

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.

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.

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.

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.

Additional information and data sources are available at www.completecollege.org.