

SET A STATE COMPLETION GOAL

**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.

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.

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.