millions of wasted dollars for students, institutions, and the state. One study in Florida found that credit hours taken in excess of graduation requirements cost the state \$62 million a year. A study of Iowa community college students found that accelerated options saved families the equivalent of \$30.7 million in future college-related expenses.

By designing clear paths for students to complete degree programs more efficiently,

states can help more students earn degrees and control costs for both students and taxpayers.

### WAYS TO REDUCE TIME AND ACCELERATE SUCCESS

A variety of policies and practices can help accelerate students' progress in college, prevent unnecessary delays, and increase degree completions. States should use a combination of the strategies below to ensure that more students earn degrees and credentials on time or in less time.

- **Require all students to have graduation plans and declare majors early.** Establishing formal completion plans for every student upon enrollment, including those who attend part-time, makes it clear from day one: Graduation is the goal. Individual plans also ensure that students know from the beginning that to graduate on time usually requires taking 15 or more credits a semester. For greatest impact, student plans must be continually updated and tracked by their schools. Students also should be required to declare majors as early as possible to avoid aimless academic pursuits, wasting precious time.
- **Reduce unnecessary course-taking.** Campuses should scrutinize degree programs to make sure they do not require extraneous credits that can slow down students or force them to take courses that are not relevant to their degrees. States and institutions should enact caps of 120 credits for a bachelor's degree and 60 credits for an associate

degree so students do not earn excessive numbers of credits, except in rare cases in which program accreditation requires otherwise. An audit of credit requirements could help define such a cap. Once the cap is in place, colleges should be required to make a strong case for exceeding it.

- **Improve transfer policies.** Student success at any and all state institutions should be honored — and counted. Nearly a third of students at four-year colleges will change schools; 60 percent of those at community colleges will do the same. With so many students on the move, statewide legislation and policies must ensure they can carry their credits with them so valuable effort and time are not lost — and precious financial resources and need-based aid are not squandered. This is so fundamental to boosting completion that states must act to achieve the greatest benefit: Individual courses, full programs, and entire degrees should transfer easily and quickly across all public institutions.
- **Require colleges to find consensus on course content and develop a common course numbering system.** States should require institutions to define equivalent content for similar courses at all public higher education institutions and set up a uniform course numbering system. To make progress quickly, states should focus first on courses that make up the transfer core, followed by lower division courses in popular majors. For students who change colleges, this will make it easier to receive credit for classes they've taken — and to know what courses they still need to take for their degrees — while ensuring they are not missing or repeating content.
- **Take attendance.** This underrated strategy can reap big rewards in improving student success.
- **Provide incentives for full-time enrollment and other strategies that enable acceleration.** Full-time students are far more likely to complete degrees. While many part-time students believe they can't afford to attend full-time, comprehensive academic advising and financial aid and tuition policies can help encourage more full-time enrollment. One example is flat-rate tuition policies that provide an incentive for taking more than 12 credit hours a semester. Financial incentives also can be awarded to students who stay on track to graduate by not dropping courses and accumulating only the credits they need to graduate.
- **Use summer.** Students should be encouraged to make better use of summer semester to keep on track to graduate.
- **Use technology.** New delivery models show that online learning can be integrated into traditional course delivery to reduce seat-time. Online course offerings also can help on-campus students fit classes into tight schedules or access courses traditionally offered less frequently.
- **Expand alternative pathways for students to earn college credits early.** There are multiple ways for students to earn college credits while still in high school, shortening their path to college completion. These include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate programs, and early college dual-enrollment opportunities. While ensuring academic rigor, states should require colleges and universities to honor this early achievement by accepting all credits earned. For returning adult students, course credit should be given for prior work experience or competencies certified by the CLEP or other exams.

**STATES IN ACTION**

Some states already are taking action, at the state level and on campuses, to reduce time-to-degree and accelerate students' success.

- Full-time enrollment in **Connecticut** community colleges increased dramatically when colleges began using full-time enrollment status as the default when they processed students' financial aid applications. The strategy shows students that attending college full-time is often more affordable than they expect.
- **Texas** has a two-step approach to cracking down on credit creep (students' earning unnecessary and excessive credits): First, the college or university loses its state subsidy for students who exceed a certain credit-hour threshold. Second, students are charged out-of-state tuition if they exceed limits for repeating courses or if they take classes that are "substantively identical" to ones they have completed.
- **North Carolina** adds a surcharge to tuition for students who exceed a certain number of credit hours in a four-year degree program.
- **Florida** enshrined a number of acceleration mechanisms in state policy, including dual enrollment (allowing students to earn college credit while in high school), early admission, credit by examination, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate credit. All of these acceleration models are made possible through a common course-numbering system that also allows credit from two-year colleges to be easily transferred to four-year institutions.
- **Tennessee** is establishing a common core associate degree curriculum consisting of 41 hours of general education courses and 19 hours of pre-major courses. Completing an associate degree will ensure junior-level status at any public four-year institution in the state with all credits guaranteed to transfer.

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# TRANSFORM REMEDIATION

**COMPLETE  
COLLEGE  
AMERICA'S GOAL:**

**By 2020, six out of 10 young adults in our country will have a college degree or credential of value.**

U.S. students don't just need to go to college; they need to complete college. Access has improved — we are sending more students to higher education — but success has declined.

In just 10 years, six of 10 new jobs will require a college education, but fewer than half of students who enter college today finish with a degree or credential. Those who do complete college are taking longer, paying more, and graduating with more debt.

*Transform remediation: In spite of best intentions, remediation most often becomes the place where students fall down and drop out instead of catch up. It's time to make major changes in remediation so that students have a real chance for the ultimate success — college completion.*

**WHY TRANSFORM REMEDIATION?**

Students who show up for college often are not ready for college, especially at two-year campuses. Most end up being placed into an extended series of remedial courses that don't count toward their degrees. With each course typically lasting 16 weeks, it's not uncommon for students to spend three semesters or more over multiple years just treading academic water, getting no closer to graduation day. Rather than providing an on ramp to courses they need for diplomas, developmental education often is an exit.

Consider:

- 60 percent of students entering two-year colleges and 25 percent of those entering open-admissions universities are placed in remediation.
- Only 30 percent of community college students pass the developmental math sequences in which they enroll.
- Fewer than 25 percent of community college students who are placed in remedial education ever receive a degree or certificate. Moreover, the longer a student spends in remedial education, the less likely he or she is to ever complete a degree.
- 75 percent of the nation's colleges and universities offer some remedial education courses, at a national cost of \$2.5 billion or more annually.

Some argue the fault lies with a K–12 system that produces too few graduates who are college ready, while others argue remediation in its current state is a backwater on most college campuses.

Solutions must exist on both sides of the K–12/higher education continuum.

Efforts to eliminate the need for remediation in college for recent high school graduates should accelerate through strengthened high school preparation. At the same time, higher education must transform remediation strategies for those who continue to arrive on campus underprepared. This work should take place with a clear understanding that the goal is not better remediation. Rather, the goal is college completion.

Transforming remediation matters because:

- Developmental education as offered on most campuses often causes students to slow their progress toward a degree, accumulate more debt, jeopardize financial aid, lose momentum, and drop out. One recent study on developmental education in Virginia found that among students identified by college placement tests as needing remediation, those who did not take the recommended remedial courses generally fared no worse — and sometimes fared better — in earning a degree than those who enrolled.
- Traditional developmental education suffers from two fatal flaws. First, it is disconnected from the credits students need to obtain credentials and degrees — even though data indicate that underprepared students have the best shot at success when they can move into college-level courses as soon as possible. Second, it is rarely tailored to individual students' needs.

Successful efforts to transform remediation appear to focus on targeting, tailoring, and time.

1. **Targeting.** Using better diagnostic tools to pinpoint academic shortcomings, more precisely identifying areas of need;
2. **Tailoring.** Customizing assistance in modules, so students concentrate only on filling academic gaps instead of reviewing what they already know; and
3. **Time.** Completing necessary assistance in the shortest amount of time, including using time during 12th grade and the summer or embedding remediation into standard courses.

#### WAYS TO TRANSFORM REMEDIATION

- **Start by clarifying what constitutes readiness for success in the first year of college.** Most states can't answer basic questions about how placement policies relate to success rates — in part because states often allow dozens of different definitions of college readiness, all determined by different placement exams with varying cut scores. States should standardize placement policies and work to develop and implement better placement tools with greater diagnostic ability — all of which are essential for more targeted developmental education.
- **Divert students from traditional remedial programs into more customized tiered approaches.** A one-size-fits-all sequence of semester-long courses is a failed and obsolete model that needs to change. States, systems, and institutions need a more segmented approach to developmental education that meets the unique academic needs of students along the developmental education continuum.

Specifically:

1. **Place more students directly into courses that count toward degrees — and shift resources to support them there.** In the current system, many students score just below college-level on college placement tests and get placed in developmental education. The growing consensus is that these students can be successful in college-level work if they are provided some additional academic support (tutoring, computer labs, extended instructional time, etc.). Evidence suggests that their chances of success are greater going straight into college-level courses than being sent to remedial classes. Some four-year institutions are using this model today, although most are not describing it as developmental education.
2. **For students with greater academic needs, implement targeted programs that accelerate learning.** Many students who place one or two levels below college-level are not good candidates for the experience described above. The approach that makes the most sense for these students is a modular one in which students are assessed to identify their specific needs in a specific subject and then are given targeted instruction to address those needs. Students then can move quickly through computer-based instruction that allows them to proceed at their own pace and advance from one module to the next when they demonstrate competency.
3. **For students significantly behind, other pathways should be available.** For students who are two or three levels below college-level in multiple subjects, the odds of being successful in a traditional developmental education

sequence are slim. Many of these students are right on the border between being eligible for adult basic education and developmental education. Many require instruction in English as a second language (ESL). These students are likely to benefit from programs that deliver or embed basic skills and ESL instruction, with an ultimate goal of earning a career certificate or other career-related credential.

In addition, states should accelerate their efforts to ensure all high school students graduate college and career ready.

- **End the college admissions mystery by aligning requirements for entry-level college courses with requirements for high school diplomas.** Academic requirements for a high school diploma should be the floor for entry into postsecondary education. K–12 and higher education policies should be aligned to articulate the same course-taking requirements.
- **Administer college-ready anchor assessments in high school.** States should assess students in high school with college-ready anchor assessments that give students, teachers, and parents a clear understanding if a student is on track for college. Giving these assessments as early as grade 10 enables junior and senior year to be used to address academic deficiencies before college. Academic interventions should be developed in collaboration with local community colleges or universities to ensure that when students complete the intervention they will be deemed college ready and therefore will be exempt from developmental education.

The Common Core State Standards and Race to the Top Comprehensive Assessment System Grant provide significant opportunities for states to leverage federal investment in college-ready assessments that can and should open the door for cross-sector and cross-state work on:

- alignment of curriculum to first-year courses;
- development of bridge courses;
- student-readiness programs and supports for the transition from K–12 to postsecondary; and
- alignment of exit standards in high school and placement policies in postsecondary.

**STATES IN ACTION**

States should tap the growing research base about what works to bring students up to speed quickly and prepare them for success in first-year courses. Depending on their readiness, students should either go directly into a degree program that includes support or enroll in an accelerated program to get them on track quickly.

While no state has yet developed a system that addresses all the components noted above, consider these emerging models. All have track records of boosting success more effectively than the remedial courses they replaced:

- In **Maryland**, Community College of Baltimore County’s Accelerated Learning Project (ALP) enrolls remedial English students in the regular credit-bearing English 101 course as well as a companion course that meets immediately afterwards. The companion course provides targeted reinforcement of topics from the mainstream course in a

small cohort group that enables intensive faculty and peer support. Early results show that ALP students passed English 101 with a grade of C or better at more than twice the rate of the control group — and did so in just one semester, as opposed to the two semesters required to complete a remedial course before moving on to the credit-bearing course.

- **Austin Peay State University** in rural Tennessee eliminated developmental math courses and instead places students in redesigned credit-bearing courses that include extra workshops and specialized help.
- The **California State University** system added a series of college-readiness questions to the state's 11th grade exam. After students take the test, they are told whether they are on track for credit-bearing classes at colleges in the CSU system. Just as important, CSU has invested in professional development with high school teachers to help work with underprepared students and is developing 12th grade transitional classes to assist students.
- In **Indiana**, Core 40 graduation requirements were co-drafted by the State Board of Education and Indiana Commission for Higher Education in 1994 as a voluntary college and career ready pathway. Then, in 2005, on the recommendation of business as well as K–12 and higher education leaders,

Core 40 was enacted into law as the required high school curriculum and the minimum admissions requirement for the state's four-year public universities.

- **Texas, Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia** are currently creating 12th grade transitional courses in math, reading, and writing. Each state's courses are based on its college-readiness standards. These courses will be available statewide to students who are identified during their junior year as not college ready so they have the opportunity to prepare while still in high school. To smooth the path into college-level courses for these students, states also are developing end-of-course assessments that are tied to the college-readiness standards and first-year college courses. Students who score at a high enough level can bypass additional placement tests and move directly to college-credit coursework.
- The **Washington I-BEST** and the **Arkansas Career Pathways** programs deliver basic skills instruction with the goal of students' earning a career certificate or other career-oriented credential. In Washington, students receive basic skills and ESL instruction in a course that also delivers career-specific instruction. In Arkansas, students attain skills that are aligned with specific career opportunities.

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RESTRUCTURE DELIVERY  
FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

*Restructure delivery for today's students: Develop new, shorter, and faster pathways to degrees and credentials of value.*

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**WHY RESTRUCTURE DELIVERY?**

The public's longstanding image of the typical college student — living on campus, studying full-time, and completing a degree in four years — is no longer accurate. Today's students are more likely to work while they attend college, take classes part-time, and commute to campus.

College students have changed dramatically, but more often than not, degree and certificate programs are still delivered just as they have been for generations. And the results are not encouraging.

One of every two students who enters a four-year university does not finish. Graduation rates at community colleges across the country average only 25 percent to 30 percent for full-time students and are even lower for the growing numbers of student who attend part-time. It is evident that we need significantly different delivery structures that are designed for the students we have on our campuses today.

Restructuring degree programs matters because:

- If delivery models don't change and colleges and universities continue to simply offer more of the same, we can expect the same results: too many college dropouts.

**WAYS TO RESTRUCTURE DELIVERY**

- **Redesign course delivery.** There is evidence that block scheduling can significantly increase completion rates. Block scheduling is offering courses in regular back-to-back time sequences

(e.g., Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. or 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.). Block scheduling or stacked courses should be implemented for both full-time and part-time students. With this approach, students can take the courses they need for their degrees in an efficient, predictable time block — allowing them to better balance their education with work and family responsibilities.

- **Build and maximize the value of cohorts.** A structured course delivery model, like the one described above, creates cohorts within programs. Students who work in cohorts benefit by functioning as a unit, learning from and supporting one another and focusing on the same content.
- **Build support programs into structured course delivery models.** Structured models are more successful when students receive embedded remedial and counseling support. Rather than create separate remediation classes that don't count toward degrees, institutions should integrate remediation into the structured course delivery blocks.
- **Require low-performing campuses to restructure delivery.** Campuses that have consistently poor completion rates should be required to implement new models of delivery. Performance funding tied to campus-level completion can be a powerful incentive to focus attention on significantly restructuring delivery for today's students.

**STATES IN ACTION**

- **The City University of New York** offers an Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to help select community college students earn associate degrees more quickly. ASAP provides student-friendly structures (e.g., block scheduling from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., Monday to Friday, and cohorts by major) along with financial incentives (free subway passes and textbooks) to speed participants' paths to a degree. One study found that ASAP students had three times the graduation rate of a comparison group who lacked the same supports.
- Technical and vocational training at **Tennessee's 27 Tech Centers** have an average 75 percent completion rate, with some centers graduating all of their students. Job placement rates also are high. Unlike traditional approaches, students enroll in whole academic programs, not individual courses, streamlining the path to completion by removing the burdens of individual course selection and availability. For those needing to brush up on basic academic skills, remediation is embedded in ordinary instruction so valuable time and student motivation are not lost.

Programs are offered Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and attendance is taken. Finally, the complete program costs and the time it will take to graduate are clearly presented up front, allowing students to plan ahead and know with certainty when they will graduate. Many of the Tech Centers' more successful program elements were included in a new state law that created a unified community college system.

- **Indiana Wesleyan University** offers evening programs for more than 8,000 adult students at multiple sites in three states. By making effective use of technology and competency exams, the university has shortened the time to complete degrees and achieved a 65 percent graduation rate.
- **Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana and Lumina Foundation for Education** have developed and launched a one-year accelerated associate degree program. The program has two key components that shorten time-to-degree: recruiting and working with students in high school so they are able to start college without the need for remediation and block scheduling associate degree courses from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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