



# The Path to a Degree

A LEGISLATOR'S GUIDE TO COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS

## Overview: The Path to a Degree

By Brenda Bautsch

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America is no longer the world leader in education. U.S. performance at the K-12 and postsecondary levels is falling behind other countries. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), America and Germany are the only two OECD countries where the younger generation is actually less educated than the older generation. In February 2009, President Obama declared the lack of educational attainment in the United States a “prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow,” and he set a goal for the United States to reclaim its position as the leader in college graduates by 2020. To accomplish that, states need to set their own college completion goals; study and diagnose where and why students are dropping out of the education system; and target state policy to those problem areas. Effective state policy can help more students obtain college degrees, be successful in life and contribute to the economy.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 54 percent of all new jobs and 75 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require some form of postsecondary education. In addition, people with bachelor's degrees earn 60 percent more over their lifetime than those with only a high school diploma, which translates into higher tax revenues for states and the federal government. College graduates also live healthier and longer lives and rely less on social programs such as welfare or Medicaid, saving states a significant amount of money. College graduates participate more in civic activities, such as voting, and in charitable activities, such as donating blood. States that improve college access and success increase these individual, economic and societal benefits.

College enrollment and completion rates will not alter significantly unless policymakers focus on nontraditional students, particularly low-income, minority and first-generation students, who are underrepresented and underserved in the education system. These students are

the fastest growing populations and the least likely to finish high school, enroll in college or earn a degree. The result is a significant and serious achievement gap that threatens states and the nation.

To meet President Obama's college completion goal and to preserve America's status as a world leader in education, state policy will need to focus on closing the achievement gap. State legislators have the power to design and implement policies that help prepare all students academically and financially for college and effectively support them to ensure they complete a degree.

*The Path to a Degree: A Legislator's Guide to College Access and Success* contains five briefs that provide an overview of key issues, discuss research findings, and offer examples of specific state action that can improve college access and success for underrepresented students.

**Raising Awareness: College Planning Strategies** focuses on early awareness and preparation as an essential component of college access. The brief discusses two strategies to increase early college planning among low-income, minority and first-generation students: information dissemination and student support services, both beginning no later than middle school.

**Increasing College and Workforce Readiness** discusses policies that can improve college and workforce readiness, such as aligning high school standards, adjusting graduation requirements, and using college-ready assessments. College readiness is a key component of both college access and success; students who take college preparatory courses in high school, for example, are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college.

**Improving College Affordability for Underrepresented Students: Financial Aid Strategies** discusses the three components of the higher education finance system: tuition, financial aid and state appropriations. The brief fo-

cuses on financial aid as a policy option to increase college affordability for low-income, minority and first-generation students and provides examples of effective financial aid programs.

*Engaging Students Academically and Socially: College Success Strategies* highlights evidence-based college success programs that help more students remain in college and graduate. Programs that increase student academic and social engagement have the greatest effect on completion rates. The brief provides examples of legislative action that encourages and supports college success programs.

*What You Need to Know About Minority-Serving Institutions* provides an overview of historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities—known collectively as minority-serving institutions. The brief highlights why an increasing number of students choose to attend these institutions; their effect on the educational attainment of underrepresented students; and the challenges such institutions face.

Higher education can improve individual lives, bolster state economies, fill workforce needs, and sustain America's economic competitiveness. Now is the time for states to act to improve the path to a degree for all students.

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