

Providing Quality Postsecondary Education: Access and Accountability

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Ms. Kati Haycock

Director, The Education Trust

Testimony

For many decades, the American education system led the world on almost every measure. We had the highest high school completion rate, the highest college-going rate, and the highest proportion of college-educated citizens. Collectively, our colleges and universities are unparalleled, attracting students and scholars from all over the world.

Higher education has long been one of the main drivers of opportunity, social mobility, and economic progress in our society. And that promise has been supported through federal policy – through tax-exempt status, establishment of land-grant institutions in the 19th century, the G.I. Bill after World War II, and Pell Grants since 1972. Our historical national commitment to education has paid fantastic dividends; the United States has long had the best-educated, most productive workforce in the world.

Over the past decade, however, we have allowed a surprising array of countries to pass by us.

- We are now 17th in the developed world in high school graduation rates;
- We are now 7th in college-entry rates;
- And we are no longer first in the proportion of young people completing a college degree.

Moreover, we are the only developed country where college-education rates are not improving and the only developed country where the literacy levels of older adults are higher than those among young adults.

Underneath this overall story, the numbers are even more worrisome for low-income students and students of color. These students are less likely to graduate from high school; those who do graduate are less likely to be prepared for college or work. To make matters worse, low-income students and students of color who do go on to college are also less likely to complete college after entering.

What is going on here? Simply put, there are problems at several key points in the education pipeline, each of which must be addressed to turn these patterns around.

Better Aligning High School and College

Every year, hundreds of thousands of American high school students follow all the rules—that is, take all of the courses they are required to take and pass all of the required

tests—expecting that, if they do so, they will be prepared for the next level of education. Unfortunately, when they get to college – as most do – they often aren't even close to prepared for the challenges they face there. Nearly one in three end up in remedial—or high school level—courses. Why? Because the standards for American high schools have not been aligned with the requirements of college and today's workplace.

Fortunately, many states are beginning to do just that—some working through the American Diploma Project, others on their own. You could help by providing incentive funding for states willing to give the high school diploma real meaning by aligning their standards, course requirements, and assessments across high school and college.

Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act provides Congress with several opportunities to promote better preparation for work, for college, and for life. First, Congress should support state efforts to align the standards for high school exit with those for beginning postsecondary study. With a relatively small investment, Congress could help states to link their K-12 and higher education data systems, would allow states to significantly advance alignment and articulation activities. What should states have to do to receive these funds? Quite simple:

- K-12 and higher education systems need to agree on common definitions of the knowledge and skills required to begin postsecondary work.
- K-12 systems need to review state standards and course requirements required for a high school diploma and develop a process to bring them into alignment with the skills and knowledge required to begin postsecondary work.
- K-12 and higher education together need to agree on common assessments for measuring whether students possess the skills they need, and a curriculum that prepares students adequately for the challenges of postsecondary education.
- Higher Education needs to ensure that teacher preparation is aligned – both in terms of quality and quantity – with the expectations of what needs to be taught in the K-12 system.
- States willing to make a college- and work-ready curriculum the default curriculum for all students should receive additional federal financial assistance to provide the professional development that will be required.

In addition, Congress can provide extra encouragement to low-income students to prepare for success in postsecondary education by providing additional financial aid to low-income students who have completed the college prep curriculum.

Many wonder whether the emphasis on preparing students to be successful in college neglects the needs of our non college-bound students. Large scale, national research, including research by the American Diploma Project and others, has established that the academic skills required for work are comparable to those required for college. The point is that high school graduates should be prepared to choose college or work. Right now, they are not being adequately prepared for either.

Money Matters

Second, it is clear that some of the students who should be going on to college aren't. In the most recent year for which data are available, for example, low-income students in the top quartile of academic achievement nationally are entering college at rates exactly the same as high-income students in the bottom quartile of academic achievement. Though college-going rates for all groups of students are up, the gap in college attendance between White high school graduates and graduates of color is larger today than it was two decades ago.

In a century where some postsecondary education is essential to gain a foothold in our economy, this is a tragedy for the young people themselves, for their families, and for our country. Providing financial incentives for students to complete a more rigorous college-prep curriculum would begin to address another contributor to low-graduation rates—the cost of attending college. But this step alone is by no means sufficient. The financial burden of paying for college is a huge barrier for many young people. Low-income young people are particularly hard hit, because the relative value of Pell Grants has diminished by 50 percent since the late 1970s. Whereas Pell Grants used to cover 84 percent of the average fixed cost at a public, four-year institution, in 2001-02 they covered only about 40 percent of these costs. It is hugely important that you act to restore educational opportunities for our most vulnerable young people.

- Congress should commit to a five-year trajectory to recoup the buying power of Pell Grants.

Beyond providing more help to low-income students, though, it is important for Congress to consider how it might provide stronger incentives to colleges to enroll low-income students. As college-going increases, colleges often have less incentive to educate more low-income students. Despite the unique importance of higher education in breaking the cycle of poverty for students from low-income families, increases in student financial aid over the last ten years – at the federal, state, and institutional levels – have disproportionately benefited upper-middle and middle-class students. So even as the dollars for financial aid have grown, truly low-income students have been asked to shoulder more of the burden of paying for college through loans. Institutions of higher education should be eligible for supplemental financial assistance for enrolling and graduating low-income students.

- Both federal grants to individuals as well as federal aid to institutions should be designed to better serve the federal priority of increasing the access and success of low-income students.

In addition, the process of simply arranging college financing presents a daunting morass of confusing, sometimes duplicative, programs. In some instances, the federal government is providing rich subsidies to private lenders without commensurate benefits to the low-income students the programs were established to serve. To make matters worse, private lenders can use their subsidies to entice college and universities into their

programs and out of the more efficient, less expensive direct loan program. These subsidies should be limited and the savings should be redirected to need-based aid for low-income students.

- Congress should eliminate excessive subsidies and directly administer a greater portion of federally guaranteed student financial assistance, and use the savings to expand need-based financial aid.

As Congress works to make college more affordable for students from low-income families, it must not cut back on prior commitments to increase college access among low-income and minority students. The GEAR-UP and TRIO programs represent a lifeline to college for some of our most disadvantaged young people. Given the inequitable access to college that exists right now, it would be unfair and unwise to eliminate these programs

Increasing College Success — What Institutions do Matters a Lot

Third, far too many students who enter our higher education system fail to earn a degree. Overall, only about four in 10 students who begin full-time at a four-year college get a bachelor's degree within four years and only about six in 10 get a degree within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Survey. Graduation rates are even worse for BA-seeking students who begin in a two-year college. Moreover, in both types of institutions, completion rates are substantially lower for minority students and students from low-income families.

While approximately two-thirds of White freshmen in four-year colleges (66.8 percent) obtain a degree within six years, fewer than half of African-Americans (45.7 percent) and Latinos (47.3 percent) do so. There are also significant differences in completion between students in terms of family income: 77 percent of students from high-income families graduate, compared to only 54 percent for students from low-income families – a 23 percentage point difference. And remember: These figures represent the outcomes only of students who began as first-time degree-seeking freshmen in four-year institutions – that is, the students who are most likely to persist and graduate.

Because the number of students entering the nation's colleges and universities has been rising overall, not much attention has been paid to these low-completion rates. The percentage of high school graduates going on to two-year or four-year colleges and universities increased from less than half in 1975 to almost two-thirds in 2001. But graduation rates among first-time, full-time students in four-year colleges have remained stagnant for decades – we are successfully getting more young people to college, but not getting proportionally any more of them through college.

While these disturbing patterns – low overall graduation rates and big gaps between groups – have remained stubbornly consistent, the consequences of not graduating have changed drastically. People with a four-year degree or higher now earn much more

relative to high school graduates than they did 30 years ago, and the gap increases with the level of the degree. By contrast, those who enroll in college but fail to get a B.A. have made only slight gains.

Unless we change current trends, we will become a society that is even more polarized by class distinctions. Consider this: Only 7 percent of young people from the poorest one-quarter of American families earn a bachelor's degree by age 26, while 60 percent of young people from the top quartile of family income do so. College degrees may be the best route out of poverty, but they are a route now for only seven of every 100 youngsters born to a low-income family.

It would certainly help if more of these young people entered college well prepared and if they didn't have to struggle to cover college costs. Preparation and ability to pay are important, but they do not tell the whole story. What is becoming increasingly clear is the critical role institutions themselves play in securing the success of their students. How do we know? Because right now, institutions that serve similar students with similar preparation and similar family incomes have widely divergent graduation rates. Our recent report focusing on this issue revealed that some colleges and universities are doing much better than others in graduating their students, even once we account for student characteristics.

Last year for the first time, institution-level graduation-rate statistics were released to the public, disaggregated by student gender and race/ethnicity. Examining the numbers closely, we find that some institutions stand out – even after controlling for factors such as institution size, resources, mission, degree programs, and the financial and academic background of their entering students. Some colleges and universities have much higher graduation rates than other, very similar institutions.

These exceptional higher education institutions range from Elizabeth City State University, a historically Black institution in North Carolina whose student body is predominantly low-income, to Miami of Ohio, a highly selective public university, to the University of California at Riverside, which serves a highly diverse mix of White, Black, Asian, and Latino students, to the University of Northern Iowa, a mid-sized comprehensive institution.

These institutions are different in many ways – their size, location, mission, selectivity, and students vary tremendously. But they're similar in one fundamental respect – they consistently and significantly outperform their peers in graduating students.

And the data reveal that high performance doesn't have to be for some students at the expense of others – institutions like East Carolina University in North Carolina and Binghamton University in New York outperform their peers without gaps in graduation rates between White students and students of color. We even know that rapid improvement is possible, thanks to the example of the University of Florida, Louisiana Tech, and others that have upped graduation rates for five years running.

This newly available data establishes that what institutions do makes a very big difference when it comes to student success. Indeed, earlier this year, the Education Trust made all of this data publicly available through an interactive database on our web site. Visitors to the College Results Online database can select a given institution and see how it compares to similar, peer institutions in graduating students. We will be happy to provide Senators and their staffs with information and analysis from this database.

Even as individual institutions have distinguished themselves, our higher education system has, collectively, made virtually no progress in improving graduation rates over the last three decades. That must change—both for the students and for our country. Institutions of higher education must be accountable for doing what they can to enable the success of the students they admit.